

Opening Classroom Doors With Teachers Who Can Teach

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(Submitted to the New York Times, 4/30/06)

Nicholas Kristof often gets it right. But in his April 30, 2006, New York Times op-ed, [Opening Classrooms Doors](#), he really missed the point. In addressing the endemic problems in both teacher supply and quality Mr. Kristof claims there is at least one “easy” solution: Let anyone who has “graduated from a recognized college, have passed a competency test in their field and have passed a rigorous background check teach.”

Don't get me wrong. There is no question that the wisdom and experience of Colin Powell, the spirit and expertise of a Meryl Streep, or the idealism and energy of bright young college graduates who promise two years of Peace Corps, volunteer-like service can offer much needed boosts in many of our nation's schools. But, the facts are clear: While current teacher education and licensing standards leave a lot to be desired (and need a good overhaul) teachers with preparation and who successfully complete an internship before they begin teaching are more effective and more likely to stay in teaching.

Unfortunately, in citing the research evidence Mr. Kristof misread the studies on Teach for America (TFA). For example, the Mathematica study he cites compared 41 TFA recruits to a group of teachers in the same schools who were, remarkably, even more under prepared, with fewer being certified or having had student teaching than the TFA group. A close look the data does not suggest a success story. For example, the reading scores for students of the comparison group went from the 13th to the 14th percentile while scores for students of TFA teachers went from the 14th to the 15th percentile. This means that students of TFA teachers are still reading more poorly than 85 percent of their peers nationwide and well below grade level. This is a sad commentary on the extent to which many urban and rural districts that hire TFA and other underprepared recruits have lowered standards for teachers of low-income and minority students.

Another important fact: Teachers who get student teaching are more than twice as likely to remain in teaching. We need teachers who will stay in the profession rather than adding to the regular turnover that undermines the stability of so many schools and costs them thousands of dollars for each teacher who leaves.

The truth is that America's public schools have long let anyone by-pass most state teacher preparation and licensing standards, without much success. A major national study conducted by SRI International recently revealed that “alternative” programs designed to recruit bright, experienced individuals from outside of the education mainstream are not getting the job done. When traditional teacher education and licensing “barriers” are lowered, these programs still cannot attract the “rocket scientists” into teaching, matriculating very small proportions of math and science experts or other “brilliant” professionals. The research shows these alternative certification programs often fail to provide the kind of supports novices need on the job to become effective.*

Granted we need to find ways to get the Mr. Powells and Ms. Streeps of the world into our schools (if they truly want to teach) and “we need to expand the pool of those eligible

to teach." But also we should expect our federal and state governments to offer scholarships for well-prepared teachers to enter teaching and require our novice pedagogues to be taught and mentored by our nation's best teachers in what would be education's equivalent of a teaching hospital. We should demand that education schools offer highly adaptive, but well developed programs for non-traditional teacher candidates. Indeed, the IBM alternative certification program (cited by Mr. Kristof) is requiring both education coursework and an internship for its math and science experts to take before they enter teaching.

Most education schools offer much more than "secret snake-charming skills" to prospective teachers. Effective teacher education programs help future teachers learn how to use research-based teaching techniques to help struggling learners read, reach students who have special learning problems or do not speak English, and use an array of assessment data to build meaningful and effective lessons. Mr. Kristof's disdain for teacher preparation does little to serve students who surely could benefit from both dazzling icons and expert teachers.

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* Humphrey, D., Weschler, M. and Heather, J (2006). Characteristics of effective Alternative Certification. Paper presented at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San Francisco, CA.