



Education Consumers Foundation

Traditional Teacher Preparation is Hindering Educational Improvement

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The education policy world was recently shaken by a review of teacher preparation programs from the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ). These are largely university-based training programs responsible for instructing teachers in how to teach and manage student behavior in the nation's elementary and secondary school classrooms.

The report was not without flaws, but its findings are troubling and important—particularly when considered from the standpoint of parents, the public, and their elected representatives.

I am a professor of education who, after decades of disappointment with teacher training outcomes, founded a “Consumer Reports”-type of organization focused on education. Its mission is to examine the impact of programs and practices such as those discussed by the NCTQ Review.

The NCTQ found only four of more than 1,100 programs earned four out of four stars and fewer than 10 percent earned over three. Over 150 programs earned less than one star and were relegated to a consumer warning list.

Entrance standards were said to be weak and training mediocre. Of particular note, training in critical areas like reading instruction was found to lack coherence and grounding in established science.

The NCTQ report was well received by many in the policy world but it generated shock and outrage in the schools of education—for an understandable reason. Teacher education's self-image is that of a respectable profession doing an imperfect but responsible job of preparing teachers. For most teacher educators, the report was a smack in the face.

The reason for the sharp difference in viewpoints is that the official assessments of teacher education, including those relied on by accrediting bodies and regulatory agencies, all say that the vast

majority of programs are doing at least a satisfactory job. Only on rare occasions are accredited and approved programs evaluated and found to be seriously lacking.

Teacher preparation programs put an enormous amount of time, effort and money into assessing whether they meet standards, but their reviews are largely in-house and their standards are developed in concert with other teacher preparation programs. The standards purport to serve the public's interest in sound educational practice, but the public's primary aim of lifting student achievement is given no special precedence.

Neither is the public's interest in protection from faulty and ineffective training respected. In theory, state agencies independently approve programs to ensure that minimum standards for safety and effectiveness have been met. In practice, the agencies are hostage to the teaching profession's political influence.

Regulators in most states employ the profession's own standards and share the profession's review process. Even the test used for teacher licensure is focused on training program content, not on an estimate of whether the new teacher will be effective in the classroom.

None of these regulatory features is unique to teacher education. Other professions are governed by similar arrangements and, in most cases, they are similarly regulated by an agency that is a captive of the profession. What is different about teacher education is that most of its educator/graduates are employed by local school districts, not by paying customers or organizations that have to satisfy paying customers.

School districts provide staff training, but most exert only loose control over teacher practices and pay little attention to learning outcomes.

Generation after generation, teachers and administrators make decisions about teaching and learning that are founded on faulty training and that result in deficient student outcomes. Faddish practices extolled by teacher education programs have swept through public education for decades. A single fad known as "whole language" is widely held to have destroyed reading instruction in California. Differences in training between teachers in the same school are known to produce life-altering differences in student outcomes.

Physicians who use dubious practices can be sued by the patient, and engineers whose bridges collapse can go to jail. By contrast, educators using untested practices can ruin the future for thousands of students and still be referred to as innovators. Unlike law, medicine or engineering,

there is no market consequence or legal penalty for incompetent or ineffective teaching. Experimentation is common, and neither the purveyors nor practitioners of faulty practice are ever held accountable by their employers, their peers or anyone else.

Awareness of this problem is a critical first step in addressing it. Policymakers and school boards should start by paying attention to NCTQ's incomplete but useful report, not the apologetics of those who have presided over decades of failure.

School boards must take greater responsibility for teacher effectiveness or allow greater parent choice. Children need and deserve better protection.

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