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Charters Licensing Their Own Teachers: A Symptom of Failure, Not a Cure

By [Marc Tucker](#) on [October 24, 2017 12:10 PM](#)

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Should all teachers be licensed by the state?

That's not quite how the question is being raised. The question that has now come to the fore is whether charter schools and charter networks should be allowed to [certify their own teachers](#).

So why did I reframe it as I did? Because what educators call 'certification' is called 'licensing' in other professions. And because the question is not really about certification; it is about the role of the state.

For the high-status professions, the role of the state is to assure the public that the holder of the license will do no harm. It does not attest to high expertise in a specialty. Certificates that do that are not issued by the state; they are issued by associations of specialists who set the standard for their specialty.

So why would anyone want to deprive the state of the duty to assure the public that someone applying for a job as a teacher will do no harm?

I can answer that question, speaking in my former role as a board member of the Washington, DC affiliate of BASIS Charter Schools. BASIS runs one of the most effective school systems in the United States. Its high school curriculum is largely made up of Advanced Placement courses. Its graduates go to many of the most selective colleges in the world. It has made a special effort to set up its middle and high schools in inner cities and to attract to the student bodies of those schools as many low-income and minority students as they can.

After some study of the BASIS system, I concluded that their secret was not concealed. It was there for all to see. BASIS sets very high standards, uses a very demanding curriculum, and goes to great lengths to hire the most effective teachers it can find anywhere in the United States. It scours the earth for those teachers and gives them a lot of support.

But many of their teachers could not be certified in most states. They might have a Ph.D. in mathematics and have worked in a company that requires a deep command of many branches of mathematics, and they might have performed well in the BASIS process for finding out whether the potential teachers are able to connect with young people, and whether they are really excited about teaching. They might have all of these skills and attributes, but they would not have gone through a conventional teacher education program. If they had to do that, then they would not have considered teaching. They will not put up with years of courses they view as ridiculous and demeaning and pile up debt in order to teach, even though they are eager to put what they know to work for young people.

So, you would say, Tucker is in favor of allowing charters and maybe even regular public schools to certify their own teachers. No, I am not.

We all want the state to license our doctors and civil engineers because we want to be sure that our doctor is not a quack and the bridge you go over every morning will not fall down. That is the do-no-harm standard.

The problem we have in education is the following: I have stood in the back of classrooms and watched licensed elementary school teachers teach mathematics while I shuddered. I shuddered because the math they were teaching was just plain wrong, they called only on the kids who raised their hands, they were using the textbook like a crutch and quite obviously had no idea what basic principles of mathematics underlay the procedures they were teaching by rote. In my opinion, they had no business teaching. I've been in secondary school classrooms in which teachers certified in one subject are, because of shortages, assigned to teach another. I've been in many classrooms in which substitute teachers were little more than babysitters. So have you.

We would agree that the teachers BASIS employs are leagues better than these certified teachers. But that is not an argument for throwing the certification process overboard. For every BASIS, there are ten—I made that number up—charter operators that will hire any warm body they can find. You can't use BASIS as an argument for waiving certification requirements. You can only use BASIS as an argument for building a system of great teachers, teachers who are deeply knowledgeable and highly skilled.

The real problem with our certification—really licensing—systems are the very low standards to which they are set. In most states, anyone who graduates from a teacher's college gets at least temporary certification to teach. Those who are temporarily certified almost always get full certification when they go through the necessary hoops, which are time consuming, but not difficult. So, as a practical matter, almost anyone who can get into a teacher education college program will be certified. And that turns out to be almost anyone.

Additionally, very few applications from universities to run teacher education programs are turned down by the state agencies that oversee them. Very few teacher education institutions are shut down for failing to provide quality teacher preparation programs. Program approval mainly depends on national accreditation. But the rules for accreditation are set by associations of the institutions being accredited. None of
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mainly depends on national accreditation. But the rules for accreditation are set by associations of the institutions being accredited. None of them are eager to go out of business. Some are first rate. Many are not. When the two national accrediting agencies consolidated into one, a battle was fought about what the standards for accreditation should be and, to make a long story short, the forces arguing for a substantial tightening of standards lost.

To my knowledge, only one state, Massachusetts, has abandoned the prevailing non-system of setting standards for teachers. They have what is really a licensing standard for teachers well above the prevailing standard and they are reaping the results in a crop of teachers who have the skills needed to produce the highest-performing high school graduates in the United States.

Letting the charter schools set their own standards for teachers is just the same as letting the teacher colleges set their own standards. They will not be the BASIS or Massachusetts standards. They will be lowest common denominator standards.

None of this will change until other states do what Massachusetts has done: take the matter into their own hands and set high standards and stick to them. Most states have not actually set a standard that will guarantee that their teachers will do no harm. They need much higher standards to do that. No one will do that for them. They will have to do it, with licensing standards and with program approval standards that are used to decide which higher education institutions will be allowed to offer teacher preparation programs.

Years ago, Al Shanker, then the larger-than-life head of the American Federation of Teachers, told his flock that they needed to stop fighting higher standards for teachers and instead embrace them. He said that they would never command the respect from the public they wanted, the status in the community they craved, or the salaries they thought they deserved unless they were perceived to meet standards of practice as demanding as those to which doctors and engineers are held.

But no state is likely to set higher standards for teacher education and licensing in the face of teacher shortages caused in large measure by plummeting applications for admission to teacher education programs, which are in turn caused by high school students deciding that teaching is no longer a very attractive career option.

Once again, we are looking at a systems problem. You can't raise licensing standards unless you make teaching more attractive. If you don't do that, you are likely to dry up the supply of young people interested in teaching at increasing rates. To make teaching more attractive you have to improve compensation and reorganize schools to create a genuinely professional environment for teachers to work in.

That is exactly what the countries with the highest student performance have done. But it is so much easier to simply tell the charter schools they can do whatever they want.

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