

A Different Approach to Professionalism: Teachers in Private Practice

Teachers can have the autonomy they need to be accountable for results by becoming contractors rather than employees.

Modest and cautious as Superintendent James Walker's proposal (see p. 68) is, it opens up a promising route to the professionalization of teaching by creating the opportunity for teachers to work for themselves. Curiously, and unfortunately, this route has been ignored in the national discussion about how to transform teaching. Virtually all the articles and speeches, proposals, and reports assume that teachers must be employees.

This need not be so. Teachers could operate from a base of private practice: working in groups, contracting with schools or school districts to take responsibility for a curriculum area or for a grade level, and making their own decisions about teaching methods and materials, selecting colleagues, determining their administration and compensation.

A key test for professionals is whether they control their own work. "Tell me what you want done," a true professional will say. "Don't tell me how to do it. I *know* how to do it." And nothing establishes professional con-

trol of work more firmly than to work for oneself as an independent practitioner.

The Private Practice Option

In Minnesota the idea of a private practice option has now become a part of what may well be the nation's most interesting and significant policy debate about the future of public education. The issue has been raised by a small project, Teachers in Private Practice, organized by a nonprofit corporation called Public School Incentives. The project has received support from several Minnesota foundations committed to the public schools and, at the same time, to changes that will challenge the traditional "givens" in education. The supporters include the Northwest Area Foundation, the First National Bank of Minneapolis Foundation, the 3M Foundation, the Bigelow Foundation, the Fingerhut Corporation, and the Medtronic Foundation, as well as the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

As a design and development project, Teachers in Private Practice is

exploring the conditions under which teachers might work for themselves. The project is looking for teachers and some schools or school districts willing to demonstrate the idea.

Some teachers already are self-employed, of course, as consultants in curriculum or test design or staff development. Others have become entrepreneurs. Most of these businesses are small and outside education. Wilson Learning Corporation in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, is an exception. Now one of the major suppliers of training services to business, it was started by Larry Wilson who was (though briefly) a teacher.

Entrepreneurship can offer teachers substantial economic benefits within the system as well. Jay Ross, a high school math teacher who taught himself about computers, founded a company in Ortonville, Minnesota, that now sells a million dollars a year of custom-designed software. Kay Fredericks, a kindergarten teacher in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, started Trend Enterprises, a supplier of classroom displays to schools.

A Way to Educate Children Better and Pay Teachers More

I've proposed to two of the 4th grade teachers in our elementary school that they take responsibility for the instruction of 90 children.

They will get about \$57,000 (about \$633 per pupil, after deducting district and school overhead and their own salaries). They will decide how to spend it. They could buy the services of a third teacher, or teachers' aides. They could teach art, music, and gym themselves, or buy those specials from the district. They will buy the fringes they need and want.

They will teach the district's curriculum, but they will select the methods and materials they want to use.

Initially pupils will be assigned to them. But parents who are not satisfied will have the option to move their children to another section of 4th grade, and parents who would like to join these teachers' sections will have the option to do so. The teachers' budget will shrink or grow accordingly.

The teachers liked the idea. It will go into operation this school year. The teachers will remain with the program for two years. Their tenure, seniority, and rights to grievance will be protected. I had initially proposed that they be given the full instructional cost and allowed to keep as personal income whatever they did not spend; but the final agreement was that the teachers would remain within the salary schedule.

I am convinced that children can get a better education and that teachers can increase their compensation with the money in the system today, if we can change the way we use people and the way we use time.

But management cannot make that change. Only the teachers can make it.

—By James Walker, superintendent, North Branch Schools, 320 Main St., North Branch, MN 55056.



Elementary school teacher Dona Yetter, right, discusses plans for a "contracting-in" program at Independent School District 138, North Branch, with district superintendent James Walker. The program, which puts teachers in control of their own budget, will be spearheaded by Yetter and teachers Jackie Anderson, second from left, and Joan Streater. Other school officials will act as consultants in the program.

Teachers as Educational Entrepreneurs

Can we bring more of this energy and innovation into the classroom? We believe so. Many teachers are risk-averse. But some are interested. Many of those most interested have spouses who are self-employed. Art, music, world languages, and special education are the fields most discussed. Indeed, nothing has impressed us so much as the way this idea has spread by word of mouth from teacher to teacher. One teacher who came to us for information said he had heard

about it shortly after moving to Minnesota. Standing in line for Kentucky Fried Chicken in Grand Rapids, he struck up a casual conversation with the person ahead of him, who turned out to be a teacher.

At least initially, most teachers think in terms of working as solo practitioners. We think this reflects their training and experience; teachers in schools essentially work alone. We think this should change.

Public School Incentives, which brought together the interested teachers, has helped them think through

the major questions that arise when anyone considers private practice. What exactly is our service? What form will our association take? Where are our markets? How do we price our service? What kind of a contract would we write? Where will we get our insurance and support services?

Each question has several possible answers. We have prepared model articles of incorporation, business plans, and contracts, and have developed networks—recurring meetings of groups of teachers—to help them with information and advice. We like the model proposed by Superintendent Walker, but would not want to see the idea limited to schools in which the teachers are presently employed. The most progress will be made where teachers come together in groups around an innovative idea and have an opportunity to offer their services to any school district.

World languages, for example, could be taught by a combination of full- and part-time associates working partly for schools and partly for outside clients. They could bring in other nationals as tutors, including students from other countries as peer-tutors, and make full use of audio and videotapes and of young people's magazines published in other countries. Math and science are clearly other high-potential areas, given the prospective shortage of qualified teachers in these fields. Schools will need to offer more attractive career opportunities to draw qualified people. It is difficult to offer competitive pay and competitive opportunity within the framework of conventional master contracts.

Moving from Employee to Practitioner

The transition to private practice is partly psychological. We know teachers who have hesitated, fearing that their request to teach as a private practitioner would inconvenience the superintendent. Others are reluctant to be different from their colleagues.

Nurses have provided a helpful model: once "the doctor's assistant," they have built their personal service into a profession. Nurse practitioners take primary responsibility for certain kinds of patient care. Colleges now

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train nurse practitioners to be entrepreneurs, and some nurse-midwives who own and operate birth clinics.

Unlike healthcare professionals who sell services to a private market, teachers need not form a private school or serve only a private market. Public School Incentives is designing an arrangement through which teachers can work in public schools by contracting with school districts.

The transition to private practice has political ramifications. We are often asked, “What does the union think?” At the moment, and in general, the teachers’ organizations oppose the plan. This is not surprising: a new idea is never accepted without challenge. We think that the unions will seriously consider it if we can show how entrepreneurship could benefit teachers and students.

Meeting Educational Challenges Through Professionalism

Almost everyone with whom we have discussed the private practice option has felt that this idea has great potential both for teachers and for students. Private practice can respond effectively to four major challenges facing education.

1. *Professionalism.* Private practice means control of one’s own work. The “employee model”—however elaborated with additional training, certifications, and job-differentiation—does not inherently produce professional autonomy for teachers.

2. *Career growth.* One public school principal we know says in private moments that his job is to motivate for as long as possible, and to the maximum extent possible, people who are in essentially dead-end jobs. Private practice, by contrast, offers the possibility for growth: different schools, multiple schools, changing roles, greater rewards, more decision-making power.

3. *Accountability.* In the employee model, administrators make evaluation, promotion, and compensation decisions that may be unacceptable to teachers. Evaluation by other teachers or by teacher-controlled boards may prove unacceptable to school districts and to legislatures.

Private practice links accountability to contract renewal. It is supplemented by the kind of self-evaluation that private practitioners in other fields tell us they perform “so that we know how well we are doing.”

4. *Innovation.* New technologies, such as interactive laser/videodisc, and new procedures, such as peer teach-

ing, promise to offer students the individualization so needed and desired by parents. Under present arrangements, teachers often see innovations brought into schools by management (if they *are* brought in) as a threat.

Private practice can give teachers responsibility for improving the educational system. Teachers will select teaching methods and materials. The benefits from the improvements that they make—from reductions in cost and increases in effectiveness—will go to them. Private practice can give teachers, schools, and districts the incentive and the opportunity to make the improvements that public education needs today. □

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John I. Goodlad

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