Teacher Certification

Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger’s findings (“Photo Finish: Certification Doesn’t Guarantee a Winner,” research, Winter 2007), supported by other recent research (including my own), are persuasive in suggesting that certification requirements do little to create or identify effective teachers. The findings might have been strengthened if measures of teacher ability had been included in the analysis, because the alternatively certified teachers in the study, from Teach For America (TFA) and the NYC Teaching Fellows program, represent high-achieving students from the nation’s elite universities. Thus one might interpret the finding of little difference between regularly certified teachers and their more pedigreed peers to show that teacher certification requirements compensate for greater intellect or better overall undergraduate academic preparation.

The wide variation in quality within groups should come as no surprise, though documenting it with sound research is helpful. What is unexpected, and of concern to those who believe recruiting better-quality undergraduates will improve teacher quality, is that by year three the TFA alumni aren’t doing substantially better than their regularly certified counterparts.

This thoughtful research raises important policy questions. Can we do without certification requirements? This study doesn’t answer that question. What we really want to know is how to create effective teachers. If, as the authors suggest, classroom experience and not certification is linked to effective teaching, we might consider moving teacher preparation programs toward a model of more K–12 classroom experience, and away from coursework.

Laura M. Desimone
Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Education
Vanderbilt University

Thank you for featuring research on the fundamental role of teachers in the achievement of New York City’s students in “Photo Finish.” The Board of Regents and the New York State Education Department are committed to improving the quality of teaching for the benefit of all our students.

We agree that multiple pathways to certification can be effective at recruiting teachers who can improve student achievement. The conclusion, however, that “certification matters little” is not supported by the analysis presented. By using teachers’ certification status when hired, rather than when providing instruction, the authors cannot assess the impact of certification on student achievement. Because of state requirements, all teachers hired without certification would have been on a pathway toward certification and many did become certified during the study period. In addition, because certification is required, it is virtually impossible to explore what would happen in its absence. For example, ill-prepared individuals who do not attempt to teach because certification is required, but who could become teachers if certification were not required, are not represented in the group labeled uncertified in the study.

The Board of Regents has always required teachers without certification to be making satisfactory progress toward certification in order to remain employed. Teachers receive “transitional” certificates that permit them to teach for up to three years provided they receive school-based mentoring and make satisfactory progress toward full certification. Similar requirements applied to individuals with temporary licenses prior to the elimination of that pathway. The preparation and induction of these individuals likely would be quite different if certification were not required.

Johanna Duncan-Poitier
Deputy Commissioner
New York State Education Department

Adequacy Studies

Jim Guthrie and Matthew Springer’s article “Courtroom Alchemy” (features, Winter 2007) presents a mistaken analysis of education-funding adequacy studies. First, the authors dismiss the pressure schools face from the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which requires near-universal student proficiency less than seven years from now. The authors infer solely from
cost data that states with currently higher test scores on exams such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) should not need significant new resources.

Second, the article provides a figure that displays the supposed differences in instructional personnel per 1,000 students across eight state studies to indicate a weakness in the overall professional judgment approach, which relies on the judgement of a panel of educators. The figure fails to account for several factors:

• Every state has its own unique accountability system with unique standards. The level of resources required to meet those standards necessarily differs as well.
• The panelists consulted in each state make different decisions about how resources should be deployed.
• These panelists make different tradeoffs regarding the personnel required to educate at-risk, English Language Learners (ELL), or special-education students. These tradeoffs can result in higher or lower staffing numbers for regular-education students.
• Differences in average school size across states can have an impact on the number of overall personnel that panels might identify.

Finally, the authors’ analysis equates the validity of adequacy studies with a universal, one-size-fits-all answer to education funding. Such an easy answer does not exist. Instead, each state's unique circumstances, standards, history, demographics, and geography all argue for education policy decisions to remain within the state and local purview.

John Augenblick
Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, Inc.

Guthrie and Springer respond:
John Augenblick proffers two arguments in support of his preferred method, professional judgment, for determining revenue levels presumed to provide an adequate educational opportunity. Regrettably, neither of his arguments addresses our principal criticism of professional judgment: the educator panels he routinely convenes employ no science in their estimates of needed revenues, but rather just guesses based on their experience and biases.

National Standards
Regarding the forum, “National Standards: Should the Federal Government Tell Schools What to Teach?” (Fall 2006), the greater the centralization of school decisions nationwide, the lower is the possibility of excellence in academic achievement. If there were a “single provider” of education policy decisions, the country would suffer a disastrous loss of competition. It would become an inevitable race to the bottom. The only effective education lobbyists would be the well-funded national ones, with their own narrow, intolerant agendas.

Consider what the federal government has already done to produce excellent education in the country. Nothing much. After billions of dollars and millions of words over decades of studies and programs, there is no definitive best teaching or learning method coming from the federal government. The slogan “No Child Left Behind” is a perfect example. It focuses on the bottom of the barrel, those who presumably are “left behind,” perhaps 10 percent of the population. The other 90 percent of students and parents are by definition “left outside” the concerns of Washington’s bureaucrats.

Carl Olson
Founder
Textbook Trust

Restructuring Questions
Michael Petrilli (“The Cure: Will NCLB’s Restructuring Wonder Drug Prove Meaningless?” what next, Fall 2006) shines a spotlight on a critical issue in the implementation of No Child Left Behind: the dearth of outside education providers ready to jump in to help states and districts deal with the increasing number of schools eligible for restructuring.

Contracting with for-profit and nonprofit school management organizations—or working with them to reopen failing schools as charter schools—could be a powerful “transplant” approach. However, two factors
restrict this solution. First, turning around existing schools is a far different business from creating them from scratch. Many organizations are wrestling with whether restructuring and conversion opportunities fit within their mission. Some nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) have been launched specifically to respond to this opportunity, including Education for Change, in Oakland; others, such as Mastery Charter Schools, in Philadelphia, partner with districts to extend their impact. Organizations must determine whether the opportunity presented by restructuring (which may involve free or low-cost facilities and other incentives from the district) is worth the loss of the autonomy and flexibility they believe are essential for improving student achievement.

Second, the demand for school management organizations exceeds supply for a reason. Most have chosen to grow slowly, to ensure consistently high-quality academic outcomes for students across their schools. NewSchools Venture Fund has supported nonprofit CMOs across the country—including nine that were not included in the article’s graphic—and collectively run another 50 schools. In total, the 14 CMOs we support today have nearly 100 charter schools open this fall and expect to manage 175 schools by the 2008–09 school year. We believe that by taking a careful approach to scale, these charter school systems will have a greater impact on public education in the long term.

Julie Petersen
Communications Manager
NewSchools Venture Fund

Spotlight on Newark

Your essay on Mayor Cory Booker’s aspirations for change in the Newark Public Schools District (“Home Is Where the Heart Is,” features, Fall 2006) was encouraging in one respect but discouraging in many others. It is extremely important to have a chief executive running our city who is clearly committed to helping all children achieve in school and reach for a higher standard of living. I, as superintendent of the district, and a veteran of 38 years, welcome Mayor Booker’s voice, support, and leadership. On the other hand, it was disturbing to read a depiction of our schools as “still a mess.”

Marion A. Bolden
Superintendent
Newark Public Schools

Kids and Exercise

Thanks to “Don’t Sweat It” (features, Fall 2006) and “Not Your Father’s PE” (research, Fall 2006), we now know that top-down solutions to child obesity offer minimal benefit. A “bottom-up” approach would be to change the way we fund schooling. We fund systems; we do not fund students. Because districts tend to add...
To go to and from big, consolidated schools—often at remote sites—children wait for and sit in buses instead of walking or bicycling to a nearby school and playing in the schoolyard before and after the bell.

are doubly afflicted: when they finally arrive at their very large schools, they find that the most popular sports are dominated by elite athletes. A glance at almost any high-school annual of the 1920s through the 1950s (before the final wave of consolidation) will reveal a lot of skinny young people, small senior classes, and wide participation in the major sports.

For combating kids’ weight problems, K–12 dance education offers unique potential. Merging mind and body, dance education can contribute to students’ intellectual growth in many academic subjects. Student dance making can offer some of what reading and writing offer—fantasy, storytelling, and performer-audience connection.

Dance is a way to cope with stress. In dances they make, kids can embody troubling ideas, hold them up to scrutiny, play with them, and, consequently, make them less threatening.

Kids need to get hooked on a physical activity in which they burn calories in physical education and that they can pursue outside of school. Breaking and krumping became popular on the streets, Mad Hot Ballroom engaged kids in and out of school, and So You Think You Can Dance drew huge audiences. Let kids make their own dances, compete, and find dances in their neighborhoods or on TV to demonstrate to classmates.

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**correspondence**

Were we to fund students rather than systems, such schools—and skinny kids—would make a comeback.

**Tom Shuford**
Retired Public School Teacher
Lenoir, North Carolina

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**Bob Cullen** has done a fine job of identifying some of the challenges physical education teachers face. In “Don’t Sweat It,” Mr. Cullen implies that it is nearly impossible to have a permanent positive impact on the health and fitness of the students given the current graduation requirements for physical education, the attitudes of the kids and parents toward PE, social and cultural factors, the declining fitness levels of physical education teachers, and the low enthusiasm among teachers. Here in Miami-Dade Public Schools, we must add to this most difficult equation low family incomes, poor nutritional habits of students, extreme heat, no use of the indoor gymnasium, large classes, lack of adequate fountains for students to keep hydrated, and lack of classroom space.

**Benjamin Packman**
Physical Education Teacher
Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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**Judith Lynne Hanna**
Senior Research Scholar
University of Maryland

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