

## Six Steps to Teacher Professionalism

To transform teaching into an authentic profession, we must revise teacher education and licensing, attract talented people, improve accountability, reform teacher unions, and promote shared decision making in schools.

A struggle over how to manage schools over the next decades is under way. The outcome of that struggle will determine whether teachers are talented, responsible professionals or low-level, closely managed bureaucrats. If teaching is regarded as a serious responsibility, then it will attract talented people. If, on the other hand, teaching is treated as a low-level, closely specified enterprise, then schools will be staffed by the bottom of the college-educated barrel.

There is in motion a set of forces that pushes toward top-down reform and standardization of practice. But on the heels of this development, a set of counterforces has begun. This other movement calls for local control of schools, school-based management, shared decision making, parent participation, and teacher professionalism.

I don't know which of these forces is going to win. The top-downers have support from the President of the United States on down. Policymakers

would create a system in which teachers are held accountable for how their students perform on standardized tests. There are even moves in the Congress to require a national assessment of educational progress for all children (in the same vein as the National Assessment of Educational Progress) so that policymakers can compare state-to-state, district-to-district, school-to-school, classroom-to-classroom, and perhaps even child-to-child. Perhaps they'll even require a NAEP report card for every child in America. That is one possibility.

The other prospect, equally possible, will come from the forces that favor client orientation to children: school-based management, teacher professionalism, and restructured schools. Closely connected, both teacher professionalism and school restructuring have but one legitimate goal—to make teachers more responsive to their students. There are six changes necessary to transform teaching from an occupation into a profession.

# 1

## Reform of Teacher Education

The first such change is the reform of teacher education. Perhaps the undergraduate education major has outlived its usefulness. It has, in fact, been outlawed in at least three states: Massachusetts, Texas, and Virginia. Interestingly, some years ago, both medicine and law decided that candidates needed to be liberally educated before they could study for those professions. Surprisingly, teaching, which is concerned with transmitting the intellectual corpus of our culture from one generation to the next, has not insisted that people be liberally educated. Fortunately, that change has begun.

As a consequence of that change, teachers would spend an additional year in a school of education (perhaps at the graduate level), learning the pedagogical and professional underpinnings of teaching. In addition to the substantial body of knowledge growing out of cognitive research and other fields, teachers would explore the context of the profession, such as the history, philosophy, economics, and the financing of education. All of this learning could occur in a one-year graduate level program or in a five-year program of integrated studies.

What's more, student teaching, while useful, is by no means sufficient. Therefore, we also need to create a year of genuine internship for beginning teachers. During that year, their performance should be closely supervised by senior personnel in the schools. This entails, of course, new roles and responsibilities for those who manage school systems. Many districts are giving lip service to this idea with mentor programs, but these are merely the beginnings of a genuine internship. The internship I envision would afford a candidate teacher multiple opportunities over the course of a year to engage in and reflect on teaching.

Teacher education, then, would consist of four years of college, one year of graduate school, and a year-long internship.

# 2

## Reform of Teacher Licensing

Step two is the reform of teacher licensing and certification. Part of the problem in teaching today is that the public does not trust teachers. To develop the kind of confidence the public generally has in members of other professions—doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers—teachers need a licensing structure parallel to those in established professions. Such a structure would assure the public that a person who is awarded the title "teacher" is, in fact, prepared to teach.

The RAND Corporation is working closely with the Minnesota Board of Teaching to design such a system. When the system is operational, candidates will have to complete four requirements:

- graduate from a school of education;
  - pass a test of pedagogical and professional knowledge;
  - satisfactorily complete a yearlong internship before taking the final test to become a teacher;
  - successfully complete a practical examination that assesses some of the complex intellectual skills of teaching.
- For a prospective English teacher, a sample task on such an examination would look something like this:

Last night the students in your class were given an assignment to write a one-paragraph essay. Here are seven essays that were produced last night. Correct these essays, giving marginal comments back to the students. Then write a short statement describing what you will do tomorrow in class to rectify the deficiencies you discovered while grading the papers.

*(A description of the class and the course objectives would be provided.)*

This kind of test—nothing like the tests now in use—is a practical review of some of the skills that can be tested in a paper-and-pencil format.

Successful completion of this series of requirements will give the people of Minnesota reason to trust the people who are awarded the title "teacher." That is the beginning of teacher professionalism.

# 3

## Restructuring of Schools

Third, we must restructure schools to promote teacher participation in decision making. For example, many of the hiring procedures school districts use are inadequate. It's possible for an administrator to attempt to assess the competence of teachers of mathematics, French, and Russian without discovering whether the person has knowledge in those fields. By involving teachers in hiring new colleagues, schools can attend to subject-matter competence in ways not otherwise possible.

In addition, districts can involve senior teachers in inducting new teachers into schools. I have already talked about the importance of internships. These are particularly instrumental in urban districts that are experiencing high rates of turnover. Finding ways to better help beginning teachers almost certainly requires sharing the responsibility for initiation with senior teachers.

In addition to hiring teachers, sometimes school systems have to fire people. A few districts have discovered that when administrators and teachers work together, it's possible to separate those who should stay from those who should leave. This is only feasible, however, in situations where labor and management work together rather than in opposition. If teachers are involved, the quality of personnel decision making can go up.

Teachers should also participate in planning the curriculum, selecting textbooks, and organizing and operating the student evaluation system (to be described later).

# 4

## Reform of Unions

The fourth change needed is the reform of teacher organizations themselves—the NEA and the AFT—a change that is under way at the national level and, to some extent, at the state and local levels. The unions are seeking a new balance between their traditional union responsibilities to their members and their newly recognized responsibilities to the profession, to teaching, and to children. The unions are recognizing that the long-term welfare of teachers, and therefore the long-term welfare of the unions, rests on a better balancing of union and professional responsibilities.

# 5

## Reform of Accountability

Fifth, we need to reform accountability in schools. Let's look at how testing can improve accountability by fostering good teaching and sound educational practices.

Years ago, a grade on a report card was taken seriously by parents. Parents made three assumptions, that the teacher (1) had a curriculum, (2) delivered the curriculum, and (3) could appraise whether a student had learned it. Nowadays, of course, we don't trust teachers to make those determinations; that is why we have these new policies. But the leap from the old system of trusting the report card to the National Assessment of Educational Progress is a substantial one. In fact, there are intermediate points that could provide assurance that learning is taking place—without distorting the curriculum in the way standardized testing does.

If the goal is to teach children to write, then the tests they take should be writing tests. If the public does not trust the individual teacher to grade that examination, then teachers can grade that examination on a school- or districtwide basis. Schools do not need a reading achievement test to reveal whether children can read: children can read to other teachers. Schools do not have to rely upon norm-referenced standardized tests. Instead, they can have a common examination in the school district, designed by the teaching staff in cooperation with the administrative staff, and graded in some fashion that assures anonymity.

Authentic or genuine testing promotes accountability without falling into the standardized testing trap. The importance of the approach is clear: it does not distort educational practice. If you want kids to learn how to write, then you assess their capacity to write. If you want them to be able to build something, then you have them build something. If you want them to be able to think scientifically, then you give them science projects or experiments. The testing system must encourage good educational practice.

# 6

## Reform of Incentives

Last, but not least, we need to motivate people to *want* to become teachers by reforming working conditions and salaries. We must create a job that talented people will want. That, of course, is part of the purpose of restructuring schools, and it is a major purpose of professionalizing teaching.

Today's teaching force may be the best one America is likely to see for some time. The reason is quite simple: a lot of teachers had no real options when they made their career decisions, and schools benefited from their limited opportunities. Now, happily, we have equality of access to occupations; the result, however, is that society can no longer trap smart young black people and smart young women in teaching.

If teaching is going to get its share of talent in today's market, we have to solve a few economic puzzles. That is, where are schools going to find the money to make teaching sufficiently financially remunerative to attract talented people? Well, there are a few places to look. For one thing, because they do not trust teachers, many cities have created a superstructure that is unnecessarily large and expensive. The money that goes to hold up the superstructure could help finance teacher salaries at an appropriate level.

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But there is a more important way to generate money for salaries: reeducate the public to be willing to pay the market wage necessary to attract top-quality people into teaching. Well, how are we going to do that? Let's look at what we currently do the instant we notice a shortage or even begin to anticipate a shortage: we say that anybody can be a teacher. States invent an emergency certification program, an alternate certification program; and schools hire long-term substitutes. But what do businesses do? When they cannot find enough workers at \$20,000 a year, they offer \$25,000. They do not, as a first resort, settle for unprepared workers.

It is especially important to have a process for licensing teachers with integrity so that the public has a clear definition of who is qualified to teach. Then, if the public recognizes that not enough smart people are showing up at the schoolhouse door, it will be

obliged to pay the wage necessary to get sufficient numbers of talented young people to join the teaching force. At least, that's the theory the private sector uses.

#### **Continuing a Tradition**

The reform of teacher education, teacher licensing, accountability, incentives, and unions and the restructuring of schools—these, then, are the steps necessary to professionalize teaching. To do so will require concerted action among a range of actors. But if we do not professionalize teaching, the consequences are very clear, especially in big cities. In fact, they are already evident there.

When the quality of education—which is intimately connected to the quality of teachers—falls below a level that the public accepts, those with the means leave the schools. Middle class people of all races, once they are able, begin to think seriously about the

quality of education for their youngsters. If they cannot get it in the city schools, they go where they *can* get it. Emerging in too many of our cities now is a two-class school system—one for poor and minority families and one for those with sufficient incomes.

The professionalization of teaching and the restructuring of our schools are critical, not just for all the obvious reasons, but for some very profound ones. At least some of us continue to believe that America is a better place because we have had a common school tradition over the last couple of hundred years. If we can make teaching attractive to talented people, then we can ensure high-quality education for all children—and our public education system may continue its noble common school tradition. □

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