

Finding Superior Teachers: The Intractable Challenge of Public Education

By Irving G. Hendrick

Early in 1998 a respected California journalist, Peter Schrag, asked: "Where do we find 250,000 great teachers?"¹ His question points up quite vividly the "quality versus quantity" issue identified by our editor, Alan H. Jones. The turning of a century, much less a millennium, seems to invite opportunities for reflection and stock taking. My sense is that of the issues identified by Jones in his "Ten Points of Debate in Teacher Education," the first concerning conflicting pressures for achieving high standards of quality in the preparation of teachers is the core issue and the one which is the most intractable. Most of the others, including conflicts of preservice versus inservice education, campus versus school site, time versus money, theory versus practice, professional versus public, and long-range versus short-range considerations seem almost like continuing sub-themes and side debates in the larger enduring conflict involving time, cost, and quality.

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The first stark realization that must be faced is that society's need for a constantly replenishing supply of hundreds of thousands of new teachers *will* be met, one way or another. Pleas for quality have been, are presently, and likely will continue to be made even more frequently and passionately than pleas for greater numbers. After all, teacher mediocrity or

worse may occur, but it is never a stated intention of politicians, citizens, journalists, or school authorities.

The tension between adhering to standards of high quality and the almost insatiable need to replenish the ranks of the nation's teaching force constitutes a virtually intractable problem. Thus, standards have been permitted to be only as high as most of society can accept—and pay for—without hampering the nation's supply of teachers. This reality does not necessarily lead to a feeling of hopelessness and despair. Indeed, if one takes the long view, a century-long view, vast improvements can be appreciated.

A hundred years ago many teachers in America were barely educated. Many others entered the occupation through two-year "normal school" programs, and relatively few were graduates of four-year colleges. Then as now, most teachers came from the ranks of working class or middle class families. Few could possibly come from the elite of social class, wealth, or high academic attainment. Yet, one would have to pronounce teacher education largely a success for meeting the needs of the twentieth century. Teacher qualifications and skills improved as public elementary and, later, secondary education became more necessary and important to the American economy. The twentieth century is sometimes characterized as the "American Century." Historians likely are in agreement that the place of the United States of America in the world community is much stronger in 1998 than it was in 1898. On-going criticisms of public education notwithstanding, this simply could not be the case were it not for the substantial success of public education—and teacher education—over the past hundred years.

The focus of these essays, however, is not about the past; it is about the future. Just as public education in general and teacher education in particular adapted quite well to the needs and challenges of the twentieth century, society requires that they will need to change and adapt even more dramatically to meet the challenges of the coming century. High standards almost certainly will never be as high as their advocates demand. But they *must* become much higher than they are today. When push comes to shove in America, it is probably fair to expect that our capitalistic economic order will, albeit perhaps grudgingly, provide the economic incentives to improve public education. The stakes in a global economy and the desire for domestic social tranquility are simply too great for public education to fail, and virtually no one believes that education can be successful without skilled teachers.

Thanks to a large supply of labor, and an industrial economy that required only persons of minimal to moderate levels of education, twentieth century public schools were largely up to the challenge before them. One hundred years ago John Dewey criticized nineteenth century schools—not for doing a bad job in addressing nineteenth century problems—but as institutions up to the challenges of the twentieth century. A similar perspective fits today. Current standards of public education and teacher education will need to adapt to current and future needs. For one thing, America's labor supply is not only low, but its skill level will need to be

greatly enhanced in order to fit the technological challenges of the new century.

Over time the focus of national attention on issues of schooling change. When the history of the twentieth century is written—and much of it has already been written—it will be understood that progress occurred step by step, and much of it happened only with a struggle. Progress rarely occurs in a straight linear way. A hundred and sixty years ago the concept of free, public, tax-supported schooling occupied center stage. Sixty years later the challenge seemed to be adapting education to the needs of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. For most of the second half of the present century the emphasis shifted back and forth between the sometime conflicting challenges of equity and excellence, as Americans endeavored to deal with contradictions in their national history as a land of equal opportunity and their need to excel in a new global economic order.

There is still much debate on how to improve the public schools, even as virtually everyone believes that schools must be improved, and everyone believes that teachers have a great influence on the ability of that to happen. Although Americans historically have generally done what was required in education to advance their national interest, progress is not foreordained nor is it inevitable. Neglect is always an easy—albeit socially expensive and decidedly unappealing—option. Currently there is still a major public policy debate on just how much priority and treasure should be spent on improving teacher quality and changing the institution of public education.

A strong peace-time economy, coupled with some sense of urgency about social and economic progress in an internationally competitive age, should bode well for continuing improvements in the education of teachers. Most notable among the recent data-based admonitions for attending to the importance and enhancement of teacher education are those found in the Report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future* (1996). Perhaps more effectively than other reports and scholarly writings, the National Commission brought home to the public debate about effective schooling the inextricable link between that and the skill level of teachers. True, this linkage has been made repeatedly for two centuries, but the constructive focus on university-based teacher education seems to have been given an important boost from this report.

The central message of the National Commission was strikingly simple, even apparent, to many: "What teachers know and can do is one of the most important influences on what students learn. Recruiting, preparing, and retaining good teachers is the central strategy for improving our schools." This insight runs counter to other appealing and seemingly apparent virtues, e.g., reducing class-size, especially in the primary grades. For sure, not all of the research evidence is in, but the best evidence and educated guesses so far from the research community suggest that dollars spent on increasing teacher education, experience, and salaries will make a greater difference in student achievement than lowering the pupil teacher

ratio.² This is a message that advocates for improved public schools must make forcefully and often to policy makers and keepers of the public's purse.

In my opening paragraph I suggested that many of the conflicts and dilemmas identified by Jones seem almost like sub-parts of the larger conflict regarding the age-old conflict between merely staffing classrooms and finding well qualified teachers to serve in them. Some of the old battles from the 1950s and 1960s are still around, of course. Issues such as subject versus method, theory versus practice, university versus field, preservice versus inservice education, etc., are all still capable of stimulating some exercised discussion within the profession and among public commentators, politicians, and journalists.

The role of university-based professional education in the work of preparing teachers still enjoys significant informed and powerful support, even as the failings and limitations of university roles have also been discovered. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the past decade in this regard has been a recognition on the part of informed observers about just what roles universities can perform best, and what roles are best left to public schools. Neither institution, it seems, can do well the proper role of the other.

Time and research have produced some enlightenment and shared understanding about what is important and what institutions are in the best position to deal with particular issues. To a large extent the central issue in the years ahead will not be so much figuring out what is the right thing to do. It will be in paying the price for improvements. It is sometimes observed that America has three public school systems. The best is a comparatively well off suburban school system where citizens and school officials take pride in attracting excellent teachers to their schools. Unfortunately, there are also comparatively impoverished—or, arguably, overly bureaucratic—large city school systems where cheaper, faster, and easier paths to teaching seem to trump quality at every turn. And, not to be forgotten, there remains the problem of rural poverty and rural schools that historically have had some of America's most modestly prepared teachers.

The pessimist could easily conclude that the institution of public schooling in large cities will be evaluated to be so hopeless that the institution itself will succumb to various voucher and special program alternatives. The optimistic view—which also is not out of the question—is that public urgency for improved education will at long last cause society early in the 21st century to pay the price for improved teacher preparation in urban and rural areas. A current and realistic short-term strategy in some states is to move motivated—if inadequately prepared—teachers into the urban and rural schools, but to test their content knowledge and require them to be held at least to an abbreviated, standards-based, subject-matter and professional preparation program.

In California, for example, much of the policy focus in teacher credentialing over the past year has been directed at subject and professional standards, and toward a developmental view of learning to teach. Such an orientation considers

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particular roles for universities and the schools and differentiates rather clearly between the preservice education of teachers and the induction of new teachers into the art and science of teaching. As reflected in the 1997 Final Report of the Advisory Panel on Teacher Education, Induction, and Certification for Twenty-First Century Schools (SB 1422), entitled *California's Future: Highly Qualified Teachers for All Students*, attention has been turned toward creating a single, standards-based, credentialing system which provides clear distinctions between preservice teacher education and teacher induction, while at the same time allowing multiple paths to initial certification. Thus, the proposal comes close to meeting many tests of "reasonableness." By so doing it accepts some pre-intern and intern entries into the profession which include only the most minimal amount of preservice professional preparation, a compromise that the National Commission likely would find displeasing.

For certain, the sheer need to find the "250,000 great teachers" spoken of by Schrag is forcing some mighty compromises. Even with those compromises teacher salaries will need to be greatly improved. College graduates of even average talent, it seems, have many options in a tight labor market. Much will change concerning the education of teachers—and the education of other professionals—during the coming century. However, one thing is sure *not* to change. Talented college graduates will continue to gravitate to the fields that offer them the most attractive mix of psychic and monetary rewards.

Notes

1. *The Sacramento Bee*, January 21, 1998.
2. See also Linda Darling-Hammond, Teachers and Teaching: Testing Policy Hypotheses from a National Commission Report, *Educational Researcher*, 27 (January-February, 1998), 5-15.