

# Teacher Professionalism Since *A Nation at Risk*

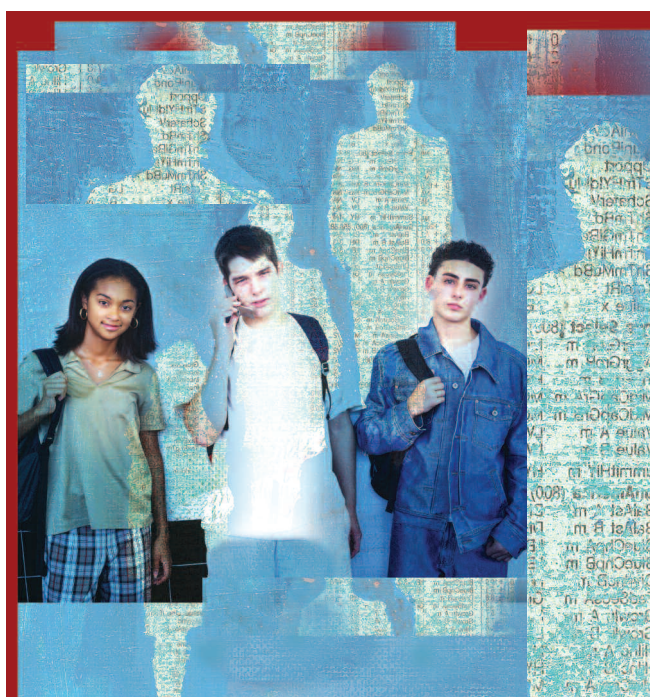
The story of a recently burned-out high school English teacher confirms the finding reported in *A Nation at Risk* that “the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable.” It appears that not much has improved in the past 25 years.

BY MICHAEL P. GRADY, KRISTINE C. HELBLING, AND DENNIS R. LUBECK

**H**OW MANY times have you seen a sweatshirt emblazoned with “If your house hasn’t collapsed, thank an architect” or “Fair divorce settlements couldn’t happen without your lawyer”? Lawyers and architects don’t need silk-screened slogans to remind the public of their worth; their value to the community is measured by the fees they collect and the respect they receive. Teachers, though they’re expected to be martyrs to the cause of children and are required to continually develop themselves professionally, get no such respect. In its place, they get limited autonomy and a fraction of the salaries of other professionals. No wonder teachers need a bumper sticker to remind us all: “If you can read this, thank a teacher.”

While the definition of professionalism can be elusive and its elements are subject to debate, some features would be common to any definition. For one, the public accords a certain respect to professionals because of their special skills and knowledge. Professionals exercise discretion in making decisions within the scope of their expertise, and they assume some authority for their own professional development.

■ MICHAEL P. GRADY is a professor in the Department of Educational Studies at St. Louis University. KRISTINE C. HELBLING is a reference and subject librarian for literature in English at Washington University in St. Louis. DENNIS R. LUBECK is director of the International Education Consortium in St. Louis.



Are teachers professionals, and, if so, in what sense? Certainly, principals, superintendents, department chairs, and officials in state departments of education have considerable input into defining the authority of teachers. The culture of the school and the school’s response to outside pressures also determine how professionalism applies. Many teachers perceive an erosion of their professionalism since *A Nation at Risk* appeared, and they have felt that erosion accelerating since No Child Left Behind.

The number of teachers who leave the field within three years speaks to the demanding nature of the profession and helps to explain why the voices of teachers are so often silent. Kristine, the second author, made it for 11 years as a solid and conscientious teacher. Sure, the days were challenging and the students could be exhausting. But what ultimately drained Kristine was the feeling that she was not considered a professional but was looked on more as a suspect cog in a broken machine. Jonathan Kozol, in a commentary in *Education Week*, lists some common reasons for the high attrition in teaching: “the systematic crushing of . . . creativity and intellect . . . the threatened desiccation of . . . personalities, and the degradation . . . of self-respect.”<sup>1</sup> While the rhetoric in Kristine’s district assured everyone that teachers were professionals, actions and climate said otherwise.

Myriad factors contribute to this climate so contrary to teacher professionalism: poor funding, poor parenting, overstuffed classrooms, low-quality teachers, and the expectation that school should be the remedy for all of society’s ills. Here we focus on a specific issue that undermines the profession of teaching: the pace and content of a teacher’s daily schedule. It points to the real problem of education: the incomplete superimposing of a “factory model.”

The typical teacher’s overcrowded daily schedule explains why teachers are seen as taking little initiative in the profession. Who has time to worry about the larger issues of how professionalism is perceived and where it is going when there’s barely time to use the restroom during the day? Exhausted teachers find it easier to let politicians’ agendas take control of their lives than to resist and assert their professionalism.

Those who enter teaching because of its mythical cushy schedule — seven-hour days and summers off — quickly learn the puzzling truth. As standards for high-quality teachers have risen, the level of professionalism has declined. Subjected to increasingly close scrutiny by administrators and other far-removed bodies, teachers are not permitted to rely on their own intelligence and initiative, a prerogative routinely accorded to practicing professionals. Instead, they are asked to document how they use their time. Yet *A Nation at Risk* and numerous subsequent reports have called for teaching to become “a more rewarding and respected profession,” an outcome that has grown, if anything, less likely since 1983.

Kristine’s experience as a member of an unofficial learning team is a case in point. The district professional development model at the time allowed for like-minded teachers to have time to work together. The members

of Kristine’s team taught sophomore English. At their meetings, they shared their concerns about their classes and assignments, exchanged some pedagogical ideas, and looked at some student work in order to enhance student performance. The meetings were beneficial for many reasons: the teachers got to commiserate a bit, saw that they were not alone, got some good ideas from colleagues, and were able to see how their own students’ skills compared to those of other sophomores. In fact, the team decided to administer a writing assessment to all sophomores in order to gauge the writing skills of the class as a whole.

This self-driven teaming was a most valuable form of professional development. It was much more purposeful than the districtwide professional development days when teachers might be treated to a motivational lecture delivered by a corporate executive. In the team meetings, the teachers focused on their own problems and created ways to fix them.

It was not long, however, before this teacher-driven model was modified. A new model of professional development descended on the district and gave a name to the teams, “professional learning communities” (PLCs). It also introduced new jargon to describe their activities. Now the teams were to create approved SMART goals and go on “data-digs” during the meetings. Teachers had to fill out a form at the end of each meeting that documented how they had used their time and how it fit into district goals. Sometimes the topics of the meetings did not easily fit the terminology of the form, so Kristine and her team were forced to make the professional discussion fit into the cookie-cutter language.

Clearly, the administrators at some level had the desire to micromanage these meetings. Maybe under the old model some less-motivated groups discussed the merits of their fantasy football leagues. Kristine’s group, however, resented the administrative interference. When left to its own devices, the group completed meaningful work and analysis. But the clear message of the new PLC model was that teachers’ intellectual, creative work had to fit into a quantifiable, “idiot-proof,” jargon-ridden system. In short, teachers were to be made “accountable” because they were not trusted to be accountable to themselves, their students, and their profession.

If we must superimpose business models on education, why not use progressive models that enhance creativity and professionalism? A “20% Time” policy enables Google’s engineers to devote 20% of their work week to projects that may not be covered in their job

*(Continued on page 607)*

---

## Teacher Professionalism (Continued from page 604)

descriptions. This free time also frees their minds to use their professional knowledge in new and possibly revolutionary ways. *A Nation Prepared*, one of the spate of mid-1980s reports that followed *A Nation at Risk*, observed that, although teachers may spend 10% to 50% of their time on noninstructional duties, little, if any, of that time is available to enhance professionalism. More than 20 years ago, it was apparent that teachers were in need of “more time . . . to reflect, plan, and discuss teaching innovations and problems with their colleagues.”<sup>2</sup> Even Richard Dufour, a proponent of the PLC model, acknowledges the need “to guarantee time for [teacher] collaboration during the school day.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Kristine recalls sitting in a meeting and being asked what was needed to make a new idea work. Her reply: “Time.” It was the one thing she couldn’t get.

Those of us who have had work done on our houses know that the kitchen will always look worse before it looks better. The same is true of the process of education. When students are learning a new skill, there is sometimes an ugly period during which they are getting their bearings and incorporating the new information into their existing system of thinking. With our home construction projects, we don’t fire the contrac-

---

tor because the kitchen is a mess. We wait until, by dint of skill and knowledge, the project comes together. When our students are learning, they are works in progress, too. While we give our contractors the time they need to finish the job, teachers are rarely offered the same level of trust.


Public perception and politics have kept teachers out of the ranks of professionals. *A Nation at Risk* sought to bring the best and brightest into teaching. But talented, creative, and well-educated individuals have little desire to be doubted, monitored, micromanaged, and flooded with busywork. The only possible way to change the situation for the better is to allow teachers to play a greater role in defining professionalism. Although the daily lives of teachers seem designed to keep them out of such a conversation, we know that teachers are ready and willing to do their part.

How will we know when teaching has acquired true professional status? The bumper stickers will be torn off the cars.

---

1. Jonathan Kozol, “Letters to a Young Teacher,” *Education Week*, 29 August 2007.

2. Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), p. 60.

3. Richard Dufour, “In Praise of Top-Down Leadership,” *School Administrator*, November 2007, pp. 38-42. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0804gra.pdf**

**Michael P. Grady, Kristine C. Helbling, and Dennis R. Lubeck, Teacher Professionalism Since a Nation at Risk, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 08, April 2008, pp. 603-604, 607.**

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to [kappan@pdkintl.org](mailto:kappan@pdkintl.org).

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.  
408 N. Union St.  
P.O. Box 789  
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789  
812/339-1156 Phone  
800/766-1156 Tollfree  
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at  
<http://www.pdkintl.org/search.htm>.