

Who's Responsible for the Teachers' Teaching?

Stephen C. Bronack, Ph.D.

Lehigh University

March 1, 2000

As the major primaries in both the Democratic and Republican races quickly approach, this might be a good time to take a look at the educational issues that are rising to the top of our candidates' minds. There are, of course, the standard ones: safety in schools, technology, and higher student achievement, to name a few. However, there is one issue that seems to have emerged as the issue of choice for both politicians and some educational administrators—*teacher professionalism*.

Teachers are professionals trained to understand the way students learn, as well as the various ways content can be presented best to support that learning. With the move toward higher standards for students and accountability for schools and school districts, it seems a natural extension for some to shift focus on the teachers, and to investigate what role *they* play in the achievement of students. The logic, for some, goes as follows: higher standards for students are irrelevant if the *teachers* themselves are not of the highest quality. In effect, politicians are crying for higher standards for teachers, as well as students.

In late February, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education ([AACTE](#)) held their annual meeting in Chicago. At this gathering, educators, lawmakers, and representatives from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education ([NCATE](#)) engaged in discussion about the future of teacher preparation and how to prepare better-qualified teachers. Some interesting perspectives and propositions for future actions emerged. For example, NCATE is now working with the Educational Testing Service ([ETS](#)) to align accreditation standards and the ETS academic-subject tests required for certification of new teachers. Some also suggested that a core inconsistency may actually exist between the way teacher preparation programs work at institutions of higher education, and the newly-emergent needs of teachers thrust into inclusive, standards-based, technology-rich classrooms. For example, Del Schalock—an education professor at Western Oregon University—notes in a recent article in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) that the concept of “academic freedom” so dear to higher education may prove a most formidable barrier to shaping teacher preparation experiences to match standards set by states or accreditation agencies. To this end, some even wonder if the process of preparing teachers may move away from universities and into the emerging market of for-profit educational companies, or coalitions of states and private sector providers.

This is not to say that those in Washington, D.C. are throwing up their collective hands and giving up. Indeed, in a [recent speech](#) at a high school in Durham, North Carolina, [U.S. Department of Education](#) Secretary Richard Riley once again addressed the issue of teacher professionalism by drawing attention to the way the world perceives teachers as professionals. In his address, Riley issues a bold call to re-think and re-structure the very nature teachers are prepared, utilized, and retained. To support this call to arms, the U.S. Department of Education has requested \$1 billion in funding to make

available for grants through a proposed Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The majority of this money is intended to address issues of recruitment, reduction of out-of-field teaching, and to provide incentives for more qualified teachers to teach in the higher need school districts.

Riley also called for a major change in the way teachers work—calling for school districts to begin consideration of teaching as a year-round profession, rather than the typical 9-month contract (It is important to note here that he is *not* necessarily calling for year-round school for *students*, only for teachers). Riley’s rationale is that, if teachers are retained on 11- or 12-month contracts, then the summers can be dedicated to professional development activities and other teacher-improvement initiatives. A year-round teaching schedule will also help raise teacher compensation, Riley suggests, which will address a major barrier to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Riley notes in his address that the gap between teachers with masters degrees and other, equally qualified professionals in other fields, is as high as \$32,000.

In short, Riley’s proposition is to do more than simply demand better performance from our teachers. Instead, he offers his vision of an environment in which teachers are also provided an opportunity to develop—and are compensated in a professionally-sound manner. Riley uses the state of Connecticut as an example: “the state of Connecticut pays its teachers the highest salaries in the country but also sets the most demanding criteria to become a teacher. The result, Connecticut leads the nation in reading, writing and math scores. Is there a connection here that other states should be investigating?”

Riley’s suggestion, to me, seems eloquently simple: If you want to improve teacher professionalism, then perhaps it is time to treat teachers a bit more like professionals. Yes, this means higher wages and better support. But it also means a stronger foundation for holding teachers accountable and for increasing the likelihood of attracting innovative, eager, young professionals to the field of teaching—professionals who may make a difference in a student’s life in important ways. The bottom line is clearly this: as we move toward new leadership in D.C., we can also expect new visions for ensuring teacher quality and professionalism. How this manifests itself in the future—and who is held ultimately accountable—is unclear. However, one thing seems certain—the issue of teacher professionalism and accountability is not likely to disappear once the race for the White House has ended.