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## How to Build a Better Teacher: The Emergence of a Competitive Education Industry

By Robert Gray Holland Senior Fellow, Lexington 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)

# To Build a Better Teacher: The Emergence of a Competitive Education Industry

*Robert Gray Holland*

Most education professors have a vision of education that differs radically from that of the primary consumers of public education.

While clear majorities of parents, teachers, and civic leaders want K-12 schools to ensure basic skills -- with an emphasis on content and correctness, as well as order and discipline -- a 1997 survey by the nonpartisan organization Public Agenda found that a startling 86 percent of professors of education deemed it more important for a pupil to grapple with a process of reaching a conclusion than actually to reach correct answers about math or history or to acquire sound writing skills.

Under typical state licensing requirements, college students aspiring to teach in public schools must complete a heavy load of pedagogical courses taught by these professors. Yet, fewer than one in five of the education professors regard emphasis on correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation to be “absolutely essential.” Moreover, only one-third of them believe it essential to maintain order and discipline in the classroom.

In his new book, veteran journalist Robert Holland associates such attitudes with a continuation of the so-called progressive philosophy that has held sway in schools of education for a century. From interviewing teachers and reviewing professional literature, he concludes that most of today’s education professors subscribe to what is now called the learner-centered or constructivist philosophy. They reject teacher-directed instruction while advocating that children naturalistically “construct their own knowledge.”

Holland raises the central question: Is this learner-centered doctrine so demonstrably superior in raising student achievement that its proponents should enjoy a near-monopoly in the preparation and certification of the nation’s public-school teachers?

Warranted or not, the education schools hold such power by means of their long-time collaboration with state departments of education. The schools detail the many credit-hours of pedagogical courses they deem necessary for teacher-candidates and department bureaucrats make the regimen mandatory for certification. This is a prime example of what economists call “regulatory capture” – regulators working in the interest of the regulated rather than consumers.

As to whether the monopoly is merited, the answer is a resounding “no.” Based on an exhaustive analysis of a century’s worth of data on the relative effectiveness of learner-centered and teacher-centered instructional methods, Jeanne Chall of the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that “for most children” teacher-centered is the most effective approach. Her book detailing her findings -- “The Academic Achievement Challenge” – was published posthumously in 2000.

Despite a growing public desire for improved student achievement, schools of education have increased their focus on social issues and tightened their hold on the teaching profession. Independent teacher licensure boards and the newly created National Board for Professional Teaching Standards now require teachers to affirm their commitment to the “equity,” “diversity,” and “social justice” agendas promoted by the schools of education.

Holland advocates an alternative path to teaching that would eliminate the bureaucratic and ideological obstacles to bright candidates while ensuring that they possess the necessary knowledge and skills to teach. The central element of his proposed reform would be a system of objectively evaluating the impact the teachers have had on their students’ learning – the “value” they add to their students’ achievement year to year.

As a prototype for a more accessible, reformed model, Holland suggests a combination of the proven innovations now used in New Jersey and Tennessee.

Over the past 20 years, New Jersey has instituted a dual-track to teaching that puts liberal-arts majors on equal footing with school-of-education collegians in the competition for teaching jobs. In addition, the education students take far fewer pedagogical courses than in the past and must complete a major in the arts and sciences. Students from both tracks are mentored in their initial classroom assignments by an experienced teacher.

Holland proposes that as the new teachers settle in, the effectiveness of their teaching be verified by a system such as that used in Tennessee. Pioneered by Dr. William Sanders, the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) tracks annual student achievement gains through a sophisticated analysis of achievement test scores. TVAAS was adopted in the early 1990s as part of a reform package focused on results.

Holland also suggests ways in which value-added assessment could be used to identify exceptional teaching and high quality training. Teachers could be rewarded for exceptional performance in meeting difficult challenges, as is being done in Chattanooga’s inner-city schools. Effective teacher-preparation programs could be identified on the basis of their graduates’ success in bringing about value-added achievement gains.

Education reform initiatives ranging from the federal No Child Left Behind Act to the privately funded, bipartisan Teaching Commission assembled by former IBM chief Louis Gertsner, Jr., are embracing the value-added concept. Holland shows why and how it can be used to improve the training of teachers.

*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*