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Professionalism and the Public Good: A Brief History of Teacher Certification

By David L. Angus
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Education Consumers Foundation

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209
www.education-consumers.org

Professionalism and the Public Good: A Brief History of Teacher Certification

David L. Angus

Good teaching really makes a difference. Studies of teacher effectiveness show that students who get the best teachers have a significantly greater chance of succeeding in school.

But does publicly regulated teacher training and licensure assure that teachers are well prepared and effective?

As evidenced by history, public regulation of teaching mostly ensures educator control of the teaching profession, not teacher quality.

Studies have found that substantial numbers of practicing teachers are unable to pass high school-level exams. And contrary to the public's belief that teachers are trained in proven pedagogy, it turns out that many of the practices taught to teachers have no proven effect on student achievement

A Brief History of Teacher Certification examines how today's system of teacher quality control came about and why its ability to ensure safe and effective teaching is in question. Written by the eminent educational historian David L. Angus and edited posthumously by the University of Michigan's Jeffery Mirel, it shows that many of today's criticisms of teacher training have been around for decades, yet continue to go unheeded. It also suggests that the education profession's ever tightening control over training and licensure has not necessarily strengthened teacher quality.

Teacher training and certification throughout the 19th century was decentralized and controlled at the local level. Teachers received little specialized training, and certification was generally based on an exam given by local or state authorities. The lay public, not the teaching profession controlled certification and hiring of teachers.

In the first 30 years of the 20th century, urbanization and the emergence of large school systems triggered a major transformation. The modern-day education bureaucracy emerged and state departments of education expanded their authority over rural schools. Hiring controlled by bureaucratic specialists became the model of modern practice. Examination by lay school board members--standard practice in rural schools--came to be thought of as provincial. Teacher colleges were established; admission requirements were raised; specialized certificates were created; and college and university "chairs of pedagogy" expanded into departments and schools of education. Local control of teacher certification all but vanished.

The newly formed university programs granted degrees in education and the leadership of the profession increasingly became restricted to credential-holders. What came to be known as the "education trust"--college faculty, district superintendents, state education officials, state association leaders, and U. S. Bureau of Education staff--controlled and shaped teaching with little regard for the wishes of parents and the public.

Following World War II, liberal arts faculty and the National Education Association pressed for greater influence over teacher training and certification. And in the 1950s--after Sputnik--colleges of education came under fire from both groups. They were charged with offering “Mickey Mouse courses” and an emphasis on theory instead of proven teaching practices and subject mastery.

Commissions, committees, and councils were formed to reshape teacher training and certification but the reforms succeeded more in shifting power arrangements, than in improving teacher quality. Sadly, although American teachers have the highest levels of formal education in the world, their degrees are mostly in education and their subject matter mastery remains mediocre.

Teacher organizations and the education trust have continued attempting to improve teacher quality by asserting control over training and licensure. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and the National Education Association formed the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. Its mission is to set national standards for teacher training.

For the most part, the education establishment’s “capture” of the public regulatory mechanisms have failed to ensure safe and effective teaching. Teacher subject matter mastery remains weak, and scientifically dubious pedagogy is the norm. Teacher educators and unions effectively control teacher quality, but neither group experiences any economic consequences if the public is not satisfied. To the contrary, public schooling is a regulated monopoly and failure almost always results in calls for more teachers and more training--a situation that neither teacher educators nor teacher unions find disagreeable.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com