

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 150

PS 014 184

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 TITLE Teacher Education That Promotes Educational Excellence: How to Know It When You See It.
 PUB DATE Dec 83
 NOTE *p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the National Forum on Excellence in Education (Indianapolis, IN, December 6-8, 1983).
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Educational Assessment; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Student Teaching; Teacher Certification; *Teacher Education; *Teacher Effectiveness

ABSTRACT

Few positive comments about the way the nation prepares its teachers have been made. Many teacher education programs are in disarray due to inept staff and curricula that have not kept up with research results. In addition, many state agencies have set teacher certification requirements that are political in nature. From current analyses of teacher education and recent research on effective teaching and learning, one can derive at least 10 criteria by which to judge the quality of teacher preparation programs. These criteria can serve as guidelines for the redesign of teacher education. In conclusion, the reform of education and the improvement of teacher education must go hand in hand. (BJD)

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Teacher Education that Promotes Educational Excellence:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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How to Know It When You See It

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Whether one looks at parent and public opinion surveys, the current spate of national studies and reports, the pronouncements of governors and state legislators, the attitudes of university professors, the views of teachers and school administrators, or the evaluation by teacher-candidates of their experience, one can find little that is positive being said about the way the nation prepares its teachers.

There can be no doubt that many, if not most, teacher education programs are in disarray. Too often they are staffed by persons who are neither scholars nor outstanding teachers. Curricula have not kept up with the results of research on teaching and learning and courses generally lack academic rigor. Too many students preparing to be teachers ask little of their own performance and their professors reciprocate by keeping standards low and requirements undemanding. There are schools of education for which this unhappy characterization does not apply. But there are all too few of these schools and there appear to be no teacher education programs that are widely acknowledged to be exemplary.

State agencies that set criteria for certifying teachers often are part of the problem. Too many certification requirements reflect the political dispositions of state board members, the lobbying efforts of groups that have a stake in the offering of certain courses, or the educational philosophies of state agency personnel. If certification (and accreditation) requirements were limited to those that could be linked directly to student learning, we could have much more flexible and creative programs for educating teachers.

It is clearly time for reform. The political momentum is present. Recognition of the importance of good teaching to educational excellence is widespread. Many schools of education realize that they must change if they are to gain the support of the general public, teachers and administrators, their academic colleagues and those who might be interested in teaching. But what to do? If reform is necessary, what directions should it take?

From current analyses of teacher education and recent research on effective teaching and learning, one can derive at least ten criteria by which to judge the quality of teacher preparation programs. These criteria can serve as guidelines for the redesign of teacher education.

1. The curriculum should manifest current knowledge related to teaching and learning in a coordinated and coherent way.

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2. Education courses, including so-called methods courses, should be academically rigorous and concerned with theory and methods of inquiry and analysis as well as with the transmission of knowledge. Such courses need not make up more than one-fourth of the required undergraduate credits a student would normally take but elective education courses should not be limited to this number.
3. Professors of education should understand and be able to convey to students the theories and knowledge that define the current boundaries of their fields of expertise.
4. Students preparing to be teachers should engage in a strong program in general (nonprofessional) studies which includes, at least for junior high and secondary school teachers, a major or its equivalent in the field for which the teacher is being certified. It should be recognized, however, that since academic majors are often not very coherent and may require courses a teacher in that field could not reasonably use, earning a major in a given field may not be an appropriate way to prepare to teach in one's field. In any case, subject matter competence should be defined by the disciplinary faculty.
5. There should be established selective processes for recruiting students, screening them before they enter upper division courses, and certifying them for the profession.
6. Once in the teacher education program, students should be expected to perform at a high level.
7. Would-be teachers should be required by their professors to engage in "active learning" as a result of the instructional and learning strategies used. These strategies should include interactive teaching, the use of cases, simulations, role playing, peer teaching, and other campus based activities as well as field based education. In other words, the teaching would-be teachers experience should model the instructional strategies they are urged to use when they enter the profession.
8. Students should learn to apply theories, knowledge and methods learned in on-campus settings through a series of carefully supervised field experiences. Serious consideration should be given to substituting a post-baccalaureate year-long paid internship that is closely supervised for what we now try to achieve through "practice teaching."
9. Students should acquire the skills, understanding, and values that are necessary to the assumption of leadership and the facilitation of change. Students should be able to demonstrate these abilities in problem solving and self-expression.

10. Schools of education should enlist the talent and expertise of faculty members from throughout the college and universities of which they are a part.

These guidelines could be applied to undergraduate or "fifth year" programs or programs that both certify and award a master's degree. The teacher education programs in many colleges and universities already meet some, if not many, of these guidelines. But such programs are uncommon and, in general, they are not the source of either many teachers or the public perception of the quality of teacher education. In times of declining numbers of 18-22 year olds, it would be suicide for some teacher preparation programs to take some of the steps suggested here.

It is one thing to specify criteria by which to judge the quality of teacher preparation programs. It is quite another to indicate how needed changes can be brought about. The tone of many reform proposals is regulatory and punitive. The idea that significant change can occur simply by punishing failure to meet prescribed goals and to maintain high standards is naive. Such policies in fact create the illusion of reform without facilitating change and creating new possibilities. The nation must educate almost 200,000 new teachers annually over the next few years if it is to staff its schools with qualified persons. This cannot be done by those schools of education that meet even half of the criteria outlined above. While many teacher education programs should be encouraged to go out of business, we also need to find ways to support the development of more effective ways to prepare teachers. No such mechanisms exist, not in professional organizations, not in flagship universities, not in state agencies, and not in the federal government.

The ability of teacher education programs to attract the most able faculty and students is constrained ultimately by the status and rewards of the teaching profession. The reform of education and the improvement of teacher education must go hand in hand. Without the former, the latter will have little long term effect. And, without better teachers, we cannot have better schools.

Finally, let me note that the continuing professional education of teachers is at least as important to better teaching as is the improvement of preservice education. And, for lots of reasons, it will be more difficult to secure.