

September 22, 2006

Dow Jones WebReprint Service®

No Teacher Left Behind

Schools of education have gotten bad grades before. Yet there are some truly shocking statistics about teacher training in this week's report from the Education Schools Project. According to "Educating School Teachers," three-quarters of the country's 1,206 university-level schools of education don't have the capacity to produce excellent teachers. More than half of teachers are educated in programs with the lowest admission standards (often accepting 100% of applicants) and with "the least accomplished professors." When school principals were asked to rate the skills and preparedness of new teachers, only 40% on average thought education schools were doing even a moderately good job.

The Education Schools Project was begun in 2001, with foundation funding, to analyze how America trains its educators and to offer constructive criticism. Its report card this week is significant for two reasons. First, it is based on four years of broad and methodical research, including surveys of school principals and of the deans, faculty members and graduates of education schools. In addition, researchers studied programs and practices at 28 institutions. No matter how many establishment feathers get ruffled by the results of these inquiries, miffed educators can't easily brush off the basic findings: There are glaring flaws and gaps in our teacher-training system.

The study also comes at a uniquely challenging moment in American education. The final report was written by ESP director Arthur Levine, a former president of Columbia's Teacher's College. Mr. Levine notes that we're currently facing a national shortage of nearly 200,000 teachers—at the same time that, "to compete in a global marketplace and sustain a democratic society, the United States requires the most educated population in history." Society now demands that teaching success be measured no longer by what children have studied but by what they have actually learned. (A copy of "Educating Teachers" is at www.edschools.org.)

The report's most stunning revelation—to outsiders at least—is that nobody knows what makes a good teacher today. Mr. Levine compares the training universe to "Dodge City." There is an "unruly" mix of approaches, chiefly because there is no consensus on how long teachers should study, for instance, or whether they should concentrate on teaching theory or mastering subject matter. Wide variations in curricula, and fads—like the one that produced the now-discredited "fuzzy math"—make things worse. Compare such chaos with the training for professions such as law or medicine, where, Mr. Levine

reminds us, nobody is unleashed on the public without meeting a universally acknowledged requisite body of knowledge and set of skills.

Mr. Levine also outlines many recommendations. Some seem obvious: more in-classroom training, for instance. Some are perennial: The report notes that one way to attract the best and the brightest to teaching would be to pay them the same salaries as other professionals —although it more realistically mentions special scholarships and merit pay as alternative incentives. The report also reveals that many failing teacher programs operate as "cash cows" for universities, which encourage their education departments to admit (and graduate) almost anybody for the sake of tuition dollars. It suggests closing some of these schools and directing students toward more rigorous academic institutions. Some critics in the education establishment already have labeled that idea "elitist," saying that it would deprive many people of a chance to become teachers.

Yet there's one idea that seems more important and urgent than the others. That is the recommendation that all states begin collecting information about how much their schoolchildren have learned from kindergarten through high school so it can be correlated with information about how their teachers were trained. Until this fundamental question is explored and answered—what kind of training produces teachers who get the best results from their children—we'll be holding classes in the dark.