

# Licensing teachers: a

Indeed, people do come to the School of Education to become teachers. Why should this be so?

To many people, the School of Education is simply where you go to become a teacher. Ordinarily I rise to combat such oversimplification. This school is, after all, a part of the university, and its scholarship and research activities carry it far beyond mere training of teachers.

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## Guest Comment:

Burton Blatt

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The reason people must come to the School of Education is that the learning must be certified to have taken place. There must be witnesses. And they can't be just any witnesses; they must be specially competent to determine whether the required learning has taken place, to discriminate between those who have mastered the requirements and those who haven't.

Why the School of Education, then? Because its faculty, having studied the nature of teaching as scholars, are clearly the best witnesses to the education of prospective teachers. If a local school official wants to find a good teacher, he needs only to find a candidate endorsed by the community of scholars at the School of Education.

This rationale, with the inevitable bureaucratic superstructure, is the basis of the current New York state system of teacher certification. The state, on behalf of society, certifies that a given person is appropriately ethical, educated, and professionally trained to be a teacher; and it certifies these things based on the recommendation of the School of Education.

But, it is all too readily apparent that something is wrong in this scheme of things. Embarrassingly, many teachers, though duly certified, seem to be neither ethical, educated nor well-trained. Embarrassingly, many high school graduates lack minimal literacy.



not an education but the accumulation of a lot of academic scrip. But at least they are running around a place where they might stumble into something that would get them to think better. However, the state Regents are now cultivating a proposal to remove control of teacher education from the academy — where one is obliged at least to appear intellectually motivated — to an appointed professional licensure board — which is obliged merely to appear inscrutable.

The proposed new rationale is that not scholars, who think about education, but professionals who practice it, are the best judges of what makes for a good teacher. The idea behind this is that teaching is a profession like law or medicine, professions so abstrusely far from an ordinary person's capacity to understand that they must form their own monitoring organizations to judge competencies and maintain ethical practices.

But teaching does share on attribute with other professions — its professional self-interest. Judging by the amount of involvement of teachers' unions in the licensure

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And, even back in the university, there is disagreement and confusion about fundamental questions such as what constitutes good education or training, how to tell who has it, and even whether it makes any difference whether a teacher has the training or not.

Now, what is a bad certification system seems destined to become an even worse licensure system. It is bad enough that there are too many students and even professors running around the university seeking

movement, this is a very significant factor. The grip of the proposed profession on both its members and its clients would become formidable. Students will have to continue the exercise of running around the academy rustling up credits — professions protect their exclusiveness by maintaining barriers to admission, so the academic hurdles will continue to be useful. But the students will have to continue the exercise even throughout their work: despite the dismal lack of evidence that even the initial train-

# community responsibility

ing of teachers makes a significant difference, the proposal for the new system includes enthusiastic requirements for ongoing, perpetual, "in-service" training — for the effectiveness of which there is even less evidence. Once power and authority are consolidated in the professional board's illusion of enormous responsibility, it will be possible to manipulate not only who and how many may teach, but also how lucrative it is to teach.

Such criticism of the licensure proposal may seem fishy coming from someone who would have quite a lot to lose if the process of approving teachers were to be removed from schools of education. However, the change I would like to propose instead diminishes the academic role of approval even more than licensure would. I propose that teacher approval be put in the hands of local school boards and their constituencies.

In making this proposal, I am calling for two very difficult admissions which go against the dogma of many generations: First, the admission that "experts" can't produce and guarantee good education; and, second, that communities have shirked what is after all their inescapable responsibility, the responsibility of raising their children.

I've already been discussing

spirited soliders for that conflict on any inadequacy of training techniques or training personnel.

Thus, the community seems the best able to decide what types of teaching and teachers it wants — not only because it is capable of making the judgment but, more important, because the judgment can only be meaningful if made by the community. At the very least, such a community would get the teachers it deserves. But it would also be more likely to get the education its children deserve. It is well known that, under the present system, there are many people who would be excellent teachers but are not permitted to teach, and many certified teachers who should find a less destructive way to make a living. An involved and thoughtful community would soon learn to distinguish qualifications from credentials. Although the process of learning can seem mysterious or even miraculous, successful education must almost by definition be recognizable to the society which seeks to impart it. In this sense education must not be permitted to seem the province of inscrutable experts.

What I have been urging obviously has grave implications for schools of education. If communities can choose freely, the academy will no longer be the gatekeeper.

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many of the reasons that make the first of these admissions necessary. I think these reasons are sufficiently nagging that few in the education business would insist very strenuously that they can deliver the elusive "expertise." That is, while there are always new plans and programs and proposals from professors or Regents or professionals, they are, at their most optimistic, minor adjustments of the present unsatisfactory educational system. No one claims that any scheme, whether of certification or licensure, will result in the sort of universal education of which we hear in commencement speeches.

But, part of the reason for the failure of experts has to do with the second admission. In permitting experts to design and control teaching, the people have attempted to pass a buck which must stop with them. Neither the purposes nor content of education are "discoveries" made in a specialized research setting; they must flow from the community as an expression of vital concerns. Not even military education can succeed without agreement and support of the people — as we should have learned from the bitter experience of Vietnam. Surely no one would blame our failure to train willing and

Enrollments would be bound to decline. But even these unwelcome consequences may turn out for the best. Schools of education may stop chasing non-academic goals and start taking education more seriously.

In creating and participating in the myth of expertise, the myth that our work and our degrees must be bought to avert the world going to illiterate pieces, we have come very close to fooling all the people all the time. But I suspect that we have not quite fooled ourselves. That is, I have hope that we can still make the difficult choice: We should turn down not only the new bad idea of a teacher licensure system, but give up our old bad idea of the current certification system as well. We should leave job recruiting and teacher selection to those who call the tune and pay the bills — the citizens. If we did this we would have everything important to gain — the freedom to concentrate on the only work that makes schools of education genuinely valuable, learning about education and educating their students.

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