The Qualified Teacher

Michael Podgursky (“In Search of the Qualified Teacher,” features, Spring 2006) points out that 10 percent of teachers nationwide (unevenly distributed by field and location) don’t have regular state credentials. But he also maintains that the dearth of qualified teachers is largely a myth and the product of an inefficient, rigid compensation structure and meaningless certification system.

While he is correct that the certification systems in many, if not most, states have too many licensure fields and (although he doesn’t say it) often lack meaningful standards, his solution is not to streamline the system and add rigor. Rather, Podgursky calls for a single license.

I for one find it difficult to imagine an individual “qualified” to teach chemistry to teenagers and reading to 2nd graders, or vice versa. His analysis ignores the extensive research base that documents the many underqualified individuals in classrooms, particularly in neighborhoods serving poor youngsters, or in fields such as math, science, and special education. But he argues that since data are mixed as to the value of the current credentialing system, we shouldn’t worry about more demanding credentials. I disagree: we need to fix the system, not abandon it. We need rigorous standards and training, not just the job, “sink-or-swim” induction. Children in poverty have the most to lose with his recommendations.

Podgursky also asserts that teachers are adequately paid and the overall salary of teachers is competitive. Not so says a recent study by Allegretto, Corcoran, and Mishel, who find that “teachers earn significantly less than comparable workers, and this wage disadvantage has grown considerably over the last 10 years.” The American Federation of Teachers believes that if we are to attract and retain a qualified workforce, the base salary must be competitive and, where that is the case, there is room for differentiated compensation alternatives that recognize teacher shortages in particular fields and new roles and responsibilities and performance.

Michael Podgursky replies:
I did not mean to imply that K–12 teaching should have a single license. I simply pointed out that when a state issues 200 or more separate certificates and endorsements, as is commonly the case, most school districts will be out of full compliance most of the time. A more rational system would surely involve substantial pruning, yet the trend seems to be in the opposite direction.

On the question of teacher relative pay, the earnings data reported in my study are collected by the U.S. Department of Labor directly from employer payroll offices, as opposed to the household survey data used in the Economic Policy Institute study by Allegretto, Corcoran, and Mishel. In a forthcoming article in Education Finance and Policy, a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, Ruttaya Tongrut and I show that teacher pay estimates based on the household survey data used by these authors are unreliable and seriously under-report true teacher pay. That paper is available on my web site.

Savage Exaggerations

Marcus Winters nicely nails the empirical and conceptual fallacies in Jonathan Kozol’s tiresome jihads against the alleged institutional racism causing the unequal funding of schools (“Savage Exaggerations: Worshipping the Cosmology of Jonathan Kozol,” check the facts, Spring 2006). Yet Kozol’s most destructive legacy may turn out to be his attempts to convince classroom teachers that their proper role is to subvert mainstream American beliefs.

In his first book, Death at an Early Age, Kozol presented himself as a nonpolitical, idealistic young man shocked by a glaring injustice. But soon afterward he revealed himself as a hard-line leftist who argued that America’s capitalist culture gave rise to its racist public schools. He hardened these views in (of all places) revolutionary Cuba, whose government invited him in the mid-seventies to study its education system. Kozol’s account of his visit, Children of the Revolution, is a nauseating apologia for the Castro regime’s indoctrination of children and adults. When Kozol asked Cuba’s education minister why political propaganda filled Cuba’s adult-literacy-course texts, he got the standard Marxist line: “All education has forever had a class bias. No society will foster education that do not serve its ends.” In his book, Kozol accepts this doubletalk as gospel and urges the reader to discard the naive view that education can be politically neutral.

Kozol’s next book, On Being a Teacher, takes as its starting point the crude Marxist view that education in all
societies is “a system of indoctrination.” All the book’s model lessons aim to teach little children to withstand America’s state-sponsored brainwashing and to open them up to the self-evident truths of feminism, environmentalism, and the Left’s account of history. Kozol also thoughtfully provides a long list of left-wing publications and organizations—including the information agencies of the Chinese and Cuban governments—where teachers can get worthwhile classroom materials.

On Being a Teacher is still widely read in ed schools and by activist teachers. To the degree that teachers take to heart Kozol’s vision of the classroom as an arena for political indoctrination and the deconstruction of Western culture, they limit the life chances of inner-city children. Education theories and practices inspired by another failed Marxist utopia are the last thing those children need.

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Rating Teachers
I applaud “When Principals Rate Teachers” (research, Spring 2006), by Brian Jacob and Lars Lefgren, and its philosophy of salary differentiation for teachers. In our No Child Left Behind era, educators are aware that high-school Algebra I teachers are under pressure for proof of student academic performance. As a high-school principal for the past nine years, I have observed Advanced Placement (AP) teachers working harder than teachers of most elective courses, but there is no bonus for them if student scores go up and there is no loss of pay if student scores go down.

Although Jacob and Lefgren’s article focused on elementary-school principals, their arguments apply to any public school setting. The problem often lies with unions that want us to believe that all teachers are the same and all curriculum areas are equally challenging. Amid all the hand-wringing about the recruitment and retention of teachers, discussions typically focus on pensions and overlook consideration of a merit or differentiated pay structure that might appeal to new and seasoned teachers alike.

As an influence on student academic achievement, a teacher’s years of experience may or may not have relevance. I have observed teachers with 30 years of experience who avoid accountability and meaningful instruction and others who enthusiastically and consistently analyze data to ensure that their students are progressing. I would welcome the opportunity to determine who on my staff would receive differentiated pay, especially if value-added student achievement and standardized test scores are tracked as a part of the measurement. It would be a sea change of thinking in the education culture. Many of us are ready for it because it is ultimately the right thing to do for students and learning.

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Great Expectations
The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is providing unparalleled leadership and innovation in the field of teaching. Not only have we “changed the conversation” about the teaching profession, as William Lowe Boyd and Jillian Reese note (“Great Expectations,”
Evidently, unions were willing to have some teachers earn more as long as everyone could trust the basis of differentiation.

William Boyd and Jillian Reese have provided an excellent and balanced account of the relatively short history of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. But I would disagree with their premise that there was no demand from policymakers and the public for a means to pay accomplished teachers more than ordinary teachers.

For more than 100 years policymakers have advanced numerous merit-pay schemes. All failed because there was no means to measure performance that all parties could support. The key to this failure was cheap, primitive teacher-evaluation systems that failed fundamental tests of reliability and validity and, therefore, could not allow for differential rewards for teachers. The National Board devised such a measurement system that, while expensive, gained the support of teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

Evidently teachers and their unions were willing, even happy, to have some teachers earn more as long as everyone could trust the basis of differentiation. Needless to say, this is a major development. In the process, the NBPTS gave the lie to the professionally crippling belief that excellence in teaching is idiosyncratic and impossible to identify.

Now the embryonic teaching profession’s advanced certification system faces a challenge unlike that faced by other established professions, many of which are using some of the very assessment procedures now being used by the NBPTS. But these other certification processes do not require external evidence of candidate impact on patients or clients. (Just how sick were the patients treated by this particular candidate for specialist certification?) Critics have set a bar for the NBPTS certification process that has never been set for other certification processes. Designing a certification process that reliably, validly and fairly produces external validation of the impact of the candidate on students erects a bar that has not been set by any other profession for its certification process.

I fully agree with the authors and the critics that ways must be found to broaden the impact of board-certified teachers. And schools must be radically restructured to take advantage of the capacities of accomplished teachers. The National Board has legitimized differentiation of teachers. Now we must break down the egg-crate organization of the schools to enable board-certified teachers to assume new roles and responsibilities.