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# Let's Examine the Profession, Not the Teachers

Minimum competency tests for teachers will not solve our problems; we need fundamental changes in the structure of teaching and learning.

Last spring I had the sobering experience of attending a session at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting at which Bill Clinton (Governor of Arkansas), John Goodlad (Professor at UCLA), Albert Shanker (President of the American Federation of Teachers), and Lee Shulman (Professor at Stanford and President of AERA) discussed the pros and cons of state-required competency testing of practicing teachers.

The session focused on an initial presentation by Governor Clinton, which extolled the virtues of Arkansas' newly-launched competency testing program. Shanker followed with a reluctant endorsement of the program but lamented the state of affairs of the teaching profession in general. Goodlad was clearly opposed to the program and was more concerned with treating the causes rather than the symptoms of what ails the profession.

As the dialogue went on, I was overcome by what I was witnessing: the year was 1985 and over 500 people seriously concerned about schooling were listening to a panel of distinguished and equally concerned educators and politicians debate the wisdom of what is essentially a test of *functional literacy* for teachers! If there were ever a better symbolic representation of the current conditions and circumstances of teaching, I have yet to see it. But the symbolic meaning cuts deeper. It goes to the very core of the educational values and priorities of a major world power that has to worry about the functional literacy of its public school teachers as it approaches the 21st century.

Whatever these values and priorities are, they appear to have little effect on the magnitude of resources, commitment, and wisdom necessary to turn around the teaching profession in this country. We are, I suspect, quickly becoming the laughingstock of many Asian and European nations whose teachers (1) are highly respected





members of their communities; (2) receive salaries equivalent to those of other high-level professions; and (3) teach approximately half-time in classrooms and engage in instructional diagnosis, planning, and other professional development activities during the other half. In short, the circumstances and conditions of teaching in these nations serve to attract quality people to a quality profession to participate in quality work environments and activities.<sup>1</sup>

### The Teaching Profession in America

We isolate our teachers in classrooms for at least five-sixths of their workday to manage approximately 150 student contact hours for instructional purposes. Then, when the going gets tough, the tough get going on the accountability bandwagon. The rhetoric of educational excellence is accompanied by the practice of *minimum* competency testing—first for students, now for their teachers.<sup>2</sup> We lure people into the profession with the offer of \$13,000 (the average beginning teacher salary per nine-month year in 1984). Then we become concerned and test them to see if they are functionally literate (7th grade-level basic skills performance in Arkansas, for example). Finally, if the current sentiment at the federal level prevails, we will put the finishing touches on “excellence” by setting schools in competition with one another and the private sector through voucher plans and the like. This sequence of events is hardly the way to go about “stemming the rising tide of mediocrity” in education.

### How Our System Has Failed

After many distinguished years in the field of educational evaluation, Cronbach and his associates (1981) noted that the “demand for accountability is a sign of pathology in the political system” (p. 4). Following many optimistic years of work toward school improvement and change, Sarason (1983) is fed up with America’s propensity to use schooling as a political football, as both “scapegoat and salvation” for society’s failures and fears. And it seems clear that the reforms of the ‘80s are motivated more by political interests and short-term, stopgap measures than by long-term commit-

ments and sustained efforts to significantly improve public schooling and the teaching profession.

Sarason now challenges the assumption that schools can change; in fact, he challenges the very viability of public schooling as we have known it. Schools are among society’s most entrenched and obdurate organizations when it comes to institutional change—rivaled only, perhaps, by correctional facilities.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the private sector is beginning to demonstrate that it can do no worse than government agencies in running prisons, and it can do it more efficiently. No doubt, it can demonstrate the same for schooling.<sup>4</sup>

It may be a bit premature, however, to give up on public schooling, to give up on our goal of a common, equitable, public education for *all* our nation’s children. The failure of major school interventions has been just that—they have been *interventions*. They have not involved school staff members; they have used them. And in return, teachers simply close their classroom doors and carry on business as usual. The many studies such as the Rand reports (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978) and the growing body of work on collaborative research (Ward and Tikunoff, 1982) have demonstrated the viability of alternative change paradigms. Our history of failure in major and pervasive educational change, then, is largely rooted in interventionist R & D models; we have not yet experienced an equivalent test of alternative approaches based on real collaboration between researchers and practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

### Hard Work in the Future

Indeed, the challenge is formidable for those seriously committed to fundamental school change and the concept of public schooling. We must continue in this pursuit, however, not through teacher examinations, but through critical examinations of the teaching profession in the context of a general examination of schooling itself.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, significant work in studying what goes on in schools has been completed recently and provides much of the required contextual grounding.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this work has been accompanied by renewed interests, concerns, and proposals regarding teacher education and the profes-

sion in general.<sup>8</sup>

My hope, therefore, is that while some go about “reforming” education, checking to see if teachers can read and compute, others will go about experimenting with more fundamental educational changes. By fundamental, I mean nothing short of reconceptualizing and reconstructing teaching and learning in schools for children and in schools for teachers of children. With these efforts must also come strong advocacy for the conditions and circumstances necessary to attract quality professionals to a quality profession. Those looking for a neat and tidy blueprint for all this may find comfort in the current wave of quick-fix accountability schemes. I submit, however, that these schemes are dangerous, especially in a time of rapidly accelerating social change. The future of public schooling itself may be on the line. □

<sup>1</sup>Staggering statistics on the current conditions and circumstances of teaching have been compiled and summarized by a number of researchers. See, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1984; Feistritzer, 1983; and Willoughby, 1985.

<sup>2</sup>We have elaborated considerably on this issue elsewhere (Sirotnik and Goodlad, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>The disturbing parallels between schools and correctional institutions have not gone unnoticed, particularly by sociologists attempting to understand the phenomenon of schooling. See, for example, Hurn, 1978.

<sup>4</sup>Large corporations such as IBM have already begun substantial educational and retraining programs for their employees.

<sup>5</sup>See the argument in Heckman, Oakes, and Sirotnik, 1983.

<sup>6</sup>This echoes Goodlad’s proposal (1970).

<sup>7</sup>See, among others, Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Lightfoot, 1983; and Sizer, 1984.

<sup>8</sup>For examples see Feistritzer, 1984; Joyce and Clift, 1984; Kerr, 1983; Sizer, 1984; and Zumwalt, 1982.

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