The authors of *A Nation at Risk* recognized a fundamental truth of education: that reforms, if they are to be successful, must reach into education’s inner sanctum, the classroom. As a result, changing the ways in which teachers are recruited, trained, and paid was one of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s chief priorities.

If the commission’s recommendations in this area had one animating theme, it was the need to attract a more talented pool of individuals to teaching. It was believed that the field’s low salaries and prestige were repelling high-caliber college graduates (see Figure 1). Moreover, the training programs run by education schools were heavy on pedagogy and light on content, creating a situation in which half the newly employed teachers of core subjects were “not qualified” to teach them, in the commission’s view. The worst shortages were in mathematics and science, where even mediocre graduates could find jobs that paid reasonably well outside education (see Figure 2).

To solve these problems, the commission recommended that potential teachers be required to demonstrate both competence in an academic discipline and an aptitude for teaching. Incentives were needed to attract outstanding students to teaching, and the commission argued that new, unconventional paths to the profession should be opened. The commission recommended increasing salaries to the levels necessary to recruit stronger candidates, adding that salaries should be performance-based and sensitive to market conditions (additional pay for math and science teachers, for instance). Performance-based pay would be tied to an “effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated.”

Teaching would gain some of the accoutrements of a profession, such as career ladders that enable teachers to gain in status and pay without leaving the classroom; master teachers would design training programs and supervise novices. The object was to create a corps of knowledgeable, skilled teachers who would be evaluated, paid, and promoted based on their performance. In other words, the commission wanted to treat teaching like a true profession.

A Rival Is Born

Though the commission’s view of teachers and teaching has gained in popularity in recent years—witness Secretary of Education Rod Paige’s recent call to dismantle the
In the realm of teaching, *A Nation at Risk*’s recommendations lost out to a regulation-driven quest for teacher professionalism. Now the pendulum is beginning to swing toward market-based solutions.
current system of training and certification—few of its recommendations have been widely embraced. We’ve really just toyed with some of them. For example, prodded by Governor Lamar Alexander, Tennessee established a teacher “career ladder,” but once Alexander left the statehouse Tennessee’s teacher unions gnawed at the career ladder until it collapsed. The “performance-based” pay experiments in places like Denver, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Douglas County, Colorado, turn out to be linked primarily to supervisor or peer judgments, not to a teacher’s track record in improving student learning. Most states have developed alternative routes to certification, meant to ease the entry of nontraditional candidates and career switchers into public school classrooms. But many of these programs have slid back into the clutches of the education schools, with the result that candidates end up having to take and do essentially all the same things as “traditional” candidates in order to become certified.

Why hasn’t more serious reform occurred in this area? One explanation is surely the intense resistance to many of these changes from powerful groups and institutions within the teaching profession’s firmament. Doing what the commission urged with respect to teachers would have meant altering deeply entrenched practices and challenging the sturdiest bastions of the education establishment: teacher unions, colleges of education, and state education bureaucracies. The forces arrayed on behalf of such changes were not half as strong as those massed to repel reform.

Meanwhile, and perhaps more important, the forces of resistance also developed an alternative view of teachers and teaching that has gained heavy traction in the past two decades. It is known widely as the “teacher professionalism” agenda, but it in fact substitutes the façades of professionalism—the lengthy training, peer-controlled licensing boards, and certificates of advanced proficiency—for the hallmarks of a true profession, whose members possess specialized skills and knowledge and whose employment and compensation are based on reputation and performance. Teacher professionalism begins to look more like a teacher cartel when it is operating in the context of a government-run system instead of a market-based economy—where professionals must constantly prove themselves in the competitive arena.

The professionalization movement among teachers can be traced mainly to another prominent report of the 1980s. A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century was issued in 1986 by the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. Its most notable feature was a subtle yet profound change of focus: from teachers-as-instruments-of-school-improvement to teachers-as-shapers-of-school-improvement. From teachers as “means” to teachers as “ends.” One might say from “teachers as workers” to “teachers as bosses.”

Carnegie’s view of teaching and teachers could coexist with one or two of the Excellence Commission’s teacher recommendations, but on the whole it was rooted in dramatically different core beliefs about who should make key education decisions, and it advanced a markedly different view of the organizational and policy framework within which teachers work—or should work.

This altered focus had much to do with who was focusing. The Excellence Commission included educators, but could in no way be termed a creature of the teaching profession or public school establishment. By contrast, the Carnegie task force included a generous representation of public education’s political establishment: the presidents of both national teacher unions (the National Education Association’s Mary Hatwood

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**Bottom of the Barrel (Figure 1)**

One of A Nation at Risk’s chief priorities was to upgrade the nation’s corps of teachers. Two decades later, it seems that new teachers are still drawn disproportionately from the bottom third of American college-going students.

**Unskilled Labor (Figure 2)**

During a period when the qualifications of teachers were a special concern, the share of teachers who have a degree (either a baccalaureate or a master’s) in math or science actually fell, from nearly 7 percent to 5 percent between 1982 and 1999. In 1982, the average teacher had taken almost six semesters of math and science in college. By 1999, the average teacher had taken only four semesters.
Futrell and the American Federation of Teachers’ Albert Shanker), two state education superintendents (California’s Bill Honig and Minnesota’s Ruth Randall), an ed school dean, the New York Times’s lead education columnist (Fred Hechinger), and the ubiquitous John W. Gardner.

The two panels began with divergent notions of the key education problems needing to be solved. The Excellence Commission took as its solitary challenge the weak performance of U.S. schools. The Carnegie task force acknowledged the need for stronger student performance but added a second, equivalent challenge: “Creating . . . a profession of well-educated teachers prepared to assume new powers and responsibilities to redesign schools for the future.” Carnegie’s authors yearned to shift power from “those who would improve the schools from the outside” to educators themselves. The Carnegie group was bent on empowering teachers, boosting their status, influence, and control over the primary-secondary education field in general and schools in particular—and did so with serene confidence that doing this would also boost pupil performance.

Unlike the Excellence Commission, the Carnegie task force had powerful allies, including people and organizations with great staying power, notably the teacher unions themselves. The campaign that it launched also had access to ample private and public dollars. Much of this money came from Carnegie and other wealthy foundations such as Rockefeller—as became evident four years later in 1994, when those two foundations teamed up to provide funds for the new (and seemingly permanent) National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), also drawn from the heart of public education’s political establishment.

In time, the teacher-empowerment campaign also won federal funding—far more, ironically, than anything done about teaching in the name of the federally chartered Excellence Commission—and gained much sway in Washington and in state capitals. While it would oversimplify to ascribe this to partisanship, it cannot have hurt those advancing the Carnegie agenda that, for eight crucial years during this period, the federal executive branch was home to the Clinton administration, which was politically in sync with the teacher unions and philosophically comfortable with the “professionalism agenda.” (GOP policymakers are more apt to think of teaching as a problem area that needs to be set right, even when this entails changes that the unions don’t like.) In the end, though, the main explanation for teacher professionalism’s leverage at the federal and state levels was the old-fashioned, many-splendored political clout of its architects.

The Rival Prospers

Between 1986, when A Nation Prepared was issued, and 1994, when NCTAF was formed, several related entities were born or strengthened in pursuit of the professionalism goal. Foremost among these was the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), founded in 1987 and the recipient of much foundation and federal largesse, chiefly orchestrated by North Carolina’s former governor, Jim Hunt, who had helped to draft A Nation Prepared. NBPTS offers an advanced credential to teachers whom it identifies largely through a peer-review process. In other words, it recognizes teachers whose ideas and practices find favor with other educators. (There is, as yet, no proof that their students learn more than those of other teachers.)

Also launched in 1987 was the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), a group of state education departments, universities, and national education groups that seeks to reform teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development.

Another key player is the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), long a sleepy “voluntary” accrediting body whose transformation began in 1991, when Arthur E. Wise took its helm. A tireless, smart, and politically sophisticated veteran of both academe and Washington, Wise dedicated himself to advancing the professionalism agenda, particularly by persuading many states that they should view NCATE as a partner in deciding which teacher-preparation programs deserve state approval. (This effort got a further boost in 1992 when the National Education Association committed itself to requiring all teacher-preparation programs to obtain NCATE certification.)

So while the Excellence Commission had no organizational progeny to carry on its bloodline, the Carnegie task force sired a whole family of descendents, including NBPTS, INTASC, NCTAF, and a reenergized NCATE. All these efforts gained further clout (and access to human, fiscal, and political resources) from their close affiliation with the teacher unions, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and other mainstream groups composing what former education secretary William J. Bennett once termed “the blob.” And they benefited hugely from the emergence of a loose, interlocking directorate among them: many of the same organizations and people are engaged in the policy direction and political advancement (and funding) of them all.

Others joined the crusade for teacher professionalism. For example, in 1986, a cadre of prominent ed school deans formed a body called the “Holmes Group” to rethink teacher education. Its debut report, Tomorrow’s Teachers, emphasized new and ostensibly more professional ways to prepare teachers. The report’s conclusions were embellished four years later in Tomorrow’s Schools, which was replete with talk of radically restructuring schools and creating “learning communities” and “professional development schools,” ensuring that learning would become lifelong for both teachers and students. Like the Carnegie report and its offspring, the Holmes reports placed teachers at the center of the education solar system, not as a satellite orbiting within that system.
The “teacher professionalism” agenda substitutes the facades of professionalism—the lengthy training, peer-controlled licensing boards, and certificates of advanced proficiency—for the hallmarks of a true profession.

The Rival Prevails
Teacher professionalism has a mom-and-apple-pie aura. Americans are fond of their teachers and tend to respect people described as “professionals.” As a result, the quest for teacher professionalism has largely trumped the push for improved teacher performance. It has become a policy goal in its own right. And it’s become a goal on which much policy activity has centered. Indeed, the teacher professionalism agenda has had enormous influence over the policies and practices of American public education during the past decade and a half, dwarfing any impacts attributable to the Excellence Commission in terms both of scale and durability.

By 2001, for instance, 16 states had created “teacher professional standards boards” that were entirely autonomous of the state education agency and thus largely beyond the influence of elected policymakers. Such bodies wield immense power through their control of teacher (and principal) preparation standards and certification decisions. Three other states had semiautonomous boards of this kind, and a number of legislatures are considering moves in this direction. Seductive and reasonable as it sounds to wrest teacher standards and licensure from the bureaucratic grip of the state—after all, lawyers do much the same thing through the bar association—in reality these structures nearly always turn out to be dominated by teacher unionists and ed school faculty. This tends to lock in the professionalism agenda while rendering states markedly less hospitable to alternative certification, subject-centered preparation programs, and kindred reforms of teaching.

Likewise, nearly every state now has some sort of “partnership” with NCATE, the accrediting organization. In half the states, NCATE wields joint power in determining which preparation programs get state approval for purposes of teacher certification. In 18 others, NCATE advises the state education agency on which programs to approve. Four states require full NCATE accreditation before a teacher-training program can operate within their borders. Three more have imposed this requirement on their public colleges and universities. The upshot is that NCATE’s ideas of what constitutes a sound program have immense influence on state decisions about who will teach in the public schools and how they will be prepared for the classroom.

Many states and school districts have also been persuaded to reward, recognize, or assist those teachers who secure a stamp of approval from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Half the states now offer continuing (or multiyear) salary increases to NBPTS-certified teachers. Four provide one-time bonuses, and 20 more offer other recognition or subsidies (such as paying NBPTS’s hefty application fee for candidates from their states). Moreover, several hundred school districts have their own versions of salary boosts, bonuses, subsidies, and recognition for NBPTS-certified teachers.

In the end, the teacher professionalism agenda has functioned like a black hole, sucking in much of the available energy, attention, and funds and leaving little for other reforms—not just other teacher-related reforms (such as those urged by the Excellence Commission), but also a very different list of changes (technology, choice programs, preschool, new curricula) that might prove more effective and economical as strategies for boosting pupil achievement. We can conclude that along with salary increases and class size reductions, the reforms associated with teacher professionalism have been the principal policy preoccupation of educators themselves during the period since A Nation at Risk.

Countervailing Forces
The basic problem with the teacher professionalism agenda, as currently constructed, is that it rests on a shaky evidentiary and research base concerning its ability to boost student learning or to address either the quality or quantity challenges of the current teaching force. In other words, it is a weak (but costly) solution to the problems at hand. This is in part a result of its sheer conservatism. The professionalization agenda seeks to strengthen monopolies, to retain power and prestige within a tight fraternity of experts, to fend off structural changes, and, of course, to deter radical education innovations that do not hinge on a vast cadre of “professional” teachers (such as distance learning and “virtual” schooling).

One obstacle for the professionalizers is that many of their proposed changes end up worsening other education problems. For instance, the push to “raise standards” for entry into the public school classroom aggravates teacher shortages while boosting opportunity costs for career switchers and others who would be willing to try teaching. Bona-fide supply and demand considerations have made it impossible for states, districts, and schools to meet their teaching needs exclusively through mechanisms favored by the professionalizers. So they have made pragmatic exceptions to those mechanisms in recruiting, compensating, and licensing teachers. In the process they have often found that the exceptions work at least as well as the rule. Such is the case with programs like Teach for America and Troops to Teachers. The upshot is, as policymakers and citizens alike have observed, that good results can be obtained without jumping through all of the hoops of professionalization.
Another obstacle is the staying power of standards-based reform, which has placed greater pressure on teachers and other educators to demonstrate their effectiveness. The advent of more student testing, especially the spread of value-added measures of pupil and school performance, has given us both the technical ability to evaluate teachers by the results they produce and the moral imperative to do so.

The growth of the education marketplace has also undermined the professionalization agenda. The bottom-up, deregulatory, consumer-driven nature of the “choice movement” inevitably weakens the government-centered, regulation-based, educators-in-charge strategy of the professionalism agenda. Many schools of choice—charters, private schools, “outsourced” schools, and certainly home schools—are even exempt from state teacher-licensure requirements. That’s a grave blow to Carnegie-style professionalism—and becomes more damaging as evidence emerges that such schools perform just as well as, and possibly better than, traditional public schools with all their certified teachers and principals.

The professionalization agenda has been stymied not only by broader trends but also by forces within union ranks.

For the most part, the unions remain stuck in an industrial model, consisting of job actions, district-wide collective bargaining, the defense of mediocrity, and insistence on uniform treatment for all their members. While there have been a handful of exceptions, the unions’ general aversion to actually behaving—and encouraging their members to behave—like professionals is squarely at odds with the professionalism agenda itself. Indeed, as recently as July 2002, outgoing NEA president Bob Chase pleaded with his members not to “go backwards” on the “new unionism” agenda that he had sought (with very limited success) to advance during his tenure.

### An Alternative Arises

Along with these trends, all of which tend to spoil the professionalizers’ agenda, has come an alternative theory that has begun to win adherents, one that says the strategy favored by the professionalizers is wrong—or, at least, that it hasn’t proved right and therefore should not be mandated throughout the land.

The alternative theory favors deregulation of many aspects of teaching, freer entry into public school classrooms, greater flexibility in personnel management, and more alternatives. Among the groups espousing this heterodox view are the National Council on Teacher Quality, the Education Leaders Council, the Progressive Policy Institute, and the Baltimore-based Abell Foundation. In a June 2002 report mentioned earlier, Secretary Paige alarmed NCTAF, NCATE, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, and others habituated to federal backing for the professionalism agenda with his call to raise the bar on teacher academic standards while lowering barriers to classroom entry by people without conventional pedagogical preparation. Paige particularly deplores “mandated education courses, unpaid student teaching, and the hoops and hurdles of the state certification bureaucracy.”

Regardless, the truth is that neither approach has proven itself so effective that it should be imposed across a large and varied nation. Political prudence and intellectual honesty argue for experimenting with both approaches and with some aspects and combinations of both.

Among the strategies worth trying are some that flow from the teacher-professionalism agenda: place teachers in charge of schools, employ and compensate them on terms that they like, and let them decide who is “qualified” to teach in those schools. Encourage the teacher-professionalism organizations (and the unions) to run schools of their own—an opportunity made readily available by the spread of the charter-school movement.

Other strategies worth trying fly in the face of the professionalism agenda. For instance, let charter schools experiment with alternative approaches to personnel. Let some districts and states experiment by field-testing performance-based pay, keyed to the academic value that teachers add to their pupils. Let distance-learning ventures get properly tested despite their profound implications for the role of teachers. Evaluate them, too.

Dual approaches should also be tested in the realm of teacher preparation. Let some teachers be trained by NCATE-accredited programs and reviewed by NBPTS. Let others enter the classroom through alternative routes and programs such as Teach for America. Evaluate both. Let us also try some promising hybrids, such as the Teacher Advancement Program, developed by the Milken Family Foundation, which enhances teacher professionalism in ways that also recall a number of the recommendations of A Nation at Risk and the latter-day “alternative view” of teacher quality reform.

This list could easily be extended, but the point is clear. Too many of today’s education reform debates are conducted as if they were winner-take-all contests that must leave a single reform strategy standing. That would make sense only if we were certain that a single strategy would succeed everywhere. But we’re not. So let’s try multiple approaches. Let’s try them with proper control or comparison groups, and let’s make sure they are evaluated according to the best available methods—and chiefly in relation to their impact on student achievement. To make that possible, let us declare a truce in the “teacher wars” for a decade or so, while we try to figure out what works best. Perhaps it will turn out that many different approaches are effective. Perhaps none will work well enough. But we’ll be better off if we take seriously the job of trying to learn this from the children’s standpoint instead of fussing endlessly over the allocation of adult interests.

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