Faced with possible mandatory continuing education laws, educators can learn from the mistakes and successes of other professions.

LAST CALL FOR PROFESSIONAL SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Because of the high costs of professional services and the public's concern about professional quality, many states are enacting mandatory continuing education laws for professionals whose work involves the public welfare. Almost half of the states have passed such legislation for doctors and over a third have enacted increased requirements for nurses. Accountants, lawyers, and even engineers and architects, who traditionally have not been affected by public welfare legislation, are finding themselves subject to regulation. Few states, however, can match the zeal of Iowa, which recently drafted relicensing requirements for all of its 23 professional licensing boards.

The implication for education is that increased certification requirements will be mandated for teachers and administrators. In states with permanent certificates, future legislation will probably require teachers to show evidence of professional growth; the lifetime certificate may well become a remnant of the past.

Education also parallels other professions in its internal conflict about the need for continuing education.

Joyce Killian, Fred H. Wood, and Paul E. Bell

Members of some professions claim their professional organizations have acted against their interests in supporting legislation for mandatory continuing education. The American Nurses' Association, for instance, has come out against mandatory continuing education on the national level, while its member state units are variously for and against the requirements. The national associations of optometrists and pharmacists, which encouraged mandatory education in every state, have lost membership for their efforts.

Professional associations are torn when it comes to a stand on increased education, facing a loss of professional membership on the one hand and a loss of professional credibility on the other. Confronted with such a dilemma many, like the NEA, consistently oppose more stringent educational requirements for practicing members. While such a position may be popular with a large segment of the membership, it antagonizes others who don't wish to be aligned against what they see as upgrading the profession.

Often the accord within a profession hinges on how much influence the members have on determining the amount and relevance of their own professional education.

The legal profession, for instance, actively provides opportunities for sharpening professional skills and keeping members abreast of current issues, and has traditionally had a great deal of autonomy in its own continuing education. Comparing various professions, Leroy W. Nattress says legal education is unique since almost all continuing education programs are carried on outside the law schools through institutes sponsored by the lawyers' own professional organizations.

This autonomy has led to some problems. Nattress notes that many programs repeat law school courses and are judged successful because they are popular, not because they're effective. This practice of free choice may be altered by specific requirements mandated by state boards; state agencies may also take up the responsibility for overseeing uniformity and quality. For the present, however, no sharply drawn lines exist between those who offer continuing education programs and those who receive them.

The issue of control is far more divisive in education. The battle lines are drawn most clearly between teachers and those charged with educational administration and improving instruction. Colleges of education, which have traditionally exerted control over teacher inservice education, are losing their dominant position in the struggle. As one teacher educator put it, "The comprehensive college of education could end up with precious
little else to share in the way of control or responsibility except preservice teacher education programs.14

Which education groups are picking up this shifting control? Much to their frustration, teachers themselves have had little say in their own training, but efforts by their professional organizations may give them a greater voice. According to the NEA, effective inservice teacher training and development must be controlled by teachers. NEA past president John Ryor believes teacher centers are part of a trend toward this self-determination:
The federally supported Teacher Center Program . . . did not come about accidentally. Its roots lie in the dissatisfaction of teachers with inservice programs that they—whose needs such programs are supposed to meet—have had little or no involvement in planning . . . the Teacher Center Program provides teachers a high degree of control over aspects of their own professional development.5

Not all administrators and board members are enthusiastic about teacher autonomy. A survey of public school district superintendents revealed that 57 percent foresaw problems with teacher centers because of their mandated control by classroom teachers.6 Similar sentiments were expressed by respondents to an American School Board Journal poll, which asked, “How do you think teacher and administrator professional development should be handled in your school system?” Sixty-one percent responded that inservice training for both levels should be more closely controlled by school boards and superintendents.7

In some cases teachers and administrators have joined together in planning inservice. Cooperative efforts improve the relations between these two groups and provide task-centered programs that help teachers improve skills and deal with specific classroom problems. Some college educators argue that such nuts-and-bolts programs may provide for immediate needs but they should not wholly substitute for substantive courses that provide a common foundation for teaching as a profession. Nevertheless, state boards in Florida, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia have begun to recognize inservice credits for at least partial fulfillment of advanced certification requirements.

At the state level teachers are making progress toward the professional autonomy long enjoyed by other fields. While the state regulatory boards for doctors, lawyers, nurses, and others have traditionally included members of those professions, state boards of education are largely consumer boards composed of noneducators. The resulting teacher dissatisfaction has led to efforts by state teacher organizations to have their own practitioners regulate the profession. These efforts have succeeded in at least two states, Michigan and Oregon. In several others a Professional Standards and Practices Commission composed of teachers, administrators, and teacher educators has gained the power to make recommendations about certification and professional standards to the State Board of Education.

Self-Policing and Accountability

While political gains may help put education on a more equal footing with other professions, self-regulation may be a mixed blessing. Self-control would make educators heir to the same problems currently plaguing professions that have long been autonomous. Medical practitioners, lawyers, accountants, and engineers are accused of failing to shoulder the moral obligations of their professions. No longer satisfied by assurances that improvements from within are forthcoming, the public is saying, “Since you won’t put your own house in order, we’ll do it for you.”

Associations that have traditionally discouraged their members from providing evidence against others within the profession have taken a new look at their role in self-policing. Chief Justice Warren Burger warned members of the American Bar Association that waning public confidence in the legal profession makes it imperative that all local and state bar associations deal effectively with all types of professional misconduct. Almost 90 percent of all federal courts have agreed to participate in ABA’s National Discipline Bank to keep informed of any disciplinary proceedings against lawyers in state and federal courts.8 Burger also urged lawyers to hold down the costs of litigation: “There is a risk that lawyers may be pricing themselves out of the market. This must be met by the profession, or it may well be dealt with by external forces.”9

Dentists, too, are advised by their professional organizations to report all instances of “gross and continually faulty treatment” and to give expert testimony against such practices.10

The same theme is reflected in The Care and Management of the Sick and Incompetent Physician. Medical practitioners are urged to assume the responsibility of protecting the public from physicians whose physical addictions or mental or emotional problems have left them unfit to practice.11

Pharmacists may have taken the most active role of all by establishing a task force to set standards of practice based on the results of a six-year, quarter-of-a-million-dollar internal study. They hope not only that the standards will provide a means of self-evaluation, but that consumers will have a means to assess whether they are getting competent services. Proponents of this study hope that its wide dissemination will help reduce malpractice complaints and provide a model of self-regulation for the other medical professions.12

All the fields that have policed their own ranks are on the defensive, trying to shore up standards before they too end up with nonprofessionals on their regulatory boards. What implications does this have for educators? For a profession already trying to defend itself against accusations that it is inefficient, uneconomical, and just plain uninspiring, education seems ill-equipped to launch a battle on a new front. If such a battle is fought at all, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators will have to coordinate their efforts and parallel the medical and legal professions by taking a more active role in policing the profession.

One roadblock may well be tenure laws. While tenure laws protect the rights of competent teachers and administrators, they also make attempts to dismiss incompetents so controversial and time-consuming that they are all too rarely carried out. This protection strains the credibility of consumers, whose own jobs may be less secure, and who may fail to believe that the political conditions that made tenure necessary are still operating. As long as the public sees tenure as a protection of mediocrity and incompetence in education, it is unlikely to be sympathetic to demands that state regulatory boards be turned over to those within the profession.
There is a final lesson teachers and administrators can learn from law and medicine. If they wish to avoid the mandate of meaningless and trivial tests and inservice, they must take a leadership role in planning and voluntarily participating in continuing education programs throughout their professional careers. This will not be as easy for educators as it is for some other professionals, whose inservice content is often logically dictated by recent political issues and scientific discoveries. The difficulties of tailoring programs to meet the needs of individual schools and even individual educators will certainly be complex. But who is in a better position to assess and meet these needs than the profession itself? The alternative is a bleak one: Education will continue to face the blunderbuss of legislated programs that do little good for anyone.

Taking the Initiative

Before teachers, administrators, or teacher educators can convince politicians to accept their standards for quality, they had better be clear about where they stand on the issues.

In the first place, teachers and administrators have to admit they cannot survive professionally without continuing education. When professional organizations decry inservice education as a waste of their members’ time, their public image is further tarnished. As the public sees it, either teachers and administrators lack the interest and energy to improve their professional skills, or the profession lacks a content base of such skills. Either way, the likelihood of support for teacher input into legislation is reduced.

In the second place, teachers and administrators must realize that they neither can nor should have complete control of their own continuing education. It makes good sense to give practitioners the major role in deciding what kind of programs they need for their own professional growth and how they should be organized. But when these same practitioners become central to decisions about whether such inservice should receive academic or certification credit, criticism about conflict of interest is likely to arise, particularly in areas where teachers and administrators are reimbursed for such credits.

Third, teachers, administrators, and teacher educators must stop quibbling about the size of their piece of the inservice pie and focus instead on dividing power according to who can best help practitioners assess their needs and whose resources are best suited once inservice needs are defined. Continuing in the present course—dividing and duplicating effort—will only waste good talent and resources badly needed for improving the quality of education.

A realistic appraisal of what is succeeding for other professionals should lead educators to a fourth commitment. They will lose ground by default unless they take an active role in protesting that which is misguided and in suggesting alternatives for positive growth. To start in the right direction, they should apply certain aspects of the medical/legal model for continuing education to their own profession. For example, experimental research and successful field-tested programs can provide a foundation for making sound decisions about educational practice. Educational researchers and practitioners should improve the dissemination of research findings through journals, conferences, workshops, and any other mode that makes information readily available to practitioners.

Finally, educators must upgrade their profession from the inside instead of just defending it against volleys from the outside. Tenure laws that protect incompetents and grievance procedures that consistently align teachers’ associations with those accused of poor professional practice do little to promote a sense of regeneration within the group or to project this image to the public. Administrative decisions that ignore sound educational practice in favor of cutting budgets may be ingratiating to school boards and local communities, but in the long run they subvert the cause of quality education. As long as such conflict is perceived by the public but ignored by the profession, education will remain the hostile recipient of legislation drafted for those who cannot or will not clean up their own act.

1 George H. Gallup, "The Eleventh Annual Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan 60 (September 1979): 33-45. Eighty-five percent of those surveyed said that teacher candidates should have to pass a state board examination similar to those now required for doctors and lawyers. The same high percentage overwhelmingly favored periodic competency testing for relicensing of teachers and administrators.


7 "Ballot Box," American School Board Journal 166 (February 1979): 42.


