

THE FIRST BLOOMING OF COMPETITION IN TEACHER CERTIFICATION

By Robert Holland

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Executive Summary

As 2004 began, long-dreamed-of efforts to open K-12 teaching to knowledgeable people who did not go through the certification mill controlled by schools of education and allied agencies were beginning to bear fruit. Two states, Pennsylvania and Idaho, already have accepted the new American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) Passport to Teaching as an alternative way for teachers to earn full certification based primarily on being able to show they know their subjects. About a dozen other states are reviewing their codes and regulations with an eye to approving ABCTE, which uses computer simulations, among other techniques, to evaluate candidates.

The education establishment and its apologists are not happy about this emergence of competition in ed-biz. People for the American Way charged that the U.S. Department of Education's approval of a five-year \$35 million grant for ABCTE was part of a right-wing plot to funnel aid to supporters of school vouchers and privatization. And last spring a lobbyist for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education publicly released items that were to be used in ABCTE's first field test, a breach of confidentiality that scuttled the test. At the request of House Education Committee Chairman John Boehner, the Education Department's Inspector General is investigating whether this was a deliberate act of sabotage.

Despite this rear-guard resistance, prospects are good for continued reform of teacher preparation and certification, encouraged by bipartisan support in Washington. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Higher Education Act (last reauthorized in 1998 and up for another reauthorization this year) share a commitment to the support of alternative teacher certification. Although the presidential politics of 2004 may challenge the NCLB consensus, it seems likely that reform of teacher hiring will continue to enjoy broad support on Capitol Hill. Details follow.

The First Blooming of Competition in Teacher Certification

By Robert Holland

As 2004 begins, monopoly control of the preparation and licensing of teachers for U.S. public schools is under challenge as never before.

Schools of education and allied accreditation and teacher licensing agencies are facing a strong challenger to their longtime role as exclusive gatekeepers to public-school teaching. With the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) deadline looming for public schools to be employing “highly qualified” teachers, the new American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) figures to be an increasingly important player in the education arena.

By the end of 2003, two states – Pennsylvania and Idaho – had officially accepted the ABCTE’s Passport to Teaching as a brand-new way for aspiring and current teachers alike to earn full certification based on subject-matter expertise and classroom know-how. Others may soon be following because ABCTE offers an innovative way to get qualified teachers into classrooms without requiring them to earn a degree from a college of education.

Recently the American Board was awarded a five-year \$35 million federal grant to expand certification options for teachers, particularly in high-need areas such as science and special education. Secretary of Education Rod Paige recognized the ABCTE’s viability in his 2003 annual report on meeting NCLB’s call for a “highly qualified” teacher to be in every classroom by the 2005-06 school year.

The ABCTE was created in September 2001 by the private National Council on Teacher Quality and the Education Leaders Council (ELC), an organization started in 1995 by state school chiefs who were critical of doctrine dispensed by the education establishment. In November 2003, the liberal People for the American Way issued a broadside at the Bush Administration for recent Department of Education grants, such as the one to ABCTE, contending that such aid goes to “an interconnected network of right-wing foundations dedicated to privatizing education in America.” However, contrary to PFAW’s conspiracy theory, the ABCTE provides an alternative that public schools may use to staff their schools with knowledgeable teachers.

The extent of the education establishment’s hostility toward an alternative to its monopoly control of teacher preparation may have been tipped in the spring of 2003 when a lobbyist for the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) publicly released items that were to be used in the ABCTE’s initial field test, a breach of confidentiality that had the effect of scuttling that test. John Boehner, Chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, has asked the Department of Education’s Inspector General to investigate whether the AACTE official’s actions violated the terms of the AACTE’s own federally funded mission of providing objective information about teacher certification through a national clearinghouse.

What NCLB Requires

To be considered highly qualified under NCLB, a teacher must have a bachelor's degree, full certification/licensure as defined by each state, and demonstrated competence in each core academic subject he or she teaches. Secretary Paige has repeatedly said that alternative routes to certification will be welcome.

J.E. Stone, an East Tennessee State University professor of education who is a critic of conventional teacher certification, believes the federal backing gives ABCTE the clout to develop and validate more alternative certification exams and to carry its message into more states.

“As more states come on line, certification without indoctrination will become a very popular option for prospective teachers. Look for a substantial increase in ABCTE-certified teachers in the next year or two,” said Stone, founder of the online Education Consumers Clearinghouse.

In late December 2003, Buffy DeBreaux-Watts, ABCTE's director of marketing and research, said at least 10 additional states were looking into steps that would be needed, such as amending codes and regulation, to add ABCTE to a menu of options for teachers and aspiring teachers.

A Problem with the Current System

Critics of the long-dominant system of teacher licensing contend that it attempts to indoctrinate all would-be K-12 teachers in the tradition of learner-centered or “progressive” education, with teachers acting as facilitators (“guides on the side”) instead of as direct transmitters of knowledge and skills (“sages on the stage”). Before her death in 1999, Jeanne Chall, a respected researcher at Harvard Graduate School of Education, analyzed a century's worth of data and concluded that, for most students, teacher-directed instruction was most effective in raising their achievement.

The new Passport to Teaching certification can be earned by career switchers, recent college graduates, or active teachers seeking full certification. In addition to passing the American Board's tests of their subject-matter knowledge and their familiarity with teaching methods (pedagogy), candidates must hold a bachelor's degree and pass a criminal background check.

Although there is a pedagogical component of the testing, it is not geared to the learner-centered doctrines favored by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), two powerful elements of the education establishment. Nor are candidates required to have a degree from a college of education or even to have taken courses from them.

The ABCTE examinations use computer simulations to have candidates gauge situations that arise in classrooms and muster the skills to meet them. As part of demonstrating their knowledge, candidates must write a cogent essay, in part to demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively with other educators and with parents.

The American Board plans to launch a second tier of testing in 2004 that will offer veteran teachers the opportunity to win certification as Master Teachers. Still under development, this high-level certification will require teachers not only to pass rigorous tests but also to submit so-called “value-added” data providing that they have helped students raise their achievement significantly.

Defenders of Status Quo Strike Back

That prospect has caught the attention of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, which was founded 16 years ago with the backing of the national teacher unions to offer veteran teachers the opportunity to gain national certification and to be rewarded for it. Aware of the emerging competition, the NBPTS posts on its website side by side contrasts it draws between its requirements and those under development by ABCTE.

In late 2003, the National Board implicitly criticized the American Board for not yet having explained how its teacher value-added data will be “collected, presented, and assessed.” Yet, it defended its own policy of not considering at all a teacher’s impact on student test scores. The NBPTS contends its policy of having teachers submit samples of student work and explanations of how they evaluated it (along with videotapes of themselves teaching) provides “a more authentic measure of learning than simply relying on test scores that may not provide enough information on a specific teacher’s actions and that may be difficult to attribute to a single teacher.”

However, states that decided in recent years to hand out hefty annual bonuses to teachers who won NBPTS certification are hearing from legislators questioning the rapidly rising price tag for a program that offers no evidence that it is improving student achievement. For instance, Georgia awards an automatic 10 percent annual pay raise for the 10-year life of a NBPTS certificate. The cost will rise from a mere \$100,000 in Fiscal 2000 to \$15.6 million in Fiscal 2005.

Former Georgia Governor Roy Barnes, who recently became NBPTS chairman, defends the expense as a worthwhile incentive for teachers, but Representative Ben Harbin, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, has said he’s not sure where the money will come from when the education needs of all children are weighed.

Among other states facing major fiscal hits are North Carolina and Florida, which rank 1-2 in the number of NBPTS-certified teachers – North Carolina with 6,641 and Florida with 4,941. Georgia has just pushed above the 1,000 mark.

Perspectives on a Teacher-Education Monopoly

Excluding bright and knowledgeable people from teaching often has seemed to be a prime objective of the 50 states’ regulations for the licensing of K-12 schoolteachers. There are, of course, many intelligent teachers but it’s an open question whether that is because of, or in spite of, their training.

Dr. Wayne Bishop, a mathematics professor at California State/Los Angeles, encountered the exclusionary attitude in action when he volunteered as an academic liaison between his campus and a Pasadena high school where he got to know the chairman of the math department.

The committee was finalizing curricular recommendations for the strongest college-bound students when Dr. Bishop noticed that physics had disappeared from the list. "I spoke up starting to remind them that they had told me about this wonderful physics teacher that they had. He was a Ph.D. candidate at Caltech and only wanted to teach a couple of classes a day {which was} convenient because that's all the physics students they had. The students loved him; good all the way around.

“I got a mild elbow from the math chair who told me to shut up, she'd talk to me later. Seems that the district office had sent out an ultimatum to only employ regularly certified teachers if any were available. The district then gave them a physics teacher, so they had to let the Caltech student go. Her authentic assessment of the new physics teacher: ‘He's not capable at the algebra level.’”

Regulators who looked after the public interest would not encourage such shunting-aside of teaching talent. However, state education bureaucracies have collaborated with the professional schools of education to ensure that teacher preparation and licensing are standardized and centralized. The ed-schools submit their pedagogical courses they deem necessary for teachers to have taken and the state bureaucracies give their approval. This cozy “approved program” arrangement is what economists call regulatory capture.

While the programs vary from state to state, all require a specified number of pedagogical or how-to-teach courses for full, regular certification. Such courses tend to be heavy on process, and extremely light on knowledge; they address such topics as “Managing Diversity” or “Facilitating Learning in a Constructivist Classroom.”

A number of states permit teaching hopefuls to earn an undergraduate major in an academic discipline but then expect them to acquire a master's degree in professional education. The one constant is that the education bureaucrats want to be able to count plenty of education courses on applicants' transcripts. Together with practice teaching, the professional courses can consume well over a year of college.

The Costs of Exclusion

The District of Columbia public schools desperately need effective teachers of such core subjects as English, math, and science. Yet as Frederick M. Hess noted in a paper for the politically centrist Progressive Policy Institute, no members of the English, math, or physics departments at Georgetown, American, or George Washington Universities could be certified to teach in D.C. schools, absent some loophole.

Even more to the point the current system slams doors in the faces of persons like Janet, whom Hess identifies as a 28-year-old marketing director with a B.A. in English from a liberal arts college. Janet attained a 3.5-grade-point average and has outstanding real-life communications experience in the private sector. She now seeks a personally fulfilling job as a teacher. Yet not only in D.C. but also in K-12 systems across the country, the gatekeepers are on guard to keep people like Janet out.

On the brighter side, there is an expanding movement to permit alternatives to the conventional approved-program approach controlled by the schools of education. The number of states with some kind of alternative teacher certification program grew from eight in 1983 to 45 in 2002, according to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI), a private research organization based in Washington, D.C. However, the 45 states vary greatly in the extent they provide regulatory relief.

NCEI president C. Emily Feistritzer credits California, New Jersey, and Texas with being states seeking to put out a welcome mat for smart people who want to become teachers but who did not go to ed-school.

New Jersey has gone so far as to put liberal arts graduates on equal footing with education majors in landing teaching jobs. They work with a mentor teacher, and receive on the job how-to instruction in such nitty-gritty as making a lesson plan, rather than having to endure arcane theory classes to learn the trade.

California hasn't gone quite that far but it does have a variety of teaching internships that permit non-graduates of education school to get a foot in the door by establishing their subject-matter knowledge on tests and then showing their ability to teach under close supervision. In most cases, they still have to complete some pedagogical studies while teaching.

Michael D. McKibbin, director of the Commission on Teacher Credentialing in Sacramento, says about one-fourth of California's beginning teachers now come from alternative routes. He believes such programs are particularly well suited for career switchers, but he believes they are "not for everyone, such as those just out of college and without much work seasoning." More traditional studies heavily emphasizing student teaching are better for the young aspiring teachers, he believes.

Barriers to Teaching

Unfortunately, many would-be career-switchers who have a wealth of background to bring to teaching still find mindless old-school regulations, or old-guard attitudes, blocking their way, as Wayne Bishop discovered in Pasadena.

Even after a teacher has completed a demanding but sensible alternative certification program, and has gone on to teach special education for nine years and become a master teacher dealing with behavior problems, she may move to another state and find that her credentials are not accepted. Suzanne Hofer found that to be the case when she moved from Texas. She learned that more classes and exams over a three-year period would be required to gain Nevada's full certification.

"Instead of taking courses I felt were unnecessary and costly," she said, "I moved back to Texas."

In Colorado Springs, Dr. Carol Mosier Bach, a physician who retired and decided to explore the possibility of teaching health to high school students, found that her years of experience and knowledge of medicine were not enough to win a pass from the regulators. She went to school for a year to earn a teaching license but then found she would be certified only in science, which she now teaches to sixth graders. She must jump through more hoops before getting an endorsement to teach health. Never mind that in her pre-retirement position as Clinical Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Washington, she taught medical students, residents, and fellows.

Enter the NCLB

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, as interpreted by the U.S. Department of Education, could put pressure on state education bureaucracies to reform teacher licensing regulations. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has made it clear that the Act's requirement of a "highly qualified" teacher in every classroom does not mean that teachers should be "highly credentialed" according to education-school transcripts.

Indeed, Dr. Paige has criticized schools of education for simultaneously maintaining "low standards and high barriers." Under new rules for federally aided schools, teachers will be deemed qualified if

they have academic majors in the subjects they teach and pass a rigorous examination to show they know their stuff. No education degrees will be necessary.

In addition, the Department's \$35 million grant to the new American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) will offer ways for knowledgeable career-switchers and liberal-arts graduates to win certification for teaching jobs without going through schools of education.

The education establishment, known as The Blob for being impervious to reform, has challenged Paige's interpretations and argues that the road to teaching must continue to run through the ed-schools. Some states are interpreting NCLB in a way as to cling to the conventional certification system as much as possible. But at least there is hope that increasing numbers of smart people can become teachers. They are needed badly.

The Higher Education Act Joins NCLB as a Tool for Reform

The NCLB is the latest reauthorized version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. That was a banner year for education enactments. As part of LBJ's Great Society, Congress passed the Higher Education Act (HEA) as well as the ESEA.

ESEA and HEA were not linked. Policies affecting higher education and the primary schools rarely are. They operate in separate universes.

In that same pivotal year, 1965, a paperback version of James D. Koerner's *The Miseducation of American Teachers* clearly established the connection between a segment of higher education – the teacher-training schools – and the intellectual caliber of public elementary and secondary education.

Koerner, a leader of a back-to-the-basics advocacy group called the Council for Basic Education, identified the circular nature of the problem: "A weak faculty operates a weak program that attracts weak students." He and other critics up to the present have documented a dominant view among the universities' teacher-trainers that future teachers should not be transmitters of knowledge but rather "facilitators" of student discovery, even when students don't know much.

Beginning in 2003 and now extending into 2004, a strong bid is underway on Capitol Hill to use the latest reauthorization of the 1965 HEA to pressure universities, along with their 1,200 schools of education, and state departments of education to demonstrate they are producing teachers who know their subjects. Proposed legislation also would provide incentives for programs that make teachers of bright people who never attended a school of education.

The move to challenge this closed system is bipartisan, and traces to 1998, when, on the heels of a finding that 59 percent of Massachusetts' teacher candidates failed a 10th-grade-level licensing test, President Clinton signed into law an HEA reauthorization requiring the schools of education to report their graduates' passing rates on state examinations.

However, some institutions exploited a loophole: They reported their candidates who passed the required coursework and then passed the state exams, but neglected to report those who passed the courses but failed the state exams. Hence, they claimed 100 percent passing rates, an assertion at odds with real performance and common sense.

The House Education and the Workforce Committee approved without dissent a new reauthorization that is intended not only to tighten the reporting of ed-school data but also to stimulate sweeping reform. Led by Georgia Republican Phil Gingrey, Congressional reformers seek to explicitly align collegiate teacher-training programs with the results-oriented NCLB, with its call for a “highly qualified” teacher to be in every classroom by the 2005-06 school year. The measure passed the full House by a wide margin, and awaits action in the Senate.

Innovative Schools of Education?

One of the reform incentives under consideration would fund “charter colleges of education” similar to K-12 charter schools. The innovative ed-schools could disdain the conventional counting of education credits in favor of “value-added” assessments showing that their graduates actually increase student academic achievement.

Federal grants would go to states and education partnerships that ensured teacher preparation programs were based on “rigorous academic content, scientifically based research (including scientifically based reading research), and challenging state student academic content standards.”

Surveys have shown that relatively few schools of education teach aspiring teachers how to use phonics in teaching their pupils how to read. Because extensive research establishes that teacher-directed instruction and phonics are essential for most students, the intent of the HEA reauthorizers to shake up teacher education is evident.

In addition, federal incentives would reward states that, among other steps, (1) set up alternate routes to the classroom that enable mid-career professionals to become teachers without encountering process-filled barriers, (2) develop merit pay for exemplary performance as well as differential pay for principals, teachers of hard-to-fill subjects such as reading, math, science, and special education, (3) develop teacher advancement and retention strategies, and (4) produce mechanisms to ensure that local school systems can expeditiously remove incompetent teachers.

The federal government has no constitutional role in prescribing curriculum on any level of education. However, it is reasonable for federal aid to go to states and institutions that seek to break the cycle of notoriously weak teacher preparation.

While NCLB was undergoing attacks in the 2004 presidential primaries not only from former Vermont Governor Howard Dean but from some Democratic Members of Congress who had voted for its enactment, it seemed likely that the seeds of teacher-education reform would survive in both the NCLB and a reauthorized HEA and bear fruit for greater diversity and excellence in American classrooms.

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Note: For more information on the new American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, check www.abcte.org

For an opposing view from the established system of teacher certification, check the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards website at www.nbpts.org