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How to Get Better Teachers — and Treat Them Right

Want better students? Find better teachers.

Chester E. Finn, Jr. explains how we can lure America's best and brightest back into the classroom. *continued ▶*

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

American teachers do not get the respect, the freedom, the compensation, or the rewards that many of them deserve. At the same time, U.S. schools are not producing satisfactory results, a problem that is not likely to be solved until our classrooms are filled with excellent teachers. The key to well-educated children and strong schools is a top-notch teaching staff.

Every child needs—and deserves—a knowledgeable, dedicated, and effective instructor, well grounded in academic content, expert at imparting knowledge and skills to children, and passionate about this calling. Unfortunately, while U.S. schools have many fine teachers today, they don't have enough. Complicating matters further, as many as two million of today's teachers will quit or retire over the next decade, creating a large need for qualified people to replace them—and for even more to accommodate the country's dual trends of enrollment growth and class-size shrinkage.

About this nest of intertwined quality and quantity problems there seems to be a national consensus. How to get from here to a suitable set of solutions, however, is the subject of far less agreement. My purpose here is to suggest a promising path that is very different from the one most policymakers and education reformers are presently following.

BACKGROUND

In round numbers, U.S. public and private schools employ three million teachers. Many other Americans—estimates run in the neighborhood of four million—were trained to become teachers but for various reasons are not working in classrooms today. In addition, an unknown number of individuals who did not originally plan to teach would now consider doing so if the terms of employment—and entry—were different.

Private schools, for the most part, are free to hire anyone they like, without regard to specialized training or state certification. In some jurisdictions, public charter schools enjoy similar flexibility. With rare exceptions, however, standard public schools are permitted to employ only people who have been “certified” as teachers by the state.

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Certification procedures and requirements vary, but typically they oblige the would-be public schoolteacher to attend a state-approved training program, ordinarily in a college of education, where the candidate must study a prescribed curriculum. Many of the required courses involve pedagogy, child development, the “foundations of education,” “classroom diversity,” “study of self (teacher) as learner,” and so on.

Practice teaching is ordinarily required (and is the part that teachers generally find most valuable). There may be a test of basic skills. It is also common, at some point along the way, to test teaching candidates for their knowledge of pedagogy and, sometimes, knowledge of the subject in which they will be certified (which may or may not be the subject they end up teaching). States award teaching certificates to those who survive this cluttered, protracted, and irksome process. That does not, however, mean that everyone holding such a certificate is well educated himself, much less that he will prove effective at imparting what he knows to the children in his classroom.

If an individual gets through college without having subjected herself to this regimen, and then seeks to become a public schoolteacher, it's usually necessary to return to college for a year or longer.

This marriage of state-approved teacher-training programs and state certification requirements for individual teachers has been the subject of criticism for many years. Two main objections are commonly voiced: first, that the content of these preparation sequences and certification requirements is banal and pointless stuff beloved of educationists but not very valuable to actual school practitioners; that it's minimally linked to subject matter mastery; and—most research indicates—that it can muster scant evidence of a relationship to classroom effectiveness. The second complaint is that this training-and-certification cycle is so burdensome—and full of “Mickey Mouse” courses and requirements—that it discourages able would-be teachers from making their way into the public schools.

These are problems that the nation needs to solve, for teacher quality matters a great deal. We know this from decades of research and the experience of millions of families. Recent studies have found dramatic differences between the performance of youngsters who are assigned the best teachers and those entrusted to the worst classroom practitioners. No matter how well intentioned, U.S. school reform efforts will surely falter unless essentially all teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to help essentially all their pupils meet high standards.

Longevity and paper credentials bring more money, but effectiveness does not.

Training and certification aren't the whole story, either. The personnel practices of the teaching field are archaic and bureaucratic. Licensure is often followed by a hiring sequence in which the likeliest openings for a novice are in the worst schools, there to be hurled into a classroom and left pretty much alone with a bunch of demanding kids and little opportunity for collegueship, professional growth, or mentoring by expert teachers.

On top of that, the expert teachers themselves get no tangible rewards; they're paid exactly the same as ordinary (and weak) instructors. Longevity and paper credentials bring more money, but effectiveness does not. Nor does it matter whether one is a high school chemistry teacher whose other job opportunities pay \$100,000 or a middle

school social studies teacher whose nonteaching options are far less lucrative. Their salaries remain identical. The same spurious equality holds for teachers in tough inner-city classroom situations and those in cushier environments.

In crafting solutions to the problems outlined above, policymakers have a fundamental choice between two basic approaches: one regulatory in nature, the other deregulatory.

THE ROMANCE OF REGULATION

The dominant theory of quality control for U.S. teachers relies on state regulation of entry into the profession. This approach has led to a cadre of people half drowned in pedagogy but not necessarily drenched in content. Indeed, the inability of today's licensure system to ensure that teachers can stay afloat in the subjects they teach is one of its gravest failings—and suggests an antiknowledge bias in the field that is scarcely compatible with attracting and retaining the best and brightest. Amazingly, state certification does not always insist on deep college-level study of the subjects to be taught, nor does it employ rigorous exams to verify the adequacy of a teacher's knowledge of his field.

Exacerbating the problem of weak subject mastery is the lamentable fact that teachers often find themselves assigned to courses outside their own fields of expertise as cost-saving measures or administrative convenience or because of instructor shortages in advanced subjects such as math and science. "Foreign education ministers who visit me are just stumped when I try to explain this practice," noted former U.S. Education secretary Richard Riley. "Their translators simply have no words to describe it."

Since most teachers merely follow the rules that their states set for certification, these shortcomings in the preparation of our teaching force must be laid at the feet of the regulators, not the teachers.

Yet, paradoxically, states are now tightening the regulatory vise, making it even harder to enter their public school classrooms by piling on new requirements for certification. Many are following the lead of California, which requires a five-year preparation sequence.

Recruiting **smarter** and **better-educated** people into teaching **will do more** to improve school results.

State regulation values the wrong things. Researchers have struggled to identify the key traits that distinguish good teachers from bad. Insofar as there are links between teacher characteristics and classroom effectiveness, the strongest of these involve verbal ability (and, in some fields, subject matter knowledge). This suggests that recruiting smarter and better-educated people into teaching will do more to improve school results than requiring more or different preservice training.

Yet outstanding candidates are often deterred by the hurdles that the regulatory strategy erects. Burdensome certification requirements deflect eager individuals who might make fine teachers but are put off by the cost of completing a conventional preparation program. One college senior writes, “What discourages us most are the

restrictive paths to the classroom and the poor reputation of schools of education—and as a result, of teaching itself... It is the certification process, then, and not a lack of interest, that steers us away from teaching.” The best and brightest of today’s young Americans have bountiful career options; if the costs of becoming a teacher are too high, they will do something else.

The most insidious hurdles involve lengthy training in pedagogy. Although some policymakers and parents view “certified” teachers as synonymous with qualified teachers, being certified generally means little more than having endured state-approved training at a school of education. Yet there’s little evidence that this leads to effective teaching.

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they will do **something else**.

In fact, there is much evidence that traditional training programs are not a prerequisite for good teaching, hence ought not to enjoy monopoly control over classroom entry. Where personnel decisions have been deregulated, schools rush to hire well-educated persons whether or not they possess standard certification. In New Jersey—the first state to implement alternative certification—roughly 20 percent of all teachers now enter the field via that route. Private schools, which are free to hire anyone they like and which have a strong market-driven incentive to engage the best instructors they can, hire a large proportion of unlicensed teachers.

We would be better off to acknowledge that nobody can systematically measure the elusive qualities that good teachers have. Teaching is a complicated art and there are many ways to be good at it. Teachers with very different teaching styles and approaches can be equally effective.

Despite the inability of the regulatory approach to ensure good teaching, a redoubling of regulatory zeal remains the field's preferred solution to the quality problem. The idea that more—and more homogeneous—training is the key has innate appeal for states seeking to do something. Regulation is contagious. Thus a number of governors and legislators have clambered onto this bandwagon. But it isn't likely to work. We certainly cannot be sure that it will work. It's premature and imprudent, therefore, to clamp this approach onto all 50 states, hence the need to experiment with other strategies.

A COMMON SENSE ALTERNATIVE

Instead of using degrees earned, standards met, or the opinions of other teachers as indicators of quality, we should evaluate teachers based on the only measure that really matters: whether their pupils are learning. Although good teachers do many other worthwhile things besides add to student learning—they help other teachers, serve as moral role models, work with parents, and so on—nothing they do is as important as academic achievement. The more of it they produce, the greater will be society's admiration for them and the more open-handed will be the attitude of policymakers and taxpayers regarding their compensation.

Gauging the student learning that individual teachers produce is no pipe dream. Careful statistical analysis can identify with precision the gains that students make during a school year and then estimate the effects of individual teachers on their progress. Judging teachers by the results they produce is the core of the common-sense strategy. The rest is straightforward: states should allow individual public schools to employ teachers as they see fit and then hold those schools accountable for their results.

Deregulating teaching in this way will not only expand the pool but also raise its quality.

Since good teachers can be found in many places, prepared in many ways, and channeled into schools via many pathways, states should scrap nearly all the hoops and hurdles that discourage good candidates from entering the classroom. Deregulating teaching in this way will not only expand the pool but also raise its quality. The role of the state should be to ensure that teachers do no harm. All other key personnel decisions should be devolved to the school itself. In return for this autonomy, schools should be held accountable for producing results. (Monitoring those results is another state responsibility.)

Such an approach recognizes that there is no “one best system” for preparing and licensing good teachers. This argues against mandating any single path into the profession. Education schools certainly ought not to control the only route, especially considering how many teachers report that the best place to learn their craft is on the job in the company of other good teachers.

Common sense argues that **outstanding** teachers should be **paid more** than **mediocre** ones.

Rather than buttressing an orthodoxy that does not work, the commonsense approach embraces pluralism. In a deregulated environment, good teacher education programs will thrive and prosper. Those that do a poor job will not, once they lose the protection that the regulatory cartel confers. Principals and their school teams will decide whether to hire teachers who have been trained in certain pedagogical methods and theories. They will do so if they see proof that those methods are effective and those theories lead to student achievement.

For principals and school teams to shape their own membership in such a way as to shoulder accountability for school results, they must not only be free to select from a wide range of candidates but must also have the flexibility to compensate staff members according to marketplace conditions (and individual performance), and they must be able to remove those who do not produce satisfactory results. Everyone who

has studied effective schools attests to the importance of a cohesive team that shares a common vision, and almost everyone who has studied current teacher personnel systems has witnessed the danger of tying the school team's hands when it comes to deciding who will join (or remain in) it. The only way to help effective teams to form is to allow them to choose their own members.

That means flexible pay, too. Common sense argues that teachers of subjects in short supply should be paid more than those in overstocked fields, that teachers working in hard-to-staff schools should earn more than those in schools with hundreds of applicants, and that outstanding teachers should be paid more than mediocre ones. Yet today the typical public school salary schedule (and teachers' union contract) allows for none of these commonsensical practices. In only 12 states can teacher pay vary at all based on performance or marketplace conditions.

School-level executives and veteran teachers are in the best position to know who teaches well and who teaches badly in their school. They have access to far more significant information than state licensing boards and government agencies. They should be authorized (and, if need be, trained) to appraise each teacher's singular package of strengths and weaknesses rather than having distant bureaucracies decide who will be on their team. Once hired, teachers should be evaluated based on the only measure that ultimately matters: whether their pupils are learning.

CONCLUSION

For too long, policymakers have tackled the teacher quality problem by tightening regulations and expanding pedagogical requirements, even though this approach shrinks the pool of candidates while having scant effect on their quality. Forty years of experience suggest that this strategy has not worked. It probably cannot work. It's reminiscent of the heavy drinker who proposes to cure his hangover by imbibing more of the strong spirits that gave him the headache in the first place.

As with the alcoholic, a "hair of the dog that bit you" approach to teacher quality reform can be counted on to make the problem worse. Indeed, it has already compounded today's dual crisis of quality and quantity and weakened the impulse to turn teaching into a true profession. True professions, after all, don't hide behind government regulations, tenure laws, and uniform pay scales.

States that want to persist with this approach will naturally do so. On the basis of today's evidence, one would have to say that most states will continue in this mode. But I suggest that others try something different. I predict that states that reduce barriers to entry will find not only that their applicant pool is larger but also that it includes many more talented candidates. The key is to shun excessive and ill-conceived regulations and focus instead on student outcomes. Let anyone teach who demonstrates the capacity to produce the desired results, and reward them accordingly.

This path to teacher quality is modeled on the approach that almost every successful modern enterprise has adopted to boost its performance and productivity: set high standards for the results to be achieved, identify clear indicators of progress toward those results, and be flexible and decentralized about the means for reaching them. Other organizations have recognized that regulating inputs and processes is counterproductive. There is little reason to believe that those methods will work better when addressing the teacher quality problem. They certainly haven't in the past.

It would be **a mistake** to put all our eggs in any **one policy basket.**

At the end of the day, what I am urging is open-mindedness, experimentation, and empiricism. Nobody today is certain how best to solve the teacher quality-and-quantity problems. It would be a mistake to put all our eggs in any one policy basket. The country, in fact, should try *both* the approaches discussed above—and others yet to be devised. Flexibility in return for results is the approach that many states are now employing for schools themselves—America is now experimenting with freedom, pluralism, and competition for its schools, all joined to accountability for their results.

In this spirit, many jurisdictions have scrapped the “one best system” view of education reform; instead, they encourage schools to be different, encourage individual schools to make their own decisions about schedule, instructional style,

and curricular focus, and empower families to select the schools that best suit their children, all the while monitoring academic performance and making that information public. The country's 2,000 (and counting) charter schools are perhaps the most vivid example of our willingness to solve the school-quality problem via deregulation. This approach trusts principals to run schools worth attending and parents to be astute consumers in the education marketplace, although it also uses statewide academic standards and tests to audit and report on actual achievement and to keep the consumers well informed.

A similar approach should be tried for teacher quality. Our children—and the nation—can only benefit from moves in this direction.

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