

# Teacher Competency and

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In times of crisis it is necessary to step back and analyze the causes and the possible solutions. We believe that a crisis exists in ensuring a steady stream of competent and qualified teachers to meet public school needs over the next decade. This crisis is marked by teacher shortages and doubts about the quality of new teachers. We will explain why this crisis exists and will offer some solutions to it, including why we think competency testing for entrants into the teaching field is necessary.

All indications point to another period of teacher shortages in the 1980s and early 1990s. Shortages have already developed in most areas of the nation in mathematics, science, and special education. The current 16-25 age cohort is one of the smallest in recent times and the pool of college graduates will continue to decrease in coming years. Fewer and fewer college graduates will go into teaching because of the attractiveness of other career fields. The depressed salaries and poor working conditions in

teaching cannot compete with higher paying jobs in business, industry, and areas of government. There are many reasons why teaching is not attracting as many people as it once did. The almost total job security it once provided used to attract teachers to the field. This security resulted from a growing teaching force and a demand for teachers that greatly exceeded the supply of available teachers. This is no longer true. Teaching is no longer seen as a secure career field when in many districts teachers with 5, 10, or 15 years experience are laid off. During the Depression and shortly afterward, teaching was one of the few fields that many college-educated people aspiring to be professionals could enter. Good job opportunities with chances for career advancement did not exist in many job areas. This was especially true for women. This has changed also. While the expanded opportunities for women, minorities, and others are a good thing, it is depriving the education field of many exceptional individuals who

in past decades might have become teachers. The American public should be concerned about where our next generation of teachers will come from. We might be faced with schools with no teachers.

How will we respond to a shortage of teachers? If teaching positions go unfilled, there will be pressures to increase class size, increase teacher loads, and cut the number of programs offered, which will harm educational quality and make schools even less attractive to teachers. Standards at teacher education institutions and standards for entry into the profession might be lowered to increase the supply of certified teachers which again would lower educational quality and weaken public confidence in schools. Teacher shortages also could lead to "emergency credentialing" of individuals who cannot satisfy the normal standards for licensing. While the intent would be to temporarily fill empty classrooms, an understandable clamor for job security by those hired on temporary emergency certificates would ensue. As has happened before, these teachers might be "grandfathered" into permanent licensing status. Also, there might well be a period of conflict over changing structures in education. Differential staffing arrangements and merit pay plans might be proposed, not on any claim of educational merit, but because they would be expedient.

Closely related to all this is the question of the caliber of students attracted to teacher education programs. Recent studies indicate that teacher education students rank below other college students on average *Scholastic Aptitude Test* (SAT) scores. For example, the January 21, 1982, *Washington Post* reported the results of a study conducted by the Virginia Council of Higher Education which showed that education majors at Virginia's



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# Testing: A Natural Affinity

state universities scored an average of 121 points lower on the SAT than did those who received bachelor's degrees in other fields. At Virginia private colleges, education majors scored an average of 80 points below other graduates. While we are on the verge of a major teacher shortage, the quality of candidates for collegiate teacher preparation programs is low. Because the two phenomena work in concert, we will face a major crisis in education.

Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer remarked that "The teaching profession is caught in a vicious cycle, spiraling downward.... Rewards are few, morale is low, the best teachers are bailing out and the supply of good recruits is drying up" (*Education Daily*, January 21, 1982). Boyer highlights major problems that must be addressed.

Boston University education professor W. Timothy Weaver (1979) studied this problem also. He looked at three conditions he presumes to be interrelated: a decline in the job market for teachers, a shift in student preferences away from the field of education, and a sharp decline in test scores of students intending to study education. As a result, Weaver sees those with low test scores go on to become graduating seniors who then go on to become teachers. It is particularly devastating to note that in a comparison of the National Longitudinal Study of the class of 1976, Weaver found that teacher education majors who did not go into teaching scored higher on four out of five competence measures in the areas of mathematics, reading, and vocabulary than those who found teaching jobs.

In its intermediate projections, the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (1980) reports that the total demand for additional certified teachers between 1984 and 1988 will be 745,000.

While similar projections for teacher supply indicate that the number of new teacher graduates will equal or slightly exceed the demand, a number of critical questions arise:

- How many of those new graduates will be attracted to public school teaching?
- How qualified will those new teachers be?
- How can we assure that only well-qualified individuals enter teaching?

Until we adequately answer these questions as a matter of public policy, the crisis will remain.

Boyer proposes a three-part solution. He advocates that teacher education colleges tighten their admission standards, that they require seniors to pass competency tests before graduating, and that states award scholarships to promising teacher recruits. Weaver, on the other hand, concludes that schools of education must sever their close connection with the public schools and broaden their mission to recognize the need for education professionals in business, government, and other areas. He feels that this would attract better qualified students to schools of education.

While these approaches address part of the problem, neither, in our

opinion, provides a comprehensive solution to problems of providing an adequate number of qualified teachers. We will offer some thoughts on how this situation might be remedied.

Money is one critical factor. If teaching paid a salary comparable to that of other occupations requiring similar preparation, there might not be a shortage of highly qualified people to go into teaching and remain in teaching. This would alleviate the shortage. In the fall of 1982, the typical beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree will earn a salary in the \$12-\$14,000 range. According to a recent report (Endicott & Lindquist, 1981), 1982 bachelor degree graduates can expect a starting salary of \$25,428 in engineering, \$18,648 in accounting, \$21,516 in mathematics and statistics, \$22,260 in computer science, and \$17,448 in business administration. If teaching salaries started at \$25,000 per year, there probably would be more highly qualified college students attracted to teaching. While \$25,000 per year may be a goal we must pursue, it is not realistic for the near future. The monetary incentive, however, remains a real problem so long as teaching does not compete with other professions. There are, of course, other reasons why teaching is not attractive to many people but

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without adequate compensation, rectifying the other problems is impossible. With adequate salaries, the other problems have a chance of being improved.

Teaching is a difficult job requiring a complex set of knowledges and skills. According to Bartlett Giamatti (1980), president of Yale University,

A liberal education is at the heart of a civil society, and at the heart of a liberal education is the act of teaching.... The teacher chooses. The teacher chooses how to structure choice. The teacher's power and responsibility lie in choosing where everyone will begin and how, from that beginning, the end will be shaped. The choice of that final form lies in the teacher's initial act.... Somehow the line between encouraging a design and imposing a specific stamp must be found and clarified. That is where the teacher first begins to choose. (p. 24)

This definition of a teacher imposes awesome responsibility on those who choose to teach. It describes a person with a deep knowledge of learners and their ways, high-level skills in the science of pedagogy, and a mastery of the subject being taught. A teacher is also a decisionmaker.

We in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have very definite ideas about how we can ensure that the teachers our institutions of higher education produce are competent. We also think it is perfectly appropriate and desirable to test new entrants in the teaching field to ensure that they meet minimum standards. As opposed to the leaders of the National Education Association (NEA), who hold that such tests are irrelevant and point the finger of blame everywhere but at themselves, the AFT welcomes fair and valid teacher competency tests. However, testing alone cannot produce competent teachers, teachers who in Giamatti's words can "choose how to structure choice."

Also, we do not accept the frequent argument that we do not need to test college graduates because they have already satisfied the graduation requirements of the college. Colleges have different programs and different standards. A test would be valuable in ensuring that general standards are met. This

was, and remains, the purpose for tests such as the bar examination for lawyers or the CPA exams for public accountants. The public must be confident that lawyers, accountants, and teachers meet certain minimal standards. Tests are less subjective than measures such as personal interviews or examinations of anecdotal records. Tests should be viewed as a positive means to support standards. Teaching deserves top-notch college students who will be able to motivate and guide their students. Bright and able college students interested in teaching should be encouraged to enter teacher education programs. The job of teaching, however, must be enriched so that it will be attractive to the well-rounded individual desiring to teach.

If you do not know something, you cannot teach something. Teacher education students need a broad collegiate program in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, the natural and behavioral sciences, the pure and applied mathematics, and the subject(s) they are going to teach. A rigorous and demanding undergraduate program can produce this, and testing to ensure that the candidate has attained this knowledge can be an important milestone in the preparation of a teacher.

The prospective teacher also needs specialization in a subject area. The undergraduate program should require that the student complete the requirements for a full major course of study in a subject. A history teacher should not be an education major with a brief background in history, but should have the skills and knowledge to teach history. Preparation in the area of specialization can be tested also.

A rigorous program at the undergraduate level in the arts and sciences and in a substantive specialization can help attract those students who are interested in teaching, but who find many current programs to be intellectually flabby.

There is also substantive technical knowledge that goes into the making of a teacher. The prospective teacher needs professional or pedagogical training in developmental and social psychology; the history, philosophy, and sociology

of education; diagnostic, planning, and prescriptive techniques; methods of instruction and classroom management techniques; techniques of research and evaluation; curriculum development; and teaching special needs students. Testing of teacher education students is appropriate in all these areas.

Prospective teachers also need practical classroom experience before they are certified. Testing plays a part here because this experience must be evaluated continually and formatively so that the teacher candidate can most efficiently use this period as a learning experience. AFT's policy is that this practicum should take the form of a 2- to 3-year internship in which the intern would not have a full teaching load and would be paid a negotiated base salary. It must be stressed that the internship is a final and important qualifying step. This test differs from the others we have discussed because it is based on actual performance as a teacher, rather than on acquisition of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is a critical assessment point in preparing a new teacher for the classroom.

AFT's policy in this area calls for greater involvement by classroom teachers and teacher educators in setting and maintaining the standards for teaching. Specifically, AFT advocates a series of written examinations to test fundamental knowledge in language and computational skills, knowledge in general education and the subject area to be taught, and knowledge of pedagogy. These would be part of an extended licensure period and successful completion of these tests would be required before beginning the internship. On completion of the internship, permanent certification or licensure would be granted. In developing such a testing program, it is important that teachers, school administrators, school boards, civil rights groups, community representatives, and others have the opportunity to comment on and suggest improvements in the tests. Such input will improve the quality of the program and increase its acceptance.

To avoid any misunderstanding, while we strongly advocate the use of tests in the manner we described, a test should never be the only

criterion used to evaluate the competence of a teacher preparation candidate. Other criteria also must be employed, but even a single test can provide valuable information that can improve both the assessment process and the end product. The test is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for entry into the profession.

This idea is not that radical. Why not require entry tests universally for new teachers? We require physicians, attorneys, public accountants, and others to pass exams before they are licensed to practice their profession. Maybe it is time we do the same for teachers.

Those who oppose this idea, including some teachers and some teacher organizations, argue that passing a test does not guarantee a good teacher, because a test or series of tests cannot measure the complex set of abilities that go into making a good teacher. This is true, but it misses the point. If a student preparing to be a teacher cannot pass a test or series of tests, then that student should not be allowed to become a teacher until the deficiencies are corrected. The NEA in its Resolution C-2, first passed in 1969, stated its opposition to testing for teacher competence by saying that "examinations such as the *National Teacher Examinations* must not be used as a condition of employment, evaluation, criterion for certification, placement, or promotion of teachers. The Association is convinced that no test in existence is satisfactory for such usage." NEA Executive Director Terry Herndon said that the Educational Testing Service, which makes the *National Teacher Examinations*, "reminds me somewhat of armament manufacturers, who say guns don't kill people, people do" (*NEA NOW*, November 19, 1979). In 1972, NEA called for the abolition of the *National Teacher Examinations*. We believe this is a destructive stance and respond by pointing out that all other abilities are superfluous if a math teacher cannot pass an exam in mathematics, or if an elementary teacher does not satisfy requirements of basic literacy, or if a teacher of the mentally handicapped cannot successfully complete a test in psychology.

Naturally the question arises of testing veteran teachers. Just as

naturally, teachers resist and will continue to resist until other veteran professionals are also retested periodically. On close examination, the entire notion applied to veteran teachers does not make sense. Testing for new teachers is a screening device to keep those with obvious deficiencies out of the profession. Mechanisms already exist to remove veteran teachers with similar deficiencies. During the teacher's probationary period, deficiencies can be identified and corrected by principals or other supervisors through the teacher evaluation system. An incompetent teacher who cannot correct his or her deficiencies can be terminated during the probationary period. Even after a teacher receives tenure, a competent supervisor can remove a teacher through a due process hearing procedure, if the supervisor can prove the case. Tenure only serves to provide an impartial process for evaluating teacher performance and removing those who are incompetent. Under these circumstances, to retest all veteran teachers on a periodic basis would be extremely costly, time-consuming, and ultimately wasteful. Millions of dollars would be spent on a new procedure, while existing procedures of teacher evaluation and dismissal for just cause are absolutely adequate. Retesting all veteran teachers would be throwing tax dollars away.

Another issue that must be addressed is the differential racial impact of testing. Experience with the *National Teacher Examinations* in several states has shown that black teacher candidates are more likely to fail the test than are white teacher candidates. The real problem is the lack of resources and attention devoted to black schools in many parts of the country. The race differential has been declining in recent years because of the positive impact of the civil rights movement and the heightened sensitivity to the problem. Rather than simplistically brand a test as racist, we must strike at the root of the problem. We do not want to certify teachers who cannot satisfy minimum standards. We do want to improve the education of minorities and take affirmative action to provide blacks and other minorities with the opportunity to succeed in

teacher education programs and to become good teachers. This requires a positive program that will actively encourage minority college students to pursue careers in teaching.

The issue comes down to answering some very fundamental questions, which should help frame the discussion and further explain our position.

Does the public have the right to insist on minimum standards of teacher competence? Of course, the public has this right. As in any professional area where the states license individuals to practice, the public can and should insist that prospective teachers meet, and prove they can meet, certain minimum standards. We have already suggested what we think the minimum standards should be.

Can tests be appropriate measures of teacher competence? Tests cannot measure everything well. However, tests can adequately and validly measure basic skill acquisitions, knowledge of general education and specific content areas, and knowledge of pedagogy. Skill areas can best be assessed by evaluating performance, but competence in knowledge areas is fundamental. Other qualities hardly matter if a person preparing to teach does not satisfy minimum competency requirements in the areas described.

Are tests of teacher competency the only key to reform? Teacher competency tests for new teachers are only one of the methods we can use to improve the quality of our teachers. Stronger academic programs for teacher education students, better admission decisions for entry into those programs, and realistic internship programs are other methods. Employing them together will go a long way toward solving the problem.

While these ideas may help solve the problems of teacher competency, how will they alleviate teacher shortages? Teacher shortages will continue to be a problem, but if we react by lowering standards and putting substandard teachers in classrooms, we will only lower quality in the schools and undermine the public's confidence in public education. One solution, as we discussed above, is to make

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on standard entrance examinations. Second, there is little or no evidence that the highest scoring students on standardized measurement are destined to become outstanding teachers.

Whatever the current situation with achievement levels of candidates for teacher preparation, teachers want candidates to begin that preparation with the highest possible promise of becoming strong and effective professionals. But entrance examinations administered by education departments are not likely to provide the solution to this problem either. This is particularly so if such examinations are of the typical basic-skills and general education achievement types. The same reasons apply for rejecting tests for admission to preparation as those cited earlier for not using exit examinations: They represent a redundancy and waste of resources because certification of competence to enter professional schools should be by the departments and professors who have provided the prerequisite instruction.

In addition, entry to preprofessional and professional preparation should be based on a wide range of factors—interest, motivation, commitment, and experience and success in related areas and the like. Basic skills and knowledge achievement should be only one of a number of factors to be taken into account when such decisions are made.

#### *What Are the Alternatives?*

A first-level solution to the issues of entry to preparation for teaching might well be like that recommended for exit examinations: Influence the appropriate administrative, policy, and political processes to require departments in universities that teach basic skills, liberal arts, and the teaching specialties, to assure that their passing grades firmly and accurately indicate competence.

As an interim measure only, the academic departments that teach the content of the first 2 years of college should be urged to implement several basic skills and/or general education and teaching-

specialty proficiency examinations (criterion-referenced, written, oral, performance) no later than the end of the sophomore year. Passing these would be required to proceed to more advanced studies.

Finally, education departments should be required to demonstrate, both for state approval and for national accreditation (through approval by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) that they implement and enforce a range of criteria for admission to preparation including grade point averages, recommendations of previous instructors, work samples, evaluations of experiential learning (particularly with children and youth) and other evidence of interest, commitment, and motivation. One promising move in this direction is a proposal under consideration by the Standards Committee of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education to include in the Council's standards a specific grade-point requirement for admission to programs of teacher preparation.

#### **Conclusion**

We reiterate our major premises:

- The united teaching profession seeks more and stronger assessment for determining who shall be permitted to pursue teacher preparation programs and for evaluating successful completion of the programs.
- No existing written assessment is accurate enough for making such determinations.
- Accountability for assessing much of what is now being assessed or is proposed to be assessed for entry to preparation should rest with the departments of arts and sciences in colleges and universities.
- The assessment of professional studies accomplishments, including the practicum, must be based on a variety of criteria, with performance on paper-and-pencil assessment (if used at all) being only one part of the whole.

A final caveat: Don't equate the implementation of complicated statistical systems, the counting of minute performance objectives achieved, or modules successfully negotiated, with relevant and accurate assessment. ■

teacher salaries and working conditions comparable to those in other professions so that teaching can compete in attracting bright and able college students. Although we believe this should be done, we do not believe it will be done in the current economic and social climate. Another potential solution is to reexamine the structure of public schools. There may well be innovative approaches to staffing which would allow highly qualified, experienced teachers to work with an instructional staff of certified individuals with varying backgrounds, preparations, competencies, and roles. We think this might be an answer to shortages of competent teachers and is an idea worth exploring.

There is no doubt that the debate about testing beginning teachers will go on for some time. It simply makes sense to test knowledge in basic skills, subject area, and teaching methodology, among other areas, to make sure that prospective teachers are not deficient in these areas. Why not start out right instead of complaining later about teacher incompetence?

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