
THE POLICY AGENDA FOR TEACHER EDUCATION: THE OHIO STORY

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The purpose of this essay is to call for an active engagement of professional education faculty in the policy issues on teacher education. In this era of standards and accountability, an unprecedented number of legislative decisions for the education field has been made at the national and state levels, with or without sufficient involvement from education faculty. Granted, we faculty don't normally take much interest in policy matters and their making. We are busy engaging in our own scholarship, fulfilling duties at our own institutions. Knowing all too well that education policy making is often very much political in nature, a process likely with limited rationale or logic but plenty of negotiating and deal cutting,¹ we would rather take a "higher road" by staying away from it. Besides, most of us do not know how and where to get relevant information, and are not familiar with the process. Even the deans of education schools and colleges sometimes find it challenging to engage effectively in the decision making process of teacher education policy at the state level.

However, various interest groups are attempting to reshape the landscape of teacher preparation in the nation. The provisions and requirements in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) pertaining to the preparation, recruitment and retention of teachers, possibly the most complex, challenging and far-reaching parts in the Act,² have been pushing real policy changes in states to a new height. In Ohio, a number of legislative actions have taken place in the recent years that will undoubtedly change the practice of all 50 institutions of higher education (IHEs) that prepare teachers and other school personnel. Consequently, the impact will extend onto individual programs and the professional life of faculty members, including professional teacher education faculty and Arts and Sciences faculty. In what follows, I will briefly describe an analysis of the competing agendas driving teacher education practice in the nation and tell an Ohio story based on my involvement and observations. I recommend that faculty should learn to get politically smart, rethink the strategies for engaging in the debate about teacher education policy. And with our enhanced credibility, we can keep teacher education on a solid theoretical ground that most of us professional educators would agree and endorse.

THREE POLICY AGENDAS

There are currently three identifiable policy agendas behind reforms of teacher education in the nation, as Marilyn Cochran-Smith points out: the professionalization agenda, the deregulation agenda, and the overregulation

agenda.³ The professionalization agenda is pushing to professionalize teacher education by establishing a professional knowledge base connected to the PK-12 school curriculum. Supported by most professional teacher educators, their professional organizations, and a number of non-profit foundations that share a similar standards-based teacher education philosophy, the professionalization agenda seeks a broad-based effort to develop a consistent approach to teacher education nationwide based on high standards for pre-service preparation, in-service development, licensing, and certification of teachers. The quality of teacher education is ensured by systematically implementing a quality course of study that covers an identifiable body of professional knowledge, skills and dispositions. The measurement of teacher quality is based on performance and long-term impact on students' overall growth. This agenda advances a belief that all teacher education programs, traditional and alternative alike, should hold accountable to high program standards set forth by the content area Specialty Professional Associations (SPAs), and that all teacher preparation IHEs should be accredited by an approved national accrediting body such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

The deregulation agenda runs in the direct opposite of the professionalization agenda. Advocated mostly by conservative education think tanks and supported by some business CEOs and political leaders, and with a growing publicity in media and policy discussions, this agenda asserts that the dominating format of teacher preparation in IHEs is a monopoly that must be dismantled. Many of the state licensing requirements and teacher education coursework including school-based field and clinical experiences, are unnecessary barriers that block out many of the young and bright from entering teaching. Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige made this point clear when he criticized the nation's teacher education as a "broken system," and the certifying teacher regulations too strenuous. He calls for a broadened base for teaching candidacy and the creation of alternative preparation programs.⁴ With this broadened definition of teacher education, quality of teacher preparation can be readily indicated by the state teacher test or alternative high-stakes tests. A free market model of alternatives of teacher preparation should be allowed and encouraged, because, only through competition can improvement in PK-12 student learning result. Examples of such alternatives include federal programs such as Teach for America, Troops to Teach, and various other "fast track" alternative licensure programs that have quickly emerged in many states.

Ironically at the same time, an overregulation agenda becomes identifiable, evidenced by an increasingly tighter state control over teacher education programs. Specific rules pertaining to program size, content coverage, credit hours, and field or clinical hours, traditionally under the jurisdiction of IHEs or academic departments, are now increasingly controlled by and directly handed down from the state. Such control is necessary, because

teacher education is seen mostly as a utility, with a primary role of helping achieve broader public policy goals such as addressing the labor force needs and economic development for the state. Therefore, education program offerings should reflect these higher goals, and quality should be measured by how effective and efficient the programs are in fulfilling this helping role. Many education faculty may have already had a good taste of this overregulation agenda at the time of submitting program curriculum to the state for approval. A care must be taken to ensure our teaching objectives adhere to the requirements demanded from the state. Not surprisingly, this agenda advocates a variety of measures to ensure the quality of teacher preparation ranging from state teacher tests and completion of required courses, to on-site performance review. The Ohio state-wide transfer articulation project is seen by many as a prime example of this overregulation agenda, which will be later discussed.

Depending on specific issues in question, the three agendas can sometimes overlap or parallel, but often compete with each other. It is noted that the NCLB allows states to have certain freedom in setting up policies based on their own interpretations on the “Highly Qualified Teacher” (HQT) provisions, which opens both opportunities and challenges to the interest groups advancing each of the three agendas. Unless a common conceptual ground is found on which input from all stakeholder groups is guaranteed and their concerns addressed, one set of agenda would inevitably overpower others in dominating the outcome of decisions. So the question is: Can professional educators afford not to get actively engaged in the statewide debate about teacher education policies?

THE OHIO STORY

Ohio is doing well in leading the nation in student accountability and preparation of a quality teaching force. The *Quality Counts 2005* report by Education Week rated Ohio a grade of “A” on Standards and Accountability, among the top nine states in the nation. This is a rating based on whether the state systematically implements tests in the core academic subjects of reading, math, science, and social studies at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The same report card also gives Ohio a “B” on Efforts to Improve Teacher Quality, among the top 10 states in the nation with no states receiving “A.” This rating indicates the level of the state’s requirements for licensing new teachers.⁵ These good grades, some argue, may be a direct result of the focused attention paid by the state legislation in the past years. The Senate Bill (SB) 1 in 2001 launched a comprehensive accountability system for the Ohio PK-12 schools with a requirement for the State Board of Education to adopt academic content standards and a comprehensive achievement testing system. Included in the SB 1 is the creation of a new Governor’s Commission on Teaching Success with a main responsibility of making recommendations for policies to “ensure an effective system that will provide caring, competent, qualified teachers in

every classroom.”⁶ Subsequently, a number of legislative decisions were made to implement the Commission’s recommendations with increased requirements for teacher education in the state.

INCREASING REQUIREMENTS

Originally driven by Title II of the 1998 Higher Education Act, a stakeholder task force was organized in summer of 2000, with representatives from both public and private IHEs, to create an Ohio teacher education accountability system. Later the taskforce’s work was also guided by the HQT provisions in the NCLB Act and by recommendations of the Governor’s Commission on Teaching Success. After two years of working and negotiating with the state Board of Education, institutional performance categories and benchmarks were identified and approved by the state legislation. As the policy stands now, an Ohio IHE, to be rated as effective in preparing teachers and other school personnel, must meet the following conditions: (1) an aggregated annual passing rate of 80% on the state licensure tests (Praxis II) for the institution’s program completers, (2) an aggregated annual passing rate of 85% on the field-based performance tests (Praxis III) of graduates from the institution, and (3) a full accreditation approval based on a NCATE’s standards. An institutional “report card” containing information on meeting the three criteria is issued to the public, and failing to meet any of the three conditions in any single year would lower the institution’s approval status to the “Conditional,” and further to the “Low Performing” status if the conditional status lasts for three consecutive years.⁷

The 50 institutions have responded to this new accountability system quickly with a string of proactive strategies: to review each academic program offering to ensure the content alignment with the SPA standards as well as the Praxis II test coverage, to reexamine program admission standards, and to offer Praxis test preparation workshops and courses, among others. More notably, in order to ensure a higher pass rate on the licensure tests for all “program completers,” many IHEs have changed their policies on the Praxis II testing time: to require their teacher candidates to pass the Praxis test in the subject area and/or the pedagogy test as a prerequisite for students teaching. Therefore, those who fail the test in the first attempt would have the time and opportunities to try to pass the tests before they become “program completers.”

Indeed, the Ohio threshold for teacher education is high. The cut scores for many of the Ohio’s teacher tests, the Praxis II, are among the highest in the nation. Ohio is also one of the leading states to institute a statewide induction program, the Praxis III, for all new teachers. Yet still more requirements have been initiated, most of which have been made into law, regarding specific program content offerings such as course title, content coverage and credit hours. A reading component, for example, with 12 semester hours (including 3 hours specified in phonics) is required for all early childhood, middle

childhood, and special education programs. The Senate Bill (SB) 2 of February 2004 mandates creation of an Educator Standards Board to develop statewide standards that “specify what teachers and principals should know and be able to do at each point in their careers.”⁸ SB 2 also directs the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR) to “develop regional articulation agreements for teacher education program among state IHEs by December 2004.” Known as Transfer Assurance Guides (TAG), four courses were identified to comprise the professional education module: Introduction to Education, Educational Psychology, Educational Technology, and Individuals with Exceptionalities.⁹ All state-supported IHEs are required to include these four foundation level courses with comparable credit hours in their education programs, and accept transfer students with those credits from any other IHEs. Concerns and suggestions were voiced at the regional hearings. Deans from some IHEs expressed their protests at the state deans’ meetings. Nevertheless, the rationale for the TAG, based largely on the Ohio’s need for a quality workforce and the economic need of the state, has won the legislation support. The finalized TAG will be implemented in the system in the winter of 2006.

Building on the success of the education TAG, the OBR is now taking on more statewide initiatives to address the state teacher demand and supply issues and to create a career pathway for interested high school students to enter the teaching profession. Questions presented to the IHEs include: How should colleges of education deal with the problem of overproduction of teachers in certain areas (early childhood, for example)? How can we address transfer courses from high schools to colleges and universities? The concerns behind these questions are surely those general ones concerning Ohio’s job market and economic welfare. The IHE deans are encouraged to consider further regulation of their program offerings and build an alignment of their programs with the high school curriculum, in order to allow students to take the beginning education courses in high schools and have the credits accepted by the post-secondary level education programs.

Yet another example of the state regulation of IHE teacher education is evident in the recent Ohio House Bill (HB) 107. It reiterates the state requirement for the IHE program curriculum to be aligned with the PK-12 academic content standards. Responding to the HS 3 in August of 2003 that requires all Ohio schools to use the Value Added assessment method by 2007,¹⁰ the HB107 now stipulates that each IHE must also add to its curriculum a Value Added assessment dimension including methods of interpreting data.¹¹ The Value Added is a data-based assessment method capable of tracking individual students’ growth indicated by their achievement test scores over time and correlating students’ test scores with individual teachers or school buildings.

GROWING PAINS OR SET BACKS?

As legislative efforts increase to create more rigorous teacher preparation, certification, and licensing in Ohio, the outcomes do not seem straightforward. They sometimes seem to work in contradictory ways. Some may have resulted from the drastic change in the education policy-making mechanism at the state level, others may be due to the policies themselves that are producing a bimodal teaching force, with some candidates meeting higher standards but with a growing number of others entering through backdoor routes on either alternative licensure or emergency permits with minimum preparation requirements.¹²

The 46-member Governor's Commission on Teaching Success headed by a business chief executive officer published its final report in December 2002. Included in the list of recommendations is one calling for changing the Ohio education policy-making body from the existing Ohio Teacher Education Licensure Advisory Commission (OTELAC) to the Educator Standards Board (ESB).¹³ It is important to note this structure change because of its significant impact on the IHE role in policies concerning teacher education programs. The OTELAC was created in 1974 "in order to provide broadly representative advice and counsel on all matters pertaining to teacher education and licensure."¹⁴ Its 22 members represent broadly diverse education constituencies, including both K-12 and higher education professional organizations as well as parents group and the state School Board. Typically there are six sitting members representing various IHE groups: public and private IHE faculty, deans, provosts and presidents. When the Ohio teacher education accountability system was put in place in 2002, the OTELAC began to assume an additional duty of making recommendations to the State Board regarding program approval and IHEs' accreditation status.

Any of us working at an IHE understand the importance of those decisions to the program, institution and to ourselves professionally. For accreditation, an Ohio institution can choose to either seek for NCATE accreditation or have an Ohio review using the same NCATE standards and procedure. According to the recent ODE data, approximately 20 IHEs (mostly privates) chose to use the OH/NCATE accreditation for which the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) assembles the visiting team, coordinates training and monitors the visit. The report resulting from the visit is sent to the OTELAC for review to make accreditation decisions at its quarterly meetings. As such, the OTELAC functions similarly to those of the NCATE Unit Accrediting Board (UAB): to grant institution's accreditation approval status. Based on my own experiences as an OTELAC commissioner for the past five years, this task is certainly one of the most challenging tasks, which regularly involves long hours of reading the reports, seeking to understand the situation, and debating to reach a fair consensus.

Other issues, also very important to teacher education IHEs and regularly brought to the OTELAC table, include choosing the state licensure tests, deciding passing scores for program completers and new graduates, and determining program curriculum coverage. Those issues can be highly charged for discussion, because they may be initiated by either the state School Board members or legislators who might also expect certain response from the Commission. Proposals for discussion, although often well intended, are sometimes based on misinformation or misunderstanding of the IHE reality. It is extremely important to have the higher education perspective present to facilitate discussions. To give an example, a few years ago, a new proposal was made per request of a state Board of Education member, asking to add a three semester hour course on gifted and talented education to all Ohio teacher education programs. At first, most PK-12 school-based commissioners voiced their strong support for the proposed, until they heard the presentation by the IHE representative commissioners on teacher education program standards and review requirements and the limitations of program design in IHEs. As a result, the Commission reached a consensus on rejecting the proposal.

The new ESB was slow in becoming. Its membership structure did not get finalized until the much anticipated SB 2 of Feb 2004 was published. Out of the 17 voting board members, 14 are PK-12 school teachers and administrators, and only three from IHEs (increased from two as originally proposed). Another five months passed before the members were appointed. The higher education representatives consisted of one private college provost, one community college faculty, and one education dean from a public university.

Realizing the daunting responsibilities that would soon be fulfilled by the ESB, OTELAC had proposed a year long transition plan to allow joint meetings with the new ESB to ease the passing of the gavel. But the delay of the ESB formation did not allow that to happen. The new ESB director and an ESB higher education committee member did manage to observe some of the OTELAC meetings in its last year. I was sitting next to an ESB member, a middle school teacher, at the last meeting and asked about her work. Expressing her great desire and confidence in learning on the job, she told us she was “clueless” about the issues related to IHEs’ teacher education issues under discussion, and was in awe in comprehending the new responsibilities now vested in her as an ESB member designated to serve on the higher education sub-committee. Beginning summer of 2005, ESB has officially assumed the full responsibilities of the OTELAC with a most recent development of adding three non-voting IHE members to its higher education sub committee.

A bimodal teaching force is forming and growing in Ohio, as the pattern emerges in many other states. The HB 74 in 2003 established creation of an alternative educator license (AEL) for special education and all teaching areas at the high school level based on the request of the school district.¹⁵ Soon after,

in SB 2, permission was allowed for “individuals seeking an alternative license *without* first obtaining a school district sponsor” (italics mine). Other alternative routes have also been created through federal funds, such as alternative college, troops to teach, and various quick route programs in special education. The requirements for these quick routes also differ greatly, some are year-long programs with clearly identified coursework coverage and structured experiences, and others reflect only the bare minimum as required in the law. The law allows an individual to get an AEL with a bachelor’s degree, passing the Praxis II test in the license-related content area, and completion of six hours of coursework in pedagogy. By June 2004, a total of 502 AELs were issued by ODE, not a significant number compared with near five thousands provisional teaching licenses produced in Ohio each year, but many more AEL seekers are currently going through the pipeline. A study shows that those AELs are meeting the need of teaching the “hard to fill” positions. However, an alarming connection is already found between the AELs and low social and economic status (SES) schools in which they teach: most AELs are teaching in poor urban or rural schools in Ohio.¹⁶

The emerging bimodal teaching preparation in Ohio can also be exemplified by the battle around the middle childhood (MC) license. When Ohio transitioned to the teacher licensure structure in 1998, the newly created middle childhood license (MC grades 4-9) was heralded as a national model for middle level teacher preparation because of its strong philosophy advocating curriculum integration and team teaching. With the requirement for the preparation in two content areas to be approved by the appropriate SPAs, the reading requirement to be approved by ODE, as well as the National Middle School Association approval of the whole package, an MC education program typically requires more credit hours and more licensure tests (two content tests plus the pedagogy test) than other licensure programs. However, not long after the first MC graduate group went to the job market in 2002, complaints and concerns began, mostly from the school front, that the new MC license makes staffing of self-contained classrooms difficult because candidates may only teach two subject areas, and that it is even harder to staff small schools where there maybe only one class for each middle grade level. Proposals quickly emerged from the school administrative group to ask for relaxed hiring rules for MC teachers. In response, the state now allows an MC licensure holder to add an MC generalist endorsement to teach additional subject area(s) up to grade six with completion of six hours of coursework and passing the Praxis II elementary content test in the area(s). At the same time, various proposals for content specialist endorsements are getting through the approval process, such as the gifted education (K-12), and elementary math specialist (K-6), which allow these endorsement holders to teach the middle grades in the respective contents.

LESSONS FROM THE OHIO STORY

As the story continues, we are reminded of three agendas discussed earlier. It would not be difficult to see the bearing of all three agendas intertwined in the Ohio story. A great deal of advancement has been made in improving the Ohio education system through improving its preparation of teachers. Many educational policies focusing on identifying teacher's professional knowledge and skills, raising standards, aligning teacher education curriculum with the PK-12 learning standards, and holding a higher accountable system to the citizens, are what we professional educators may endorse and support. Also true, however, is the fact that there are just as many education policies aimed to advance the broader economic or political purposes that we may not support, because they are not in the best interest of the young learners in schools. But such policies are made nevertheless because professional teacher educators do not have an independent and powerful enough policy "silo,"—an organized group of individuals with similar characteristics and a common agenda bond together with the passage of time for a political purpose,¹⁷—in order to hold the policy leverage we need. What should we do then? I echo what the former dean of The Ohio State University College of Education Donna Evans said at a SUED meeting early this year. Voicing her concerns with the TAG on the ground of institutional autonomy over academic programs, she raised a question: does the mere fact that the TAG is going to happen anyway (because the legislation wants it) give us a good enough reason to cave in without articulating our protesting reasons? With that, and with my own belief that a teacher education policy "silo" can, and should be built, I suggest the following ideas for IHE faculty to participate and influence the making of teacher education policies:

- Pay attention to the current and upcoming education policy issues by urging your deans to regularly share information from their monthly SUED meetings
 - Find out the names of your local representatives on the Education Standards Board, and make contact whenever needed
 - Keep your communication channels open: get on email lists for particular issues in which you are interested, check on the ODE and OBR websites regularly and check on the legislative links off those sites
 - Attend local or regional hearings on education issues and ensure that your opinion is documented and delivered
 - Consider integrating teacher education policy matters into your scholarship for conference presentation and publication to help create the policy "silo"
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- Share with your undergraduate and graduate students in education to help them get interested and engaged in the policy matter discussion and debate

NOTES

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