

BEHIND EVERY SILVER LINING

The Other Side of Highly Qualified Teachers

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by Wade A. Carpenter

One of the recurring abuses of classical and tutorial education was . . . er, uh . . . “overfamiliarity” between teacher and student.¹ So we modern, progressive Americans have overwhelmingly put our children into public schools. In doing so, we’ve taken our children out of the hands of pedophiles and put them into the hands of politicians. So this is an *improvement*?

For teachers and schools and schoolchildren, the politics of education is a no-win situation. My favorite writer on the left, Joel Spring, has put his finger on one of the most basic problems of public education: Public schools serve public purposes.² That mission makes them political, so the interests of the children and teachers are at best secondary. Given that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, maybe even 270 million purposes for public education, schools and the people in them are completely vulnerable to attack by politicians. Consequently, we will spend countless hours and dollars responding to every demand of every parvenu who can raise money for advertising time. So let’s say, just for argument, that some statistical and pedagogical miracle actually elevates 100 percent of our kids to grade level by 2012. Immediately, somebody will point out that too many kids are overweight. Then, if educators get that problem solved, it will be dental hygiene. Next, crime, or they can’t talk to foreigners, or read a road map (and fully 48 percent will never, ever ask directions!), or tell a hickory tree from an oak or. . . Get the idea? Since teachers and schools and kids will *always* fail at *something*, educators might as well understand that they will be an endless source of exploitable issues. Then we should also remember the business-community axiom that “If you say something ten times, it becomes true” and that astute politicians can afford to say anything they want just about as often as they want. In contrast to the educator, for the demagogue it’s a no-lose situation.

So what’s the latest illustration of my point? Obviously, No Child Left Behind. Things are even worse than the contributors to this issue report, especially in teacher education. Here the problem arises from the admin-

istration's decision to leave the definition of the term "highly qualified teacher" up to the states. Like the "disaggregation of data" requirements that Lowell Rose and the others discuss, the "highly qualified" notion itself was a splendid idea, an encouraging response to long-standing complaints about out-of-field teaching, including some published in *educational HORIZONS*.³ State control is another eminently defensible idea that can be debated by intelligent people of good will. The problem is that teachers and teacher educators, like our children, are defaulting into the hands of the politicians. They and their administrative minions are deciding the criteria for "highly qualified teacher" for at least three reasons: (a) professors have uneven credibility and teachers have little real empowerment; (b) the public neither knows nor cares about what makes a highly qualified teacher; and most important, (c) most people couldn't care less about their children's education, but they *are* very concerned with their children's *success*. Educators have, I'm afraid, completely misread the public on that one, and the politicians have gotten it right. Success is of interest to everyone, but education is of interest only to the educated.

A couple of weeks ago education professors in Georgia were notified that the Professional Standards Commission will establish a test-out option for teacher certification.⁴ Similar to the practice in Texas, Idaho, and several other states, anyone with a college degree will be able to take the PRAXIS tests and become a teacher in-field.⁵ Even more dismaying is the proposal to allow anyone with master's degrees in anything to become principals. The insult to teachers, the danger to kids, and the threat to teacher preparation are chilling. As of this writing (December 17, 2003), it appears to be a "done deal."

We were appalled, but as always, there are different ways of depicting this:

1. It may bring new blood and new ideas into the public schools. This, of course, is a nice way of saying that it may break the domination of left-leaning, warm-and-fuzzy education professors on the teaching force. Although I would not be opposed to breaking up such a monopoly, I am not convinced that one exists. Certainly there are a lot of "lefties" in the professoriate, and a lot of advocates of "soft" pedagogy, but to say the least, their influence on actual teaching practice is dubious.⁶ Furthermore, the proposal completely nullifies the past decade's substantial improvements in many ed schools, and that will hurt children.
2. It may close down those schools of education that have been turning far too many semi-literates out into the schools. The downside here is that *improving* teacher education is probably a better idea. While I am not convinced that well-educated educators will solve

all the world's problems, I'm pretty sure that less-well-educated teachers will not.

3. It may encourage people with "serious" majors to become teachers, thereby raising the level of content knowledge in the teaching force. Additionally, it can be seen as getting warm bodies into the classrooms. Georgia is said to have a terrible teacher shortage. The problem with this line of reasoning, both the silver lining and the dark side, is that there is no general teacher shortage in the state. Oh, certainly there are holes here and there (not enough science teachers in Dahlonga or special ed teachers in Waycross, etc.), but *there is no general teacher shortage*. What exists is a shortage of people willing to teach in Georgia schools. There are thousands upon thousands of fully trained and certified teachers who will not teach in Georgia schools, and nationally there are hundreds of thousands of fully certified people who have walked away from what schoolteaching has become in the hands of the politicians. This is a crucial distinction, since if the problem really were a teacher shortage, the solution would be precisely what the authorities are doing—recruiting warm bodies. If, however, the problem is a shortage of teachers willing to teach, the solution is to make conditions in the schools better.⁷
4. It's better than the current policy requiring only high school diplomas for substitutes . . . including *long-term* substitutes. Then again, maybe it really isn't necessary. After all, *anybody* can teach, right? And think of all the money we could save just by going down to the corner for day-laborers. Speaking of which:
5. It may ease budget pressures on reelection-conscious legislators and budget-strapped administrators. As far as they are concerned, there is no downside to this argument. Teachers and children, however, might not be so enthusiastic. And as far as teacher educators are concerned, the actions of those state agencies amount to a stab in the back. As any salesperson knows, putting one's entire reliance on one customer or client is usually bad business. The states' actions have now shown clearly and brutally that government is a bad business partner, and that teacher educators have been naive to have entrusted their jobs—much less children's futures—to them.

Can we fight back with the argument that "the research" supports teacher education courses? I'm not sanguine, since

1. Much of the research on both sides is methodologically suspect: the opponents of teacher education can provide just about as much

“documentation” to support their claims as the proponents can, and most of it on both sides is open to accusations of self-interest.

2. Even the research that has been done well still depends on what questions the researchers asked and how they asked them. Any researcher who cannot frame questions to favor his or her own point of view should not have been granted the doctorate.
3. Only a tiny fraction of the public would be able to understand technically respectable research. And even if by some unhappy chance the data were overwhelmingly and undeniably to go against the researcher's position, the rhetoric of the report can still nullify the outcome of the research. For instance: a measly rise from one percent effectiveness to two percent can be reported as “a whopping 100 percent improvement.” Likewise, “The research suggests . . .” actually means nothing more than “I found at least one article that agrees with me,” but the public doesn't know that. Et cetera, et cetera. So politicians can selectively and skillfully use what passes as “research” and spout their nostrums ten times—virtually no one will ever know the difference. To put it nicely: the problem with democracy is that although it is the most responsive form of government, it is also the most embarrassing. Finally,
4. Only a tinier fraction of the public cares what the research says. American anti-intellectualism is proverbial, and analyzed ad nauseum by commentators from H. L. Mencken to Richard Hofstadter.⁸

On a more positive note, I suspect that regardless of the research, we can establish the need for teacher education in the public's mind by slightly redefining the argument: Does a teacher (singular) need teacher education? No, of course not. We've all known excellent teachers without a shred of formal pedagogical preparation, and, alas, we've all known fully certified idiots.

On the other hand, do teachers (plural) need teacher education to teach well in the schools the politicians have created? Damn right they do. The ironic thing is, we don't even need research to document that, since the politicians' own rhetoric about how rotten the schools are, combined with the well-earned distrust and contempt they have brought upon themselves over countless generations, has already hoisted them on their own petards. Character counts, but an absence of character is even easier to count.

So now, let's look on the bright side of the dark side: states that are allowing test-out options for teacher certification have, whether they know it or not, deregulated teacher preparation. Now we are free to do right by our students and their students. For too long we have turned out highly certified teachers. Now we maybe we can turn out highly qualified ones. The ed schools will, I hope, take different approaches,

each building on its own strengths. As long as they prepare their students to pass the states' stupid tests, the students can get certified. True, ed schools are no longer protected by the politicians, but then again, they are no longer answerable to them, either. And maybe teacher educators can now understand that politicians are not to be trusted. Not now, not ever. As Henry VIII's ex-chancellor Cardinal Wolsey said on his deathbed: "If I had served God as diligently as I have done the king he would not have given me over in my gray haire."⁹

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Notes

1. The standard work on classical pederasty is H. I. Marrou, *Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1948; 1982), 26–35.
2. *American Education: An Introduction to Social and Political Aspects*, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 1991), 4.
3. E.g., Richard M. Ingersoll, "Deprofessionalizing the Teaching Profession: The Problem of Out-of-Field Teaching," *Educational Horizons* 80 (1): 28–31; Gregory Kent Stanley, "Faith without Works? Twenty-five Years of Undervaluing Content Area Knowledge," *Educational Horizons* 80 (1): 24–27.
4. For the full text of the proposal, and a response to it by the deans and chairs of Georgia ed schools, see "Certification Redesign" and "Who Will Teach Georgia's Children?" Georgia Association of Independent Colleges of Teacher Education WebCenter, <<http://www.gaicte.org/>>.
5. Michelle Galley, "Texas Ponders Easing Route to Secondary Teaching," *Education Week*, December 3, 2003: 16; AACTE Education Policy Clearinghouse, <<http://www.edpolicy.org/>>. Accessed December 12, 2003. Descriptions of alternative certification programs in other states litter the Internet. For a good start, see the ERIC System's *Becoming a Teacher*: ERIC InfoCard #2, <http://www.ericsp.org/pages/become/alternativeRts.html>.
6. See Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1990*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). The critiques of ed schools' content and effectiveness are, of course, beyond numbering, and range wildly in quality. Perhaps the most recent is discussed by Bess Keller, "Education Courses Faulted as Intellectually Thin," *Education Week*, November 12, 2003: 8.
7. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see "TalkBack Live: A Highly Qualified Teacher for Every Classroom: Teacher Recruitment and Retention." *Education Week on the Web*. December 9, 2003, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/tb/tblive/transcript_12-09-2003.htm>.
8. Mencken's famous quote, "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public," can be found, with many others apropos to this column, at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/H._L._Mencken/>; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1972).
9. From George Cavendish's *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, 178–179, <<http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/ret/cavendish/cavendish.html>>.