

U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Education Reform: How Does Your Program Rate?

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Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President Barack Obama’s plan for teacher education reform and improvement was described in the document *Our Future, Our Teachers* (2011). The rationale for reform is that “many of our teacher preparation programs fall short” (p. 5). The measures of this are stated as “only 23% of all teachers come from the top third of college graduates,” “only 50% of current teacher candidates receive supervised clinical training,” and “more than three in five education school alumni report that their education school did not prepare them for classroom realities’ (p. 5). An added criticism is the teacher work force does not reflect the communities they teach. It was reported that 14% of the teachers come from diverse groups while 38% of students do so. In other venues, Secretary Duncan has repeatedly stated that the majority of teachers say their university preservice education left them unprepared for the classroom and added that 67% to 82% of principals say they are dissatisfied with the preparation their teachers have received through university programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

The recommendations of the report to “reform” teacher education include performance-based indicators of quality, tracking job placement and retention rates, surveying program graduates and their principals, and examining academic growth of elementary and secondary students taught by program graduates. While the evidence presented for the need of reform may be questionable and misleading, as will be explained, the recommendations have potential worth. We posit that the other “reforms” are largely standard operating procedure and the attacks on teacher preparation “credential mills” should be separated by the Department of Education from attacks on the field in general.

Criticisms by Department of Education

Top Performing University Students Do Not Enter Credential Programs

Since fall 2010, 877 applicants have been admitted into one of the three main teaching credential programs at California State University, Fresno. Students are admitted after obtaining a bachelor's degree and documenting subject matter competence by either obtaining an approved content area bachelor's degree or passing a high-stakes content-knowledge standardized test administered by the State. California does not offer undergraduate degrees in education, thus all admitted candidates come from fields other than education. For AY 10-11, the mean GPA of the 877 teacher candidates, prior to taking education courses, was 3.25. Campus-wide, the 3551 bachelor's degree recipients had an average GPA of 3.09. The eight undergraduate schools and college GPAs ranged from 2.98 (Agriculture) to 3.21 (Health and Human Service) thus all were lower than the credential student mean. Teacher education at Fresno State gets excellent candidates.

Percent Teachers and Principals Rating Teachers as Prepared

Beginning with the 2000-2001 academic year, the California State University (CSU) has conducted an annual evaluation of teacher preparation termed the *Systemwide Evaluation of Professional Teacher Preparation Programs (SETPP)*. The purpose of the evaluation is to monitor the effectiveness of the California State University system's 22 colleges and schools of education and to provide data to help programs make needed improvements in the preparation of teachers. Each campus annually sends to the CSU Chancellor's Office (CO) Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ) a list of former teacher candidates at that campus who, during a prior 12-month period, met the standards for state certification as K-12 teachers. The CO enlists the assistance of State agencies to identify the school sites of the completers, ultimately resulting in the identification of approximately 85% of program completers (CTQ, 2009).

The *SETPP* consists of separate but parallel 110-item surveys for each of three credentials (Elementary, Secondary, and Special Education). One survey for each credential type is given to program graduates after their first year of teaching, and the second survey form is given to their employment supervisors. The instruments were designed to collect information about the extent to which the teachers perceived the effectiveness of their program to prepare them for important teaching responsibilities and the extent to which their program coursework and fieldwork were professionally valuable and helpful to them during their initial year of teaching (CTQ, 2009).

Ratings were indicated on a four-point Likert-type scale with the following choices: *Well Prepared*, *Adequately Prepared*, *Somewhat Prepared*, and *Not At All Prepared*. Each campus receives data on their own graduates and the system's performance overall every year. Each education program uses the data for program improvement and evaluation; its reliability and validity has been supported by a number of external studies (Beare et al, 2012). System-wide responses from a total of 8575 program completers and 6101 employment supervisors of 2009-10 graduates were recently released. The percent of respondents in each of three credential categories who rated the overall effectiveness of the credential program as either well or adequately preparing the graduate for the rigors of teaching in the schools appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Number of respondent program completers and employment supervisors (and percentage) rating the teacher as being either well or adequately prepared for the classroom by the CSU teacher preparation program for three teaching credentials.

Credential	Program Completers		Employment Supervisors	
	Number	% Well /Adeq Prepared	Number	% Well /Adeq Prepared
Elementary Education	4744	77%	3365	86%
Secondary Education	2774	73%	2034	81%
Special Education	1057	74%	702	86%

This data dramatically contradicts Secretary Duncan's statements that 60% of teachers report they are inadequately prepared for teaching and 67% - 82% of principals saying the teachers were unprepared for the schools. The CSU data shows that a mean of 75% of the teachers rate their preparation in the "well prepared or adequately prepared" range. A mean of 84% of supervisors so rate the first year teachers. These are widely disparate numbers, not possibly explained by some small error of measurement.

Job Placement and Retention

The Administration stated that programs should be rated on the placement rate of their graduates and the years the graduates are retained in jobs. Almost *a priori*, job placement depends in large part on the economy, particularly the economy in the region in which a program is located. Our University is located in the city identified as number one in urban poverty by the Brookings Institute (Metropolitan Policy Program, 2008). Population growth in a region and competition from other teacher preparation institutions in the area also directly affect the placement rates of programs.

Teacher preparation was found to be a minor variable in teacher retention in California in a comprehensive examination by Ken Futernick (2007). Futernick's survey's of 6000 teachers showed poor preparation programs to be the 32nd most highly mentioned reason for leaving teaching teaching, mentioned by only 10% of dissatisfied teachers who quit positions. The highest rated reasons for leaving, named by over half the respondents, were bureaucratic impediments and poor district supports, closely followed by unsupportive principals and poor pay. Nearly 40% of those who left the profession stated they disliked the negative public image of teachers. Given this information, the impact of the Administration's statements about teaching and teacher preparation would seem to be a much greater cause of teachers leaving the profession than the quality of a preparation program.

Recommendations by the Administration

Teacher Performance Assessment

The members of *The Renaissance Group [TRG]* teacher education consortium, as well as researchers in Oregon and elsewhere studied and developed teacher work samples over 15 years ago. These evolved into what is now commonly termed a Teacher Performance Assessment [TPA] (Torgerson, Macy, Beare, & Tanner, 2010). California requires a state approved, valid Teacher Performance Assessment be passed by any teacher wishing to be credentialed (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CCTC], 2006). While Torgerson *et al.* found the TPA to be useful in program approval efforts, other research has found a poor relationship with traditional supervisor evaluations and question its use as a high-stakes assessment (Sandholtz & Shea, 2012). This is neither a new nor a revolutionary suggestion.

Surveys of Graduates and Principals

As stated, all schools in the California State University already do this, and have done so for over a decade (Beare *et al.*, 2012). Teacher preparation programs accredited by NCATE have been advised to do this for decades. One of the authors of this manuscript was assigned this task in the 1980s at his university. Again, this demand for reform is one that is standard operating procedure for virtually all state universities, colleges, or accredited schools.

Tracking K-12 Achievement Associated with Teacher Preparation

This recommendation is perhaps the most interesting. Teachers are an important variable in student learning, perhaps the most important (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Research by the CTQ has indicated that by using careful value-added methodology, one can determine an effect size from different models of teacher preparation. These effects may exceed the effects of other variables traditionally considered important, such as student socio-economic level or English learner status (Wright *et al.*, 2012). The effects are however small compared to the effect of prior learning. However, certain findings are clear. For example, CSU prepared teachers obtain significantly higher math and language arts achievement than teachers not prepared in the CSU (Young & Wright, 2012). Even with the complete collaboration of five large school districts in the state, it has taken the CTQ multiple years to develop even preliminary analyses of the effect of certain teacher preparation variables on achievement. States (or the federal government) need to provide tools and resources to teacher preparation institutions should they seriously expect them to develop accurate methodology to determine program effects on K-12 achievement. There needs to be accessible systems for tracking teachers accurately to determine the effect size of different teacher education programs and/or approaches.

Summary

The Administration bases its rationale for reform on false information or information gathered from the worst programs, likely for-profit, non-traditional programs. It claims that poor students go on to be teachers, that graduates and administrators condemn preparation programs, and that the programs have responsibility for teachers leaving the field. The data indicate these claims are patently false when referencing schools such as those in *The Renaissance Group*. In addition, the suggested reforms are already largely in place in such institutions.

Conclusion

Secretary Duncan and the Department of Education attack the entire field of education and blame it for the nation's woes. The entire profession of teacher education has become "the usual suspects." In reality, all *TRG* institutions and almost all public university programs are reputable and engaged in serious, self-initiated improvement efforts. There are, of course, for-profit schools that are irresponsible and execrable. Most of us have experience with teachers who were products of these programs. The authors have had conversations with graduates of such programs who state, "I learned nothing in the program and completed most courses in a weekend. It would have been bad if I didn't already know how to teach," and "I just owed it to my family to take the easy route." While many districts will not hire graduates of these programs, others end up in classrooms, failing our students. Mr. Duncan should begin to differentiate between this type of disgrace and legitimate teacher preparation.

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