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education

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March 16, 2009

Dear Legislators,

We ACES ECA parents are writing about the Commissioner of Education's proposal that all part-time instructors in Connecticut become certified. We are adamantly opposed to this proposal because it would deprive ACES ECA of its highly-specialized, extensively-trained core teachers—the professional artist/teachers recognized in their fields, who are responsible for our school's 35-year record of success, including a graduation rate significantly higher than the Connecticut average. Their training is the bedrock of the education that defines ACES ECA. They have already incurred significant time and expense attaining their advanced degrees at the masters and Ph.D. levels, and are concurrently teaching at colleges like Wesleyan, Sarah Lawrence, and Yale. They would not be able to incur the additional time and expense required to become certified, even in the ARC program, and if required to do so (for part-time positions that offer no benefits), they would regretfully be forced to leave their jobs at ECA. Given that there would not be teachers available to hire who would be both certified and, simultaneously, practicing professional artists with college-teaching experience, as required to fulfill the mission of ECA, the end result of the Commissioner's proposal is that the school would close.

Attached please find two articles by Nicholas Kristof, in which he advocates against requiring certification for professionals who have tremendous assets to offer public education, and are dissuaded from doing so by certification requirements. Other states have found creative solutions to this problem. The state of Kentucky allows for a waiver of certification requirements for adjunct faculty; the state of New York allows for permits (see http://www..highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/typesofcerts.htm). **The alternative of providing a permit to the part-time professionals at ECA, rather than requiring certification, would be the solution that would best enable the school to continue with its current roster of extraordinary teachers.**

The Commissioner's present certification requirement would make it impossible to sustain a program that is inspiring our children to highly achieve and readying them for our competitive global economy, as well as fostering their admissions and scholarships to the best post-secondary conservatories and universities. We cannot afford for such a compromise in the education of our children to occur.

Thank you for your consideration of this issue.

Sincerely yours,

PACE
Parents For Arts Centered Education
ACES Educational Center for the Arts

OPENING CLASSROOM DOORS

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
New York Times
Op-Ed Columnist

Suppose Colin Powell tires of giving $100,000-a-pop speeches and wants to teach high school social studies. Suppose Meryl Streep has a hankering to teach drama.

Alas, they would be "unqualified" for a public school. Elite private schools would snap them up, of course, but public schools that are begging for teachers would have to turn them away because they don't have teacher certification.

That's an absurd snarl in our education bureaucracy. **Let's relax the barriers so people can enter teaching more easily, either right out of college or later as a midcareer switch.**

Sure, there are lots of other problems in the U.S. education system. But this is one of the easiest to solve.

One reason to act is that the U.S. faces a growing shortage of teachers. Just to keep student-teacher ratios where they are now, we need a 35 percent increase in the number of people entering teaching.

The other problem is that the quality of teachers is deteriorating, mostly because — fortunately! — women have more career options. A smart and ambitious woman graduating from college in 1970 often ended up as a third-grade teacher; today, she ends up as a surgeon or senator.

The upshot is that between 1971 and 1974, 24 percent of teachers had scored in the top 10 percent on their high school achievement tests. Now only 11 percent have done so.

So one study after another has concluded that it is time to relax teacher certification requirements.

"Barriers to entry are too high," declared last month's final report of the Teaching Commission, a private blue-ribbon panel led by Louis Gerstner, the former I.B.M. chief. "Confusing and cumbersome procedures discourage many talented would-be teachers from entering the classroom."

A white paper from the Hamilton Project of the Brookings Institution urged, "Rather than dig further down in the pool of those willing to consider teacher certification programs or raise class sizes, we need to expand the pool of those eligible to teach."

In a new book called "Tough Love for Schools," Frederick Hess argues that applicants should be eligible for teaching jobs if they have graduated from a recognized college, have passed a competency test in their field and have passed a rigorous background check. Principals may prefer to hire graduates of teaching colleges, he writes, but they should have the option to hire other outstanding applicants as well.

That's the situation in some of America's most elite private high schools. Phillips Exeter Academy, for example, says that 85 percent of its faculty have advanced degrees but probably only a handful are certified. (Since it is private, it doesn't worry about certification or even keep track of which teachers are certified.)

At Exeter, for example, biology is taught by a former doctor. Japanese is taught by a former businessman who worked in Japan. And a history teacher arrived with no teaching experience but has published five books.

The idea behind teacher certification is that there are special skills that are picked up in teacher training courses — secret snake-charming skills to keep the little vipers calm. But there's no evidence this is so. On the contrary, several new programs have brought outstanding young people into teaching without putting them through conventional training programs, and those teachers have been widely hailed as first-rate.

One superb initiative for young college graduates is Teach for America, which last year had 17,000 applicants for 2,000 spots teaching in low-income schools. Among those who applied were 12 percent of Yale's senior class and 8 percent of Harvard's and Princeton's.

Teach for America participants get only an intensive six-week training session, yet they excel in the classroom. One study found that classes with a Teach for America participant learn an extra month of math over the school year, compared with classes with a traditional teacher.

Likewise, Troops to Teachers helps retiring military personnel become teachers in public schools. And I.B.M. has started a program to help executives with math or science backgrounds switch to teaching.

Granted, intellectual brilliance alone does not make a great teacher. When I think of my best teachers, like Juanita Trantina in the fifth grade, they didn't just teach us but also inspired us, humored us, tamed us and enchanted us. Maybe it helps to be brilliant and to have studied teaching, but mostly it is personality. Colin Powell, Meryl Streep and many anonymous others would dazzle the surliest student, so why continue to bar them at the schoolhouse door?

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Our Greatest National Shame

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
New York Times
Op-Ed Columnist

So maybe I was wrong. I used to consider health care our greatest national shame, considering that we spend twice as much on medical care as many European nations, yet American children are twice as likely to die before the age of 5 as Czech children — and American women are 11 times as likely to die in childbirth as Irish women.

Yet I'm coming to think that our No. 1 priority actually must be education. That makes the new fiscal stimulus package a landmark, for it takes a few wobbly steps toward reform and allocates more than $100 billion toward education.

That's a hefty sum — by comparison, the Education Department's entire discretionary budget for the year was $59 billion — and it will save America's schools from the catastrophe that they were facing. A University of Washington study had calculated that the recession would lead to cuts of 574,000 school jobs without a stimulus.

"We dodged a bullet the size of a freight train," notes Amy Wilkins of the Education Trust, an advocacy group in Washington.

So for those who oppose education spending in the stimulus, a question: Do you really believe that slashing half a million teaching jobs would be fine for the economy, for our children and for our future?

Education Secretary Arne Duncan describes the stimulus as a "staggering opportunity," the kind that comes once in a lifetime. He argues: "We have to educate our way to a better economy, that's the only way long term to get there."

That's exactly right, and it's partly why I shifted my views of the relative importance of education and health. One of last year's smartest books was "The Race Between Education and Technology," by Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, both Harvard professors. They offer a wealth of evidence to argue that America became the world's leading nation largely because of its emphasis on mass education at a time when other countries educated only elites (often, only male elites).

They show that America's educational edge created prosperity and equality alike — but that this edge was eclipsed in about the 1970s, and since then one country after another has surpassed us in education.

Perhaps we should have fought the "war on poverty" with schools — or, as we'll see in a moment, with teachers.

Some education programs have done remarkably well in overcoming the pathologies of poverty. Children who went through the Perry Preschool program in Michigan, for example, were 25 percent less likely to drop out of high school years later than their peers in a control group, and committed half as many violent felonies. They were one-third less likely to become teenage parents or addicts, and half as likely to get abortions.

Likewise, the KIPP program, the subject of a fine book by Jay Mathews, has attracted rave reviews for schools that turn low-income students' lives around.

There are legitimate questions about whether such programs are scalable and would succeed if introduced more broadly. But we do know that the existing national school system is broken, and that we're not trying hard enough to fix it.

"We have a good sense from the data where there are big opportunities," notes Douglas Staiger, an economist at Dartmouth College who studies education.

The hardest nut to crack is high schools — we don't have a strong sense yet how to rescue them. But there's a real excitement at what we are learning about K-8 education.

First, good teachers matter more than anything; they are astonishingly important. It turns out that having a great teacher is far more important than being in a small class, or going to a good school with a mediocre teacher. A Los Angeles study suggested that four consecutive years of having a teacher from the top 25 percent of the pool would erase the black-white testing gap.

Second, our methods to screen potential teachers, or determine which ones are good, don't work. The latest Department of Education study, published this month, showed again that there is no correlation between teacher certification and teacher effectiveness. Particularly in lower grades,
it also doesn't seem to matter if a teacher has a graduate degree or went to a better college or had higher SATs.

The implication is that throwing money at a broken system won't fix it, but that resources are necessary as part of a package that involves scrapping certification, measuring better through testing which teachers are effective, and then paying them significantly more — with special bonuses to those who teach in "bad" schools.

One of the greatest injustices is that America's best teachers overwhelmingly teach America's most privileged students. In contrast, the most disadvantaged students invariably get the least effective teachers, year after year — until they drop out.

This stimulus package offers a new hope that we may begin to reform our greatest national shame, education.

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