The Disintegration of Teacher Preparation

by Lawrence A. Baines

The disintegration of teacher certification programs in the United States holds an eerie similarity to the recent meltdown of American financial institutions. In 2000, then-Sen. Phil Gramm helped pass the Commodity Futures Modernization Act, which allowed unregulated trading in financial instruments known as derivatives. Gramm has recently acknowledged that the advent of these new forms of investment created an environment "so opaque that nobody knew who was holding the bag" (Fox 2009).

The billionaire investment guru Warren Buffet, who characterizes derivatives as "financial weapons of mass destruction," has hypothesized that their proliferation will ruin significant numbers of banks and financial firms over the next decade. Of course, no one purposefully set out to destroy America's financial infrastructure by promoting unfettered, unregulated trading in derivatives, but that is what has happened.

Similarly, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, whose purported purpose was to ensure that all students get highly qualified teachers (HQT), has had an unintentionally devastating effect on the quality of teacher preparation. No Child Left Behind defined a highly qualified teacher as possessing three credentials:

- Bachelor's degree
- Certification to teach
- Proven knowledge of the subject taught

Few could argue against those well-intentioned requirements. However, the subsequent scramble to provide evidence for them has brought chaos and uncertainty to teacher preparation. Although the requirement of a bachelor's degree is easy enough to verify, the certification issue is more difficult. In response to directives from accreditation agencies such as the National Council for the

Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), many universities have significantly "ramped up" their admissions standards and program requirements for teacher certification, turning four-year programs into graduate-degree requirements that include a full major in the subject, significant course work in pedagogy, and several semesters of observation and practice under the tutelage of a master teacher. Thus, states under threat of financial reprisals by the federal government for not measuring up to the HQT provision have had to either promote higher enrollments in rigorous, university-based programs or reconsider what was meant by certification. Because state funding for higher education has been declining at the same time that enrollments have been climbing, most states opted for the easier solution—redefining certification.

Massachusetts, for example, has declared that anyone who holds a bachelor's degree and passes a state test is worthy of a preliminary teaching license (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009). Before No Child Left Behind, out-of-field teachers were issued waivers, through which the law required a school district to seek permission from the state to employ an uncertified teacher in the classroom and that teacher had to enroll immediately in a teacher preparation program. Massachusetts' new five-year preliminary license solves the problem of waivers by declaring all candidates, irrespective of deficiencies, highly qualified. Under the old definition, a candidate with a waiver was required to enroll in courses immediately; under the new definition, the same candidate is simply issued a license.

By redefining certification, Massachusetts has been able to circumvent all previous state legislation related to teacher preparation—requirements for minimum levels of preparation in the subject taught, study of child development and appropriate pedagogy, and supervised practice teaching. However, the new, undemanding rules apply only to candidates in alternative certification programs: university students must still meet the old standards.

For the past eight years, states have created separate and unequal standards for candidates in alternative certification programs. For example, the preparation for alternative certification in New Hampshire has disintegrated to six hours, a requirement attainable in a typical freshman's first semester of college (New Hampshire Department of Education Division of Program Support 2006). Meanwhile, students seeking traditional certification at the University of New Hampshire must major in English (forty hours of course work), take an additional thirty-two hours of graduate study in education, and spend an entire year teaching in a school under the supervision of a veteran teacher (University of New Hampshire College of Liberal Arts Department of Education 2009).

Capitalizing on the opportunity to build economies of scale with little financial risk, corporations have seized upon the changing definition of teacher certification by bringing a tough-minded, competitive, market orientation to a field that previously had been a university-based, largely humanistic enterprise. A business called I-Teach Texas recently churned out more than 1,400 new teachers through an Internet-based program that requires no observation or teaching in schools. During the same period, the University of Texas at Austin prepared 142 new teachers, or approximately 10 percent the number produced by I-Teach (U.S. Department of Education 2009).

In New Jersey, Florida, North Carolina, California, Massachusetts, Virginia, and other states, the right to certify teachers has been distributed to school districts, regional service centers, community colleges, and even K–12 charter schools. The move of certification from a tightly controlled, state-regulated, university-based platform to an unregulated, market-driven free-for-all has been swift and unequivocal. In many states, the numbers of new alternatively certified teachers have started to eclipse the enrollments of university-based teacher preparation programs.

As with the proliferation of derivatives, no one is sure exactly how many alternative certificates are being handed out or if the certificates have any real value. There are simply too many programs, too many certificates, and too much money trading hands to try to figure it all out. When derivatives trading imploded, investment

firms responded first with denial, then desperation, and finally insolvency. The consequences of alternative certification are not as readily apparent on the ledgers of our schools. Undeniably, bottom-line dollar comparisons look foreboding. Why spend tens of thousands of dollars for a university-based regimen of grueling work and unpaid assistantships in schools when you can obtain certification right away by taking a multiple choice test? The consequences of the opacity and unregulated growth of alternative certification programs should not be counted in the money saved in the short term, but in the intellectual and social capital lost in the next generation.

Alternative—What's in a Word?

It is difficult to generalize about alternative certification because of the gaping disparities among the programs' admissions standards, courses, and prerequisites for working with children. Alternative programs such as I-Teach Texas have few standards or requirements. Some university-based programs offer alternative programs that are identical to their traditional routes. For example, Oregon has only one path to teacher certification. A candidate hired on an emergency certificate must meet the same standards as a student enrolled in a university (Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices 2009).

Emblematic of the confusion about alternative certification is the case of the University of Phoenix, a profitable provider of graduate education that has set up sales offices in office buildings throughout the country. Surprisingly, in most states the University of Phoenix is considered not an alternative program at all, but a traditional, university-based program. In California, the University of Phoenix certified 511 new teachers in 2007–2008 through its traditional programs as well as 41 students in an alternative program. However, the largest "traditional" provider of teachers in California is neither the University of Phoenix nor the University of Southern California but National University, which certified 1,382 teachers through its traditional Internet program and another 532 teachers through its alternative Internet program. Together, National University and the University of Phoenix certified 2,466 new teachers in 2006–2007, or more than twenty times the number of new teachers graduating from the University of Southern California during the same period—115 (U.S. Department of Education 2009).

Originally, alternative certification was a stopgap to fill a vacancy with an unqualified individual when no certified teacher could be found. For example, if health problems forced a physics teacher in rural Iowa to take a leave of absence during the school year, the school district would have to locate an unqualified substitute until

a permanent, certified replacement could be found. Today, alternative certification is no longer alternative: it is mainstream and the number of alternatively certified teachers is soaring. Forty-seven states have opened their gates to various forms of alternative certification, even states such as Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Ohio with negative growth rates and large teacher surpluses.

Characteristics of University-based, Traditional Programs

One trend, apparent in legislative documents and Title 2 reports, is that education is an undesirable major for a prospective teacher. Increasingly, states are prohibiting future teachers from majoring in education. Even though accountants major in accounting, anthropologists major in anthropology, and engineers major in engineering, teachers are often majoring in anything but education. Even future teachers of kindergartners must earn degrees in liberal arts or English or science.

Although some national attention has been given to a career ladder for teachers, most states have no category for highly accomplished teachers. The typical system provides an initial license, valid for three to five years, and a professional license, renewable every five years. Some states have extremely complicated renewal systems contingent upon a teacher's level of education, experience, and his or her individual professional development plan. The permanent or lifetime certification has become a relic, though North Dakota still offers permanent certification to teachers who have accumulated thirty or more years' experience (North Dakota Educational Practices and Standards Board 2009).

The idea of an elite teaching force, exemplified by large numbers of teachers seeking certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), continues to gather momentum in different areas of the country. States such as North Carolina, South Carolina, and Mississippi have created small armies of nationally certified teachers by offering hefty salary increments for teachers who earn the designation and reimbursing the $2,500 application fee for all who pass. Although the trend may be good news for employees of the NBPTS organization and for select teachers, the move toward national certification is yet another move away from university-based preparation. Some states have begun replacing financial incentives for graduate degrees with bonuses for passing the national boards. An increasing number of states have followed the lead of Georgia and Texas, which switched to a one-level teaching certification with few (or no) increments in pay for

either graduate degrees or national board certification. Rather than require graduate study to renew a teaching license, most states now use a point system that credits district in-service meetings, administrative duties, and community service.

Characteristics of Non-University Alternative Programs

Two kinds of alternative programs predominate in the United States: "learn while you earn" programs such as Teach for America (TFA) and Internet-based programs with little to no field experience requirements. However, a third model—based upon a single test score—is lobbying hard for acceptance.

Perhaps the most popular alternative program design is the model commonly associated with Teach for America—a crash course of a few weeks in summer followed by a full-time teaching position in early fall. The TFA model is predicated on two essential components:

1) very bright, altruistic students and
2) indefatigable mentors

Unquestionably, many Teach for America students have great credentials on paper. The purported average score on the SAT for its candidates exceeds 1300 (Teach for America 2009). But those students receive precious little time to practice, learn, or discern whether they have any talent for working with children. With appropriate courses and extended practice in real classrooms, Teach for America students could probably become great teachers; some pull off small miracles anyway, despite their lack of preparation. Nonetheless, the complexity and intensity of real-time teaching is difficult to overstate. A five-week crash course is better than nothing, but it remains woefully inadequate.

The linchpin in the TFA program is the mentor, usually an experienced teacher willing to spend hours observing and offering constructive feedback. Such individuals are usually handpicked master teachers trained in traditional, university-based programs. In an interesting development, many states now specifically mandate mentoring for alternatively certified teachers. In that way, school districts maintain quality by forcing a seasoned teacher who already teaches a full schedule of classes to take responsibility for the quality of instruction in a beginning teacher's classroom. In West Virginia, for example, mentors are required to spend at least one hour per week observing the beginning teacher, meet with the candidate at least once per week throughout the year, and plan monthly formal evaluation sessions. For all that time and effort, the mentor receives six

hundred dollars (West Virginia Department of Education 2009). That may not seem like much money, but it is six hundred dollars more than many states pay for mentorship.

The most dangerous aspect of the Teach for America model is that it has been replicated throughout the country without Teach for America students. Most Transition to Teaching programs, which have been funded by millions of federal dollars, use the TFA model, though their students do not necessarily match the TFA prototype. The fact that the federal government has handed out more than 130 million dollars the past three years to private businesses and public institutions so they can develop certification programs that undercut traditional teacher preparation has yet to stir much controversy (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance 2009).

The typical admission requirement for Transition to Teaching and similar brands of alternative certification is a grade point average of 2.5. Some programs use lower criteria or forgo any grade point requirement at all. The number of content hours may be as low as zero, as in the state of Washington, or as high as thirty, as in Montana. (By the way, Montana requires forty hours of content for university students.) Many states do not assess content knowledge at all as long as the alternative candidate posts a passing score on a test such as PRAXIS II. Some states, such as Mississippi, allow an alternative candidate who cannot pass the exam to complete a portfolio instead. Students in university programs do not receive such options.

Because most Transition to Teaching programs are delivered online and designed with no practice teaching, a candidate's first day as teacher may represent his or her first experience in a classroom (Transition to Teaching 2008). A science museum in New Jersey that certifies teachers requires only twenty days of seminars at the museum and no practice teaching before candidates take over classrooms as full-time teachers. Additionally, a mentor is not likely to show up unless the state or school district specifically mandates one. Another feature of Transition to Teaching programs is that students often pay no tuition to participate in the program. In fact, some programs pay the student several thousand dollars for agreeing to teach in the state for a designated period—usually three years.

Although certification programs in school districts also cost candidates little to nothing, they employ a different model. In general, school districts try to hire an individual with a bachelor's degree in the subject to be taught, though they will accept work experience in lieu of academic preparation. The "program" usually consists of a brief indoctrination in district and state policy followed

by occasional seminars. If the candidate survives the first year, he or she is rewarded with a professional certificate. If the candidate quits, then no certificate is offered. That is how large numbers of new teachers are trained in urban districts in Los Angeles, New York, Dallas, Houston, Milwaukee, and Boston. In the state of Kentucky, this model is called Certification: Route 5. Route 5 allows anyone in Kentucky with a bachelor's degree to begin teaching right away. Kentucky also offers teacher certification to veterans, master's degree recipients who work in community colleges, and anyone with ten years of experience in almost any field (Kentucky Professional Standards Board 2009). In Arkansas, anyone can legally teach two classes in a public school with no teaching credentials whatsoever (Arkansas Department of Education 2009).

Although such alternative certification programs are distinguished by their lack of rigor and dearth of classroom practice, they offer more preparation than the programs at the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE). ABCTE offers neither course work nor supervised practice. Instead, ABCTE sells test-preparation kits for its own test, the contents of which the organization has yet to divulge. Somehow, ABCTE has penetrated state legislatures around the country and managed to get its pseudo-programs approved as legitimate vehicles for teacher preparation. In Florida, Idaho, Missouri, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Utah, legislators have conferred "preferred status" upon ABCTE so that its customers can bypass all state requirements, including course work, practice teaching, and PRAXIS (or the equivalent) examinations (ABCTE 2008). The only evidence substantiating an ABCTE customer's suitability for teaching is a score on a multiple choice exam, an instrument created by ABCTE and scored by ABCTE. On most exams, a passing score consists of 50 to 61 percent correct responses. Many state departments of education prominently feature ads for ABCTE programs on their Internet home pages.

ABCTE frequently runs "specials," and its Web site intermittently features Internet coupons that can save customers one hundred dollars or more on the retail price of certification. The organization also actively solicits donations. Lobbyists for ABCTE continue to press for acceptance. Bills supporting ABCTE are expected in the state legislatures of Maryland, Arizona, and several other states this year.

The Way Forward

No Child Left Behind forced states to track a litany of student indicators such as achievement, poverty, and ethnicity; to monitor

school baseline-achievement scores; to establish, maintain, and enforce standards; to keep close tabs on teacher preparation programs at universities and colleges (there is little to no monitoring of alternative certification programs); and to promote new pathways into teaching. Obviously, the old state departments of education could not take on all the additional tasks, so new, expensive bureaucracies, unrelated to instruction, had to be created.

In Oklahoma, for example, four agencies now battle over policies for teacher preparation—the Oklahoma Department of Education, the Professional Standards Board, the Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation, and the Oklahoma Board of Regents for Higher Education. In Oklahoma, as in most states, policy decisions can turn into vituperative turf wars among governmental agencies. Currently, Oklahoma produces vast numbers of alternatively certified teachers, but most of them are in oversupplied areas such as business and social studies.

In *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1964), Callahan worried that the prospect of teacher certification, a relatively new concept in the early 1960s, might deprive the profession of individuals who would make loving, open-minded, creative, and dedicated teachers. Such traits have become superfluous in contemporary alternative certification programs. Care, curiosity, creativity, and dedication cannot be compressed into five-week cram sessions or inferred from multiple choice test scores. Those traits take effort, energy, and time to develop.

The emphasis in teacher preparation has moved from the humanistic to the technical, from the intangible to the measurable. Standardized tests have provided the implicit rationale for most educational reforms of the past fifty years. The logic seems to be that teachers who score well on tests can best teach students how to score well on tests. The gauge of student success, the chances for a school's survival, and the indicator of quality for a teacher preparation program have become dependent upon how good a number looks on a chart.

Perusing the multitudinous documents and thick reports of state departments of education praising themselves for "performance-based assessments" makes it apparent that many states assume a score on a multiple choice test can adequately represent teacher performance. Do inputs matter? Is it logical to equate the expertise of someone who has taken six hours of biology as a freshman and managed to pass a multiple choice test with the experience of a master's degree recipient who has taken up to fifty hours of college

courses in biology and spent a year or two teaching biology under the guidance of a master teacher?

Many educational reformers longingly point to Singapore, whose students routinely earn top marks in international tests, as an exemplar for what education in the United States should be. Teacher preparation programs in Singapore do not admit all applicants; indeed, competition for admission is fierce. A recent report by the Aspen Institute describes Singapore's program this way:

> The courses deal with all aspects of teaching from content to pedagogy, to multicultural issues to student guidance and character development. Teacher candidates are in schools to observe, assist and learn from early on. The professors . . . work closely with the teachers and administrators at the school to see how teacher candidates are doing during their practica, and all provide counseling, coaching and support. (Sclafani 2008)

In essence, that description fits the approach of most colleges of education in Research I universities today. The problem is not that high-quality teacher preparation programs do not exist; it is that the number of teachers graduating from those programs is dwarfed by the horde of new teachers certified each year through alternative programs.

A friend of mine received his master's degree in education at a Research I university last year. Craig is a veteran of the Marine Corps who achieved a 3.8 grade point average in his studies. Fluent in Japanese and conversant in Chinese, he has written several published articles on the world wars and is in the process of finishing a book analyzing the depictions of Pearl Harbor in Japanese and American textbooks. He has recently completed a rigorous, field-based university program that required him to teach in an urban public school for more than a year.

Despite completing sixty applications from school districts in six different states, Craig has yet to receive a job offer. Meanwhile, in Oklahoma last year alone, 318 new social studies teachers were certified via a new, quick, and easy alternative route. During the same period, 282 new social studies teachers were alternatively certified in Texas (U.S. Department of Education 2009). At this moment, thousands more individuals across the United States—with no preparation in content, pedagogy, or practice—are receiving credentials attesting that they are highly qualified.

In a recent "state of education" speech (Horne 2009), Arizona's superintendent of public instruction boasted: "Under my

administration, we have broken the monopoly that limited the supply of teachers to those going through conventional teaching programs." Indeed, Arizona's new Alternative Pathways program requires only twenty-four hours in the teaching field and no practice teaching before candidates begin jobs as full-time teachers. According to the Arizona superintendent, Americans should be thankful that such quick and easy pathways to certification exist. But everything known about teacher preparation suggests that quick and easy alternatives are deleterious to student learning, the future of the profession, and the cultivation of wisdom. Not everyone deserves to be a teacher, least of all those who never learned how to teach.

References

American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE). 2008. *Passport to Teaching Information Kit.* Washington, D.C.: ABCTE.

Arkansas Department of Education. 2009. Retrieved May 30, 2009, from <http://arkansased.org/teachers/licensure.html>.

Callahan, R. 1964. *Education and the Cult of Efficiency.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fox, J. 2009. "Phil Gramm Says the Banking Crisis Is (Mostly) Not His Fault." *Time* (January 24). Retrieved March 7, 2009, from <http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0.8599.1873833.00.html>.

Horne, T. 2009. State of Education speech. Retrieved March 13, 2009, from <http://www.azed.gov/administration/superintendent/articles/2009StateofEducationSpeech.pdf>.

Kentucky Professional Standards Board. 2009. Retrieved March 29, 2009, from <http://www.kyepsb.net/index.asp>.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. 2009. *Regulations for Educator Licensure and Preparation Program Approval.* Retrieved November 19, 2009, from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr7.html?section=all>.

New Hampshire Department of Education Division of Program Support. 2006. *Report on New Hampshire Educators: Credentialing and Employment Trends.* Prepared by N. C. Smith and K. J. Mackin. Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire DOE.

North Dakota Educational Practices and Standards Board. 2009. Retrieved March 13, 2009, from <http://www.nd.gov/espb/>.

Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices. 2009. Retrieved October 20, 2009, from <http://www.tspc.state.or.us>.

Sclafani, S. 2008. *Rethinking Human Capital in Education: Singapore as a Model for Teacher Development.* Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 4.

Teach for America (TFA). 2009. Retrieved February 9, 2009, from <http://www.teachforamerica.org>.

Transition to Teaching. 2008. Retrieved October 2, 2008, from <http://www.tent2t.com>.

University of New Hampshire College of Liberal Arts Department of Education. 2009. *The M.A.T. and M.Ed. in Elementary or in Secondary Education.*

Retrieved January 25, 2009, from <http://www.unh.edu/education/index.cfm?ID=AE5602BF-A03A-E5FE-87606518930EEFE8>.

U.S. Department of Education. 2009. *Title II Database.* Retrieved December 2007 to November 2009 from <http://www.title2.gov>.

U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. 2009. *An Evaluation of Teachers Trained through Different Routes to Certification.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

West Virginia Department of Education. 2009. *Applications and Forms: 37, 30, 4B, 20T, 8, 25, 25T, 12*. Charleston, W.Va.: West Virginia Department of Education.

Lawrence A. Baines, Ph.D., is a professor in the Rainbolt College of Education, University of Oklahoma.

This article has been adapted from *The Teachers We Need vs. the Teachers We Have* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).