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## CONTENTS

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Enforcing "Statutory Rape"?	<i>Michael W. Lynch</i>	3
The Case Against Teacher Certification	<i>Dale Ballou &amp; Michael Podgursky</i>	17
The College and the City: Then and Now	<i>Nathan Glazer</i>	30
<i>Building Hopes in the City:</i> Sports Stadium Boondoggle	<i>Mark F. Bernstein</i>	45
Convention Center Follies	<i>Heywood T. Sanders</i>	58
Are the Children of Today's Immigrants Making It?	<i>Joel Perlmann &amp; Roger Waldinger</i>	73
Telling the Poor What to Do	<i>Lawrence M. Mead</i>	97
<i>Books in Review:</i>		
The Therapeutic State, by James L. Nolan <i>Francis Fukuyama</i>		113
For Your Own Good, by Jacob Sullum <i>David Skinner</i>		117
Dustbowl Migrants in the American Imagination, by Charles J. Shindo <i>Roger Starr</i>		122
Contributors		128

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## The case against teacher certification

DALE BALLOU AND MICHAEL PODGURSKY

**T**HE system by which the nation trains and licenses its public school teachers recently came under sharp attack from an organization called the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF). In its 1996 report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, the commission charged that public schools employ large numbers of "unqualified" teachers, largely as a result of inadequate and poorly enforced standards for teacher training and licensing. The report was greeted as a "scathing indictment" of the current system and was widely publicized by the media.

What is the NCTAF? Its name notwithstanding, the NCTAF holds no "commission" from any elected official. It is a private organization, funded by the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations. Although the NCTAF claims that its report is not the work of education insiders, the largest block of members comes from major education organizations and education schools, including the two major teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Remarkably, for a body that claims to represent the public interest on issues of education policy, the commission also includes leaders of private organizations that have a direct and substantial financial stake in the adoption of the commission's recommendations, among them the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

### **The NCTAF plan**

The commission blames current conditions on state education departments and many teacher education programs:

Because most states do not require schools of education to be accredited, only about 500 of the nation's 1200 education schools have met common professional standards. States, meanwhile, routinely approve all of their teacher education programs, including those that lack qualified faculty and are out of touch with new knowledge about teaching.

As a remedy, the NCTAF offers a sweeping plan to "professionalize" teaching, shifting control of accreditation and certification from local school boards and state education agencies to private education organizations. The commission's recommendations do not specify the curriculum of teacher training programs or the content of licensing examinations. Rather, the NCTAF would empower groups of education professionals to set standards for how teachers will be trained, tested, hired, and promoted. It will be up to these professional organizations to determine the curricular reforms needed to upgrade the teacher work force.

A key element of the commission's program calls for all teacher education programs to meet "professional standards" or be closed. By this, the commission means obtaining accreditation from NCATE. While all education schools must currently meet the standards required for accreditation by their state department of education, most do not obtain, or even try to secure, the approval of NCATE.

The commission also calls for establishing an independent professional board in every state to set standards for teacher licensing. In most states, teacher licensing (certification) requirements are currently set by state education departments.

By contrast, in law and medicine these standards are set by professional boards composed of respected practitioners. NCTAF proposes similar boards for teachers in order to set higher standards for teaching and to "create a fire wall between the political system and standards-setting process."

The commission's proposals extend to the assessment and compensation of experienced teachers as well. They call for states to establish goals and incentives for National Board Certification in every state and district, with the aim of certifying 105,000 teachers in this decade as "master teachers," one for every school in the United States. Teachers seeking this recognition submit portfolios for evaluation to the board (located just outside Detroit). The portfolios include videotapes of their teaching, lesson plans, and samples of student work. These materials are reviewed by "experts"—moonlighting teachers trained by the board. Teachers are also required to take a test at a regional site. Input from supervisors or parents is not solicited.

Remarkably, there has been very little public discussion of the merits of these recommendations. While the NCTAF's report received wide coverage in the media when released in the summer of 1996, the heaviest publicity was given to the commission's claims that public schools were employing large numbers of poorly trained and poorly qualified teachers. Given this, the commission's proposals to strengthen teacher training and licensing seemed uncontroversial, if not irresistible. Thus the commission succeeded almost at once in setting the terms of public debate about the way the nation will recruit and train new teachers.

The NCTAF remains active, vigorously promoting its proposals. It has issued a state-by-state report card grading states on their efforts to "professionalize" their teaching work forces, an effective device for pressuring states with low scores to accede to NCTAF demands. According to a commission press release, 11 states have formed "partnerships" with the NCTAF to "create programs and policies advancing [NCTAF] recommendations."

Recent activity within the federal government indicates that the NCTAF's influence is growing. The commission has worked closely with legislators in the current session of Congress on

bills affecting teacher training and recruitment. Thirty-five million dollars in federal funds have been spent to support the efforts of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to certify master teachers. President Clinton's 1998 budget proposes \$105 million more over the next five years.

The U.S. Department of Education has just awarded a \$23 million contract to the University of Maryland and 25 partner organizations to build consensus on teaching and teacher training. This consortium will study states that are implementing NCTAF recommendations and, on the basis of this study, will disseminate information about "best practices." Among other tasks, the consortium will determine whether teachers certified by the National Board are more effective. This is surprising for two reasons. First, it is an admission that the administration is spending taxpayer dollars to promote an organization whose ability to identify good teaching—let alone promote it—is still in doubt. Second, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is itself one of the consortium's 25-member organizations. Indeed, the NCTAF and the principal organizations aligned with it are all members of the consortium, a circumstance that strongly compromises the objectivity of the forthcoming "study."

### **Not enough teacher training?**

As economists who have studied labor markets for public and private school teachers, we have serious doubts about the direction in which the NCTAF proposals would take public policy. The NCTAF has misdiagnosed the problem of teacher quality. Many of the commission's proposals would do little or nothing to improve teacher performance. Indeed, the policies advocated by the NCTAF hold considerable potential to do harm.

Fourteen years ago, a prolonged debate about education quality in the United States was set off by the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*. This report called attention to the poor academic performance and weak cognitive skills of many teachers. College board scores of education students were below nearly all other majors and had been declining in relative terms through the 1970s. Too many graduates of teacher education programs did

not understand the subjects they were teaching.

This concern is all but forgotten by the NCTAF, which focuses not on recruiting more talented people into the profession but on improving teacher training. The distinction has important implications, not least for schools of education. If the nation needs to recruit more talented people into the teaching profession, policies should be shaped with that end in mind. Such policies might well include ways of opening the profession to capable individuals who have not completed formal teacher training.

However, a rather different set of policy prescriptions emerges if it turns out that the problem with the teacher work force is simply inadequate training. If teachers need to be better trained, it is to schools, departments, and colleges of education that the nation will presumably turn, pouring in resources, strengthening requirements, and ensuring that state-of-the-art practices are disseminated throughout the community of teacher educators. True, some teacher training programs may be closed down, if they prove unable to upgrade themselves. But this would represent a transfer of resources within teacher education to the better programs, not a flow out of the professional education community. Education schools would play a larger role, not a smaller one, in shaping the teaching work force.

Given the composition of the commission, it is not surprising that it embraces more teacher training. But, in making its case, the NCTAF distorts the evidence on teacher qualifications, claiming, for example, that "in recent years, more than 50,000 people who lack the training required for their jobs have entered teaching annually on emergency or substandard licenses.... Twelve percent of all newly hired teachers have no training [in pedagogy and teaching methods], another fourteen percent enter without having fully met state standards."

Our own tabulations of the data failed to reproduce the commission's statistics. The most recent national survey to investigate the issue found that only 4.6 percent—not 12 percent—of newly hired public school teachers had taken no courses in teaching methods. The commission's claim that districts have been hiring 50,000 new teachers each year with emergency or substandard certificates is an even greater exag-

generation. In fact, about 16,000 new public school teachers and instructors held "temporary, provisional, or emergency certificates" in 1991-92.

Even these figures overstate the problem, since, with the passage of time, unqualified teachers are either dismissed or make up their deficiencies. As a result, "unprepared" teachers constitute a negligible proportion of the entire work force. In 1993-94, fewer than 2 percent of all public school teachers held emergency or temporary certificates, the two principal "substandard" licenses.

Finally, teachers may be hired on emergency or temporary licenses because they are *better qualified* than fully licensed candidates. This possibility does not appear to have occurred to the NCTAF, which attributes these decisions to administrative incompetence or misplaced priorities. But consider the qualifications of new science teachers hired on substandard licenses. Of the 39 respondents to the latest national survey who fell in this category, 27 had a degree in one of the sciences. This ratio exceeds that for science teachers overall and strongly suggests that districts exploit loopholes in standard certification requirements to offer employment to individuals with superior subject-matter preparation.

Meanwhile, what has the commission to say about the academic competence of the work force? The NCTAF report is silent on this issue except for this remarkable assertion:

Talented recruits are entering schools of education in record numbers. Due to recent reforms, both standards and interest have been steadily rising. By 1991, graduates of teacher education programs had higher levels of academic achievement than most college graduates, reversing the trends of the early 1980's.

A reader encountering this statement would probably assume that it referred to scores on the ACT, the SAT, or other standardized achievement tests. In fact, the commission's evidence for this proposition consists solely of self-reported college grade-point averages obtained from a series of Department of Education surveys of recent college graduates. Because the average GPA of education majors is higher than engineers, the commission concludes that education majors have higher levels of academic achievement.

This is postposterous. The commission ignores differences

in grading standards familiar to virtually everyone in higher education. The average grade awarded in the education courses taken by 1992-93 graduates was 3.41 on a four-point scale. By contrast, the average in social-science courses was 2.96. In science and engineering it fell to 2.67. Yet science and engineering majors have significantly higher college board scores than education majors.

### Misguided standards

By entrusting the accreditation of teacher education programs and the standardization of licensing requirements to professional organizations, the NCTAF expects to enhance the training that prospective teachers receive in pedagogical methods. Such training will reflect "state-of-the-art practices," "incorporating new knowledge" and an evolving "knowledge base for teaching" that makes clearer than before just what teachers should be doing in the classroom. Language of this kind is disconcertingly familiar. Public education in the United States has been marked by numerous waves of enthusiasm for newer and better methods that turn out to be passing fads. The succession of these fads does not inspire much confidence in the ability of education schools to ground their curricula in a reliable research literature. Indeed, the organization that the commission would entrust with the accreditation of teacher education programs—the NCATE—refers in its manual to "evolving standards," suggesting that this pattern of swinging one way and then the next may not end with the adoption of the NCTAF proposals.

Organizations that belong to this accrediting body have issued standards that are highly controversial and of dubious educational value. One of the constituent members of the NCATE is the National Council of Teachers of English. This council has been a major proponent of "whole language" instruction for reading in the primary grades—a teaching strategy that has come under withering attack from other educators and parents who are demanding that their confused children receive instruction in phonics. A similar process of rejection seems about to begin for the guidelines recently issued by the National Council for Teachers of Mathematics—another NCATE constituent organization. These guidelines, re-



flecting the predilection for "student-centered learning" that is popular in schools of education, have appalled many parents and educators who have described the results as "warm, fuzzy mathematics" and "rain-forest algebra." A requirement that teacher preparation programs be accredited by the NCATE could put such organizations in a position to insist that all reading and mathematics teachers be trained in methods widely rejected by the public and questioned by many educators.

The NCTAF report blithely ignores these controversies. Instead, the commission assures us that graduates of NCATE-accredited programs will be better prepared than non-NCATE teachers for the challenges of the classroom. They will supposedly stay in the profession longer and will exhibit a higher degree of professionalism in their relations with students and colleagues. The NCTAF report contains no evidence to support these claims. As far as we can determine, they are not true. Using data from surveys conducted by the Department of Education, we have compared NCATE to non-NCATE teachers on a number of dimensions related to professionalism and career commitment. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups. Perhaps more revealing, there is no evidence that those hiring new teachers think so either. The percentage of non-NCATE applicants who found a teaching job was as high as among NCATE applicants. The jobs they received paid as well.

NCATE has accredited teacher education programs in some of the least selective institutions of higher education in the country. Thirty percent of the teachers who graduated from NCATE-approved programs attended colleges that were rated less than "competitive" in Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*. Since the "competitive" category is not in fact very selective, one thing seems clear: Whatever the requirements for NCATE accreditation, rigorous admission standards are not among them. The academic ability of students graduating from a teacher education program plays virtually no role in determining whether the program will be accredited. While NCATE requires that a program use a test to screen applicants for admission, it does not specify the test to be used or the passing score.

Criteria for successful completion are even more vague,

emphasizing process, not outcomes. For example, NCATE stipulates that "a candidate's mastery of a program's stated exit criteria or outcomes [be] assessed through the use of multiple sources of data such as a culminating experience, portfolios, interviews, videotaped and observed performance in schools, standardized tests, and course grades." This requires that program administrators use various means of assessment, not that graduates be held to any particular standard, since the exit criteria themselves are left up to the program or to state regulations.

Many schools and departments of education have shown by their decision to forgo NCATE accreditation that they do not believe this stamp of approval is of great value. Having failed a market test, NCATE and its champions are now pressuring state legislatures to require NCATE accreditation. The list of NCATE-accredited colleges suggests that politics are at least as important as educational quality in determining whether a school is accredited. Where governors have led, colleges have sought and obtained accreditation. Thus every college in North Carolina offering a teacher education program has obtained NCATE accreditation. In Arkansas, all but two have it. By contrast, New York has 103 state-accredited programs, but only three accredited by NCATE. Massachusetts has 61 state-accredited institutions of which only eight hold NCATE accreditation. All are non-selective institutions. The state's selective private schools, such as Harvard, Boston University, Brandeis, Smith, and Mt. Holyoke, are not NCATE accredited.

### **The problem with certification**

The NCTAF's proposals would restrict the choices of both prospective teachers and school boards, as the licensing and accreditation standards it endorses would raise barriers to entry. For example, mandating NCATE accreditation could make it more difficult for talented undergraduates to become teachers should the cost of acquiring accreditation drive small liberal-arts colleges from the market. Programs that serve only a few students a year would be particularly vulnerable, leaving the supply of teachers to be dominated by large diploma mills.

The NCTAF endorses reforms that would require prospec-

tive teachers to take more courses, prolong their formal education, and devote more time to pre-service training in the form of induction programs and internships. This will have the greatest deterrent effect on those who place the greatest value on their time, including workers who are contemplating career changes. The practical experience and maturity of many of these individuals make them attractive candidates for teaching. Precisely for this reason, many states have adopted alternative certification routes that relax the standard requirements for certification, facilitating the entry of such persons into the profession. Yet the NCTAF, while nominally endorsing the concept of alternative certification, is generally opposed to programs that would reduce pre-service training. The NCTAF prefers that career changers spend a year or more in a post-baccalaureate program before they begin to teach.

Requiring more pre-service training would tend to screen out prospective teachers who have the interest and ability to pursue other careers, but who will find it hard to keep these options open while completing additional education courses. As a result, the applicant pool will be increasingly dominated by those who never thought of themselves as anything but teachers. Notice that this would have precisely the opposite effect of other policies that are intended to improve the quality of the teaching pool, for example, raising salaries. It is the very purpose of such policies to draw into education persons who are wavering between two careers. By contrast, increasing teacher-certification requirements discourages those who have attractive alternatives to teaching.

### **Teaching is not medicine**

The NCTAF frequently resorts to argument by analogy, comparing teaching to medicine. The medical profession is largely self-regulated. Doctors put in years of training in medical school and residencies before achieving full professional standing. They must pass rigorous licensing examinations. Why should we expect less of teachers?

The case for licensing in medicine rests partly on the premise that consumers cannot make well-informed decisions concerning the quality of medical services. There is a complex body of specialized medical knowledge that medical consumers can-

not be expected to know. The NCTAF continually draws comparisons to the "clinical" model in medicine and asserts that a similar body of specialized clinical knowledge exists in education. Let us see.

The following question on clinical practice was prepared by the National Board of Medical Examiners.

A previously healthy 33-year old man has abdominal pain that he describes as steady with occasional cramping. His aunt, uncle, and cousins have had similar episodes. His abdomen is distended, and bowel sounds are decreased. Neurologic examination shows mild weakness in the upper arms. His urine is a faint reddish color. These findings suggest a defect in the biosynthetic pathway for

- A. collagen
- B. corticosteroid
- C. fatty acid
- D. heme
- E. thyroxine ( $T_4$ )

The next question is taken from the Praxis test for teachers developed by the Educational Testing Service—a test used by many states for teacher licensing.

A third-grade student who is attempting to draw a spaceship stops drawing and asks the teacher to draw it. Of the following teacher responses, which would best provide for this student's continued learning and growth?

- A. Drawing the spaceship for him so that he can continue his picture
- B. Having the student observe models of spaceships and giving him some pointers about drawing
- C. Asking the best student artist to provide help
- D. Having another student draw the spaceship for him
- E. Assuring the student that the drawing is fine for his purpose

We suspect that few readers who are not medical professionals knew that the answer to the question on abdominal cramping was "E" or even understood the choices. By contrast, using common sense, virtually all readers were probably able to figure out the answer to the clinical teaching question (B). There is a body of expert knowledge informing clinical practice that doctors should know and that they can be tested on. The NCTAF has not established that anything like this

exists in the field of pedagogy. Questions like the foregoing from the Praxis examination expose the pretensions of teacher professionalization.

Even if one supposed that teaching rests on a body of expert knowledge that consumers lack, the medical analogy breaks down for the further reason that parents do not purchase the services of teachers. School districts purchase these services for parents. Not only are principals and other school administrators trained professionals, they are also in a position to observe the teachers they hire directly, enjoying access to better information than any licensing agency. In fact, many teachers have previously taught at the schools that hire them as student teachers or as substitute teachers.

Of course, similar intermediaries stand between consumers and the medical professionals who treat them (though most consumers retain some choice of primary-care physicians). But this underscores another important difference between medicine and teaching. The NCTAF seeks legislation to require school districts to hire teachers who have completed NCTAF-approved training. In the field of medicine, however, it is the purchasers of medical services—hospitals, clinics, etc.—not the state, that have been the moving force behind the adoption of credentials for physicians. A state license is merely the beginning for most doctors. Nearly all practicing physicians and surgeons must also hold certification from one of the 24 national specialty boards. This has come about because the major actors—hospitals, insurance companies, and HMOs—have insisted that the doctors whom they hire or contract with be board certified.

### **A question of control**

Enacting the NCTAF agenda would only serve to strengthen the position of the education establishment against parents and children in the making of public policy. Behind the NCTAF and NCATE are the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, whose interest in restricting teacher supply is so obvious that it is astonishing that anyone would contemplate giving these organizations the right to determine who will be allowed to teach. Of the current 31-member NCATE executive board, seven are union appointed.

All examining teams sent to colleges include at least one teacher drawn from a pool of examiners selected by the NEA and AFT.

Unions also provide financial support for the professional organizations that would be empowered under the NCTAF proposals. The NEA's 1997-98 budget contains \$366,600 for NCATE. The same budget contains \$306,550 to support the certification through the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards and \$213,765 to support efforts "to make licensure ... a process controlled by the profession."

For all the discussion of higher standards and improved training, the NCTAF's recommendations are fundamentally about control. The NCTAF would turn over the accreditation of teacher preparation programs to NCATE. Licensing examinations would be prepared by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), another private professional organization. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards would decide who qualifies as a master teacher. Overseeing and guiding all of this activity would be independent professional boards whose members would be drawn not from the public's elected representatives but professional education organizations.

It is naive to think that the impact of these changes would be limited to improving the training teachers receive (if it would even accomplish that). Prominent members of the commission and organizations aligned with the NCTAF have a vested interest in opposing charter schools and other forms of school choice, as well as alternative certification programs that bypass traditional teacher training. The prospects for such reforms will be much bleaker if power is taken from elected officials who are increasingly responsive to the public's demand for genuine accountability.