

6-21-1985

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Recommended Citation

Gifford, Bernard R. (1985) "Teaching--From Occupation to Profession: The Sine Qua Non of Educational Reform," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol1/iss2/7>

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Teaching—From Occupation to Profession:

The Sine Qua Non of Educational Reform

Bernard R. Gifford

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Many problems have been blamed for the crisis in public education. This article argues that the teaching occupation as it currently exists is one problem whose solution promises to yield significant consequences in terms of pupil learning. That solution, according to the author, is to restructure the teaching occupation to bring about a greater appreciation of and respect for teaching as a high-level activity that supports self-evaluative behavior—a professional consciousness that encourages teachers to see themselves as evolving practitioners capable of learning from errors, rather than as nonreflective paraprofessionals armed with a set of error-proof teaching methods applicable to all instructional settings.

NEARLY TWO AND ONE-HALF YEARS AGO, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its landmark report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. One unique feature of the report was its stylistic pugnaciousness. In contrast to most governmental reports, wherein recommendations are couched in euphemisms, circumlocutions, double-talk, and evasions, *A Nation at Risk* was straightforward and in some places even abrasive, rubbing raw the sores of public discontent with the schools. The report warned the country that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”¹ And, to make sure its message would be received in the spirit in which it was sent, the commission underscored its dire findings with the observation that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”² *A Nation at Risk* was quickly followed by a plethora of studies and reports elaborating on the themes of crisis and collapse in the nation’s public elementary and secondary schools.³ Many of them, mainly those sponsored by governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, echoed both the alarmist style and the content of *A Nation at Risk*.

The din has quieted now at the national level at least, but the debate over educational reform has not ended; in a certain sense, it has just begun. At the state and local levels, the commissions, panels, task forces, and study groups that have been established to probe state and local schools and to propose initiatives for reform

defy enumeration. Unlike any of the national groups that surveyed the nation's schools, many of these state and local groups bear some measure of direct responsibility for educational policy-making and management. Thus, much of the post-*Nation at Risk* deliberation has been directed away from the large policy issues, toward the nuts and bolts of identifying appropriate policies for change in the nation's classrooms, and the resources to make the change occur.

It is still much too early to conduct a definitive analysis of the impact that *A Nation at Risk* and its successors have had on education at the state and local levels. Final judgment will have to await more systematic studies on the effect of specific efforts to improve student learning and achievement.⁴ However, it is not too soon to conclude that the writing of *A Nation at Risk* was a landmark event which caused a major shift in the polity's attitude: survey data and other indices of public opinion clearly demonstrate that the report and its successors vastly increased public awareness of the difficulties troubling the nation's schools.⁵ This heightened awareness resulted in education's being pushed close to the top of the national political agenda during the presidential campaign of 1984—a position that it had not enjoyed since the late fifties and early sixties. Besides stimulating the most active national debate about the purposes, goals, and objectives of public education since the period following the launching of Sputnik, *A Nation at Risk* also succeeded in stimulating the public education community—particularly the teaching profession—to engage in intense introspection and discussion about the conditions of schooling and teaching in America.⁶ For the first time in nearly twenty years, the higher education community, in a series of major studies, articulated its relationship to elementary and secondary education, as well as its obligation to alter the status quo.⁷

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Problem Identification, Solution Formulation, and Policy Development

From the perspective of the policy analyst on which this article is based, it is too soon to pass judgment on the success of the educational reform movement. For one thing, it is simply too early to make correlations between the new policy initiatives and any possible consequences for education. In addition, most of the reformist reports fall short as templates for new policy initiatives. Although they captured the attention of the public in their descriptions of the unacceptable conditions in public education, the reports failed, by and large, to make the transition from macroanalysis to microanalysis; they delineated the larger obstacles impeding the schools' capacity to serve all of their pupils effectively and efficiently, but they did not focus on specific problems that require the application of specific policy initiatives for their solution.

Unacceptable Conditions and Solvable Problems

In nearly all of the reports, including *A Nation at Risk*, an implicit connection is drawn between conditions that are unacceptable and problems that need to be solved through the application of new policy initiatives. The trouble with this approach is that in reality the connection between condition and problem is rarely as neat as it is made to appear. In order for a general complaint to be transformed into a specific problem for which there is an acceptable solution offering some

promise of a permanent cure, the implicit must be made explicit. Consider the following exposition from Lindblom and Cohen, which makes this very point:

Suppose we begin, as an exercise in defining a problem, with the familiar "Why Johnny can't read." To specify the problem more precisely, someone will suggest that the problem is one of reading difficulties among certain urban ethnic groups. But then it will be said that the problem is one of inadequate family incomes for these groups. And to that it will be responded that income itself is not the problem; the problem is basically a deficiency in the family's ability to implant an incentive to learn to read in children. Hence the problem becomes that of the inadequacy of the urban ethnic family as a social institution—an institution that is failing to perform its required functions. That may provoke the suggestion that the problem is one of defective socioeconomic organization; socioeconomic institutions do not integrate these families into normal social functioning. But perhaps, then, the problem is one of faulty political organization in the society at large, since presumably the right kind of political decision could remedy the faults of the economy, the structure of urban society, and the place of the family in it.

At this point someone is also certain to suggest that politics is not an independent influence on economy and society, being itself dependent upon them. It might then be proposed that the problem is one big interlocked problem of social organization—to which formulation one may or may not add some further problem specification, such as that the phenomena of social class are the "real" problem. But problem definition at this level can perhaps be counted on to produce another abstract formulation. Any big interlocked problem of social organization, it will be suggested, can only be understood as a product of history and culture. The problem, then, is a fundamental one of a historically produced culture that is inadequate. From which it seems only a small step to the conclusion: the world is not what it should be. That is the problem.⁸

As the preceding discourse makes clear, problem definition is not an easy task in the face of the temptation to account for all possible causative factors responsible for producing a particular condition. Problem definition necessitates that allowances be made for resource constraints, prevailing values, political interest, and organization configurations. A solution that requires the would-be problem solver to rearrange radically the entire political constellation is not much of a solution.

Looking for the Problem

In making the point that solutions and problems need to be coupled, we are not arguing that a solution is viable only if it results in cessation of the problem. Problems are rarely, if ever, completely solved. When we refer to problem identification and solution formulation, we are talking about processes that stand a chance of producing outcomes which, measured by some objective standard, will improve existing conditions. In the "real" world, dealing with a succession of problems may be the best we can expect, given our inability to remedy a multitude of factors simultaneously. For example, it is highly unlikely that we will be able in the near future to teach all of the Johnnys attending central city schools to read at grade level; our current knowledge about the comparative efficacy of various methods of teaching reading to pupils attending these schools is limited,

and existing socioeconomic conditions attenuate the impact of even the most effective formal classroom instruction methods. What is more likely is that under the proper circumstances, schools can make a better match between teaching approaches and students' learning styles, thereby increasing the proportion of students who can read at or above grade level. This solution, although difficult to achieve, is not beyond reach.

Problem definition, in this view, is a framework for doers—problem solvers, managers, policymakers, and policy analysts—to confront the reality they are seeking to change but not necessarily to understand. Thus, mental frameworks that help us to make sense of reality may not suffice. We also require a frame of reference which will aid us in making sense of our own actions, past and future. In other words, problem definition is a framework within which certain interventions are considered—and indeed defined—as solutions. Without this framework the same actions would make no sense.⁹

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If what we have described as problem identification and solution formulation is necessary to the process of school reform, then our earlier observation about the limited utility of increased public awareness must be taken very seriously, for this awareness is only the first, albeit crucial, step in school reform; unless it leads to a definition of problems that stand some chance of amelioration, and unless proposed remedies prove feasible, life in the nation's classrooms and schools will go on unaltered and unacceptable—as if nothing had happened. Without accurate problem identification, solutions in the form of new policies will produce no improvements. In some instances, conditions may actually be worsened. If awareness produces nothing more than public excitement, and if the process of appropriate problem identification and solution formulation never gets under way, there is a real danger that the public will demand policymakers to “do something” before it is clear what needs to be done. When policymakers feel pressured to do something, they often make inappropriate or meaningless gestures—what Edelman describes as symbolic behavior¹⁰—aimed at dissipating the pressure itself. The outcome of this situation is not problem identification but problem proliferation, problem diversion, and policy gridlock. A good example of this symbolic behavior is the call made by both policymakers and reformists for longer school days and extended school years. The apparent theory behind these suggestions is that more is better, but in reality, more of the same may well make things worse.

The Problem with Education

Many “problems” have been blamed for the crisis in public education, including school days that are too short, curricula that are intellectually truncated, teacher expectations that are too low, funding that must be stretched too far, poor instructional leadership at the school site level, too little homework, too few objective, content-sensitive tests, the changing composition of the family structure, a general decline in moral standards, a failure to articulate moral standards, conflicting educational objectives, insufficient public input, inferior performance auditing and monitoring procedures, and many, many others. The number of proposed solutions has been even greater than the number of problems. It is the contention here, however, that many of these so-called problems are really descriptions of unacceptable conditions, and that even where the word *problem* is

used accurately, the solutions that are proposed frequently will not have much of an impact on student learning.

One problem exists, however, whose solution promises to yield significant consequences in terms of pupil learning. It has the added virtue of being comprehensive enough to test the political and intellectual skills of the most ardent reformer. The problem lies in the teaching occupation as it currently exists, and the solution to the problem is to restructure the teaching occupation. This proposition will form the core of the remainder of this article.

Suggested Policies and Predicted Progress: The Weak Condition

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Nearly all of the myriad proposals for educational reform offered in the wake of *A Nation at Risk* call for actions that will enhance the attractiveness and status of the teaching occupation. For example, the National Commission on Excellence in Education "found that

not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields.¹¹

The commission recommended that the following solutions be implemented:

Salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. Salary, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated.¹²

In his seminal study, *A Place Called School*, John Goodlad summarized a decade of classroom observations in this way:

In general the practicing teacher—to the degree we can generalize from our findings—functions in a context where the beliefs and expectations are those of a profession but where the realities tend to constrain, likening actual practice more to a trade. It undoubtedly is too late to turn back the clock with respect to embellishing teaching with the trappings of a profession. But a question arises as to whether the circumstances of teaching can be made conducive to developing in all teachers the behavior a profession entails. By its nature a profession involves both considerable autonomy in decision making and knowledge and skills developed before entry and honed in practice.¹³

In *High School*, Ernest Boyer, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, commented:

Surveys reveal that teachers are deeply troubled, not only about salaries, but also about their loss of status, the bureaucratic pressures, a negative public image, the lack of recognition and rewards. To talk about recruiting better students into teaching without first examining the current circumstances that discourage teachers is simply a diversion. The push for excellence in education must begin by confronting those conditions that drive good teachers from the classroom in the first place.¹⁴

In *Horace's Compromise*, Theodore Sizer, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals' High School Study Group, observed:

It will require an unprecedented leap of faith for Americans to trust their teachers. They never have, not very much. Furthermore, the current public mood is punitive, albeit with some justification. Much teaching in high schools is abysmal. While some of this clearly is due to teachers' incompetence, insensitivity, and carelessness, some also flows from the conditions of the work—giving rise to Horace's compromise—and the demeaning attitudes, and the policies that flow from them, with which the public treats the profession. America and its teachers are in a cul-de-sac of attitudes and practice. Reversing direction will therefore be difficult.¹⁵

The aggregate portrait of the teaching occupation is a collage of contradictions that engenders conflicting thoughts about which steps ought to be taken to ameliorate the circumstances of teachers and teaching. But contradiction and teaching are virtually synonymous. Similar observations simultaneously demonstrating adulation and neglect, reverence and scorn, have been made about the status of education as an idea and as an ongoing enterprise by countless commentators and critics of American education for at least a century.¹⁶ What the comments of Goodlad, Boyer, and Sizer reveal is how little views of teaching and teachers have changed over time. The teacher, generally acknowledged to be strategically and pedagogically the most important factor in formal learning, has traditionally been allotted little authority or latitude in planning, decision making, and evaluation. The teacher has long occupied the bottom link of a lengthy chain of command stretching from executive mansions and state legislative chambers down to commissions and state boards of education, further down to local school boards and district superintendents' offices, then from this complex control structure to principals in individual schools, and, finally, to the teacher in the classroom.

Although widespread consensus exists on the need to change the status quo, the outlook for enduring reform in American education is not encouraging. The resistance to change that has been built up as the result of habit, public opinion, and long-standing institutional arrangements will not be easy to reverse. Take, for instance, the issue of making the profession of teaching more attractive to the more academically able, new college graduates. Nearly every report calling for reform argues that it is this change, above all others, upon whose shoulders rests the long-range possibility of significant and enduring educational improvement. At the same time, nearly every reformist agenda observes that this key policy objective will not be achieved unless steps are taken to dramatically increase teacher salaries, especially those of new teachers. The difficulty of transposing this observation into a policy objective is symptomatic of the obstacles facing the school reform movement.

Teacher Salary Increases: Doing Better and Feeling Worse

One of the major reasons for the difficulty of using salary to increase the relative attractiveness of teaching to the more academically able college graduates is that the cohort of new graduates is shrinking, a fact that is driving up the relative wage rates that all sectors of the economy must pay for college-educated workers

newly entering the labor market.¹⁷ In regions of the country, such as New England, where this shrinkage is complemented by a robust economy,¹⁸ the difficulty of increasing the attractiveness of teaching by increasing salaries is compounded. The situation is even worse in parts of the country where the demand for new teachers is accelerating, owing to (1) the retirement of the cohort of career teachers who started teaching after World War II, (2) the baby boom echo, which is sharply pushing up elementary school enrollments, following a long period of enrollment decline, and (3) the adoption by local school districts of new coursework requirements for promotion and graduation. Here again, New England is a case in point. The opening up of the employment market to talented female and minority college graduates—two groups that in the past were disproportionately channeled into teaching on account of discrimination in other professions—further increases the difficulty of attracting more and better talent to teaching.

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In states and school districts where the potential teacher applicant pool is shrinking and the demand for teachers is accelerating, even larger than normal across-the-board salary increases for new teachers might fail to increase the attractiveness of teaching vis-à-vis other occupations that require similar educational and skill levels. Given a robust economy and the changing economic and social demography of the labor market for all groups of young, educated workers, larger than normal salary increases for prospective teachers may be required just to maintain the status quo in the current wage gap between teachers and similarly educated workers in comparable occupations. Situations in which new policy initiatives produce real improvement (teacher salaries go up) and the intended beneficiaries of the new policies (prospective new teachers) end up feeling that conditions have gotten worse are not at all uncommon in the sphere of public policy.

Raising Standards and Lowering Morale

Another area in which a policy initiative could end up producing unanticipated results is that of educational standards. In response to findings that the intellectual integrity of the public school curriculum has been seriously compromised—allegedly as the result of a prolonged falloff in educational standards, teacher expectations, and student effort—more and more state education departments have implemented rigorous curriculum monitoring and evaluation programs. In some states, including California, Florida, and Texas, these efforts have produced volumes of detailed curriculum guidelines and copious suggestions for their utilization. An increasing number of these curriculum improvement programs rely heavily on the use of state-selected standardized achievement examinations for the purpose of assessing compliance and pupil progress. In California, a report card for every high school in the state is now issued annually by the state superintendent of instruction; a ranking is provided and areas in need of improvement are spelled out in great detail. Further, supplementary appropriations are allocated to high schools on the basis of how well their students perform on state-designed standardized achievement examinations.¹⁹ Adoption of the California model is now being discussed and debated in at least fifteen other states.

At the classroom level, the new emphasis on educational standards is manifesting itself, as it must, in reduced teacher discretion and autonomy in the selection of textbook and instructional materials, less control over teaching methods, and greater constraints on the distribution of instructional time. More and more

teachers are responding to pressures to align their instructional objectives with state guidelines. Where there is resistance, principals and other instructional administrators, responding to pressures to demonstrate instructional leadership abilities, are there to make sure that the classroom teacher has gotten the message and will toe the new party line on curriculum. The process of trimming and accommodating commitment, creativity, and imagination at the expense of individual initiative is bound to affect the more gifted and talented teacher and teacher trainee. Here is one veteran teacher's reaction to these new developments:

No one intimately involved in a classroom [can fail] to appreciate the subtle interplays, the minute changes that take place among people in that setting—and, when things go very well, between a student and a text or an idea. So, when we are told to get ready for the lessons-by-appointment that are arranged every six months and duly noted in our personnel files, we go for the grand slam. Most of us can do this on schedule . . . but lessons-by-appointment don't reveal tiddly-pom about our real strengths and weaknesses over the 180-day season. It always amazed me that students ham such lessons as much as their teachers, cooperating in the production of show-and-tell tinsel for the benefit of visiting administrators. For 50 minutes twice a year, we all pretend that school is what everybody outside the classroom claims it should be. No student even asks to go to the bathroom.²⁰

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It is difficult to imagine how this reduced autonomy and increased role playing will attract more able, and one would surmise, more imaginative and creative college graduates to the teaching profession. It is especially ironic that these changes in the circumstances of teaching are taking place at a time when the nation's private sector is deep into debate about the continued effectiveness of managerial systems which presuppose that worker productivity and worker discretion are mutually incompatible.²¹

More Accountability and Less Substance

In all fairness to those who have advocated the imposition of stronger control systems for educational standards, it must be said that the new emphasis on standards-setting, monitoring, and evaluation is not entirely unwarranted. At least in theory, greater central control over educational standards permits central administrative authorities to reduce the pernicious impact of high teacher turnover, always a chronic problem, and doubly so during periods when the demand for young, college-educated workers is high, as it is expected to be for the next decade. Also, in cases where schools are compelled to employ marginally competent teachers or are forced to assign teachers instructional responsibilities outside their areas of academic competence—a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly routine in high school mathematics, science, English, and history courses—better defined and better articulated curriculum standards could prove to be a powerful antidote to mediocrity. This, of course, presupposes that curriculum guidelines are buttressed by well-conceived and well-written textbooks, and supplemented by stimulating materials beyond the textbook. This is a large assumption. As Harriet Bernstein, director of the Project on Textbooks (sponsored jointly by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Association of State Boards of Education) notes:

The writing in most textbooks, particularly in elementary textbooks, is choppy and stilted. The lion's share of the blame for such writing is heaped on the

states and cities that have mandated the use of readability formulas to determine the level of difficulty of text. As more and more jurisdictions have required that textbooks meet specific grade-level readability scores, publishers have been impelled to write or adapt their texts according to the formulas. Paradoxically, the effect of the formulas has been to make the prose harder rather than easier to understand. . . .

Researchers have also found that textbooks in nearly every category tackle too many subjects and cover them so superficially that students have difficulty understanding what is being said. Books flit from topic to topic; chapters wander between the truly important and the trivial; even paragraphs can be jumbled and lacking in evident focus. Researchers call this "mentioning," and the primary cause of the problem seems to be educators themselves. In most jurisdictions, adoption authorities have required textbooks to cover all topics in a course. Publishers have tried to accommodate the lists of required topics from several major adoption states in order to sell to as large a market as possible. The result is magazine-style books—filled with tidbits but lacking context, adequate explanation, or clarifying examples.²²

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Why More Education May Yield Less-Educated Teachers

If the connection between educational improvement, on the one hand, and new policy initiatives that would increase teacher salaries and raise education standards, on the other hand, is weaker than commonly imagined, the link between another frequently proposed reform initiative and school improvement may be even more feeble. The call for an immediate upgrading of the quality of the teaching corps through the imposition of rigorous academic prerequisites for prospective teachers falls into this class of questionable policy initiatives. On the surface, the need for this reform seems unassailable. And it is. However, a second, unanticipated facet of this recommendation gives cause for concern. From a policy perspective, strengthening the academic prerequisites for entry into educational studies programs would make sense only if those who entered teaching sans currently acceptable courses of academic and professional preparation were less academically able than those who entered the teacher occupation through more orthodox channels. The evidence suggests the contrary. As Dan C. Lortie²³ and others have repeatedly pointed out, students who make an early decision to pursue the teaching profession (*vertical recruits*) are usually less academically able than students who decide to go into teaching later on in their academic lives (*lateral recruits*).

The policy implications of this unpleasant state of affairs are obvious. Unless some means are uncovered for activating a lateral interest in teaching among prospective teachers currently in the lateral recruit pool, policies constricting lateral entry into teaching would result in counterproductive consequences. Put another way, if all other factors affecting the attractiveness of teaching as a profession remain unchanged, raising the academic requirements for entry into education studies programs may not only fail to woo increased numbers of more academically able students into teaching, but may also prevent a large fraction of highly motivated (although academically marginal) students from entering teaching. Were this outcome to be realized, the teaching corps would become even more bereft of academic talent than it is now, since school districts would be compelled

to dig deeper into the pool of unemployed (and otherwise unemployable?) college graduates who have traditionally served in the reserve army of would-be substitute teachers. The more districts are forced to reach down into this pool, the greater will be the number of untrained and unmotivated teachers who will end up teaching the nation's youth.

Even if a mechanism were developed which would activate early entry into rigorous educational studies programs for students now falling into the lateral recruit category, it is not clear that this reform would endure in the absence of other changes in the circumstances of teaching. If longer periods of formal study should differentially benefit those who are more intellectually able, who are inquisitive and self-sufficient intellects, who are eager to inform their modes of practice with insights from research and with intelligence gleaned from careful study of exemplary techniques and approaches, the gap between the least competent and the most able teacher could actually widen. In turn, the widening competency gap could eventually drive out the better teachers.

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Teaching: The Flat and Ineffective Occupation

The competency gap unavoidable in any occupation presents a unique dilemma in teaching, because teaching is a "flat" occupation in at least three dimensions. First, with respect to workload assignments, all teachers, regardless of experience and past achievements, are treated pretty much alike, with one notable exception. Contrary to the mode of operation in nearly every other occupation, new teachers are more likely to be assigned to classes with the greatest number of problem students! Further, new teachers are not given reduced teaching loads and are not instructed to work with more experienced practitioners. In most occupations that require long periods of prepractice education and training, a period of "apprenticeship" is standard. Not surprisingly, for many beginning teachers, the first year of classroom duty is exhausting, punitive, and emotionally upsetting. Few guidance and support services are available to them, the only possible exception being occasional scheduled visits from supervisory personnel conducting formal evaluations. Obviously, evaluations of this sort often are viewed as invidious procedures rather than as a supportive method of identifying errors for the purpose of correcting them. Left on their own in isolated work stations to deal with the complexities of translating abstract theories of knowledge transmission (teaching) and knowledge acquisition (learning) into the concrete reality of a contemporary classroom populated by students whose learning styles, capabilities, past successes, and personal preferences are in constant flux, is it any wonder that the more capable new teachers are the first ones to abandon the classroom? Given the challenges and obligations imposed by diverse instructional needs; the difficulties engendered by inappropriate curriculum materials, outdated instructional technology, and chronic supply shortages; the heavy administrative burden of governmental regulation; student poverty; parental indifference; and community racial and ethnic sensitivities, to name just a few of the more apparent stresses, the amazing thing is that so many teachers choose to remain in the profession.

Second is the problem of a flat salary structure. Teachers reach the top of the salary scale in a relatively few years and then have no monetary incentive to improve their skills and every monetary incentive to leave the classroom for administrative or other higher-paying nonteaching positions. During long periods of

fiscal stress, which characterized most of the seventies, for instance, teacher salaries in real terms have actually declined by as much as 20 percent in many of the nation's central city districts.

Third, as if the objective of school districts were to make a counterproductive arrangement even more so, the workload of the skilled clinician-practitioner capable of helping new teachers is not reduced in order to facilitate the effective execution of this important function. Not only are *new* teachers denied systematic access to the insights of these reflective practitioners; *tenured* teachers are also denied the benefits of regular and close association with excellence. This perverse condition is an outcome of the administrative organization of the schools. With few exceptions, in most school districts all teachers, regardless of level of education and experience, are considered equivalent to one another. That is, for purposes of allocating mentoring responsibilities, assessing instructional duties, determining compensation, establishing incentives, and conferring status and awards, no distinctions are made between the efforts and contributions of the marginally competent teacher and those of the truly gifted and reflective practitioner.

The failure to make a distinction between performance that is merely adequate and performance that is superior leads to feelings of inferiority and insecurity among marginally competent teachers and to feelings of injustice and frustration among reflective practitioners. Teachers who know they are falling short of their capabilities and of the expectations others have of their ability are denied access to positive role models and therefore must stumble along until they attain a level of comfortability. Where the barriers to increased competence are so palpable and frustratingly unassailable, the pursuit of comfort is likely to take precedence over the pursuit of excellence. Teachers who are capable of serving as worthy role models are denied both the opportunity and rewards of doing so, which, however inadvertently, can only heighten their sense of dissatisfaction.

Given the flatness of the teaching occupation and the strong disincentives against collegueship, it can come as no surprise that education is the last topic one expects to hear discussed in teacher lounges. Befitting their circumstances, teachers have established elaborate codes of conduct and behavior designed to minimize public displays of competence, for such displays serve only to underscore the isolation built into the teaching occupation. Studied silence, as a response to the problem of structural isolation, may be effective in the short run. In the long run, it will continue to drive from the profession those teachers who are most sensitive to quality, who thrive intellectually and whose skills expand in an environment that promotes and rewards systematic inquiry, who are capable of self-evaluative behavior, and who place great value on collegueship. These are the teachers who would be most likely to become reflective practitioners. Rosenholtz and Kyle, who have investigated the organizational consequences of isolation, made the following observation:

Teachers in most schools . . . believe . . . that it is wrong to inflict suggestions for improvement upon each other, however well intentioned, and that it is proper to avoid any face-to-face criticism, however constructive. Isolated teachers appear instead to enact a live-and-let-live professional protocol.

In fact, there is the sense in isolated settings that to seek advice from other teachers is to admit, at least to some degree, a lack of teaching competence.

The offering of unsolicited advice is equally poor etiquette, because it implies that the advisor possesses greater teaching competence. In other words, teachers do not generally approach each other with requests for, and offers of, assistance because those actions convey, undeservedly, an aura of superiority or inferiority. To avoid such implications, when teachers do talk with one another, like our Ms. Brooks, conversation is maneuvered around professional issues, with talk about politics, sports, the latest trends and social situations interrupted only occasionally by the swapping of stories about hopelessly uncooperative students or parents. Since it is believed that teachers have both the duty and the right to establish their own classroom standards and procedures, professional protocol in isolated settings prohibits professional dialogue about the substance of teaching, even about the most routine matters. As a result, the conversation becomes more social, [and] the intellectual vigor of the faculty diminishes.²⁴

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In noting some of the difficulties that confound initiatives designed to enhance the attractiveness of teaching—a policy objective that has garnered the support of every would-be educational reformer—we are not attempting to demonstrate that this sensible, and thus potentially effective and enduring, educational reform is impossible. In fact, it could be argued that for the first time in nearly twenty years, there is legitimate cause for optimism with respect to this objective. Reports on the status of the public schools (if not the public itself) are no longer using teachers as the scapegoat for all the ills therein, as they did in the period following the launching of Sputnik. Many reports issued at that time placed much of the blame for the problems in public education on the inadequacies of the nation's teaching force.²⁵ In contrast, the teacher of today is often characterized as a harried, unappreciated, undervalued, and underpaid public servant performing heroic tasks under impossible conditions. Nevertheless, policies designed to increase the attractiveness of teaching through improved salaries, educational standards, and educational studies programs are necessary. Clearly, efficacious and lasting educational reform cannot be achieved without major new initiatives in all these areas. Still, these initiatives alone will not be enough. More—much more—needs to be done.

Effective Teachers: Effective Profession

If the teaching occupation is to become more than what it currently is, and if the change is to be indicative of something more substantial than mere capitulation to public demand that something be done about the schools, then a basic understanding or shared assumption about the educational enterprise must guide the transformation. This understanding will serve as the point of departure for the remainder of this inquiry. If we did not impose this frame of reference, we would have no place to begin our problem identification and solution formulation. The understanding is that teachers can and do make a difference in pupil learning. Effective teachers can have a substantial, enduring, and positive impact; ineffective teachers can have a substantial, enduring, and negative impact. If this were not so, it would be pointless to push for the implementation of the costly policies suggested by *A Nation at Risk* and its progeny—policies designed to enhance the teaching profession's ability to compete for talent, its basic compensation levels,

and its incentive and reward structures for outstanding practitioners. If effective teachers and effective teaching do not make a difference, advocating changes in the teaching occupation that will drain more money from the public fisc is simply irresponsible. In this case, the right solution to the wrong problem would be costly, not only in terms of missed opportunities for effective changes, but also in terms of the misuse of already scarce resources that could be invested in support of more promising policy initiatives.

To the degree that a pupil's social, affective, and cognitive development are influenced by formal instructional activities, and to the degree that these activities take place in teacher-led classrooms, consideration of human factors and organizational variables that influence the quality of the teacher-student interaction warrants a central place in any reformist agenda. In fact, the teacher-student interaction, as a determinant of student achievement, may well be the most significant area in which educational policymakers can exercise their influence. When this interaction is in any way compromised, student achievement is hampered, and so are all attempts at achieving educational excellence. Given the complexity of American public education, pathways to compromised teacher effectiveness and truncated student performance abound. But the pathway to poor student performance is most often taken when teachers are assigned to classroom settings in which they are misplaced, misguided, and mismatched. If one accepts this assertion, it follows that educational reform cannot be achieved without paying attention to the structure of the teaching occupation, and that any proposed restructuring must be guided, and eventually evaluated, by its likely impact on the teacher-student relationship.

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Guiding the Restructuring Effort

If restructuring is one of the solutions to the problem of the teaching occupation, then what objectives should be guiding our restructuring efforts? The first and most important outcome of restructuring should be a greater appreciation of and respect for teaching as a high-level activity, one that requires those who take it up as an occupation to objectively demonstrate (1) comprehensive knowledge of the subjects they wish to teach; (2) the ability to systematically conceptualize how knowledge from the learning sciences (i.e., instructional and developmental psychology, cognitive science, ethnography, etc.) can be applied in a variety of instructional settings; and, last but not least, (3) the ability to blend and apply these two essential and complementary skill attributes in the classroom.

Second, it should be recognized that teachers develop and mature as effective practitioners at different rates and that these differences simply reflect the variation in behavior that is characteristic of the human developmental process. *Difference* is not a synonym for *deficiency*. If one were to draw a representative sample of elementary school teachers, for example, all of whom shared a common educational achievement and preprofessional preparation profile, and subsequently monitor their ability to teach an educationally homogeneous group of second-grade students how to read, one would discover that some teachers master this key skill early in their careers, while others require more time and practice to attain mastery. To ignore this variation in the amount of time individual teachers need to acquire teaching skills is tantamount to promoting the systematic mal-use of teacher talent.

The third change that restructuring should promote is the development of a work ethos among teachers that supports self-evaluative behavior—a professional consciousness that encourages teachers to see themselves as evolving practitioners capable of learning from errors, rather than as nonreflective paraprofessionals armed with a set of error-proof teaching methods applicable to all instructional settings.

One way to achieve these three objectives is to put into place in local school districts organizational systems and incentive structures that would encourage, support, and reward teacher-to-teacher cooperative and collaborative efforts, especially where those efforts would result in linkages between highly accomplished clinician-practitioners and teachers in need of continuing training and development. Although differences among teachers should not automatically result in unwarranted distinctions, differences in the rate of skills acquisition should not go unacknowledged. Teacher authority, teacher responsibility, and teacher compensation should be influenced by demonstrated teacher capacity. Differences among teachers are not currently taken into account, as noted earlier.

These changes would transform—we think in the right direction—education as it is currently organized and practiced in the nation's schools. If used to guide the development and institution of new rules for allocating instructional resources and for rewarding achievement and competence, these changes would steer teaching away from the undifferentiated and unattractive vocation it currently is toward a profession bearing a closer resemblance to occupations that require the exercise of informed judgment. Although it cannot be proved in advance—policy initiatives are based on predictions about the way the world might work, not on *dicta* about the way it actually works—these changes are likely to make teaching more attractive to the more academically able college graduate. They certainly would improve circumstances for the more talented members of the teaching corps already in the schools.

Notes

1. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1983), 5. For an excellent account of the work of the commission, see the essay of commission member and Harvard University professor of physics and history Gerald Holton, "A Nation at Risk Revisited," *Daedalus* 112, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 1-27.
2. *Ibid.*
3. See Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy, *Making the Grade* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1983); Education Commission of the States, *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1983); College Board Equality Project, *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do* (New York: College Board, 1983); Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology of the National Science Foundation, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century: A Plan of Action for Improving Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education for All American Elementary and Secondary Students So That Their Achievement Is the Best in the World by 1995: A Report to the American People and the National Science Board* (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, September 1983); Ernest L. Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects*

for the Future (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983); Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

4. For some early and necessarily speculative evaluations of the educational reform movement, see Harold Howe, "Education Moves to Center Stage: An Overview of Recent Studies," *Phi Delta Kappan* 65, no. 3 (November 1983): 167-72; Lawrence C. Stedman and Marshall S. Smith, "Recent Reform Proposals for American Education," *Contemporary Education Review* 2 (Fall 1984): 85-104; K. Patricia Cross, "The Rising Tide of Reform Reports," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 3 (November 1984): 167-72; "Symposium on the Year of Reports: Responses from the Educational Community," *Harvard Educational Review* 54, no. 1 (February 1984): 1-31; Albert Shanker, "Taking the Measure of American Education Reform: An Assessment of the Education Reports," *American Journal of Education* 92, no. 3 (May 1984): 314-24; John Hardin Best, "Reforming America's Schools: The High Risk of Failure," *Teachers College Record* 86, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 265-74; and Maxine Greene, "Excellence, Meanings, and Multiplicity," *Teachers College Record* 86, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 283-98.
5. George H. Gallup, "The 16th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 1 (September 1984): 23-38 (hereinafter "Gallup Poll 1").
6. Alec Gallup, "The Gallup Poll of Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 2 (October 1984): 97-107, and "The Gallup Poll of Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Public Schools: Part 2," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 5 (January 1985): 323-30 (hereinafter "Gallup Poll 2" and "Gallup Poll 3").
7. See "Report of the National Institute of Education Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education," in *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), reprinted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 October 1984, pages 35-38, 40-49; William J. Bennett, *To Reclaim a Legacy: Text of Report on Humanities in Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), reprinted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 November 1984, pages 16-21; "Report of the Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, the Association of American Colleges," in *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (Washington, D.C.: The Association of American Colleges, 1985), reprinted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 February 1985, pages 1, 12-16, 18-22, 24, and 26-30.
8. Charles E. Lindblom and David K. Cohen, *Useable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 49-50.
9. David Dery, *Problem Definition in Policy Analysis* (Lawrence: Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 5.
10. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1964).
11. *A Nation at Risk*, 22.
12. *Ibid.*, 30.
13. Goodlad, *A Place Called School*, 193-94.
14. Boyer, *High School*, 155.
15. Sizer, *Horace's Compromise*, 195.
16. See Merle L. Borrowman, *Teacher Education in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1965), and *The Liberal and Technical in Teacher Education: A Historical Survey of American Thought* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1965).
17. Howard N. Fullerton and John Tschetter, "The 1995 Labor Force: A Second Look," *Monthly Labor Review* 106, no. 11 (November 1983): 3-10.
18. Susan Elizabeth Shank, "Changes in Regional Unemployment Over the Last Decade," *Monthly Labor Review* 108, no. 3 (March 1985): 17-23.
19. Larry Cuban, "School Reform by Remote Control: SB 813 in California," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 3 (November 1984): 213-15.

20. Susan Ohanian, "Huffing and Puffing and Blowing Schools Excellent," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 5 (January 1985): 318-19.
21. See Daniel Yankelovich and John Immerwahr, "Putting the Work Ethic to Work," *Society* 21, no. 2 (January/February 1984): 58-76.
22. Harriet T. Bernstein, "The New Politics of Textbook Adoption," *Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 7 (March 1985): 463-66.
23. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
24. Susan J. Rosenholtz and Susan J. Kyle, "Teacher Isolation: Barrier to Professionalism," *American Educator* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 12.
25. See James F. Koerner, *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), and Hyman G. Rickover, *American Education—A National Failure: The Problem of Our Schools and What We Can Learn from England* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963).