As dean of an education school, more and more I find myself asking, to my own surprise: Is it time to sever the link between the university programs that prepare teachers and the public bodies that certify them? For half a century, college- and university-based teacher-education programs have held a monopoly position in operating, in partnership with state governments, virtually the only route to the teaching profession in public schools. This has guaranteed us a fairly constant stream of students, revenues, and state and federal funding. These benefits have come with strings attached, of course: states have mandated much of the curriculum that prospective teachers must take.

The question is, has our monopoly position and the states’ intervention helped or undermined the quality of our programs? Has our monopoly made us unresponsive to the needs of our students and the schools that hire them? Have state mandates distracted us from designing a coherent, innovative, and high-quality curriculum? I think so. As the education system makes a transition to a focus on results-based accountability combined with more flexibility in school design, it’s time for those of us in the teacher-education profession to become more results-based and flexible too. We ought to concentrate on offering the best possible professional training programs while leaving it to others—state and local governments and individual schools—to decide who is qualified to be certified and hired. The breaking up of our monopoly would force us to convince students, their tuition-paying parents, and the school districts that do the hiring that our programs...
The reality is that we haven’t gained the respect of our colleagues in higher education, and many of our graduates claim to have learned little of any value in education school.

produce teaching candidates who are more qualified and skilled than candidates who obtained their training elsewhere or who come in with no training.

Policymakers and the public have realized that one of the keys, if not the key, to raising student achievement across the board is to improve the quality of the nation’s teachers. To my mind, nothing is more important to school quality than placing a passionate, dedicated, knowledgeable, and highly skilled teacher in every classroom. Doubts about the academic abilities of some of the nation’s teachers—as measured by various tests of student learning—have led to doubts about the university programs that prepare teachers. The conservative backlash against progressive education has also planted seeds of doubt about the content of the education provided in education schools. Moreover, the national teacher shortage has forced policymakers to create alternative pathways to teaching in order to encourage mid-career changers and talented college graduates who didn’t complete education programs to go into teaching. The success of programs like Teach for America and other alternative-certification programs has convinced many that a teacher needn’t attend an education school in order to be effective. Education schools need to recognize these doubts and answer them effectively.

This is not a call to move the professional preparation of teachers and administrators from the academy to the “real world” of practice in the schools. Such a move was a major part
of the conservative agenda of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who sought to denigrate academic learning of any kind. A similar anti-intellectualism has come quickly to the United States. Classroom experience is a crucial part of any teacher’s training, but it is only a part. The apprenticeship approach works well in preparing people for a profession as it is currently practiced. It does not work very well in preparing people to be reflective or to innovate and be leaders of change. And if today’s schools need anything, it is some pretty basic reflection, rethinking, and reconsidering.

Nevertheless, we in teacher education do not have a stellar record of producing change agents, and we have failed at the task of policing ourselves. There are many wonderful teacher-preparation programs today, many more than there were only a few years ago. Leaders in teacher education have succeeded in raising the academic standards of their programs and promoting more interaction between education faculty and arts and sciences faculty. We have also answered the criticism that education programs were long on theory and short on practice by linking our programs more effectively to schools through yearlong internships and through the development of a clinical faculty of school-based teacher educators who are truly part of the teacher-preparation team. But the world of teacher education remains uneven. The teacher educator who has not been in a school in years; the one who advocates “multiple modes of instruction” but only lectures in class; the one who is just plain boring: these people are still all too real. Above all, the reality remains that we haven’t gained the respect of our colleagues in higher education, and many of our graduates themselves claim to have learned little of any value in education school. This alone should cause us to do some dramatic rethinking.

**A Brief History**

The current university-state partnership in preparing and then certifying teachers is relatively new. For much of the nation’s history, school districts often ran their own teacher-preparation programs. In many cases, elementary-school teachers were simply graduates of the local high school. Normal schools, which began in the 1830s, were in their early years much closer to being high schools than the equivalent of colleges. Most expanded their curriculum for future teachers to the equivalent of a baccalaureate degree only in the early decades of the 20th century. For all the debates over the virtues and vices of progressive education, before World War II the vast majority of Americans attended only elementary school, and they were taught by normal-school or high-school graduates who had often studied for one or two years at a school of pedagogy. Only in the mid-20th century did the notion that every teacher should have a college degree and some sort of professional preparation even begin to take hold. My home state of Massachusetts, long known as a leader in school reform, began requiring a bachelor’s degree for teachers only in 1954. At the same time, state departments of education began the process of monitoring college-based teacher-preparation programs using standards that were usually the result of careful negotiations among the state, the representatives of the college, and—in some cases—representatives of teachers and school administrators.

There is no question that these mid-century reforms made a significant difference in the quality of teaching across the country. In many states the old normal schools were transformed into a state college system after World War II. Higher education expanded to offer amazing new opportunities to the waves of GIs returning from the war and many others who had previously been excluded. A good number of these college graduates—especially the female graduates—became teachers. In the 1980s many states raised the standards once again. Especially after the 1986 reports of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy and the Holmes Group of education deans, most states abolished the old education majors and required that future teachers combine a rich and full baccalaureate program with significant preparation in pedagogy, either as an undergraduate minor or through a fifth year or other kind of graduate program. The teachers of the past half-century have been the best prepared of any generation of teachers in history. They have had better undergraduate educations and deeper knowledge of their subject matter and the complex process of teaching and learning than any who preceded them.

Still, the nation is not satisfied with the quality of the nation’s teachers, and rightly so. Much of the blame has fallen on education schools. There are many other culprits, from the
If we have high-stakes tests and all the public attention that goes with them, we should be able to trust school districts and schools to make wise decisions about whom to hire.

unequal funding of school districts, which leads to gross disparities in teacher pay, to the sheer lack of respect afforded to teaching as a profession. But we in teacher education are ultimately responsible for preparing prospective teachers to be great teachers. So as more and more states adopt various forms of high-stakes testing for both students and teachers, and as the reports of failure on a massive scale continue to proliferate, we in teacher education face harsh scrutiny. The logic is unavoidable: if the schools are failing, then the teachers are failing. If the teachers are failing, then the programs that prepare them must be failing too. Deeper analysis has raised many questions about the quality of some standardized tests. But high-stakes tests are here to stay. They speak for a public that has lost faith in the bright assurances of professional educators that teachers were well prepared and that students were learning.

At the same time, and arising from the same frustrations, many states have sought to impose even tighter regulations on the current state-approved college- and university-based teacher-preparation programs. In 1998 the U.S. Congress joined in this effort with its requirements for tough new reporting measures—the Title II Report Cards—that every teacher-preparation program in the country now files and that will be made public across the nation in the spring of 2002. Leaders within the teacher-education enterprise itself have also demanded much better preparation for future teachers. The 1996 report of the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future made a series of dramatic recommendations, including a call for states and school districts to “get serious about standards, for both students and teachers” and for a thorough restructuring of teacher preparation, recruitment, and professional development. Meanwhile other reformers wish to dismantle the entire certification system and afford public school principals the same privilege as private school principals: the ability to choose any teacher, certified or not, based on a personal assessment of their skills and attitude.

A Modest Proposal

Overhauling the system of teacher education first requires that education schools recognize that for many in the larger public—the parents of today’s schoolchildren, the taxpayers who foot the bill, and the elected officials who represent them—the current system of teacher preparation is seen as part of the problem, not the solution. While we may complain that such judgments are unfair, we need to address the reality that, fairly or unfairly, teacher education has lost its legitimacy in many circles.

As someone who has devoted a large part of my professional career to teacher preparation, this situation worries me. I am not a fan of the old system, but I am deeply worried that “alternative routes” are going to create a generation of teachers who do not have the fundamental skills, knowledge, and inclinations needed to support student learning. I fear models that reinforce status quo in our schools, because of me the status quo in American education is unacceptable. Too many kids are left out, marginalized, or taught that their failures are their own fault. Too many kids are excluded from the benefits of today’s economy and from participation in tomorrow’s democracy. What is to be done?

Perhaps the time has come for those of us in higher education to simply step out of the teacher-certification business. We should let school districts and, ideally, in many cases, individual schools make the certification and the hiring decisions. States, in turn, should step out of their role in regulating university-based teacher-preparation programs. Both the schools and the higher-education programs will thrive, I believe, in such a new atmosphere of freedom and accountability.

The role of university-based teacher preparation should be different—and if we do the preparation right, more significant. Let the schools and school districts certify and hire whom they will. Our role as teacher educators will be to provide programs that add such clear and obvious value that school districts prefer our candidates to others. If we are doing a good job, our graduates will obviously be the best teachers. If they are not, we will have only ourselves to blame.

If we give up the monopoly that has protected us in the past, a monopoly that is gone whether we like it or not, we should be given much more freedom to design the kinds of programs that we believe will truly prepare the best teachers. If the state no longer certifies teachers because they are our graduates, the state also must relinquish any right to regulate our curriculum. Let us clearly separate the two functions. We would not offer any courses “because the state mandated them.” We would be free to design the best curriculum we could imagine, to seek accreditation or not, as it served the education of our students and—more important—their students. Let our quality be judged by our graduates’ ability to get the best teaching jobs and by the learning of students in their classrooms.

I can already hear the first objection: “But what about nepotism? What about a politicized hiring process?” These are not idle worries. In the much romanticized “good old days”
before teachers were certified, many a school board member hired teachers based on who could offer the best pay-off, in cash or in promised votes. Many a school administrator hired cousins and friends, sometimes their not-too-bright cousins and friends, who could not find other employment. The schools were the great employment agency of last resort, not only in corrupt big cities, but also much more in small towns, where fewer outside eyes were watching. But society has undergone a dramatic change. It is not that 21st-century America is magically free of corruption and cronyism; it is that now there are no places where outside eyes are not watching.

Ironically, it is the high-stakes testing movement that has made nepotism a losing proposition and the need for certification less pressing. In an accountability system where the very livelihood of educators depends on their schools’ performance, what school board member, superintendent, or principal would hire an underqualified teacher and allow that teacher to bring down the school’s or the district’s test scores, thereby incurring the wrath of parents, state legislators, and the media? In the past it was possible to have Lake Wobegon schools where school leaders assured parents and the community that wonderful learning was happening and all of the children were above average. Today the averages are out there for everyone to calculate. With high-stakes testing, the stakes have simply become too high for anyone to risk his or her career by failing to exercise informed judgment about the quality of the teachers being hired.

If we have high-stakes tests and all the public attention that goes with them, we should be able to trust school districts and schools to make wise decisions about whom to hire. Those of us in higher education should design admission standards, curricula, clinical experiences, and exit examinations that will allow us to be sure that our graduates really are the best women and men for the jobs. If we do that, and if we succeed, our programs will flourish and our graduates will be able to compete quite successfully for jobs in the most wonderful of careers—teaching our nation’s schoolchildren.

What will such programs look like? My guess is that the most successful of the unregulated programs will adopt many of the recommendations of the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future. I cannot imagine quality teacher education that is not based on a rigorous academic curriculum alongside a series of increasingly complex and extended field experiences. These experiences allow students to mix the very best teaching with thoughtful and intellectually rigorous reflection on those experiences, along with a high-quality academic curriculum that is rich in content knowledge at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels.

Those of us who live our professional lives in college- and university-based teacher-preparation programs must face a radically changed and changing reality. We cannot return to the old system of states’ closely regulating our programs while guaranteeing ready access to the profession for our graduates by making us the only route to certification. It was not that good a system, and in any case it is gone. Our choice is to be defensive and to mourn for the past or to strike out in a new direction, trying something new and adventurous and engaging, for our students and ourselves. Who knows, it might even be more intellectually and professionally rewarding for us and—what really matters—it might begin to prepare a generation of teachers who can have the intellectual resources, the professional skills, and the moral courage to design schools in which no one is excluded, in which every child succeeds and thrives.

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“I cannot imagine quality teacher education that is not based on a rigorous academic curriculum alongside a series of increasingly complex and extended field experiences,” says Fraser.