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## Preparing Teachers: Are American Schools of Education Up to the Task?

By David Steiner, Boston University of Education

**American Enterprise Institute**

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**Education Consumers Foundation**

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209  
[www.education-consumers.org](http://www.education-consumers.org)

# Preparing Teachers: Are American Schools of Education Up to the Task?

*David Steiner*

E. D. Hirsch, Chester Finn, the late Al Shanker and other critics have argued that faulty teacher training is a key contributor to school ineffectiveness. They say that the schools of education embrace “constructivism”—an educational philosophy that places student self-esteem ahead of academic achievement.

As a means of investigating this claim, Steiner reviewed 206 course syllabi from 16 mostly well-regarded colleges of education. They ranged from 400 to 5000 in enrollment and were located throughout the U. S. All emphasized constructivism and the belief that teachers have a professional duty to work against social injustice and oppression.

Ten of the 16 either were accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or in the process of applying for NCATE accreditation. NCATE is the nation’s largest accreditor of teacher training programs and its standards emphasize “equity,” “diversity,” and “social justice.”

Steiner examined four areas of teacher training: Foundations of education, reading, mathematics, and general teaching-methods. Students attending the surveyed institutions were required to take one or more courses in each of the four areas.

“Foundations of education” is comprised mostly of courses in educational history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. They play a critical role in shaping teachers’ understanding of education’s nature and purpose and of the teacher’s role in public schooling. As Steiner notes, “a weak foundations program can leave future teachers at the mercy of fad and fashion in their professional work.”

In most cases, the foundations courses were heavily slanted toward topics such as multiculturalism and “critical” or “liberationist” pedagogy. These are educational perspectives that emphasize group differences, oppression by dominant societal groups, and the role of education in correcting social, economic, and political injustices.

Little attention was given alternative viewpoints. For the most part, the courses appeared to teach a distrust of mainstream American knowledge and beliefs. Teachers were encouraged to think of themselves as social and cultural liberators, not purveyors of knowledge.

Reading courses were found to have a similarly narrowed focus. They were based more on doctrine than research.

Respected summaries of research such as the National Reading Panel's (NRP) recent reports were largely ignored. The NRP reports highlight the importance of explicit, systematic, and sequential instruction— instruction designed to build student skills. By contrast, most colleges of education have over recent decades emphasized the naturalistic “whole language” approach to reading—one that shuns skill building and emphasizes the sufficiency of providing children exposure to a “print rich” environment.

The syllabi in reading courses did, however, contain a rhetorical shift—one that reflects at least the language of recent research findings. Most declared a preference for a “balanced” approach to reading—one that blends elements of whole language with systematic skill instruction. Whether the change is more substantive or rhetorical, however, remains unanswered. Steiner characterizes balanced reading instruction as “whole language” with varying degrees of explicit skill instruction.

Despite the evidence favoring explicit, systematic instruction in reading skills, only two out of 16 colleges offered courses in methodologies that are exclusively skill-oriented—Open Court, for example. To the contrary, many continued to teach courses taught exclusively from the whole language viewpoint.

Mathematics instruction syllabi generally appeared to follow the recommendations of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and its constructivist approach to teaching. So-called “deep understanding” of mathematics was emphasized but unaccompanied by any comparable concern for proficiency in computational skills.

NCTM standards are widely followed. They remain controversial, however, because they endorse the use of calculators in basic mathematics instruction.

General teaching-methods courses are introductions to teaching methodology and are usually taught in conjunction supervised classroom practice. The syllabi reviewed by Steiner included topics such as lesson planning, familiarization with state learning standards, and teaching strategies. Notably, however, they reflected very little attention to test-based assessment of student performance and to the key objective of improving measured student achievement.

Taken as a whole, Steiner's analysis found teacher training courses give little attention to student achievement and, instead, exhibit a suspicion of, if not hostility toward, conventional assessments of American social, political, and economic institutions. Neither were these courses congenial to the use of research-based teaching practice or sympathetic to the public's concern about schooling outcomes.

Steiner's study is one of the few that have directly examined the content of teacher education courses. It found much to support what critics have been saying about teacher education. Indeed, constructivism is the predominant doctrine and there is much else that may be undermining teacher effectiveness. Faulty teacher training may, indeed, be responsible for the poor results produced by the education policy initiatives of recent decades.

*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*