

Redirecting the Teaching Profession



IN THE WAKE OF A NATION AT RISK AND NCLB

A Nation at Risk sounded the call for school improvement and offered recommendations for

bringing it about. No Child Left Behind was even more prescriptive in its approach to raising student achievement. But, Mr. Seed points out, for all their recommendations and strategies, both reform efforts neglect the essential conditions for improving teaching.

BY ALLEN H. SEED

EVER WONDER what life in the classroom of the future might be like for teachers? I offer below two very different scenarios. Which school and classroom would you like to teach in?

Scenario I

Even though the sun has yet to rise, Steven Allen knows it will be a beautiful early spring day. He knows this because he receives the weather forecast first thing every morning on his personal communication device. He arrives at school as the sun begins to peek over the gently rolling hills of Elmhurst. He enters the employee lounge, where he overhears a lively conversation taking place in the seating area as he walks over to the central curriculum machine to pick up his daily script.

"You youngsters have it so easy now," says an older woman sitting in the large comfortable chair.

"Why do you say that, Mary?" ask the three younger people, all in their twenties and thirties.

"Back when I used to be called a teacher and test-takers used to be called students, we had to plan every lesson and adapt it for every special-needs student. We had to figure out how

to motivate our students, present the material, determine what supplies would be needed, and check for understanding," Mary replies.

The chimes ring to signal the beginning of the first session. Steven ambles over to the group and says, "I'm glad things are much more efficient and standardized now. Can you imagine all the different lessons kids would have encountered? No one would know the same thing!"

The morning sun can barely squeeze through the slender openings in the wall that some architect had the audacity to call "windows." Steven strides confidently to the front of the classroom, and in a commanding tone he addresses the 39 sixth-graders seated in neat, tightly spaced rows. "Good morning, test-takers. I've been called in to prepare you for your next testing session, which will take place in two weeks. My name is Steve, and I'll be your educational technician for the next 12 school days." He smiles and points to the embroidered name patch located smartly over the left breast pocket of his khaki overalls. Covering his closely cropped hair is a cap with "ET, Grade A" embroidered on it.

"As you can see by my cap, I've been certified as a 'Grade A' Educational Technician. I am quite proud of this achievement and look forward to improving your achievement. Now, where's my script?" Several test-takers begin slowly banging their heads on the desks, while others doze quietly. Just then Mary pops her head in through the door, glances at the monitor on the wall over Steve's head, and makes a check mark on the paper clipped to her clipboard.

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That's one possible vision of our future. But here's another scenario for your consideration.

Scenario II

Golden beams of sunshine enter the open classroom windows, seeming to ride on the warm breeze of the late September afternoon. Allen Stevens walks into the room after consulting with the math teacher next door. He raises his hand, and the class of 25 students grows quiet. "This afternoon we will be performing acceleration experiments. It is important that you make careful measurements. You'll be taking your data to math class tomorrow morning to analyze and graph your results. Each team will need a ramp, an acceleration car, and measuring tools." John and Todd, two members of the team in the third row, turn to each other and say, "Way cool."

After school that day, Allen ambles over to the math teacher's classroom. "You know that we'll have to map out our curriculum to see where our lessons can intersect, Matt. This is the most excited I've ever seen the kids about learning something."

Matt looks up from his computer and replies, "Yeah, we really started something today. Even I'm excited about the connections we're making!"

Doesn't it seem ironic that the scenario most educators would associate with *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind is the first of these? Doesn't that first scenario seem to be right in line with the idea of "a rising tide of mediocrity"? While I'll admit that that first scenario is an exaggeration, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, I've visited over a hundred schools in four states and talked to nearly 1,000 teachers, and I know that in far too many schools it is not that far off the mark. Moreover, since the advent of No Child Left Behind, which can trace its ancestry to *A Nation at Risk*, that first scenario seems to be drawing ever closer to reality.

What must happen to make the second scenario the norm, rather than the exception? I would like to offer some recommendations for the kinds of conditions teachers need if they are to perform at their peak, as in the second scenario, along with some action steps that teachers can take to earn those conditions.

FIVE CONDITIONS FOR IMPROVING TEACHING

Andy Hargreaves put it well: "If we want high-level, deep learning for students, we have to have highly skilled and intellectually able teachers. That means attracting, developing, and retaining teachers who have those qualities and giving them working conditions that inspire them and offer them a chance to soar."¹ Both *A Nation at Risk* and No Child Left Behind recognize the criti-

cal importance of teachers to the success of our schools, but their approaches to developing a strong teaching force do not mesh well with what we know about good teaching, what makes people want to become teachers, and why they stay.

Collaboration. Providing opportunities to collaborate is an essential condition for improving teaching.² Through collaboration, teachers form a learning community that establishes its own goals, manages its own resources, shares shortcomings, respects each member, and constructively criticizes practice.³ Collaboration helps to minimize the disconcerting and persistent isolation that teachers experience, and it can foster a sense of ownership of the process of school improvement. Meetings to discuss planning and implementation and to review instruction and curriculum should be held frequently as a means to foster collaboration.

Empowerment. Empowering teachers is another necessary condition for improving teaching. Empowered teachers are able to make decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling. Teachers who are empowered become involved in such activities as hiring staff, determining budget priorities, planning professional development activities, and evaluating teaching.⁴ In order to survive and thrive in the current high-stakes school climate, empowered teachers assume such roles as team leader, action researcher, curriculum developer, and in-house trainer. As a result of their own involvement in a school's decision-making process, empowered teachers assume more responsibility, have improved morale, and generate better solutions to the problems they encounter.⁵

Reflection. A third condition necessary for improving teaching is reflection. Reflecting on life in school enables teachers to carefully consider their current practice and to envision new and innovative approaches to assessment, curriculum, and instruction. Reflective practice begins with the belief that one's own efforts are worthwhile and moves on to a careful examination of one's own actions and thought processes. Shared reflections promote empathy, enhance regard for the moral and ethical considerations of a community, and create a positive school climate.⁶

Time. Because of the rapid pace of the typical school day, time in schools is rarely organized in ways that enable teachers to work together, to support one another, to reflect, or to experiment with new practices.⁷ Reallocating time during the day gives teachers the opportunity to collaborate and challenge one another to do more than they might have thought possible.

In 1983, the same year that *A Nation at Risk* was published, Ernest Boyer recommended three conditions

for reconstructing a teacher's workday to facilitate improved teaching and learning in middle and high schools. First, teachers should teach no more than four classes a day, with an additional period to tutor and assist students with independent projects. Second, teachers should be given at least an hour a day of planning time. Third, no teacher should be responsible for monitoring lunchrooms, hallways, and restrooms. Elementary teachers also need and deserve a greatly restructured work day. Grant Simpson put the matter clearly nearly two decades ago:

Without substantive efforts to include time for planning and professional growth, the hue and cry for collaboration, shared leadership, and participative management are blasts of hot air. . . . Mechanisms and funds that would create, support, and sustain the internal time needed for planning, growth, and renewal [must be found].⁸

Training. The fifth condition for improving teaching is probably the one most people would think of first: training. Schools should be places not just of student development, but of adult development as well. Training is required for teachers to acquire new skills and attitudes, to take on the new and unfamiliar roles that empowerment and collaboration engender, and to tackle the challenges schools face. Ongoing, job-embedded professional development programs should incorporate a variety of activities including, but not limited to, peer coaching, study groups, and frequent assistance from consultants. These programs should focus on the improvement rather than the deficiency of the entire school and should include collaboration, the use of adult learning models, and the development of a community of learners.⁹ It is also vitally important for everyone involved in improving teaching to recognize that the path to improvement will not always be smooth. Most teachers will naturally stumble and make some mistakes as they get better.

I do not intend this list of optimal conditions for the improvement of teaching to be exhaustive or comprehensive. It includes those conditions that have been repeatedly described in the literature. If teachers work in schools where these conditions prevail, I believe that teaching will improve significantly along the lines illustrated in the second of the scenarios with which I began. However, teachers must also take action to ensure that these conditions are earned and retained.

FIVE ACTIONS TEACHERS MUST TAKE TO EARN THESE CONDITIONS

Improve current educational standards. Teachers, the deliverers of the curriculum, must play a major role in

the improvement and revision of curriculum standards. Teachers know better than any other participants in education today whether or not the standards used for assessment, curriculum, and instruction are what they need to be.¹⁰ Vermont's process for developing standards includes teachers in every facet and offers every teacher the opportunity to review drafts of the standards. It could be a model for other states to use as teachers seek to regain their voice.¹¹ Teachers must take a leading role in the efforts of their districts and schools to align curriculum with the state standards and to develop a variety of assessments that promote understanding, rather than rote memorization. Teachers must also design effective and engaging instruction that actively involves students in the learning process.

Develop standards for the resources needed to meet educational standards. One area that seems to have disappeared from the standards movement is standards for *delivery*, specifically for the provision of the resources needed to teach to the standards.¹² The National Science Education Standards provide an excellent example of standards for delivery. Standard D states: "The K-12 science program must give students access to appropriate and sufficient resources, including quality teachers, time, materials and equipment, adequate and safe space, and the community."¹³ Teachers need to insist that sufficient equipment, materials, time, and tools be made available to enable them to provide appropriate instruction. Of the five action steps described in this section, this one should be near the top of the list.

Develop assessment systems to show that students and schools are meeting standards. Our current overreliance on standardized testing as the primary measure of school success is wrongheaded. Testing experts agree that making important decisions based on a single test is not good educational practice, and education associations are on the same page. The National Education Association states:

NEA believes that standardized testing should be only one component of accountability. A good accountability system uses multiple measures to determine progress:

- For teachers, evaluations are a more rigorous and thorough accountability system than standardized test scores.
- For students, assessment also should take into account classroom assignments, grades, scores on teacher-developed tests, and other performance measures.
- For schools, assessments should take into account graduation rates, progress on standardized tests (as opposed to just raw test scores), and other measures.

Standardized tests should be used to guide instruction by helping identify gaps in learning and groups of students who need the most help. But test scores alone should never be used to punish students, teachers or schools by cutting

funding, closing schools or firing teachers.¹⁴

I recommend that, with the guidance of experts, schools and school districts design their own unique accountability systems and then have them approved by a comprehensive board of stakeholders. By utilizing a variety of measures, including test scores and such indicators as student interviews, employer and parent surveys, and classroom observations, a school can provide stakeholders with a broader and richer picture of its adequacy.¹⁵

Develop a definition of highly qualified teachers and enforce it. Teachers need to develop their own definition of “highly qualified” and then enforce it. Teachers, students, and parents know that good teachers are not only knowledgeable in their content areas but also adept at making that content accessible and interesting to students. Most of us have encountered people who are expert in their own fields but have no clue how to explain what they do to a novice. No Child Left Behind’s focus on content knowledge, part of the legacy inherited from *A Nation at Risk*, is woefully inadequate for identifying highly qualified teachers and has had little effect on student achievement.¹⁶ The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is an excellent step in the right direction on this issue. The movement toward professionalism must be embraced and expanded by rank-and-file teachers so that teachers become responsible for ensuring that all students have high-quality teachers in all their classes. Teachers need to take responsibility for eliminating from their ranks those who became teachers only to have long summer vacations and those who have one year of experience — repeated 30 times. Taking action on this recommendation alone would yield significant benefits for the profession.

Develop processes for recruiting, inducting, retaining, and rewarding highly qualified teachers. While providing the teaching conditions described above would go a long way toward helping recruit and retain teachers, more needs to be done. Creative ways to attract people (young and mature) to teaching need to be developed and piloted. Philadelphia’s Teacher Ambassador Program is one example that involves veteran teachers in recruiting new teachers to the district.¹⁷ Induction programs that include all new teachers in a building, last at least a full year, assign able mentors to all new teachers, provide reduced teaching loads for inductees, and culminate with a summative review of teaching should result in a much more effective cadre of new teachers. Retaining and rewarding teachers is generally an administrative function, but teachers can be in-

involved through a variety of means, including participation in surveys and contract negotiations and service on retention and rewards committees.

The five conditions that support the improvement of teaching that I’ve listed above and the action steps that follow from them cannot be accomplished by teachers alone. They are collaborative in nature and require the assistance and cooperation of all stakeholders, including administrators, community members, parents, and policy makers. However, if we do not provide these conditions and if we fail to take these action steps, I’m convinced that the future of our schools will be closer to the first scenario than the second.

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