
From Checker's Desk

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Recent and lasting columns on education by the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Paige Makes Teacher-Ed Hive Buzz

In June, education secretary Rod Paige issued an important report, the first "Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality." What a splendid fuss it has kicked up—and hurrah for Paige for standing his ground.

Entitled "Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge," this report responded to two statutory stimuli. Title II of the Higher Education Act (as amended in 1998) created a national reporting system meant to address the quality of teacher preparation. Reports are filed by every teacher training program and then submitted by every state to the secretary of education, with the secretary mandated to tell Congress what these reports show, what patterns he sees, what problems are evident, and so on.

Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that, by 2005–06, every teacher of a core academic subject in an American public

school be "highly qualified," defined as both possessing full state certification *and* demonstrating mastery of the content of the subjects to be taught.

Paige's June report thus dealt both with the current state of American primary and secondary schools vis-à-vis NCLB's "highly qualified teacher" requirement and with the evidence yielded by the first cycle of the Title II reporting system. But it did more. It also offered a searching, critical, and lucid discussion of the ways in which the current teacher preparation and licensure system is "broken" and the bold steps that, in the secretary's view, must be taken to rectify matters. These include "radically streamlining the system" by which teachers are prepared, recruited, and certified to teach in public schools and opening numerous "alternate routes" into the classroom.

Others had pointed down similar paths, such as Rick Hess's persuasive paper for the Progressive Policy Institute, numerous recommendations from

the National Council on Teacher Quality, even some work by the Fordham Foundation. But nothing had the clout or visibility of the U.S. secretary of education telling the nation that our traditional ways of training and licensing teachers need top-to-bottom rethinking.

You may not be surprised by what happened next: Practically the entire public education establishment rose up to smite Dr. Paige and his team for having the hubris to speak the truth, though it's a truth already widely grasped outside the self-absorbed precincts of that establishment.

Teachers College president Art Levine asserted that Paige's suggestion that "burdensome education requirements" be eliminated would doom poor and minority children to incompetent instructors. (Note that Levine presides over one of the most prominent suppliers of courses that comply with those burdensome requirements. Note, too, that poor and minority students are not terribly well served by today's requirements.)

Arthur Wise of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education quarreled with many aspects of the secretary's report, beginning with Paige's basic analysis of the Title II data. The Education Department judges that "teacher preparation programs are failing." Wise asserts the opposite. (Wise, of course, runs the group that accredits many of the programs in question.)

Outgoing National Education Association president Bob Chase huffed that Paige's proposals "demeaned" and

"insulted" the teaching profession by suggesting that (in Chase's formulation) "inexperienced college grads can be as successful as formally trained teachers."

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Penelope Early attributed dark motives to the education secretary—that he and his colleagues were "using this opportunity . . . as a chance to promote their 'No Child Left Behind' Act and their alternative-certification agenda." AACTE also called for "an independent analysis of the Title II data, saying the report misrepresents information to argue a conservative agenda." (One need scarcely point out how much AACTE and its members stand to lose if Paige's approach to teacher preparation gains traction.)

The Education Trust's Kati Haycock didn't quarrel with Paige's policy conclusions so much as with the quality of the Title II data on which they were (partly) based.

Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond, doyenne of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, charged that the Education Department's report was replete with information that's "inaccurate, misrepresented or badly out of date."

The American Federation of Teachers' Sandra Feldman lamented Paige's failure to call for "quality hands-on experience and access to ongoing professional development"—and, of course, for more money for teachers.

The American Association of School Administrators echoed Feldman, faulting the secretary for not "solving a much

larger problem, the retention of high-quality educators in struggling schools.” (The AASA’s preferred retention strategy: more federal cash.)

Gene Carter, executive director of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, ticked off six major objections to the Paige report, centering on ASCD’s contention that teachers “need to acquire a sophisticated body of professional pedagogical knowledge”—and disputing the research cited by the secretary in making the case for reform.

Vince Ferrandino of the National Association of Elementary School Principals embraced the NCATE analysis and stated that “NAESP stands squarely behind strong teacher preparation programs” and abhors “hiring what some of our colleagues call ‘Taco Bell’ educators, i.e. if you can manage a Taco Bell, you can manage a school.”

Had I time to persist in this depressing search, doubtless I’d find dozens more objections of this ilk, voiced by people and groups of this ilk: those who brought us today’s K-12 education system and have deep vested interests in keeping that system more or less the way it is, except for infusions of more money.

It’s clear not only that Paige has nerve but also that he struck a nerve. A big, quivering, supersensitive nerve that runs through nearly the entire body of the public school establishment.

But he’s sticking to his guns. Not out of cussedness but because he believes what he said in “Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge.” (His aides do, however, acknowledge that the Title II data are not what they

should be, though this is really something Congress needs to rectify when it revisits the Higher Education Act. Some who fault the current data will also oppose attempts to make them better and clearer.)

In a policy world increasingly divided between those who subscribe to traditional modes of teacher preparation and licensure and want the regulatory screws tightened further, and those who would open up classroom entry and then judge teachers primarily by how much they know and how effective they are, the U.S. secretary of education has come out for openness and results. His definition of highly qualified teachers, it’s now clear, is people who know their stuff and are good at teaching it. He doesn’t seem too interested in the rest of the establishment paraphernalia nor much swayed by that establishment’s claims that it has persuasive evidence that its approach works better. The fact is that much “scholarly” evidence in this field is complicated, conflicted, and controversial. The fact is that the “deregulatory” approach has not had nearly enough of a test to have generated much clear evidence. To its opponents, that’s ample reason not to try it. To Rod Paige, that’s part of why it must be tried.

On balance, the secretary did something courageous and important by slicing through the clutter and making clear what direction he thinks the country should take. Bravo for him. Sometimes one’s convictions are strengthened by observing who opposes them. In this instance, I judge, Dr. Paige has had his own beliefs bolstered

by this cacophony of self-interested criticism of his fine report.

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Do Teachers Believe in Standards-Based Reform?

Standards-based reform has become America's main strategy for boosting student achievement, strengthening school effectiveness, and renewing our education system. It undergirds President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act as well as the reform efforts of nearly every state and community.

As everybody knows, standards-based reform rests on a tripod of academic standards, testing, and accountability. It is an elaborate behaviorist scheme for altering the actions and priorities of students and educators in order that children end up learning more and schools end up producing stronger results.

But standards-based reform works only on the outside of education's "black box," not on what happens inside the classroom. Its eventual success, therefore, is determined not by lawmakers but by teachers and pupils whose everyday decisions and priorities actually shape what is taught and learned. Once that classroom door is shut, the teacher is in charge. What she deems important, what she cares about, how she spends her time—all these have immense impact on what her students end up learning.

One way to find out what teachers judge to be important is to ask them. Though plenty of surveys have been conducted over the years, few have probed teachers' views of key elements

of standards-based education reform. So the Manhattan Institute, with the help of the University of Connecticut's highly regarded survey research center, decided to investigate. Its report, "What Do Teachers Teach? A Survey of America's Fourth and Eighth Grade Teachers," came out last week.

Working with a national sample of fourth and eighth grade classroom teachers, it inquired into their educational philosophies and instructional methods, their view of standards, and their curricular priorities. The results are revealing and more than a little alarming. Five findings display a chasm between teachers' views and reformers' expectations.

First, a majority of teachers in both fourth grade and eighth grade opt for "student-directed learning" rather than "teacher-directed learning." No more than two in five affirm a philosophy of education in which the adult in the classroom sets the agenda, decides what youngsters will learn, and ushers her pupils toward that destination. "Student-directed" learning is an old progressive-educator notion. It means that children's own interests matter more than a preset curriculum in shaping what teachers and pupils work on in class each day and what approach they take to learning. Yet it's nearly impossible to imagine standards-based reform succeeding in places where students decide what will be learned—or even how it is learned. Standards-based reform presupposes that teachers take charge of prescribing the skills and knowledge to be learned—and persist until their young charges actually learn

those things. Plenty of research shows that teacher-led instruction matters most for disadvantaged kids.

Second, three-quarters of teachers have embraced the college of education dogma that the purpose of schooling is to help youngsters “learn how to learn” rather than to acquire specific information and skills. Barely one in seven believes that educators’ core responsibility is “to teach students specific information and skills.” When evaluating pupil work, just 25 percent of fourth grade teachers and 28 percent of eighth grade teachers place primary emphasis on whether students supply the right answer or correct information. Yet standards-based reform is all about the successful acquisition of specific information and skills. Few would deny that schools should *also* assist their pupils to “learn how to learn” more in the future. But standards-based reform cannot succeed where that is deemed to be the school’s chief mission. Nor can it succeed where teachers put greater stock in student creativity and effort than in accuracy.

Third, not even two-fifths of fourth grade teachers base the pupils’ grades primarily on a “single, class-wide standard”; most place heavier emphasis on individual youngsters’ abilities. In other words, they opt for a relativistic mode of evaluating achievement instead of an unchanging, objective standard. (This is also the case with nearly half of eighth grade teachers.) Yet the essence of standards-based reform is judging students according to their success in meeting a fixed standard of learning. How unfortunate it will be if kids grow

accustomed in class to relativistic grading practices, only to be hit by an unyielding standard on the statewide exam at year’s end. How confusing for them and their parents—and how damaging to standards-based reform.

Fourth, teachers do not have terribly high expectations for their pupils. Despite the endlessly repeated mantra that “all children can learn” and Congress’s assertion that *no child* will be left behind and all will attain their states’ core academic standards, teachers do not quite buy that. Fewer than half of those teaching fourth grade expect their students always to spell correctly. Less than half of eighth grade math teachers expect all their students, by year’s end, to be able to show why the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees. (One-quarter of eighth grade math teachers do not even expect this from a majority of their pupils.) Only 70 percent of eighth grade history teachers expect that, by the time they enter high school, most students in their classes will know when the Civil War was fought. What does it mean for Congress to mandate that every child in every state will (within twelve years) attain “proficiency” on state standards when many classroom instructors have no such expectations? Though the survey didn’t ask, we can fairly assume that the kids for whom teachers harbor lower expectations are those from poor and minority neighborhoods and troubled homes—those who traditionally have been most apt to be left behind.

Fifth, and most bluntly, one-third of fourth grade teachers and 30 percent of

eighth grade teachers do *not* agree that “a teacher’s role is primarily to help students learn the things that your state or community has decided students should know.” In other words, they seemingly don’t believe in state academic standards at all. At least, they don’t see helping youngsters meet such standards as the school’s core mission.

There’s no point in castigating teachers, much less the conscientious instructors who cooperated with this survey, for harboring these attitudes. They are what they are, what they’ve been molded into by those who trained them yesterday and supervise them today. For the most part, their attitudes, expectations, and priorities, as well as the methods they employ when the classroom door is closed, reflect the influence of their education school professors as well as mentors and peers within the schools and the profession.

The problem is that the professors and the profession have not entirely bought into standards-based reform. It

goes against their grain. It contradicts their philosophies of education. Never mind that it’s the law of the land, the principal public education dynamic of nearly every state, and the strong preference of most parents. Where it is well implemented, it also boosts student achievement, especially for disadvantaged youngsters. Yet it hasn’t permeated the education profession. Hence it hasn’t percolated into many teachers. The problem ahead is that policy makers—and parents, voters, and taxpayers—are destined for a whopping disappointment if what happens when the classroom door closes does not advance the goals that were so hopefully enshrined in those statutes, those hard-fought standards, and those sometimes onerous accountability systems. An education train wreck may lie ahead.

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