

The Future of Teacher Education

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The quality of teacher education programs in New York State, and the academic performance of licensed teachers, are being seriously questioned by state and local officials and parents. In a highly publicized case, nearly three-fourth of the applicants for teaching positions in the Connetquot school district scored less than 80% on an eleventh-grade reading comprehension test. State education commissioner Richard Mills is also threatening to decertify Schools of Education whose graduates continue to perform poorly on state teacher certification examinations.

The initial response to Connetquot and Mills' statement has been demands that teachers meet higher academic standards before they are licensed, and that they be retested throughout their careers. But demanding higher standards is easy; the problems are deciding (a) what needs to be measured, (b) how improved teacher performance will be achieved, and (c) whether voters are willing to foot the bill.

Most standardized tests measure reading and writing skills. Clearly teachers must be literate. But literacy alone does not make someone a good teacher, doctor, lawyer, or police officer. These professions require a high level of social skills and judgment that tests do not effectively measure. In fact, people who score the highest on tests may not be the best teachers. Often, they fail to empathize with students who are having difficulty in a subject or they do not understand the need to connect with and motivate learners.

While improving the academic performance of teachers is important, it is not the only concern. The proposal to decertify Schools of Education introduces more problems than it solves. Many of the endangered programs are part of the City University of New York. They educate most of the new African-American, Latino/a, and Caribbean teachers hired by the New York City public school system. If these programs are decertified, it will be extremely difficult to prepare qualified minority staff to work with the city's overwhelmingly non-white student population. Suburban residents who cannot find positions closer to home might accept these jobs, but many have limited experience with urban and minority youth, and would be ineffective as teachers in these settings.

CUNY education graduates perform poorly on standardized examinations primarily for two reasons. The first is that the City University has suffered through waves of budget cuts and hiring freezes. Classes are larger than in the private institutions and they are generally taught by adjuncts. Tuition increases force students from low income families to maintain heavy outside work schedules. These factors combine to deny perspective teachers adequate academic preparation.

In addition, the City University welcomes students with English language difficulties and problematic high school records. Many have the potential to be outstanding teachers, capable of motivating young learners. These teaching candidates need extra academic support, but because of budget cuts, they receive less.

Instead of closing public Schools of Education, New York State needs to invest in them. Teacher education is expensive. It requires smaller classes, supervised field placements, and intensive mentoring. It is not surprising that the most successful teacher education programs, including Hofstra University, N.Y.U., and Teachers College at Columbia, are at private schools that charge higher tuition than the public universities. The quality of teacher education at these institutions must become the model for all New York State programs. But this will only happen if the state legislature is willing to allocate more tax dollars.

Proposals to attract academically stronger teacher education candidates also come with a price tag. They include tuition remission, forgiving education loans, and increasing teachers' salaries. Improving education for children by strengthening teacher education programs and recruiting and retaining highly qualified candidates will not be cheap. It is also not a miracle cure that will solve all of the problems of schools and society. But it is an important step.