

Why Is American Teaching So Bad?

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The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession

by Dana Goldstein

Doubleday, 349 pp., \$26.95

Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)

by Elizabeth Green

Norton, 372 pp., \$27.95

Getting Schooled: The Reeducation of an American Teacher

by Garret Keizer

Metropolitan, 302 pp., \$27.00



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Bob Moses, civil rights activist and founder of the Algebra Project, a program that 'uses mathematics as an organizing tool to ensure quality public school education for every child in America,' with students at Lanier High School, Jackson, Mississippi, 2002

In 1853, the most important man in nineteenth-century American education gave a speech praising female teachers. Horace Mann was the head of the growing common school system in Massachusetts, where women teachers already outnumbered men by four to one. That helped save money for taxpayers, because school districts could pay women less than their male counterparts. It also capitalized on women's natural instincts and abilities, Mann argued, converting America's formerly chaotic, male-led classrooms into domiciles of love and order. "How divinely does she come," he declared, extolling the female teacher,

her head encircled with a halo of heavenly light, her feet sweetening the earth on which she treads, and the celestial radiance of her benignity making vice begin its work of repentance through very envy of the beauty of virtue!

In a rapidly industrializing nation, in which there were many perils of poverty and violence, as well as opportunity, schools needed to inculcate thrift, civility, and self-control in the young. And the most obvious candidates to provide this instruction were women, whose delicate constitutions prevented them from pursuing other kinds of work outside the home.

The same year, in an adjacent state, the most important woman in nineteenth-century American politics gave a speech denouncing men like Horace Mann. Susan B. Anthony had taught school for over a decade but had become tired of its deadening routines; she also resented the nineteen-year-old man who was hired to supervise her, at a higher salary than she could hope to earn. In her first recorded public address, to the New York State Teachers' Association, Anthony argued that the profession would never achieve parity with others if men continued to regard it as a feminine domain:

Do you not see that so long as society says a woman is incompetent to be a lawyer, minister, or doctor, but has ample ability to be a teacher, that every man of you who chooses this profession tacitly acknowledges that he has no more brains than a woman?

Anthony asked the association's male-only leaders: "And this, too, is the reason that teaching is a less lucrative position, as here men must compete with the cheap labor of women?" Privately, Anthony's feminist comrade Elizabeth Cady Stanton condemned "schoolmarms" who had attended specialized "normal schools" for teachers—not the more demanding liberal arts colleges, which were starting to open their doors to women. The normal schools were also a brainchild of Mann and others of his generation. Teachers who defended the second-rate teacher-training institutions they had attended were "an infernal set of fools," Stanton told Anthony. Indeed, Stanton concluded, the entire teaching profession was "a pool of intellectual stagnation."

Both of these episodes are recounted by Dana Goldstein in *The Teacher Wars*, her impressive new history of teachers in the United States. For two centuries, as Goldstein makes clear, Americans have simultaneously lauded teachers' moral virtue and deplored their lack of adequate knowledge and skills. But debate over teaching has shifted sharply over the past two decades, when public education became much more narrowly academic in focus and purpose. Thanks to the No Child Left Behind law passed under the Bush administration in 2001, schools are now rewarded or penalized based on their students' performance on standardized tests. More recently, the federal Race to the Top program sponsored by the Obama administration encouraged schools to use students' test scores in evaluating individual teachers. The primary responsibility of teachers is no longer to encourage good behavior in future citizens, as Horace Mann insisted. Instead, it's to ensure that they get the right answers on a high-stakes test.

The shift in goals has unfortunately done nothing to alter the tedious, anti-intellectual practices of American teaching. If anything, the strong commitment to "academic" goals has probably made teaching *less* academic—so far as the

quality of learning is concerned—and more routinized than it was before. When teachers were hired for their inborn ability to “nurture” schoolchildren, many derided or disregarded their intellectual capacities. Now we’ve created a system that is so firmly tied to scholastic achievement—as narrowly defined by standardized tests—that no serious scholar would want to teach in it.

Who becomes a teacher in America? The answer keeps changing, and not in ways that should make any of us proud. In the first half of the twentieth century, as Goldstein notes, bookish urban immigrants used the profession to catapult themselves into the middle class. During the Great Depression, especially, teaching attracted people of outstanding academic achievement—including some with Ph.D.s—who couldn’t get work elsewhere. Since the 1960s, however, the proportion of top college students who have entered the field has steadily declined. Part of the reason lay in the feminist movement, which created new occupational opportunities for women outside of teaching. Rather than enhancing the profession’s status, as Susan B. Anthony had predicted a century earlier, this harmed it considerably, as many high-achieving women went into other professions.

The profession was also harmed by the campaign for racial integration, which closed all-black schools and threw thousands of experienced African-American teachers out of work. Those teachers had often achieved much within black school systems and then found themselves without jobs. By 1980, *Texas Monthly* published an award-winning article showing that public school teachers in Houston and Dallas scored lower on reading and math tests than the average sixteen-year-old in nearby suburbs did. It also reported that students of teacher education at Southwest Texas State University—where future president Lyndon Johnson received his teaching degree—were functionally illiterate. Teacher preparation, the article concluded, was “a hoax and an educational disgrace.”

The Texas exposé caught the eye of a Princeton student named Wendy Kopp, who cited it in an undergraduate thesis proposing the organization that would become Teach for America. This now attracts thousands of recent graduates from largely elite colleges, who are posted for two years in some of the nation’s most backward and needy schools.

The jury is very much out on the effectiveness of TFA teachers, who represent just 1 percent of America’s teaching force. But even such small numbers can be seen as an enormous indictment of the profession and especially of the institutions that prepare people for it. Imagine if an Ivy League student started Nurses for

America, giving highly qualified recruits a quick five-to-seven-week training (which is all that TFAers receive) and then sending them into hospitals to draw blood, administer vaccinations, and monitor life-support machines. Newspapers and patients' rights groups would immediately mount a strong political protest, and personal injury lawyers would see fertile new ground for lawsuits. Everyone understands that you can't be a nurse without attending a nursing school with carefully developed standards that must be met if candidates are to be systematically inducted into the profession. Most of our schools of education lack such high standards. If they did, TFA and other "alternative routes" into teaching wouldn't exist.

What is the matter with teacher preparation and how can we make it better? Elizabeth Green takes on both questions in her eloquent new book, *Building a Better Teacher*, which manages to be depressing and hopeful at the same time. Like Dana Goldstein, Green was a Spencer Fellow at the Columbia Journalism School; if nothing else, the current educational crisis has produced a new group of skilled and knowledgeable reporters on education. Green's thesis is simple: most teachers are never actually taught how to teach. After encountering a very thin introduction to the theory and practice of teaching at education schools, they're sent into classrooms to learn on the job.

What should be encouraging is that we now have a strong body of knowledge about how good teaching happens and—even more—about how to help people do it. Much of this understanding has come not from ideologues in education schools but from organizers and teachers in charter schools, which are funded by state dollars (and, increasingly, by private foundations) but receive much more freedom to experiment and innovate than other public schools get. Like TFA, charter schools are at the center of a rabidly polarized debate in which each side impugns the other's motives and invokes its own set of experts, all of them armed with allegedly incontrovertible statistical evidence.

But the influence of the charter movement is unmistakable, although some would claim their methods are still largely confined to charter schools and not being passed on to the larger system. The hero of Green's book is Doug Lemov, a charter school entrepreneur and the author of a book distilling forty-nine different techniques that good teachers use. As a newcomer to the classroom, Lemov was astounded to discover that no such book existed. So he wrote one, providing careful observations and advice on everything from maintaining eye contact to correcting student mistakes.

Lemov's behavioral primer has been helpful for novice teachers, but it's hardly the kind of discussion that promises to challenge or expand their minds. As Green admits, Lemov's taxonomy of good teaching is more about "discipline"—that is, about maintaining classroom order—than it is about teaching the actual discipline of English, history, or math, among other subjects. Despite its resolute dismissal of the simplistic ideas of rapport with students and group feeling that still dominate many education schools, Lemov's book actually echoes one of the most enduring myths of such schools: that any "good" teacher can teach anything well. But as cognitive psychologists have been reminding us for a half-century, each discipline, whether history or math or English composition, has its own "episteme" or system of knowledge—that is, a distinct way of asking questions, gathering evidence, and generating answers.

Aware of such research, Green circles back to the education schools, where a zealous coterie of scholars has been trying to identify and inculcate the "habits of mind" that define the disciplines. They tend to follow the work of Stanford University's Lee Shulman, who coined the term "pedagogical content knowledge" to describe the intellectual apparatus that you need to teach a given subject. I am a full professor at a major research university, but I could not, without much preparation, teach high school chemistry. I could, of course, require my students to memorize the periodic table of elements. But I couldn't teach the discipline, because I don't understand its history or structure: how it developed over time, what it has discovered, what is left to know, and what counts as "knowledge" in the first place. These are hugely complicated questions, usually reserved for graduate study in the disciplines themselves. But unless you understand how a discipline actually works, you won't be able to help anyone else understand it, either.

And that brings us to the saddest fact of all: most of our teachers don't possess a deep working knowledge of *any* discipline, at least not in the way that good teaching demands. Perhaps the teachers of very small children do not need the same mastery of a discipline as their counterparts in middle and high schools. But surely they need a deep and theoretically sophisticated understanding of the ways that children learn. Even the teaching of so-called simple arithmetic turns out to be an immensely complicated endeavor, but most of our teachers do not treat it as such. Part of that failing has to do with the lack of constructive collaboration inside our schools, where teachers work almost entirely in isolation.

By contrast, many other advanced countries have institutionalized critical

commentary by peers and also provide intellectual support to improve skills and learning as part of teachers' professional practice. Japanese teachers even have a separate word for this process, *jugyokenkyu*, which is built into their weekly routines. All teachers have designated periods to observe each other's classes, study curriculum, and otherwise hone their craft. But they also learn a great deal in their pre-service training, which is both more rigorous and more demanding concerning particular subject matter than anything American teacher-education students are likely to encounter.



In Finland, which has become something of an international star in education reform circles, students of education take carefully constructed courses in the subject they will teach; they then spend a full year apprenticing in a school, receiving regular feedback from several mentors; and finally, they research and write an original thesis on a scholarly trend or controversy within their fields.¹ Their preparation is much more intellectually sophisticated—and also more “practical”—than the standard teacher-education program in the United States.

American education schools are often derided as overly theoretical, inscribing an arcane vocabulary about education and few real skills for delivering it. But these institutions actually teach a hollow and decidedly anti-intellectual *brand* of theory, as many critiques of education schools have concluded. Future teachers receive a warmed-over set of homilies about preparing “the whole child” and “student-centered learning” (with the requisite homage to philosopher and education theorist John Dewey) instead of a serious intellectual initiation into the subjects in which teachers will have to instruct students.

An immensely gifted scholar, dedicated to the perpetual exploration of ideas, Dewey would be appalled at the current state of American teaching. In one of the most poignant passages in Green's book, a Japanese educator and self-described Deweyan comes to the United States to see his idol's theory put into practice. But when he steps into American schools, he finds the instruction dull, highly routinized, and devoted mainly to rote and recall. Alas, he would find much the same in many of our college classrooms.

Despite her welcome criticism of the lazy, insubstantial character of teacher-

education courses, Green seems unaware that similar problems afflict undergraduate teaching in general. Unlike their counterparts in K–12 classrooms, most college professors have studied deeply in the disciplines they teach. But they typically haven't received training in *how* to teach these subjects. Masters of “content,” they know little about the theory and practice of pedagogy that would help them teach it to somebody else. So they go easy on the students, and—not incidentally—on themselves.

In a typical semester, half of our college students don't take a single course requiring more than twenty pages of writing; the average student spends about twelve hours per week studying outside of class, while a third of students report studying no more than five hours and often less each week.² Sadly, education students write and study even less than their counterparts in the arts and sciences. But the differences aren't great, and they point to another great unacknowledged elephant in the gloom of American education. Several states now require future teachers to major in a discipline they will instruct, which is obviously a good thing. But if the professors in those fields don't teach with rigor and depth, what good will it do?

At least college professors can work without fear of being dismissed by people who disagree with them. Not so for our K–12 teachers. Especially in the McCarthy era, as Goldstein reminds us, hundreds of teachers were fired for expressing unpopular opinions or for associating with allegedly subversive organizations. But neither Goldstein nor Green examines the ongoing speech constraints on teachers, even on tenured ones. (Tenure has never been quite the sinecure that the public imagines; it entitles you to a hearing and other due-process rights, not to guaranteed lifetime employment.)

Upholding the dismissal of a St. Louis teacher for allowing her students to use profanity in a creative-writing course, a court recently declared that the Constitution did not protect her “student-centered teaching method.” Education schools may rightly recognize the virtue of that method, but out in the public schools it can get you fired.³ So can any exercise that exposes students to an idea that parents and community leaders might not share. During the buildup to the Iraq invasion in 2003, an Indiana teacher lost her job for telling her class (in response to a student question) that she had driven by an antiwar rally and honked her horn in support. A few years later, an Ohio teacher was dismissed for asking her students to select and read one of the American Library Association's one hundred most commonly banned books.⁴ Most of Green's examples of great classroom instruction come from math, where teachers are free to pursue a

problem wherever it leads. Try doing that in social studies or English, and you might find yourself looking for a new line of work.

Garret Keizer is an English teacher, and a great one at that. In 2010, after a fourteen-year hiatus from the classroom, Keizer returned to the same rural Vermont high school where he had started his teaching career thirty years earlier. He soon put up in his classroom a poster about banned books of the kind that got the Ohio teacher fired. Keizer has more freedom to explore ideas than many other communities allow. But he is hamstrung anyway, not by book-burning censors but by the mind-numbing “accountability” regime that arose in the years following his first period as a teacher. As Goldstein and Green explain, *No Child Left Behind* and its spin-offs are premised on the grim notion that teachers will work harder—and better—if we can somehow pinpoint their performance and connect it to rewards and punishments.

But the fact is that the new measures adopted under *Race to the Top*—measures purporting to identify the effectiveness of each teacher based on students’ test scores—are notoriously imprecise. The entire conception of “accountability” is an insult to the intelligence of American teachers, taking little account of the demanding intellectual activity—both the command of knowledge and ways to show it—that good teaching involves. According to the logic of those at the top, these people just need a good kick in the pants and everything else will take care of itself. Should we be surprised that intellectuals like Keizer—who lasts exactly one year in his return to the profession—are avoiding it?

Keizer is kind to his principal and to his other colleagues, who are burdened in ways that most of us can’t imagine. But he doesn’t romanticize the profession, either. He is well aware of the lazy teachers out there, counting the days until they can collect their union-guaranteed pensions. As Keizer quips, they’re “long on ‘organized’ and short on ‘labor.’”

Perhaps the new rules can shake some of this deadwood into a semblance of life. But “accountability” makes our best teachers do their job worse, which is the ultimate indictment of contemporary education reform. The endless battery of standardized tests takes many weeks away from real instruction. So do the long cycles of preparing for the exams, during which thoughtful American teachers are forced to tailor their practice to the mindless demands of the system. Tell your students to start their essays by repeating part of the question, Keizer is advised, and make sure they “fill the space provided”; the more words, as a rule, the higher the score. A graceful essayist for *Harper’s* and other national publications, Keizer

knows that neither strategy is a likely route to elegant prose. But this isn't about improving writing, as any good teacher could tell you. It's about passing the test, getting ahead.

Most of the best scores will go to the kids who live in decent housing, have books in their bedrooms, and plenty to eat in the kitchen. Some of Keizer's students aren't so lucky, and he makes it clear that they struggle in school as a consequence. Keizer doesn't romanticize the rural countryside, either, where most impoverished Americans still reside. But he does deflate another absurd assumption of the accountability movement, which is that any student—like any teacher—can succeed, if the correct incentives are in place.

Of course, our best teachers can and do make a difference in the lives of our least privileged children; you can see Keizer doing that, in small ways, in *Getting Schooled*, his fine book. Yet every piece of credible social science confirms that, notwithstanding such efforts, schools cannot overcome the crippling effects of poverty. Telling teachers that they can represents yet another insult to their intelligence, all in the guise of bucking them up. Ditto for the perennial promotions of digital technologies, which promise to “revolutionize” teaching very soon. Similar claims greeted film projectors, radio, and television in their own times; in 1922, for example, Thomas Edison predicted that motion pictures would replace textbooks within a few short years.

Computers have a much wider range than these earlier machines, of course, and some American teachers have obviously put them to very good use. But the countries that are outpacing us at school, like Japan and Finland, are noticeably low-tech in their classrooms; they recognize that it's the teacher that counts, not the technology. In America, by contrast, we're always looking for the next gadget to improve—and, one suspects, to supplant—our beleaguered teaching profession.

Indeed, the biggest insult to the intelligence of American teachers is the idea that their intelligence doesn't matter. “The teaching of A, B, C, and the multiplication table has no quality of sacredness in it,” Horace Mann said in 1839. Instead of focusing on students' mental skills, Mann urged, teachers should promote “good-will towards men” and “reverence to God.” Teachers need to be good, more than they need to be smart; their job is to nurture souls, not minds. So Garret Keizer's first supervisor worried that he might have too many grades of A on his college transcript to succeed as a high school teacher, and Elizabeth Green concludes her otherwise skeptical book with the much-heard platitude that teachers need to “love” their students.

Keizer is offended by comments like that, and he has every good reason to be. Do lawyers have to love their clients? Must doctors adore their patients? What American teachers need now is not love, but a capacity for deep and disciplined thinking that will reflect—and respect—the intellectual complexities of their job. It won't do to simply strip away our insipid accountability systems and leave everything in the hands of present-day teachers, who are mostly unprepared for the tasks we have set before them. The US badly needs to design and develop an entirely different system of teacher education, stressing cognitive skills above all else. Anything less will leave our teachers languishing in “intellectual stagnation,” as Elizabeth Cady Stanton told Susan B. Anthony, and our schools mired in mediocrity.

- 1 Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World, and How They Got That Way* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), pp. 84–87. ↵
 - 2 Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 69. ↵
 - 3 Michael D. Simpson, “Defending Academic Freedom: Advice for Teachers,” *Social Education*, Vol. 74, No. 6 (November/December 2010). ↵
 - 4 Jonathan Zimmerman, “When Teachers Talk Out of School,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2011. ↵
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