EDUCATION WEEK
Published Online: April 22, 2014
Published in Print: April 23, 2014, as **Sowing Seeds of Change**

Teacher Education: No Longer 'Business as Usual'

By Ellis Hurd & Gary Weilbacher

One of our colleagues provided us with an article by David Ruenzel, called **"Business as Usual,"** that appeared 20 years ago in *Teacher Magazine* (then a print periodical published by *Education Week's* parent company). Mr. Ruenzel described the status of teacher education programs at Illinois State University—one of the country's oldest teacher education institutions—as "in the ideological mainstream." As faculty members now in the throes of helping to redesign its middle-level-education program, we found the article intriguing. In 1994, discussions of standards and high-stakes testing were just beginning, as more progressive movements (e.g., the middle school movement, multicultural education, and distance learning) had been a prominent part of educational discourse only for the previous few years.

On the basis of interviews and classroom observations, Mr. Ruenzel wrote that ISU "professors are not progressive," that the majority did not believe "new teachers can or should be agents of change," and that preparing teachers for "the status quo is, however unintentional, still the predominant activity."

Ultimately, he concluded that schools of education may be irrelevant, as all they do is prepare future teachers to "adapt to prevailing practices" in the public schools.

As public school teachers in the 1990s and early 2000s, we can say that Mr. Ruenzel's article ran counter to what we were experiencing in our own classrooms and learning at conferences: that teachers could transform their classrooms and schools into democratic spaces. While the issues raised by Mr. Ruenzel may be just as relevant now as they were 20 years ago, clearly it is no longer "business as usual" at our university or in the field of K-12 education.

The current wave of politically motivated reform efforts has effectively stirred the educational pot with questions about how schools are organized and operated, as well as how teachers should be trained. In an institutional sense, ISU has capitulated to state-mandates that have increased the standardization of how teachers are being prepared. Many members of the education faculty have responded to these mandates, however, by shifting their practice in more progressive ways.

One such shift in the past 20 years is the number of professors who have formed partnerships with Illinois public schools and their teachers.

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field of K-12 education."

Current ISU education faculty members have returned to school settings, as over 70 percent are involved in professional-development public school programs or other kinds of partnerships that are connected to public school classrooms. This work emanated from faculty members who had become interested in returning to the laboratory and public schools to work directly with teachers, teacher-candidates, and school-age children. Many had been classroom teachers themselves. As more and more faculty members from the public schools have been hired by ISU's education programs, this partnership trend has increased.

These relationships include the customary supervision of teacher-candidates, but also involve innovative partnerships (such as co-teaching, online discussions and collaborations, and professional-development schools) that provide professors direct contact with pre-K-12 students. Partnerships like these can help bridge the perceived and real gaps between professorial theory and classroom practice and between universities and public schools, while providing critical professional growth for all involved.


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In terms of the evolving landscape of teacher education, our colleagues today appear to be more open than the professors in the *Teacher* article to embracing changes in the way teacher-candidates are trained. In part, this more recent willingness to change may be tied to university course-redesign grants that have helped prepare teacher-candidates to work with historically underrepresented groups and in underresourced schools.

This desire for change may also have its roots in the hiring of a generation of professors trained in doctoral programs who espouse comprehensive views tied to constructivist, multicultural, contemporary, and critical perspectives. Likewise, more and more professors are placing education students within school cohorts for clinical experiences and preparation before student teaching, in contrast to what Mr. Ruenzel noted at the time.

Impossible to ignore today is the impact of state-mandated change tied to hundreds of teacher-preparation standards, new licensing, high-stakes testing, national accreditation, and edTPA.

While such corporate-driven and commercialized changes frequently run counter to the comprehensive tendencies of teacher-educators, there is no denying that these mandates have altered the work of faculty and students alike. This trend has resulted in an increase in the standardization of course syllabi, a move to immense systems of data-gathering to defend our existence, and a narrowing of curricular options for education students, while the number of courses and degrees online has increased. The "shopping mall" metaphor of 1994 has been replaced by more of a "Walgreens" one-stop-shopping approach—a prescriptive form of teacher education that, at least on paper, aligns nicely with the major themes found in the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top initiatives.

Most impressive is that fact that our colleagues continue to carve out progressive initiatives under a mountain of mandates created by those furthest removed from the process of public education.

There is little doubt that the forward-looking political climate of 20 years ago is gone. Current state and federal policies and federally endorsed approaches (such as the No Child Left Behind Act; the Race to the Top grant competitions; "response to intervention"; the Common Core State Standards; and edTPA, the performance-based teacher-licensing test) are being fused together in a powerfully competitive and conservative coalition. Just like the social-efficiency reforms of the early 20th century, this coalition leads to the de-skilling of teachers, the narrowing of the curriculum, and the reduction of learning to strictly a vocational and (in some cases) commercial endeavor.

Emblematic of these educational shifts are flashy technology products that provide districts with "teacher proof" curricula and online testing programs that aid in data-driven decisionmaking. Such products have infiltrated higher education as well, significantly altering the work of teacher-educators in ways that are remarkably similar to the altered work of K-12 teachers.

Much of what we see today in standardization and in schools of education is very different from what existed in the past, even in the mid-1990s. The current prescriptive form of teacher education has been largely influenced by more commercialized and for-profit efforts. These differences can be seen in the ways that standards and tests are imposed upon teachers and schools. Power brokers and elite capitalists have essentially bought out education and its standards for profit. The status quo and test scores have been nationalized in this regard.

So, what can be done, and what might the educational landscape look like in, say, another two or even four decades?

We predict that unless the current climate of education changes, school systems will continue to spiral downward. More centralized standards and accountability measures will be implemented, and reform efforts will be more rigorous and less relevant and relational. Schools of education and resisting professors will become more marginalized by state and corporate coalitions eager to reduce public costs and increase private profits. Tomorrow's teachers will be forced to implement curricula that will become more scripted, test-based, and technological.

Perhaps most ominous, the critical thinking and teaching of education students and the questioning of texts and materials may shift and cease altogether, replaced by the notions that schools of education are irrelevant, and that teachers are no longer agents of change. Schools once considered irrelevant based on a lack of innovation may now become irrelevant for having the wrong types of innovation and change. Such a prospect reminds us that the more things change, the more they stay the same. We may then wonder: "Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Corinthians 1:20).

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Vol. 33, Issue 29, Pages 22-23