

TEACHER COMPETENCY AND TESTING

by

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In times of crisis it makes sense to step back and analyze the causes of the problems and some possible solutions. We believe that a crisis exists in ensuring a steady stream of competent and qualified new teachers to meet public school needs over the next decade. This is a crisis marked by teacher shortages and strong doubts about the quality of new teachers. We intend to explain why we believe this crisis exists and to offer some solutions to it, including explaining why we think competency testing for entrants into the teaching field is necessary.

All indications point to another period of teacher shortages in the 1980s and early 1990s. Shortages have already developed in most areas of the nation in mathematics, science, and special education. The current 16-25 age cohort is one of the smallest in recent times and the pool of college graduates will continue to be smaller in the coming years. Fewer and fewer college graduates will go into teaching because of the attractiveness of other career fields. Depressed salaries and poor working conditions place teaching in a very uncompetitive position compared to jobs in business, industry, and other areas of government. There are many reasons why teaching is

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not attracting as many people to it as it once did. Some teachers were attracted to the field because of the almost total job security it once provided. At one time security resulted from a growing teaching force and a demand for teachers that greater exceeded the supply of available teachers. This is no longer true. Teaching is no longer seen as a secure career field when in many districts teachers with five, or ten, or fifteen years' experience are being laid off. During the period of the Depression, and shortly afterward, teaching offered one of the few fields that many college educated people aspiring to be professionals could enter. Good job opportunities with chances for career advancement did not exist in many job areas. This was especially true for women. This has changed also. While the expanded opportunities for women, minorities, and others are a good thing, it is depriving education of many exceptional individuals who might have become teachers in past decades. There should be a real concern among the American public about where our next generation of teachers will come from. We may be faced with schools with no teachers.

How will this nation respond to a shortage of teachers? If teaching positions go unfilled and there are vacancies, there will be pressures to increase class size, increase teacher loads, and cut the number of programs offered. These moves will harm educational quality and make schools less attractive to teachers. Standards at teacher education institutions and standards for

entry into the profession may be lowered to increase the supply of certified teachers, again lowering educational quality and weakening public confidence in schools. Shortages of teachers could also lead to the "emergency credentially" of individuals who cannot satisfy the normal standards for licensing. While the intent would be to fill empty classrooms on a temporary basis, there would soon be an understandable clamor by those hired on temporary emergency certificates for job security. As has happened before, these teachers might be "grandfathered" into permanent licensing status. There may well also be a period of conflict over changing structures in education. Differential staffing arrangements and merit pay plans might be proposed, not on any claim of educational merit, but because they would be expedient.

Closely related to all this is the question of the caliber of students attracted to teacher education programs. Recent studies have indicated that teacher education students rank below other college program students on average Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores. For example, the January 21, 1982, Washington Post reported the results of a study conducted by the Virginia Council of Higher Education which showed that education majors at Virginia's state universities scored an average of 121 points lower on the SAT than did those who received bachelor's degrees in other fields. At Virginia private colleges, education majors scored an average of 80 points below other graduates at those schools. While we are on the verge of suffering a major

teacher shortage, the quality of candidates for collegiate teacher preparation programs are low. As the two phenomena work in concert, we will face a major crisis in education.

Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer has remarked that (Education Daily, January 21, 1982), "The teaching profession is caught in a vicious cycle, spiraling downward....Rewards are few, morale is low, the best teachers are bailing out and the supply of good recruits is drying up." Boyer highlights major problems which must be addressed.

Boston University education professor W. Timothy Weaver (1979) has studied this problem also. He has looked at three conditions which he presumes to be interrelated, which are a decline in the job market for teachers, a shift in student preferences away from the field of education, and a sharp decline in test scores of students intending to study education. Weaver sees a resulting pass through of those low test scores to graduating seniors in education programs and to those who find teaching positions. It is particularly devastating to note that Weaver found, in a comparison of the National Longitudinal Study of the class of 1976, that teacher education majors who did not go into teaching scored higher on four out of five competence measures in the areas of mathematics, reading, and vocabulary than those who found teaching jobs.

In its intermediate projections, the National Center for Education Statistics (1980) reports that the total demand for additional certificated teachers between 1984 and 1988 will be 745,000.

While similar projections for teacher supply indicate that the number of new teacher graduates will equal or slightly exceed the demand, a number of critical questions arise:

- How many of those new graduates will be attracted to public school teaching?
- How qualified will those new teachers be?
- How can we assure that only well qualified individuals enter teaching?

Until we adequately answer these questions as a matter of public policy, the crisis will remain.

Boyer proposes a three-part solution. He advocates that teacher education colleges tighten their admission standards, that they require seniors to pass competency tests before graduating, and that states award scholarships to promising teacher recruits. Weaver, on the other hand, concludes that schools of education must sever their close connection with the public schools and broaden their mission to recognize the need for education professionals in business, government, and other areas. By doing this, he feels, the schools of education would attract better qualified students.

While these approaches deal with part of the problem, neither of them, in our opinion, provide a comprehensive solution to problems of providing an adequate number of qualified teachers. We propose to offer some thoughts on how this situation might be remedied.

Money is one critical factor in this discussion. If teaching paid a salary comparable to that of other occupations which require similar preparation, then there might not be a shortage of highly qualified people who will go into teaching and remain

there. This would help alleviate the shortage. In the fall of 1982, the typical beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree will earn a salary in the \$12,000 to \$14,000 range. According to a recent report (Endicott and Lindquist, 1981), 1982 bachelor degree graduates can expect to start work at a salary of \$25,428 in engineering, \$18,648 in accounting, \$21,516 in mathematics and statistics, \$22,260 in computer science, and \$17,448 in business administration. If teaching salaries started at \$25,000 per year, there would probably be a lot more highly qualified college students attracted to teaching. While a \$25,000 per year may be a goal we must pursue, it does not seem realistic in the near future. The monetary incentive, however, remains a real problem when teaching does not remain competitive with other professions. There are, of course, many other reasons why teaching is not attractive to many people. Without adequate compensation, rectifying the other problems remains impossible. With adequate salaries, the other problems have a chance of being improved.

Teaching is a difficult job requiring a complex set of knowledges and skills. As A. Bartlett Giamatti (1980), president of Yale University, has written,

A liberal education is at the heart of a civil society, and at the heart of a liberal education is the act of teaching.... The teacher chooses. The teacher chooses how to structure choice. The teacher's power and responsibility lie in choosing where everyone will begin and how, from that beginning, the end will be shaped. The choice of that final form lies in the teacher's initial act.... Somehow the line between encouraging a design and imposing a specific stamp must be found and clarified. That is where the teacher first begins to choose.

This definition of a teacher imposes an awesome responsibility on those who choose to teach. It describes a person with a deep knowledge of learners and their ways, high level skills in the art of science of pedagogy, and a mastery of what is being taught. A teacher is a decision-maker within the field of teaching.

We in the American Federation of Teachers have some very definite ideas about how we can go about making sure that teachers our institutions of higher education produce are competent teachers. We also think it is perfectly appropriate and desirable to test new entrants into the teaching field to ensure that they meet minimum standards. As opposed to the leaders of the National Education Association, who hold that such tests are irrelevant and point the finger of blame everywhere but at themselves, the AFT welcomes fair and valid tests of new teachers' competencies. However, testing alone cannot do the job of producing competent teachers, teachers who in Giamatti's words can "choose how to structure choice."

Also, we do not accept the often made argument that we do not need to test college graduates because they have already satisfied the graduation requirements of the college. Colleges have very different programs and very different standards. To ensure that general standards are met, a test would be valuable. This was, and remains, the purpose for such tests as bar examinations for lawyers or the CPA exams for public accountants. The public needs confidence that lawyers, accountants, or teachers meet certain minimal standards. Tests are much less subjective

than other measures such as personal interviews or examinations of anecdotal records. Tests should be viewed as a positive means to support standards. Teaching deserves top notch college students who will be able to motivate and teach the children they teach. Bright and able college students who are interested in teaching students should be encouraged to enter teacher education programs. The job of teaching, however, needs to be enriched so that it will be attractive to the well-rounded individual who desires to teach.

If you do not know something, you cannot teach something. Teacher education students need a broad collegiate program in the humanities and arts, the social sciences, the natural and behavioral sciences, pure and applied mathematics, and the subject or subjects they are going to teach. A rigorous and demanding undergraduate program can produce this and testing to ensure that the candidate has attained this knowledge can be an important milestone in the preparation of a teacher.

The prospective teacher also needs specialization in a subject area. The undergraduate program should require that the student complete the requirements for a full major course of study in a subject. A history teacher should not be an education major with a brief background in history, but a history major with the skills and knowledge to teach. Preparation in the area of specialization can also be tested.

A rigorous program at the undergraduate level in the arts and sciences and in a substantive specialization can help attract those students who are interested in teaching, but find many current programs to be intellectually flabby.

There is also a substantive technical knowledge base that goes into the making of a teacher. The prospective teacher need professional or pedagogical training in such areas as developmental and social psychology; the history, philosophy, and sociology of education; diagnostic, planning, and prescriptive techniques; methods of instruction and classroom management techniques; techniques of research and evaluation; curriculum development; and teaching special needs students. Testing of teacher education students is appropriate in all of these areas.

Prospective teachers also need practical classroom experience before they are certified. Testing plays a part here because this experience needs to be evaluated continually in a formative fashion so that the teacher candidate can make the most efficient use of this period as a learning experience. The policy of the AFT is that this practicum should take the form of a two-to-three year teacher internship in which the intern would have less than a full teaching load and be paid a negotiated base salary. It must be stressed that the internship is a final and important qualifying step. This test is different from the others we have discussed because it is based on actual performance as a teacher, rather than on acquisition of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is a critical assessment point in preparing a new teacher for the classroom.

AFT's policy in this area calls for greater involvement by classroom teachers and teacher educators in setting and maintaining the standards for teaching. Specifically, the

AFT advocates a series of written examinations which test fundamental knowledge in language and computational skills, knowledge in general education and the subject area to be taught, and knowledge of pedagogy. These would be part of an extended licensure period and successful completion of these tests would be required before entry into the internship period. Permanent certification or licensure would be granted at the end of the internship. In the development of a testing program as we have described, it is important that teachers, school administrators, school boards, civil rights groups, community representatives and others have the opportunity to comment on and suggest improvements in the tests. Such input will improve the quality of the program and increase its acceptance.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, while we strongly advocate the use of tests in the manner we described, a test should never be the only criterion upon which the competence of a teacher preparation candidate should be evaluated. Other criteria must be employed, but even a single test can provide valuable information which can improve both the assessment process and the end-product. The test is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for entry into the profession.

This idea is not all that radical. Why not require entry tests universally for new teachers? We require physicians, attorneys, public accountants, and many others to pass exams before they are licensed to practice their profession. Maybe it is about time we do the same for teachers.

Those who oppose this idea, naturally including some teachers and some teacher organizations, argue that passing a test does not guarantee a good teacher, because a single test, or series of tests, cannot measure the complex set of abilities that go into making a good teacher. This is true, but it misses the point. If a student preparing to be a teacher cannot pass a test, or series of tests, as we have described above, then that student should not be allowed to become a teacher until the deficiencies are corrected. The National Education Association in their Resolution C-2, first passed in 1969, stated its opposition to testing for teacher competence by saying that they believe "that examinations such as the National Teacher Examination must not be used as a condition of employment, evaluation, criterion for certification, placement, or promotion of teachers. The Association is convinced that no test in existence is satisfactory for such usage." NEA Executive Director Terry Herndon has said that the Educational Testing Service, who makes the National Teacher Examination, "reminds me somewhat of armament manufacturers, who say guns don't kill people, people do" (NEA NOW, November 19, 1979). In 1972, the NEA called for the abolition of the National Teacher Examination. In response to this wrongheaded and destructive stance of the NEA, we say that all other abilities are superfluous if a math teacher cannot pass an exam in mathematics, or if an elementary teacher does not satisfy requirements of basic literacy, or if a teacher of the mentally handicapped cannot successfully complete a test in psychology.

The question naturally arises of testing of veteran teachers also. Teachers just as naturally resist this and will continue to do so until other veteran professionals are also retested periodically. Upon close examination, the entire notion for veteran teachers really does not make sense. Testing for new teachers is a screening device to keep those who have obvious deficiencies out of the profession. Mechanisms already exist to remove veteran teachers with similar deficiencies. During the teacher's probationary period, deficiencies can be identified and corrected by principals, or other supervisors, through the teacher evaluation system. An incompetent teacher who cannot correct his or her deficiencies can be terminated during the probationary period. Even after a teacher receives tenure, a competent supervisor can remove a teacher through a due process hearing procedure, if the supervisor can prove the case. All tenure does is provide an impartial process for evaluating a teacher's performance and removing inadequate teachers. Under these circumstances, to retest all veteran teachers on a periodic basis would be extremely costly, very time consuming, and ultimately wasteful. Millions of dollars would be spent on a new procedure, while existing procedures of teacher evaluation and dismissal for just cause are absolutely adequate. Retesting all veteran teachers would be throwing tax dollars away.

Another issue which must be addressed is the differential racial impact of testing. Experience with the National Teachers Examination in a number of states has shown that black teacher candidates are more likely to fail the test than white teacher

candidates. The real problem is the lack of resources and attention devoted to black schools in many parts of the country. The race differential has been declining in recent years because of the very positive impact of the civil rights movements and the heightened sensitivity to the problem. Rather than simplistically brand a test as racist, we must strike at the root of the problem. We do not want to certify teachers who cannot satisfy minimum standards. We do want to improve the education of minorities and take affirmative action to provide blacks and other minorities with the opportunity to succeed in teacher education programs to become good teachers. This requires a positive program which will actively encourage minority college students to pursue careers in teaching.

The issue comes down to answering some very fundamental questions, which should help frame the discussion and further explain our position.

Does the public have the right to insist on minimum standards of teacher competence? Of course, the public has this right. As in any professional area where the states license individuals to practice, the public, through their representative bodies, can and should insist that prospective teachers meet, and prove they can meet, certain minimum standards. We have suggested above what we think the minimum standards should be.

Can tests be appropriate measures of teacher competence? Tests cannot measure everything well. However, tests can

adequately and validly measure basic skill acquisitions, knowledge of general education and specific content areas, and knowledge of pedagogy. Skill areas can best be assessed through evaluating performance, but competence in knowledge areas is fundamental. Other qualities hardly matter if a person preparing to teach does not satisfy minimum competency requirements in the areas described.

Are tests of teacher competency the only key to reform? Teacher competency tests for new teachers are only one of the methods we can use to improve the quality of our teachers. Stronger academic programs for teacher education students, better admission decisions for entry into those programs, and realistic internship programs are other methods. Employing them all together will go a long ways toward solving the problem.

While these ideas may help solve the problems of teacher competency, how will they alleviate teacher shortages? Teacher shortages will continue to be a problem. However, if we react to teacher shortages by lowering standards and let substandard teachers into classrooms, we will only lower quality in the schools and undermine public confidence in public education. One solution, as we discussed above, is to simply make teacher salaries and working conditions comparable to those in other professions so that teaching can remain competitive in attracting bright and able college students. We believe this should be done, but we do not believe it will be done in the current

economic and social climate. Another potential solution is to re-examine the structure of public schools. There may well be innovative approaches to staffing which would allow highly qualified, experienced teachers to work with an instructional staff of certified individuals with varying backgrounds, preparations, competencies, and roles. We think this might be an answer to shortages of competent teachers and is an idea worthy of exploration and discussion.

There is no doubt that the debate about testing beginning teachers will go on for some time. It simply makes sense to test knowledge in basic skills, subject area, and teaching methodology, among other areas, to make sure that prospective teachers are not deficient in these areas. Why not start out right instead of complaining later about teacher competence?

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