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**[Can Teaching Survive as a Profession?](https://danielskatz.net/2016/10/19/can-teaching-survive-as-a-profession/)**

Education reform has finally gotten around to taking direct aim at teacher preparation.  On October 4th, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan [published an “open letter”](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2016/10/04/arne-duncan-letter-education-school-deans/" \t "_blank) at Brookings to America’s university presidents and deans of education.  In it, he used “evidence” from a report from self appointed “teacher quality” watchdog, NCTQ, which claimed that America’s future teachers get a disproportionate degrees with honors to claim that our teacher preparation programs are too easy.  The NCTQ “study,” which follows their standard method of examining available materials gleaned from websites without ever visiting a campus, claimed that few programs offer enough rigor and grade subjectively.  On October 12th, Mr. Duncan’s successor, Secretary of Education John King, [released long expected federal regulations for teacher preparation](http://www.ed.gov/teacherprep" \t "_blank), the heart of which focus on reporting of program “success” in preparing successful teachers.  The transparency rules will require states to report program by program on:

* Placement and retention rates of graduates in their first three years of teaching, including placement and retention in high-need schools;
* Feedback from graduates and their employers on the effectiveness of program preparation;
* **Student learning outcomes measured by novice teachers’ student growth, teacher evaluation results, and/or another state-determined measure that is relevant to students’ outcomes, including academic performance, and meaningfully differentiates amongst teachers**; and
* Other program characteristics, including assurances that the program has specialized accreditation or graduates candidates with content and pedagogical knowledge, and quality clinical preparation, who have met rigorous exit requirements.

The bolded section obviously refers to student growth measures based upon standardized examinations, essentially requiring states to utilize value added measures or student growth percentiles and then pegging that to the “value added” of various teacher preparation programs.  “Meaningful” differentiation “amongst teachers” is obviously yet another “highly effective” to “ineffective” stack ranking system beloved by the Federal DOE.

Finally, on October 14th, the editorial board of *The New York Times,* weighed in with [an editorial](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/opinion/help-teachers-before-they-get-to-class.html?_r=0" \t "_blank) that hit on all of the familiar themes of recent education reform efforts:  Other nations “eclipse” our educational outcomes, our schools of education have no real standards, and they don’t prepare the “right” teachers to fit our need.  The board accepted without question the conclusions of NCTQ about teacher preparation and embraced the reporting of “multiple measures” of teacher preparation, especially the tying of value added on standardized test scores back to the supposed quality of teacher preparation.  While the regulations leave the choice of “growth measures” up to the states, it is obvious that such language inherently means value added based on standardized test scores as those systems are the only ones actually in place.  This is not unlike how Arne Duncan did not “force” state competing for Race to to the Top grants to adopt the Core Curriculum Content Standards, but he actually did by requiring them to adopt “College and Career Readiness Standards” which, to the surprise of nobody, only existed in any form in CCSS.

Let me offer a concession at this point:  Teacher preparation in America could certainly do a better job.  It is common among teachers to express that their teacher preparation was inadequate and disconnected from their actual work teaching, and this complaint is hardly new.  Tying what is learned in university classrooms to elementary and secondary classrooms is both difficult and often tenuous.  Even programs that constantly include extensive work in classrooms throughout preparation struggle with the reality that few experiences can adequately simulate the full responsibilities of teaching day in and day out, and adapting to that reality while keeping a clear focus on what students are learning is one of the most difficult things anyone ever teaches.

And the field of teacher preparation is certainly aware of this.  [I have written before](https://danielskatz.net/2015/11/13/teachstrong-brother-here-we-go-again/" \t "_blank) that efforts to improve the quality of teacher education in the country are hardly new, and numerous reports and agencies have both proposed and implemented change over the past 30 years.  Since the publication of *[A Nation at Risk](http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html" \t "_blank)* in 1983, we have had influential reports from the [Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED268120" \t "_blank) and [The Holmes Group](http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED270454" \t "_blank).  Thinkers like [John Goodlad have seriously challenged](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1990/10/24/10390020.h10.html" \t "_blank) how we see the relationship between university based teacher preparation and practitioners in the field, and the [National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future](http://nctaf.org/wp-content/uploads/WhatMattersMost.pdf" \t "_blank) issued its own report highlighting innovations to more strongly connect theory and practice as well as universities and P-12 classrooms.  These ideas have been worked into influential standards and accreditation bodies such as the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and its successor, The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) – [which guide the preparation of teachers in more than 700 institutions across the country](http://www.ncate.org/StatebyStateListofAccreditedInstitutions/tabid/539/Default.aspx" \t "_blank).

But can teacher preparation – and by extension, the teaching profession – survive this next round of attention from federal regulators and reform advocates?

There can be no doubt that teaching and teachers are suffering today.  [A recent article in](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/the-disproportionate-stress-plaguing-american-teachers/503219/" \t "_blank) *[The Atlantic](http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/the-disproportionate-stress-plaguing-american-teachers/503219/" \t "_blank)* reviewed the various forms of stress that have had demonstrable impact upon teachers, and it tied that stress to growing concern over high attrition rates caused by on the job dissatisfaction.  Further, [the pipeline of willing teachers has contracted dramatically in recent years](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching" \t "_blank), as much as 35% with enrollments in teacher preparation programs falling from 691,000 to 451,000 in only 5 years.  Reasons for this tightening supply at a time of high demand vary, but it cannot be disputed that it is increasingly difficult to replace qualified teachers with qualified new teachers.

The transparency portion of the federal regulations seems perfectly poised to make this worse.  Regulators and reformers insist that they want the best and the brightest to enter teaching through programs with high entry standards and a track record of graduating successful teachers.  But they wish to measure this by tracking the value added on standardized tests of program graduates, a process fraught with conceptual difficulties such as the incredible instability of such ratings, [where teachers in the very top of value-added in one year can find themselves moving from one level to the next over subsequent years](https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2012/11/17/on-the-stability-or-not-of-being-irreplaceable/" \t "_blank).  This is yet another incentive to reduce the breadth of the curriculum to tested subjects, to produce teachers who can enact scripted lessons aimed at high test performance, and to discourage graduates from serving any urban population other than those in no-excuses charter schools, [schools that do not emphasize teaching as a life long commitment](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/education/at-charter-schools-short-careers-by-choice.html" \t "_blank).

Of course, nobody openly cops to wanting to wreck teaching as a profession (with the possible exception of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie who cannot seem to pick apart his ire at New Jersey’s teacher union from New Jersey’s teachers).  However, actions, regardless of intentions, have reshaped teachers’ work for the worse, and if the profession is to survive *as a profession* serious changes are necessary.  Some of the most obvious threats:

1. **Attrition**: Experienced teachers are better at their work than rank novices.  While advocates like [Teacher for America’s Wendy Kopp](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/27/education/at-charter-schools-short-careers-by-choice.html" \t "_blank) claim that the “best” schools can develop new teachers into very effective teachers in only a year or two, that is based heavily on a charter model of scripted lessons aimed at test performance.  Although teachers develop rapidly in their very first years in the classroom, that improvement continues far past that point not only in test-based measures, but also in areas like lower student absenteeism and improved classroom discipline.  [Findings that we are losing teachers at a rate of 8% a year](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching" \t "_blank) – and only a third of that due to retirement – should worry anyone concerned about the viability of the profession.  Teachers with little preparation leave at rates of two to three times higher than those with strong preparation, and teachers in our high poverty schools tend to leave more frequently. [Loss of teachers with experience also harms novice teachers](http://www.sagepub.com/kwilliamsstudy/articles/Kardos.pdf" \t "_blank), who try to learn their work within schools that lack a depth of knowledge represented by experienced colleagues.
2. **Obsession with test based measures:** It is disheartening to see that the Federal DOE remains gripped with its obsession on using standardized tests to root out ineffective teachers and, now, teacher preparation.  The reality is that these measures are poorly suited for the job.  [Student Growth Percentiles](https://schoolfinance101.wordpress.com/2014/01/31/an-update-on-new-jerseys-sgps-year-2-still-not-valid/) are so tightly correlated to the poverty characteristics of schools that it is difficult to determine whether or not they measure teacher input at all.  Value-Added Models, although more statistically sophisticated, produce enormous error rates and simply cannot account for all of the factors that contribute to standardized test scores, leading to a recent New York State court case which called the evaluation system using VAMs “[arbitrary and capricious](http://vamboozled.com/arbitrary-and-capricious-sheri-lederman-wins-lawsuit-in-nys-state-supreme-court/" \t "_blank).” Although the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act directly forbids the federal government from requiring growth measures in state evaluation rules, it is imminently clear that Secretary King intends to jump on whatever lever he can find to maintain them.  So long as this continues, teachers face continued pressure to narrow their curricula and schools face continued pressure to box teachers deeply in test preparation mode which is simply not the same thing as teaching and learning mode.
3. **Vanishing teacher autonomy:** If teachers were treated as professionals, it would be self evident that they would have latitude in determining the needs of their students, designing instruction to meet those needs, implementing and adjusting that instruction, and assessing their success by a variety of means.  Such professional autonomy is at threat in the current policy environment [where teachers strongly believe that testing policies have diminished their ability to make decisions](http://neatoday.org/2016/01/11/teacher-autonomy-in-the-classroom/" \t "_blank).  Sadly, as Richard Ingersoll of University of Pennsylvania notes, micromanaging teaching and curriculum decisions may assist weaker teachers, but for good teachers it contributes to job dissatisfaction which contributes to turn over.  Scripted lessons and little decision making probably satisfies the teacher as young and crusading short term job model many reformers favor, but it plays havoc on our ability to retain a dedicated body of professional teachers.
4. **Attacks on teachers’ representatives:** It drives education reformers nuts that teachers are represented by organizations modeled on trade unions.  The old line of attack on unions was that if teachers were professionals, they should have gradated careers like other highly educated professional workers, making unions less “necessary.”  Today, the attacks are more directly aimed at union representation itself and workplace protections, [with lawsuits attacking the practice of tenure](http://www.cta.org/vergara" \t "_blank) under the guise of violating students’ rights to excellent teachers.  Get rid of the due process procedures given to tenured teachers, the thinking goes, and bad teachers will be easily removed leading to better outcomes.  The flaws in this are manifest.  First, [the most common arguments](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/03/fact-checking-campbell-brown-what-she-said-what-research-really-shows/" \t "_blank) against tenure do not actually match what current research knows.  Second, if the existence of tenure itself were a problem for student achievement, we would expect wealthy suburban districts where teachers remain on the job longer than average to be suffering with the weight of tenured faculty failing to work hard.  Obviously, that is not the case because teacher attrition is much more detrimental to student achievement than tenure.  Finally, teachers are in an odd profession where their duties and ethical obligations require them to actually speak up against administrators who are harming students.  [Peter Greene argues cogently](http://curmudgucation.blogspot.com/2014/08/without-tenure.html" \t "_blank) that teachers *need* special protections in order to do their jobs properly: “It (lack of tenure protections) forces teachers to work under a chilling cloud where their best professional judgment, their desire to advocate for and help students, their ability to speak out and stand up are all smothered by people with the power to say, “Do as I tell you, or else.”  This is absolutely correct, and it is something the moguls and philanthropists funding much of the assault on teacher unions, who are used to work force operating in tight chains of command, simply do not grasp.
5. **Workplace struggles:** Loss of autonomy and attacks on workplace protections contribute to what many in the profession see as a deteriorating situation in the workplace.  The American Federation of Teachers collaborated with the grassroots activist group Badass Teachers Association (BATs) for a first of its kind workplace survey with 30,000 teachers participating.  Although the results are not representative of a scientific sample of teachers, [what was reported](https://danielskatz.net/2015/08/07/the-teaching-workplace-missing-the-forest-for-the-bathroom-stalls/" \t "_blank) should give education policy makers serious pause for concern, especially from the perspective of treating teachers as professionals.  45% of respondents disagreed with the idea that they can count upon support from their supervisor, and 52% disagreed that teaching allows they to make decisions on their own.  43% of the teachers said that they rarely or never have opportunities to make decisions that impact their work, and 45% said that their job interferes with family life. Structured support for new teachers is not the norm with 62% noting that their schools have no mentoring program for novices.  Worse, nearly a third of respondents reported experiencing bullying or intimidation in the workplace, and nearly half said they had been treated for anxiety or depression at some point in their careers.  We know very well that teachers leave their jobs, especially in high poverty schools, [when working conditions fail to foster collegiality among teachers and effective, supportive leadership among administrators](http://www.tcrecord.org/library/abstract.asp?contentid=17810" \t "_blank).  Poor working conditions coupled with attacks on teachers’ existing protections can only contribute to our attrition problem
6. **A strangled supply line:** While Arne Duncan is lamenting that teacher preparation programs are too easy, policy makers in various states are continuing to increase requirements for entry into such programs.  In New Jersey, for example, policy makers mandated that nobody can enter a teacher preparation program unless he or she is among the top third of standardized test takers entering college.  Once enrolled, he or she must maintain a GPA of 3.0 and complete both an education major and a major in a liberal arts subject.  In order to successfully complete teacher preparation and gain a professional license, he or she must pass both the ETS PRAXIS II exam and submit a detailed study of his or her impact as a teacher in the form of Pearson’s EdTPA performance assessment.  Whether or not these requirements are appropriate is a wider conversation, but one thing is certain: the number of students available to even contemplate teaching as a career is smaller today than it was previously.  Higher selectivity might make sense in an environment with high retention of experienced teachers and where teaching is seen as a desirable profession.  As of right now, teacher preparation programs in New Jersey at least have to try to convince honors students to consider teaching in an environment where they see their own teachers suffering and scapegoated.  This is not a situation conducive to a sustainable number of teachers entering the profession.
7. **De-professionalization:** The contradictions from Washington and from education reformers are legion.  We are told that teacher preparation must become more rigorous, but then we are told that we measure teacher effectiveness using test based measures which fail to actually capture what teachers do.  We are told that teachers must be thoroughly prepared to teach students to thrive in a complex modern economy and information environment, [but more and more teachers work in environments](http://neatoday.org/2014/09/02/the-testing-obsession-and-the-disappearing-curriculum-2/" \t "_blank) where the testing has spawned narrowly scripted curricula that have to be implemented without professional judgement.  [We see a broad coalition of partners from education reform and more traditional teaching advocates](https://danielskatz.net/2015/11/13/teachstrong-brother-here-we-go-again/" \t "_blank) joining to “nenew” the profession with better and more in depth preparation, but within that coalition, Teach for America sees “no reason” to revisit their 5 week “training” model for corps members.  It is not hard to see that the current reform environment favors de-professionalization over  truly professional teachers.  The new DOE regulations insist upon student growth being tied back to the quality of teacher preparation, an inherent call for heavy reliance of standardized test data.  This opens the door for “highly effective” ratings to be lavished upon Relay “Graduate School of Education” [which is largely in the business of training teachers in the methods of no excuses urban charter schools](http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/13/07/09/alternative-grad-school-raises-concerns-about-who-s-teaching-nj-s-teachers/" \t "_blank) – high levels of behavioral control, heavily scripted curricula delivered as written, a heavy emphasis on preparing for the annual accountability tests, and relatively short “careers” in teaching.  Such methods may result in high value added for Relay’s graduates, but it is not likely to result in lifelong career teachers who retain professional autonomy and a robust vision of how teachers shape curriculum.

These challenges to teaching are robust, and, by now, they possess a frightening degree of inertia.  Together, they genuinely pose a threat to teaching as a profession that individuals pursue and commit to for a lifetime.  Our future teachers are watching what goes on in school today and are either developing a commitment to become teachers – or a desire to stay far away, dispositions towards the profession that will not be easy to turn.  Further, the increasing reliance on short time teachers granted credentials that emphasize high scores on standardized tests threatens to reinvent teaching into something that enthusiastic young people do for a short time before moving on to their “adult” lives.

A profession of many millions working with many tens of millions, however, does not turn quite so easily, as reformers have discovered over the past decade.  In order to redirect our efforts so that teaching can genuinely thrive, we need better ideas competing for time and attention.  Some ideas that demand our attention:

1. **Slay the Testing Beast:** This does not mean doing away with any concept of standardized testing at all (although I know many advocates who wish for that).  It does mean, however, admitting once and for all what they cannot do.  Education reform has been adamant for 15 years that test data will first identify failing schools and provide them with incentives to improve and then that test data will objectively identify ineffective teachers and let us remove them so they harm no more children.  We know now that it has done no such thing, and that [test-based accountability has created more problems than it has solved](http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/esea" \t "_blank).  NCLB mandated testing has not told us about failing schools that we did not already know were struggling, and Race to the Top mandated growth measures have consistently failed to create evaluation systems that fairly identify teachers who should not be in the profession.  What they have done is wreak havoc on the curriculum, especially in communities of color, and restrict teachers’ professional autonomy.  Further, the tests have been used as rationales to privatize control of public education into hands that are inherently unaccountable to the communities they operate in and which increase costs and burdens for the remaining public schools. Instead of being a single, limited, tool of accountability, the tests have become the objects in and of themselves and rationales for “creative disruption” of a core democratic institution.
2. **If we are going to measure, be clear what we are measuring and why.** Of course, teachers and schools should be accountable, but large standardized tests can only measure very narrow skill bands.  That’s a snapshot of a year’s worth of teaching, and often a poorly designed one that teachers do not get to see anyway.  At its best, such data can give higher level administrators an bird’s eye view of work across a school or a district, but it will not tell them what they find if they look closer.  There are schools with low test scores that are places of warmth and support but which need specific resources they are not getting.  There are schools with high test scores that are Dickensian nightmares of behavioral control and test preparation with little else.  There are also many different ways to define school success and until we acknowledge how limited test based measures are we are not going to give those concepts the attention they deserve.  Do schools with high poverty student populations work to develop their teachers?  Do they collaborate on problem solving for their students?  Are they well connected within the surrounding community?  Do they partner with local businesses, agencies, and organizations?  Do they actively reach out to parents and guardians?  Are they seeking grants and other opportunities for their academic programming?  Are the students happy and safe in the building?  There are many other ways to assess the work of schools and teachers if we can let go of the idea that only some measures are valid.
3. **Focus on retention and growth of teachers:** Federal regulators and education reformers have been obsessed with creating a system that identifies the lowest ranked teachers via growth measures and then removes them from teaching.  Their tools are inadequate to the task and thoroughly miss that retention of experienced teachers is a far greater issue in the profession.  Experienced teachers are more effective than inexperienced teachers, and they provide a core of institutional and practice knowledge that both assists novices and cannot be easily replaced.  While meaningful supervision and assessment is important for novice teachers, it is at least as important to maintain our veterans.  If policy makers aimed their efforts at retention veteran teachers and establishing environments where teachers collaborate and support each other across experience levels, we would have a more stable core of teachers and teacher development in the early years would improve.
4. **Instead of attacking unions, develop administrators:** It is almost religious dogma among education reformers that unions make it impossible to remove ineffective teachers.  [This is false](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teacher_in_a_strange_land/2014/10/no_its_not_nearly_impossible_to_fire_bad_teachers.html" \t "_blank).  Unions do make it necessary for administrators to do their jobs well before removing a teacher with tenure, and the process may involve steps.  The benefit of this, however, is that experienced teachers are able to do their jobs without fear that they may face retaliation if they end up crossing an administrator.  What schools need are administrators who are adept instructional leaders and willing to engage in the process of removing a teacher when necessary.  What they absolutely do not need are teachers who have no confidence that they can speak up on the job in defense of their students.
5. **Healthy, collaborative schools work better for all:** Even before the BATs/AFT workplace survey, we knew that the environment in a school is crucial.  Schools where teachers collaborate to help their children and which are led by administrators interested in substantive work centered on real learning are positive environments for student learning and for teacher growth.  Schools typified by isolated teachers subjected to micromanagement from rigid administrators are not.  Schools under pressure to meet unmanageable expectations generally do not foster the former.  While accountability proponents may be right to expect schools to work towards improvement, it is crucial that we seek to enable the conditions that make that improvement possible.
6. **Remember the teacher pipeline:** It is all well and good that many advocates want to make it harder to become a teacher, but when narrowing that pipeline they need to remember two important considerations:  First, we need about 3 million teachers in the country at any given time, so while there is merit to improving teacher’s pay as requirements go up, there is a ceiling to that due to basic labor economics.  Second, if we are not going to be able to raise teacher pay to attract college students who have other career options, we have to foster those aspects of the profession that attract people beyond fame and money.  Historically, [people have been attracted to the “psychic rewards” of teaching](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496123.pdf" \t "_blank), those aspects of the work that develop a sense of efficacy and evidence of having done good in the world.  Such rewards are evident to potential teachers in schools where their own teachers are treated well, have professional autonomy, collaborate with each other, and are valued beyond what test scores they can generate.  Unless we pay careful attention to the vision of teaching as a profession that we project, we will have a terrible time convincing a new generation to pursue it.
7. **Pay up:** It hurts the ears of politicians who do not want to consider tax increases, but education is not cheap, and it remains underfunded in many ways.  For example, when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in the 1970s, it promised states that the federal government would pick up 40% of the cost of serving the children entitled to services under the act.  It has never done better than 20% of the costs, and [the latest effort to fully fund education for the disabled](https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/551" \t "_blank) sits in committee in the waning days of the 114th Congress.  New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has openly mocked increased education funding, [but his state remains $3.9 billion behind promised state funding](http://www.aqeny.org/campaigns/campaign-for-fiscal-equity/" \t "_blank) **[annually](http://www.aqeny.org/campaigns/campaign-for-fiscal-equity/" \t "_blank).** [Shockingly poor school conditions](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/01/20/how-appalling-are-conditions-in-detroit-public-schools-this-appalling/" \t "_blank) can be found in urban districts like Detroit, but [more than half](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/half-u-s-public-schools-need-repairs-modernization-survey-finds/" \t "_blank) of our nation’s aging schools need repairs and capital improvements.
8. **Refocus on equity:** For 33 years, education policy has focused on increasing standards and accountability with an intense focus on test based accountability since 2001.  But during this time period, we have largely forgotten one of the most historically powerful enablers of teachers’ teaching and students’ learning: equity. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, federal policy aimed opening school to more students and enabling states and municipalities to serve these student populations, but since 1980, we have demanded more results from teachers and schools while failing to accept any responsibility for the well being of the children we send to those schools.  [David Berliner noted this powerfully a decade ago](http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12106" \t "_blank):  “We need to face the fact that our whole society needs to be held as accountable for providing healthy children ready to learn, as our schools are for delivering quality instruction. One-way accountability, where we are always blaming the schools for the faults that we find, is neither just, nor likely to solve the problems we want to address.”  If we want schools and teachers to be fully capable partners in raising children up, we need to accept that we cannot kick the ladders out from under those same children and blame teachers when they do not catch them all.

It is past time to change our focus.