

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: August 21, 2012

Published in Print: August 22, 2012, as **What If We Brought Education Reform to the Military?**

COMMENTARY

What If We Brought Education Reform to the Military?

By **Lawrence Baines**

It is in vogue to compare preparation programs for teachers to preparation programs for doctors. Interns in medicine observe surgeons using a scalpel before trying it themselves; interns in education observe seasoned teachers instructing children before trying it themselves. Recently, the accrediting agency for teacher preparation, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or NCATE, released a "Blue Ribbon Panel Report on Clinical Preparation," thick with analogies between medicine and education. By associating with doctors, perhaps the hope is that the stature of teachers will rise.

In truth, however, the teacher-doctor analogy does not hold, as many beginning teachers today "learn while they earn," meaning they jump into teaching with little or no preparation. No medical school allows first-year interns to perform surgery on real, human subjects. Prospective doctors must have four to seven years of intensive training beyond the bachelor's degree. But no training is expected of prospective teachers beyond the bachelor's degree. In fact, the current trend is to deny pay increases to teachers who earn a master's or doctoral degree, thereby eliminating the possibility that they'll pursue either.

At the same time, school districts across the nation have started counting "local service activities" as professional development, effectively giving lunchroom duty the same weight as enrollment in a graduate program. In many states, districts have the power to decide what constitutes professional development and what doesn't. In Florida, a teacher can simply retake a certification test in lieu of university coursework. Doctors cannot undertake cafeteria work or retake old exams for their professional development. They must attend conferences and learn about the latest developments in medicine.

To be honest, teaching has more in common with the military than with medicine. Like a soldier, a teacher who fails to perform assigned tasks can be removed. Union representation doesn't exist for soldiers; soon it won't exist for teachers,

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The advertisement features the SAS logo on the left, with the tagline "THE POWER TO KNOW." on the right. Below the logo, the text reads "Empowered staff. Insightful decisions. 7 keys to a data-rich district." At the bottom of the ad is a button that says "DOWNLOAD WHITE PAPER". The background of the ad shows several colorful keys (yellow, red, blue, green, purple) hanging from a silver ring.

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| **medicine."**

Like a soldier, a teacher must secure the area, actively monitor the welfare of the locals, and constantly assess potential threats. Both soldier and teacher must follow orders devised by superiors of higher rank who work far from the action. Both teacher and soldier are expected to subvert personal needs for the sake of the mission. The soldier does not relish defusing an improvised explosive device, or IED, in the middle of a war zone, but neutralizes the bomb to save lives. The teacher does not relish subduing a violent student in a high-poverty school with an "unacceptable" rating, but pacifies the out-of-control student to protect other children.

Of course, the jobs of teacher and soldier are not exactly alike. Currently, soldiers carry weapons and teachers do not, but savvy legislators in many states are working to resolve this discrepancy through the radical easing of gun laws that will help arm students and teachers on campuses everywhere. Forty-nine states allow concealed weapons; 25 states allow the open carrying of handguns. Legislation such as Georgia's **House Bill 981**, which expressly endorsed the open carrying of handguns on K-12 campuses and in churches, was narrowly defeated this year.

In 2011, the federal government expended 20 percent of its budget on the military, but only 2 percent on education; perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that Americans tend to value soldiers more than teachers. As if to reinforce the point, the 2012 edition of the **Gallup Confidence in Institutions poll** found that the military had a 75 percent approval rating, while public schools had a 29 percent approval rating, the lowest rating since 1973, when Gallup first began polling for confidence in the public schools.

Nevertheless, the military could learn much from America's education reformers, particularly in the areas of recruiting and accountability. Rather than burden new recruits with the humdrum drill of boot camp or the tedium of officer candidates' school, the U.S. Army should consider "alternative entry" for soldiers who want to "make a difference" right away. These recruits should be allowed to skip all military training and head straight to the front lines of battle.

Similarly, the Army's antiquated accountability system, still focused on quality training, must change. Although a comprehensive accountability system would be expensive, the best performers need to be identified and rewarded. An infantryman in Afghanistan, outnumbered by well-armed terrorists, who fails to accomplish the mission should receive a deduction in pay. An accountant stationed in Honolulu, who balances the payroll, thereby accomplishing his mission, should get a raise. In a strict accountability system, environment and assignment are irrelevant. There are no excuses.

Entire platoons should be graded on a scale of A to F, depending upon relative effectiveness. A platoon that experiences catastrophic casualties would not make adequate yearly progress and should be given a grade of F. A platoon that experiences success should be given a grade of A. Soldiers in an A-rated platoon should be offered opportunities for advancement; soldiers in an F-rated platoon should be court-martialed and publicly humiliated by posting their names with their performance scores in newspapers and



—iStockphoto.com/Akindo and Vanessa Solis/Education Week

on websites.

This outcomes-based, pay-for-performance system would allow soldiers the chance to be all that they can be and would transform the military into a different kind of institution. To be competitive in an increasingly global society, the American military must implement policies that allow anyone to be a soldier, including those who want to join over the Internet, on their own time. The military should require no training, and should immediately halt the antiquated practices of tenure and promotion, professional development, and postbaccalaureate study. After all, these innovative reforms have made the teaching profession what it is today.

Lawrence Baines chairs the department of instructional leadership and academic curriculum at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. He is a former secondary school teacher and the author of eight books, including The Teachers We Need vs. the Teachers We Have: The Realities and the Possibilities (R&L Education, 2010).

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