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Teacher Reform Gone Astray

By Chester E. Finn, Jr

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In *Teacher Reform Gone Astray*, Chester E. Finn, Jr. reviews efforts that have been made on improving teacher quality since *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983. Finn argues that the teacher education establishment impeded true reform; it advanced the recommendations that were congenial to the establishment's interests, but did little to improve student achievement. A June 2002 report from the U.S. Secretary of Education found many of the same teacher quality issues identified in *A Nation at Risk*.

Published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk* called for raising teacher educational standards and providing incentives to attract highly qualified people to teaching. Among the report's conclusions were that teacher preparation programs needed substantial improvement and that a serious shortage of teachers existed in key fields.

However, Finn observes that the U.S. education establishment made little attempt to follow the report's advice, largely due to deeply entrenched practices and interest groups such as teacher unions, colleges of education, and state education bureaucracies. It would have meant training people differently, licensing them differently, paying them differently, and judging them differently.

From Teachers as Workers to Teachers as Bosses

A task force established in 1986 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York effectively sidetracked the *Nation At Risk* teacher reforms. *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the Twenty-First Century* acknowledged the need for stronger student performance but recast the need for teacher reform as a lack of teacher professionalism. Its solution was to change the role of teachers as workers to that of key decision makers on matters of instruction, budget, personnel, and scheduling.

Teachers unions, state capitols, the federal government, and other established players lined up solidly behind the Carnegie task force. Powerful new supporting groups were born. They included the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and a reinvigorated National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

The quest for teacher professionalism has largely trumped the push for improved teacher performance, obscuring the view of teachers as instruments for producing more learning in children and better performance by their schools.

Finn states there is little evidence that the professionalism agenda has boosted student learning, and there is much evidence to the contrary. He cites the case of the Rochester City School District, which incorporated recommendations of the Carnegie report. A recent study of teachers certified by the NBPTS shows a similar lack of results (see here).

Teacher professionalism has maintained established practices and orthodoxies and deterred innovations that do not hinge on a vast cadre of “professional” teachers, e.g., school competition, parental choice, distance learning, virtual schooling, etc. It has blocked the shifting of power from experts to laymen and from producers to consumers. Finn further states that the movement to deregulate teacher hiring and permit schools to select the best qualified individuals as teachers has been stymied the government-centered, regulation-based, educators-in-charge strategy of the professionalism.

The idea that teachers should be evaluated on the basis of the results they produce is a far cry from everything the professionalizers cherish. Certain federal initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind act, which further prods schools, districts, and states to tie their education policies to results-based accountability, are looked down upon. And so are their supporters, including the National Council on Teacher Quality, the Education Leaders Council, the Progressive Policy Institute, the Abell Foundation, and Finn’s Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

In moving forward, Finn does not urge an outright rejection of the professionalism agenda, but rather an acceptance of both professionalism and deregulation and experimentation with both. He does, however, premise his recommendation on across-the-board acceptance of objectively measured student achievement as the indispensable gauge of success.

Deflecting Reform: An Age-Old Strategy

Finn shows that the professionalization agenda deflected the teacher reforms urged by A Nation At Risk. What he does not say, however, is that educators have, for decades, deflected reforms by much the same strategy. In fact, a recent report from Fordham Foundation shows how a promising initiative of the early 1990s - the New American Schools Development Corporation - was steered to school-friendly ends by many of the Carnegie stakeholders (see here).

Policymakers should not expect substantial improvement in teacher preparation so long as teacher educators are permitted to implement reforms without clear accountability for improved student achievement. For decades, teacher educators have taught teachers that education’s top priority is the full and healthy development of the child, not the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Teacher educators will not “reform” themselves on this issue because it is one of their core beliefs. Any real reform will require accountability for results followed up by reconstitution or closure of failing programs.

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