

How to Build A Better Teacher

Robert Holland

American schools need more teachers. American schools need better teachers. Practically everyone with a stake in the education debate agrees with those two premises. However, there is sharp disagreement as to whether more regulation or less is the way to go.

The differences of perspective begin over just how vital to transmitting knowledge a teacher is. No one is more certain about the overriding importance of a teacher in a child's academic progress than Tennessee statistician William Sanders, who has developed a value-added instrument that might revolutionize how good teachers are found and rewarded for productive careers. Speaking before the metropolitan school board in Nashville in January, Sanders risked friendly fire when he disputed the connection much of the education world makes between poverty and low student performance: "Of all the factors we study—class size, ethnicity, location, poverty—they all pale to triviality in the face of teacher effectiveness."

That flies in the face of a widespread conviction in the education world that poverty is such a powerful depressant on learning that even the greatest teachers may only partially overcome its effects. As Diane Ravitch documents in her recent book *Left Back* (Simon & Schuster), education "progressives" long have believed that many children shouldn't be pushed to absorb knowledge beyond their limited innate capacities; that they are better off with teachers who help them get in touch with their feelings and find a socially useful niche.

But Sanders has volumes of data to back up his contention. While at the University of Tennessee, he developed a sophisticated longitudinal measurement called "value-added assessment" that pinpoints how effective each district, school, and teacher has been in raising individual students' achievement over time. His complex formula factors out demographic variables that often make comparisons problematic. Among other things, he found that students unlucky enough to have a succession of poor teachers are virtually doomed to the education cellar. Three consecutive years of first quintile (least effective) teachers in Grades 3 to 5 yield math scores from the thirty-fifth to forty-fifth percentile. Conversely, three straight years of fifth quintile teachers result in scores at the eighty-fifth to ninety-fifth percentile.

The state of Tennessee began using value-added assessment in its public schools in 1992, and Sanders is in demand in many other states where legislators are considering importing the system. The "No Excuses" schools identified by an ongoing Heritage Foundation project—high-poverty schools where outstanding pupil achievement defies stereotypes about race and poverty—buttress Sanders' contention that the quality of teaching is what matters most. Consider, for instance, Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school in central Harlem that has a student population 80 percent black and 19 percent Hispanic. The *New York Times* recently reported that all of Frederick Douglass's students passed a new, rigorous English Regents exam last year, and 96 percent passed the math Regents. The Grades 6–12 school ranks among the top 10 schools in New York City in reading and math, despite having class sizes of 30 to 34.

And what makes the difference? "Committed teachers," said principal Gregory M. Hodge—teachers, he said, who

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come to work early, stay late, and call parents if children don't show up for extra tutoring. The disciplined yet caring climate for learning set by Hodge and principals of other No Excuses schools also is due much credit.

Those who believe in deregulation of teacher licensing see in value-added assessment a potential breakthrough. Principals (like Hodge) could hire and evaluate their teachers not necessarily on the basis of credit-hours amassed in professional schools of education but in terms of objective differences instructors make when actually placed before classrooms of children. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation published in April 1999 a manifesto on teacher quality that argues strongly for a "results-based accountability system," disaggregated by teacher, along the lines of what Sanders has devised.

However, much of the education establishment—those in and around education school faculties nationwide, the professional development specialists at teacher unions and associations, state and local boards of education, and education specialists in much of the foundation world—takes a very different view. They argue that what is needed is much more centralized control of teacher preparation and licensing to ensure that teachers are better and more uniformly qualified when they enter the classroom. They propose to ensure this by placing professional licensing under the aegis of a single accreditation body, one that would be controlled to a great extent by the teachers themselves—or, more precisely, their national unions.

Which side prevails in this dispute over how to get the best teachers into schools—the Sanders model of ongoing evaluation of effectiveness or the establishment preference for centralized credentialing—may tell us more than anything else about the quality of instruction American pupils and their parents can expect from their schools for a generation. This is the key battleground in public education today.

TEACHER CERTIFICATION: A PRIMER

The one point on which both camps agree is that the existing system of teacher certification badly needs reform. Hence, a brief survey of that system may be helpful. Currently, state departments of education and collegiate schools of education are the gatekeepers to teaching careers in America's public schools. This is a collaboration dedicated to the use of government power to standardize and centralize education, or, in the economists' term, "regulatory capture." Government licensing agencies that are charged with protecting the public interest are effectively

controlled by the interests—in this case, the teacher-trainers—they are supposed to be regulating.

As a result, an aspiring teacher typically must complete a state-approved program of teacher education that is heavy on how-to-teach or pedagogical courses. All 50 states require new teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree, and all 50 require course work in pedagogy. In some states, the teacher's degree must be in education, while other states require an academic major but specify that within that degree there must be a considerable number of education courses (about a semester's worth) and also a period of student teaching (another semester). In addition, many teacher colleges tack on additional training requirements, so that fulfilling requirements for the study of pedagogy can consume well over a year of college. Most states require prospective teachers to pass one or more subject-area tests, but these often ask for regurgitation of nostrums taught by education professors.

Critics of the schools of pedagogy are legion. Seventy years ago, H.L. Mencken (never one to mince words) asserted that most pedagogues "have trained themselves to swallow any imaginable fad or folly, and always with enthusiasm. The schools reek with this puerile nonsense."

In the early 1990s, Rita Kramer took a nationwide tour of leading schools of education, from Teachers College at Columbia to the University of Washington, and reported in *Ed School Follies* on the intellectual emptiness of teacher preparation—hours spent on how to teach Tootles the Locomotive with the proper attitude, but precious little depth in history, mathematics, science, or literature. Recently Heather Mac Donald took a close look at ed schools for *City Journal* and summed up teacher educators' dogma in the phrase "Anything But Knowledge." She found teachers of teachers still holding fast to the doctrine laid out in 1925 by Teachers College icon William Heard Kilpatrick: Schools should instill "critical thinking" in children instead of teaching them facts and figures, which (he surmised) they could always look up for themselves as they became "lifelong learners." Today, Teachers College mandates courses in multicultural diversity and has students act out ways to "usurp the existing power structure."

Jerry Jesness, a special education teacher in a south Texas elementary school, observes that "every profession has its gatekeepers, the college professors who not only teach, but also sift out the slow, the lazy, and the mediocre, those unfit to practice the profession for which they are preparing. One must have intelligence, drive, and stamina, especially to get through schools of engineering, law, or medicine.

"In colleges of education, the reverse seems to be the case. After a few weeks of Ed 101, the students most pos-

sessed of those qualities begin to slip away. By the time education students begin their semester of student teaching, the best and brightest have already defected to other disciplines. Colleges and departments of education separate the wheat from the chaff, but unlike those of the other disciplines, they then throw away the wheat.”

The current system does allow for a semblance of public accountability. At least in theory, citizens—by their votes for governors and state legislators, and in some states, the state education boards and superintendents of public instruction—can pressure education bureaucrats to adopt more sensible rules for preparing and employing teachers. One state in which the political process has recently yielded reform is Georgia, where Democratic Gov. Roy Barnes last year won legislative approval for eliminating seniority-based teacher tenure.

At the center of the school of thought that believes tighter national regulation is key to reform is a foundation-funded entity called the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF). NCTAF is the latest incarnation of a Carnegie Corporation commission—the first was the 1986 Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession—advocating a centralized, national system of teacher licensing controlled by private organizations with stakes in the process. With North Carolina Gov. James Hunt as its chairman and Stanford education professor Linda Darling-Hammond as its director, NCTAF issued its report, “What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future,” in 1996. (The Rockefeller Foundation joined Carnegie in bankrolling the commission.) NCTAF, which stayed active to lobby for its proposals, drew raves in the press for its “action agenda” to reform the training and certifying of teachers. Little ink went toward exploring the deeper implications of nationalizing control of teaching.

NCTAF called for, among other things:

- Mandatory accreditation by an organization called the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) of all teacher-training programs in the country.
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification of more than 100,000 “master” teachers.
- Formation of “independent” professional boards in each state to set policies on teacher preparation, testing, and licensing, in tune with the nationalized policy.

In December 1999, Linda Darling-Hammond forcefully stated the case for the pro-regulatory proposition that education credentials do make a difference. “It stands to reason,” she wrote, “that student learning should be enhanced by the efforts of teachers who are more knowledge-

able in their field and are skillful at teaching it to others. Substantial evidence from prior reform efforts indicates that changes in course taking, curriculum content, testing, or textbooks make little difference if teachers do not know how to use these tools well and how to diagnose their students’ learning needs.”

THE UNION INTEREST

The national education association, the nation’s largest teacher union, has emerged as a leading advocate of the NCTAF model of “reforming” the system by stripping control of teacher certification from the state departments of education. The NEA touts this as “professionalization,” meaning self-regulation by teachers or benign-sounding “peer review.” But critics dispute how much rank-and-file teachers would be empowered. Education Consumers Clearinghouse founder John Stone, a professor of education at East Tennessee State University, believes “the parties serving up these bold proposals represent the interests that have governed teacher training and licensure all along. Since publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, teacher training and licensure have undergone repeated rewrites, none of which has produced any noticeable improvements in schooling.”

The NEA likes the idea of all teachers having to graduate from a teacher-training program certified by NCATE. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that NCATE has been tightly linked to the NEA since the former’s founding in 1954. NCATE’s director, Arthur E. Wise, also heads the NEA’s 31-year-old nonprofit subsidiary, the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education. Meanwhile, NEA president Robert F. Chase chairs the Executive Committee of NCATE. Furthermore, Wise sat on the national commission, NCTAF, that would grant NCATE control of all teacher accreditation that it has not been able to gain on a voluntary basis over the past 40 years.

An important link in the pro-regulatory reformers’ plan is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), an outgrowth of the 1986 Carnegie report. NBPTS subsequently received Carnegie Corporation outlays of several million dollars. In the 1990s, the federal government also began subsidizing the NBPTS heavily, at the urging of President Clinton. The board is a key element in today’s strategy to centralize control of the gates to teaching. The privately operated NBPTS confers national certification on teachers who submit portfolios (videotapes of the teaching, lesson plans, samples of student work) for evaluation. The teachers also must pay a \$2,300 application fee, but sometimes their school boards pay it for them.

The NBPTS purports to identify excellence through this process, but economists Dale Ballou of the University of Massachusetts and Michael Podgursky of the University of Missouri—who called “professionalization” into question after careful analysis—point out that there has been no evidence to show that students of NBPTS-certified teachers learn any more than students of other teachers. Researchers at the Consortium for Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison recently found that NBPTS-certified teachers tend to become more reflective about their teaching, but their principals found it difficult to link any improvements in student achievement to the teachers’ national certification.

From the perspective of economists Ballou and Podgursky, “The activities over which the profession seeks control—accreditation of teacher education programs and teacher licensing—are well-recognized means of restricting supply,” which puts upward pressure on salaries. They add there can be no doubt that teacher unions see the professionalization movement “as a means to increase salaries.” For further evidence of how tightly linked some of the regulatory reform is, consider that NEA president Chase serves as a member of NCTAF, which seeks to greatly augment the powers of NCATE, on which Chase is a major power—and all this would confer more economic muscle on the NEA.

NCTAF was remarkably successful using the rhetoric of reform to persuade business leaders and the media that its program actually was a “scathing indictment” of the system for training and certifying teachers. The *New Republic* begged to differ: “Forcing teachers,” the journal’s editors commented, “to attend NCATE certification programs that douse them with pedagogical blather (NCATE’s ‘vision of quality’ seeks to promote ‘equity’ and ‘diversity’ but says nothing about academic achievement) will likely scare off math and science specialists in droves.”

The NEA stepped up its campaign in spring 2000. Chase and his associates unveiled revised NCATE standards for accreditation at a Washington news conference. NCATE stated that schools of education it accredits will have to meet “rigorous new performance-based standards” in order to win NCATE accreditation.

By focusing on “candidate performance,” said NCATE president Wise, the “standards represent a revolution in teacher preparation.” But skeptics wonder how “revolutionary” it is to assess candidates largely according to videotaped activities, portfolios of projects, personal journals, or their compatibility with a team. That’s the emphasis of the NBPTS, but portfolio assessment relies heavily on subjective judgment, as opposed to testing a teacher’s knowledge of the subject being taught.

“In spite of claims to the contrary,” notes Podgursky, “at present there exists no reliable evidence indicating whether or not graduates of NCATE-accredited teacher

training programs are better teachers.” Although several states have responded by mandating NCATE accreditation, Podgursky added, “mandatory accreditation would almost certainly restrict the supply of teachers and exacerbate teacher shortages, yet its effect on the teacher quality pool is uncertain. It may also stifle promising state-level experiments with alternative teacher certification and the entry of new teacher-training institutions into the market.”

For his part, Wise claims: “As more institutions meet NCATE’s national professional standards, more qualified teacher candidates will be available, since candidates from accredited institutions pass licensing examinations at a higher rate than do those from unaccredited institutions or those with no teacher preparation.” Wise based that assertion on a recent Educational Testing Service (ETS) study of the rates at which teacher candidates pass the Praxis II licensing exams. However, the same study shows that the sat and act scores of NCATE graduates who passed licensing exams are lower than those of non-NCATE peers. In addition, Podgursky observed that the released ETS data are so flawed as to make any comparisons problematic. For instance, 14 percent of the sample of Praxis II test-takers never enrolled in a teacher-training program—yet the researchers sorted them into NCATE categories based on the colleges they attended. The study also failed to take into account wide variations in how states test prospective teachers.

The new standards condense NCATE’s 1995 version of standards from 20 categories into six. Examiners will look at teacher-candidates’ knowledge, skills, and “dispositions”; the school’s assessment system; the inclusion of field experience and clinical practice; the institution’s devotion to “diversity”; how faculty model “best practices”; and unit governance, including the wise use of information technology.

Actually, notes Professor Stone, the “new” standards implement mostly old ideas about teaching from existing standards. As for the portfolios, classroom observations, and emphasis on Praxis II, “performance on these various assessments reflects nothing more than a grasp of the same old faulty teaching practices that education professors have been espousing right along.”

Most parents—the primary consumers of education—want schools to stress academic achievement, as studies by the nonpartisan Public Agenda have shown. However, as Public Agenda’s surveys also reveal, many education professors believe “best practice” is a teacher not teaching, but facilitating in the progressive tradition, while children construct their own meaning, an approach called constructivism. “Social justice” is valued more highly than achievement. Arguably, that’s the approach NCATE accreditation would enshrine.

As Podgursky and Ballou note in a recent Brookings Institution paper, public education already is a regulated monopoly. In most school districts, parents have little or no

choice of their children's schools or teachers. In addition, unlike in medicine or other service markets, education consumers lack the protection of antitrust or malpractice lawsuits. Within this structure, the teacher unions already exercise enormous economic power as their well-organized affiliates bargain with fragmented local school boards.

If, next, teacher unions win control of the gates to teaching through their domination of such organizations as NCATE, they arguably would possess "market power not enjoyed by producers or unions in any major industry in our economy." That would not bode well for efforts to expand consumer choice and to get fresh blood into the teaching profession. Moreover, when a monopoly can restrict supply, prices will rise—in this case, teacher salaries. That would fulfill a primary objective of the teacher unions, but without any guarantee of increased quality.

ANOTHER APPROACH

What kind of persons might be attracted to teaching were the doors to teaching careers open to people with a wide variety of backgrounds that didn't necessarily include sitting through hundreds of hours of education courses, whether NCATE-accredited or not? Suppose principals could hire their own teaching staffs without having to follow the credits-hours prescribed by education bureaucracies?

Well, there would be more teachers like Scott (Taki) Sidley, who taught English at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va., the past three years, but ran athwart the state bureaucracy's insistence that he take additional prescribed courses in order to be "certified." In a piece of Sunday commentary in the *Washington Post* (June 25, 2000), long-time teacher Patrick Welsh lamented the "bureaucratic narrow-mindedness" that pushes people like Sidley out of teaching.

Welsh noted that Sidley, a University of Virginia graduate who has served in the Peace Corps, won acclaim from students and parents and was considered "one of our [T.C. Williams'] finest teachers." But he must leave the young people he was teaching so well because he lacks on his resume 30 credit-hours that regulators insist he must have—one being a low-level composition course, even though he took 48 graduate hours in creative writing at U.Va. and the university exempted him from introductory composition because of his Advanced Placement English score in high school.

Many young teachers like Sidley, Welsh notes, "see the petty adherence to the certification rules as symptomatic of a pervasive problem." For an alternative vision, he quoted Dave Keener, head of the school's science department and the 1998 Virginia winner of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching: "The

process of getting the best has to be streamlined. Individual high schools should be given the power to advertise positions and do their own recruiting . . . Principals, with advice of teachers, should be able to do all the hiring on the spot without having to get approval from the central office, which often takes weeks. De-emphasize the education courses. Once we get the kind of people we want, we could train them in the schools."

That's the sensible approach that one kind of education reform, the charter school, facilitates. Organizers of charter schools—often teachers with a common vision—receive waivers from certification and other bureaucratic rules. In exchange for independence, they agree to be accountable for academic results. Many charter schools freely hire teachers who know their subjects but haven't been through the education-school mill. Only a small fraction of charter school teachers choose to belong to the national teacher unions.

In its 1996 report, NCTAF gave the impression with its sharp attack on the current state-controlled certification system that it wanted a thorough-going reform that would bring bright young teachers into the classroom. But as Professors Ballou and Podgursky observe, NCTAF focuses not on recruiting more talented individuals but on beefing up the system of teacher training—and shifting its control from political bodies to organizations, like NCATE, that may also reflect private agendas, such as the NEA's.

There are a few small-scale programs designed to deepen the pool of teaching talent by going outside the certification routine. One is Teach for America, which places liberal arts graduates in high-need urban and rural districts. Another is Troops to Teachers, which assists retiring military personnel in becoming teachers. In both instances, the newly minted teachers obtain provisional certification and then work toward obtaining enough professional education credits to gain full certification.

New Jersey is one state that has taken seriously the desirability of offering alternative routes to teaching. In 1984, the state reduced the number of education courses required for traditional certification, while putting new teachers under the tutelage of a mentor teacher. At the same time, it allowed teachers to recruit liberal arts graduates who hadn't been through education schools at all. These teachers were also put under the supervision of a mentor. They would get on-the-job training in applied teaching. The new approach has resulted in higher scores on licensing tests, a lower attrition rate, and a more diverse teaching force, notes former New Jersey Education Commissioner Leo Klagholz in a Fordham Foundation paper.

Such programs are fine as far as they go—but they don't go nearly far enough nationwide. Strict regulation of K-12 teaching has yielded pervasive mediocrity. It is time to deregulate and to emphasize results. Instead of screening

teachers according to courses taken and degrees earned, school administrations should free principals to hire the most intellectually promising material—English majors to teach English, history majors to teach history—and then let the schools assimilate them in the nitty-gritty of preparing lesson plans and monitoring lunchrooms.

VALUE-ADDED ASSESSMENT

The quest for reform based on proof of good teaching brings us back to William Sanders and the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), which generates annual reports of gains in student achievement produced by each teacher, school, and school district. Progress is broken down by core subject, and gains are compared to national, state, and local benchmarks.

Professor John Stone explains the significance of using such a system:

By comparing each student's current achievement to his or her past performance and aggregating the results, value-added assessment statistically isolates the impact of individual teachers, schools, and school systems on the average progress of the students for which they are responsible. Not incidentally, value-added assessment can also be used by education's decision-makers to isolate and assess the effectiveness of everything from the latest curricular innovations, to the preparedness of novice teachers, to the quality of the programs in which teachers were trained.

Here, in short, is a real-world way to assess the performance of teachers—as opposed to the paperwork realm of

NCATE, which deems credentials and licensure hoops to be the equivalent of quality assurance.

The most thoroughgoing reform of teacher licensing and hiring could come through a combination of the New Jersey and Tennessee approaches. Schools could hire teachers with liberal-arts educations and/or valuable working-world experiences, then give them on-the-job mentoring, and finally evaluate their teaching prowess according to a value-added assessment.

It's known from Sanders's research, the No Excuses schools, and plain common sense that teachers make a profound difference in students' lives. Deregulated teacher hiring combined with value-added assessment could bring an infusion of fresh talent into teaching and provide a basis for rewarding those teachers who do the most to help children learn. Such a system also could quickly identify teachers who needed extra training, or those who ought to be pursuing a different line of work. Such a change would deserve to be called reform; mandatory accreditation locking in the status quo in teaching preparation does not.

Three days into his administration, President George W. Bush unveiled an accountability plan for federal education spending that sparked hope for a fresh approach to bringing good teachers to K-12 schools. He proposed that Congress revise Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act so that school districts can come up with alternative ways to certify teachers. And he would reserve a chunk of funding for grants to states that develop systems to measure teacher effectiveness according to student academic achievement.

That's value-added, and it may turn out to be the most significant education tool since chalk.