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The Teaching Profession at the Crossroads

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Are teachers unions ready to take the lead in balancing test-based accountability with a more professional vision of teaching and learning?

The teaching profession and the unions that represent it are at a crossroads in their history. What happens to public schools in the future depends on a confluence of trends surrounding teachers unions, teacher accountability, and curriculum.

Declining Union Power

Recent efforts to curb the power of teachers organizations, even in traditionally strong pro-union states like Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois, highlight how vulnerable these once-powerful groups have become. Examples of the dilution of union political influence abound. Sacrosanct tenure and seniority rights have been challenged in dozens of places, even in bastions of unionism like New York City, Chicago, and New Jersey. Unions face criticism not only from traditional Republican opponents but also from "progressive" elements of the Democratic party. Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reportedly have suffered significant losses in membership, and there is little doubt that they are on the defensive.

Those who support teachers unions are increasingly concerned that the lack of respect for teachers and the decline in public sector unions will affect the morale of today's teachers and tomorrow's recruits to teaching. In the meantime, many education reform advocates in the political, business, and philanthropic sector, as well as substantial segments of the U.S. public, believe that the teachers unions have not pursued professional reform with the urgency required to improve student performance.

Teacher Accountability: Professional—or Bureaucratic?

Currently, the major point of contention between reform leaders and teachers organizations is the use of standardized testing as the primary basis for teacher evaluation. The future of public education may hinge on how teachers are evaluated and held accountable. Every reasonable person believes that teachers should be accountable for the performance of their students. The controversy is about the accountability mechanism and its consequences.

Throughout the 20th century, those who favored viewing teaching as a profession promoted accountability mechanisms intended to engender public trust in teachers. In the 1950s, teachers organizations and others established an accreditation system for teacher preparation institutions; today, the majority of such institutions, but not all, are accredited. States, with the support of teachers organizations, have established and regularly upgraded

requirements for a state teaching license. However, the enforcement of these requirements has been highly uneven and often ignored. And the decision to grant tenure, which could and should be the definitive judgment of a teacher's competence, is too often made hastily and by default.

The path to bureaucratic, test-based teacher accountability began in the 1960s with state-imposed accountability systems that effectively supplanted teachers' judgment and grades with standardized tests. To the extent that standardized tests limit instruction to what is tested, they prescribe the content and form of teaching and reduce teaching to a bureaucratic routine. Thus, the education system demands less of teachers, requires less teacher preparation, and treats teachers as bureaucratic employees who, because the public has no basis for trusting them, must be micromanaged.¹

In the 1980s, teachers organizations and other groups took another step toward professional accountability when they sponsored the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to establish a system of advanced certification for teachers. But policymakers' support for National Board certification has been uneven: Incentives for certification have periodically been given and taken away by states and districts. For the most part, National Board–certified teachers have been confined to their classrooms and have not been employed in leadership roles, such as working with novices or other teachers who need assistance. The partial and uneven implementation of these and other quality-control measures has not unexpectedly left the public wondering just how much to trust teachers.

Advocates of bureaucratic and professional accountability have been battling each other for decades in a war that has barely been acknowledged. Each approach leads to a different vision of teaching and learning. Occasionally the war breaks out into the open—for example, when middle-class parents object to "too much testing" or teachers protest the unfairness of being judged by student performance on standardized tests. Yet, for the most part, advocates for professionalization have operated in stealth while state and federal legislators promote test-based accountability without input from parents or teachers.

How Accountability Choices Affect Curriculum

If accountability mechanisms were neutral in their impact, it might not matter which side wins the accountability "war." Yet the choice has unmistakable practical consequences.

Here are the activities that we've observed in two different science classrooms. The difference between these two typical learning experiences indicates how accountability mechanisms determine what teachers teach and what students learn.

5th Grade Science in a Virginia Public School

Each week, students learn a specific scientific concept through the study of related scientific vocabulary. What is a hypothesis? What are the parts of a plant? Students learn how to spell, define, and use these words. Each Friday, students are tested on their knowledge of these words. A comprehensive textbook with appropriate photographs, charts, and graphs is provided to each student, although time permits only limited use. After the state administers the SOL (Standards of Learning) science examination in late spring, teachers and students may do science experiments.

5th Grade Science in a Virginia Private School

Students first learn about simple machines. Each student then designs a practical instrument that makes use of these simple machines. After the teacher approves the design, students build the instrument. Students write a paper describing their projects and make an oral presentation to their classmates. On parent/grandparent visiting day, students display their projects in a science fair setting, explaining them to the visiting adults.

What the Examples Show Us

Both the public school and the private school treat teacher accountability for student learning as essential. Yet here we see in stark relief how the *mechanisms* of accountability determine the content of instruction. Virginia is a state with a history of test-based accountability in public schools that precedes No Child Left Behind. In the mid-1990s, the state developed its Standards of Learning (SOL), clearly describing what students should learn in each grade in the major school subjects. Standardized examinations fully aligned with the standards made clear to educators and parents that everyone—students, principals, and teachers—would be held accountable for performance on these examinations.

Within a few years, classroom instruction changed to ensure optimal results on the SOL. Teachers understood what now counted: Whatever other learning goals they may have entertained for their students, these were now clearly subordinate to strong performance on the state examination. The message to those contemplating teaching as a career was equally unmistakable: Prepare for a job in which test scores are what matter most. The message to students was also clear: Science is memorizing lists of science words.

The private school uses a very different accountability mechanism, which allows teachers to teach something closer to real science. Accountability is based not on an examination about science but on performance on real-world scientific tasks and communication skills. The student must acquire knowledge about machines, but then must put that knowledge to work building something that can be seen and judged by peers, teachers, parents, and others. The display is public and self-evident. The requirement to describe the project in writing and orally not only reinforces

these real-world skills but also enables others to determine the degree to which the student has mastered the content of the instruction.

The message to the teacher is clear. Create challenging instruction, but know that your students and you will be publicly evaluated. (Music teachers and coaches have always lived under this accountability mechanism.) Under this approach, instruction and assessment can be what teachers, boards, parents, and administrators think it should be. This kind of accountability does not distort instruction; instead, instruction comes first, and the accountability mechanism comes second. The message to teachers is, Teach to high standards, knowing that you will be evaluated in ways that support authentic instruction. The message to would-be teachers is, You will face a challenging environment in which the tools used to appraise you are appropriate to the task. The message to students is, You are learning real-world skills and not simply learning to perform well on a test that is a poor reflection of the real world.

The Role of Teachers Organizations

The development of each of these accountability mechanisms has been, and will continue to be, advanced or hindered by the leadership provided by teachers organizations. A brief look at the history of the two national teachers organizations shows that both have experienced tensions as they have tried to promote teacher professionalism while protecting teachers' jobs and benefits.

From its beginning in the 19th century until the 1960s, the National Education Association (NEA) was a professional advocacy association encompassing all educators working toward the advancement of education. In the 1960s, in response to the belief that the NEA did not advocate aggressively for teachers' rights, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) began to assert itself as a labor union. As the AFT gained traction, the teacher members of the NEA felt obliged to divorce themselves from school administrators and to add union organizing and collective bargaining to the NEA agenda. At the same time, the AFT added advocacy of professional and education issues to its agenda. From the 1960s to the present, both the NEA and the AFT have behaved as both professional associations advocating the advancement of education and unions pressing for higher salaries and increased job protection for teachers.

Given the current position and status of teachers and their unions, how will a decline in union power generally, and teachers union power in particular, affect the course of professional accountability?

One possibility is that as union power declines, the move to professional accountability will further decline, leaving bureaucratic teacher accountability to fill the void and test-based accountability to continue unabated. In this scenario, schools will become even duller factories, producing students who can do better and better on standardized tests and worse and worse on real-world skills. Teaching will become an even more bureaucratic job, one that is not appealing to the best and brightest, who seek a measure of control over their work and career prospects.

Another possibility is that teachers organizations will turn back to their original missions of strengthening teaching and learning. They will be advocates for a teaching profession that appeals to the best and brightest, for high-quality teacher preparation and meaningful mentoring of beginning teachers, and for a career progression in teaching in which novices are supported and veterans take on greater leadership roles. They will be advocates for systems that remove underperforming teachers. They will be advocates for a system that generates sufficient public confidence that competent professionals are allowed to teach real-world skills that meet the needs of all students. The problem with this scenario, however, is that unless teachers organizations retain some characteristics of unions, they may be unable to influence legislators and other policymakers to pay teachers sufficiently to compensate them for increased rigor in teaching and better results for students.

A New Direction in Teacher Professionalism

As teachers unions and public education come to this crossroads in their history, we must address a number of important questions. Does a merger between the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers make sense at a time when both organizations confront serious threats to their influence and even existence? What can teachers organizations do to build more public understanding and credibility? Do reform efforts endorsed by teacher unions—such as differentiation of educator roles and responsibilities and peer evaluation—merit greater acceptance?

Should academic credentials and entry requirements be elevated to provide greater prestige to teaching, as has occurred in Finland and Singapore? Can better preparation and stronger peer supervision enhance the quality of the teaching force enough to meet the United States' needs in a competitive global economy? Will the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards play a more active role in elevating the teaching profession? Will educators and parents join forces to insist that schools teach real-world skills rather than test skills?

Supporters of the teachers unions contend that the organizations are already in the process of reinventing themselves and embracing approaches that call for mutually agreed-upon standards for performance pay and more rigorous requirements for tenure. Will these efforts to ensure quality be sufficient to ward off the powerful bipartisan political forces insisting on more rapid change and a bureaucratic view of the teaching profession?

The future of teachers and their organizations may well depend on the recognition that some form of test-based accountability is inescapable. The next generation of teachers already accepts this reality. It will be incumbent on

future union leaders to collaborate in developing a synthesis of top-down, test-based reform and professional norms that allows for greater professional discretion, attention to the needs of individual students, and authentic teaching and learning.

This synthesis may well determine the future relevance of teachers unions—and the future shape of public education. Without teacher and union leadership, test-based accountability systems will dominate and continue to narrow the learning process. This trend may well compel families who can afford it to leave the public schools and thus further exacerbate the growing economic, demographic, and social polarization between the haves and the have-nots in U.S. society. The nation at large has a collective stake in ensuring that teachers have a voice in shaping the teaching profession, thus preserving public schools' traditional role as engines of social mobility and democracy.

Endnote

¹ Wise, A. E. (1979). *Legislated learning: The bureaucratization of the American classroom*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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