

# Reforming Schools of Education Will Not Be Enough

by Wendy Kopp<sup>†</sup>

Most schools are currently built on the premise that all teachers are perfectly effective. Every single teacher has the same responsibility and the same duties. Every single teacher—from the most competent to the least competent—each day strives, within the four walls of his or her own classroom, to engage students and to convey material to them. Every day, in every class period, our schools subject twenty or thirty young people to the strengths and weaknesses of an individual teacher.

It is frightening, then, that teaching is far from one of the highly respected career options in the eyes of college students or the American public at large; that the average SAT score of teacher education majors is below the national average at less than 900; and that most districts' methods for teacher recruitment, selection, and professional development bear little qualitative resemblance to the elaborate human resources systems that characterize successful organizations in other sectors.

However, an education revolution is currently being launched from outside the classroom. Calls for longer school days, better teachers, and more relevant curricula have recently been subsumed by calls for a whole new concept of school. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander has created of New American Schools Development Corporation,<sup>1</sup> a company that funds "design teams" to develop a new model for K-12 education. Chris Whittle<sup>2</sup> has pulled together some of our leading education reformers for the purpose of creating and building a for-profit school system so radical that the public system has to respond. Alexander and Whittle are questioning all of the assumptions we have made to date about subject areas, grade levels, textbooks, and teachers.

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1. The New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) is one component of the Bush Administration's new education strategy, "AMERICA 2000." NASDC is an independent, non-profit organization, funded by private corporations and foundations. It intends to support a number of design teams organized to create and test designs of new high-performance educational environments, and to assist communities in adopting and recreating these designs for their own purposes.

2. Chris Whittle is chairman of an innovative media company, Whittle Communications, based in Knoxville, Tennessee. The company's newest venture, Whittle Schools & Laboratories, will invent, build and operate a new system for educating young people. After several years of laboratory research by 100 innovators from education, business, science and other fields, the first 200 centers of learning will open their campuses in the fall of 1986.

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Nonetheless, the success of the new educational institutions that result will rise or fall on the creativity, intellect, and drive of the people who staff, manage, and lead them.

If we are to develop a quality education system—one in which schools have the ability to transform themselves into first class educational institutions of the future—schools and school districts must assume *full* responsibility for the recruitment, selection, preparation, and development of a quality teaching force. Moreover, states must grant them the freedom to implement comprehensive programs that replace rather than supplement current personnel practices.

### I. REFORMING SCHOOLS OF EDUCATION WILL NOT BE ENOUGH

Those concerned with teacher quality often focus their attention on college and university schools of education. Yet education schools are disconnected from the K-12 schools that must forge ahead to develop new models and approaches of schooling; acting independently, they are not in the position to prepare and develop the staff that new schools will demand. Moreover, schools of education face a status problem that jeopardizes their ability to assume the lead role in teacher recruitment, selection, and development. Education schools' reputation among university officials often results in a lack of funding and therefore a lack of freedom to adopt necessary reforms. Worse, their reputation among college students and the American public impairs their ability to attract our most talented individuals.

Teachers need to acquire knowledge about the learners they will teach, about learning patterns and problems, and about a wide array of teaching strategies. They also must stay up-to-date on the latest research in these areas. Structured effectively to conduct appropriate training and to communicate research findings, universities and schools of education should be involved in developing the people who staff schools. The question, then, is *how* and *when* they should be involved. Most of the teachers with whom I have spoken believe that they are best prepared to understand and absorb knowledge about teaching and learning after they have experienced full responsibility for a classroom.

Some schools of education are endeavoring to address this dilemma by collaborating with local schools in the formation of "Professional Development Schools" where university faculty and experienced teachers work together to develop future teachers in the school setting. Although this is a tremendous improvement on the prevailing model, my contention is that *school districts* should bear the responsibility for ensuring that their new teachers are prepared in such professional development schools. Under my proposal, districts would recruit and select future teachers and pay for their development, thus circumventing the challenges created by the poor image of teacher education schools.

Districts would have complete freedom in determining at what point in the course of teachers' careers they receive development. Through either in-house systems or contracts with outside institutions, districts would develop the types of teachers most effective in their particular communities' schools and in the school models they have created.

Progressive schools of education begin their reform initiatives by recognizing that tomorrow's K-12 schools will look entirely different from today's schools. Many such education schools have themselves joined in the Holmes Group,<sup>3</sup> a consortium which for six years has called for change in the content and methods of teacher education. Holmes Group members recognize that our concept of school is evolving, and that as our concept of school evolves, our concept of teacher will necessarily change. Any reform in the way we identify and develop teachers must keep pace. With an upcoming overhaul of traditional schools as their premise, schools of education nevertheless proceed to search for better ways to identify and develop teachers for today's schools rather than for those of the future. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to expect otherwise so long as they are responsible for supplying and developing teachers for the immediate market, and so long as they are disconnected from changing schools. Ongoing, direct school district responsibility for staff development is the answer.

## II. STATES MUST STOP MICRO-MANAGING

States currently attempt to micro-manage the educational human resources system by establishing "standards" for teacher quality. I put the word *standards* in quotes because that label ill fits the regulations found in licensure laws. In fact, the regulations are coursework requirements that exclude some candidates who would be great teachers and at the same time approve others who will not be. Licensure laws, for example, can prohibit a former doctor from teaching science, or a Phi Beta Kappa math major from teaching elementary school, but might, on the other hand, allow a teaching certificate to just about *anyone* who completes an education major at an accredited university. Licensure requirements vary from state to state. Some states prescribe education coursework in areas such as the history and philosophy of education, child psychology, and instructional strategies; some states require certain credit hours in various content areas such as math, science, and English; most currently mandate a mixture of both. That these requirements vary widely among states should indicate that they do not stem from any widely accepted, research-supported view of what teachers should know and be able to do.

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3. The Holmes Group is a consortium of U.S. research universities committed to help improve the quality of schooling through research and development and the preparation of professional teachers.

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Furthermore, coursework taken does not necessarily equate with knowledge acquired, and course selection is hardly a measure of the assets of a quality teacher.

Some state officials have undertaken efforts to reform the licensure system. However, states fear that school districts will do a poor job in recruiting and selecting teachers, and that they will make insufficient provision for the ongoing professional development of those they hire. State officials therefore leave countless restrictions on the books to ensure some degree of quality control. The resulting maze of requirements is often counterproductive; it deters many of the most outstanding candidates from even thinking about teaching.

Teach For America recruits individuals who have majored in everything from math or science to international relations without regard to their particular courses of study. Although we place our recruits in districts that waive full certification requirements because of a shortage of qualified, certified teachers, we must comply with alternative certification laws, a maze of requirements unto themselves. We cope with this by placing in Texas an individual who does not fulfill requirements in California, for example, and by placing in California one who cannot teach in Texas. We have been unable to detect any difference in teacher quality between the corps members placed in different states; the reviews we receive from district and school officials are consistent across the country.

I propose that states abandon their role as micro-managers and abolish licensure laws altogether. They should instead devise mechanisms for holding districts accountable for student achievement. Districts would then assume the responsibility for setting meaningful standards for teacher quality. They would be responsible for the professional development and evaluation of teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, for their recruitment and selection.

### III. RECRUITING & SELECTING TOMORROW'S TEACHERS

Although some districts do conduct recruitment drives, many simply choose teachers from those candidates who approach them. Moreover, I have found that many of the districts that do recruit start from the assumption that they will not be able to attract our nation's most academically talented individuals. If they recruit on college campuses, for example, they avoid those that are most prestigious on the theory that "There is no way someone from Stanford would *teach*." (That is a direct quote from a personnel official in one of the nation's largest school districts.) My point is not that the best teachers are found only at "elite" institutions, rather that school districts automatically discount those individuals whom they perceive to have a great many other career opportunities.

Every public school district should launch recruitment efforts not unlike those conducted by major firms in corporate America. In cases where they are too small to justify a recruitment effort of the scale that would be effective in attracting the necessary talent, districts could create economies of scale by forming cooperatives in which they would pool their resources to launch a combined effort. Alternatively, the state could facilitate joint efforts. Districts should develop strategies to attract many different sectors of applicants, including older, more experienced candidates. While its experience is largely with college students, Teach for America could be instructive.

We based our effort to recruit college students on an understanding of the mindset of graduating seniors. We started with the following assumptions: (1) college students have heard all their lives that teaching is not something to do if other career options are accessible; (2) college students often do not realize that they can teach in public schools without a degree in education; (3) graduating seniors see before them a wealth of opportunities and therefore find it difficult to choose among career options; (4) college students are hesitant to commit themselves to a single path for more than a few years—which helps to explain the popularity of law school and other professional schools, as well as the success of aggressive corporate campaigns to recruit seniors into two-year training programs; and (5) college students often have spent their college years actively involved in community service and tutoring activities and are looking for an opportunity to assume a meaningful responsibility.

In recruiting at 150 colleges and universities, Teach For America addresses these attitudes in ways that could also prove effective for school districts. Our approach is to: (1) be highly selective in an effort to counter the downwardly mobile image of teaching; (2) recruit seniors from all majors aggressively so that they know teaching is an option; (3) establish personal contact with as many graduating seniors as possible in order to sway driven yet undirected individuals to consider teaching; (4) require an initial commitment of two years on the theory that this initial experience will shape recruits' interests and career direction; and (5) focus promotional sessions on the impact teachers can make on childrens' lives and the future of the nation.

In competition with corporate recruiters and graduate schools, full-time Teach For America recruiters go beyond traditional recruitment strategies and communicate directly with students through classes and student organizations. Recruiters make a particular effort to reach individuals for whom districts express a particular need: those who are bilingual, those who majored in math, science, and foreign languages, and people of color. Such a strategy is a far cry from the recruitment techniques that most public districts currently employ. By not taking dramatic, visible steps to enhance the selectivity of teaching in their schools, many districts subject themselves to the common image of teaching. Most districts limit themselves to education majors, and it would be

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rare to find a teacher recruiter out talking with the members of the Black Student Union, or speaking to a math class. Finally, most districts would not encourage graduating seniors who are not willing to commit more than two years to teaching in their district.

Statistics do little to capture the quality of the corps members, but they can at least indicate the effectiveness of our recruitment mechanisms. Teach For America selected 500 charter corps members out of the 2,500 individuals who applied in 1990; 700 new corps members, chosen from an applicant pool of 3,100, joined them in 1991. Corps demographics defy national averages: while 8% of graduates of teacher education schools are people of color, 24% of our corps members represent minority groups; while 18 percent of education graduates are male, 38 percent of our corps members are male; and corps members' average SAT (self-reported) is 1255.

We believe that many of these recruits will decide to remain in teaching and education beyond their initial two-year commitment. It is difficult to predict the percentage of corps members who will stay in the classroom, for our charter corps members are in the midst of only their second year of teaching. Yet we have seen this experience dramatically affect corps members' mindsets and career directions. One who had been headed to law school is still going, but with an intention to concentrate on education law. One who had deferred an acceptance from Harvard Law recently wrote to the admissions office to explain his decision to remain in the classroom. One who turned down an investment banking offer, still with the intention of heading to business school after Teach For America, is now applying to graduate schools of education. Everyone has his or her own story. We believe that a substantial group will remain in teaching, a good percentage will go on to graduate school in education with the intention of either returning to the classroom or working in other aspects of the educational system, and others will work in education and related fields in order to effect systemic change.

Teach For America's teacher selection strategy, in addition to its recruitment strategy, could also be adapted for use by school districts. On the advice of experienced practitioners who have worked closely with our corps members, we have developed the following criteria for teacher selection: a high level of commitment demonstrated through excellence in academics, extracurricular activities, or work experience; effective communication skills; maturity; leadership; flexibility and adaptability; and an educational approach consisting of respect for all students and a love of children. We look for these characteristics through a written application, three written references, a sample teaching session, and two interviews.

If public schools were to adopt this approach to teacher selection, districts could put candidates through an on-campus selection process and invite top candidates to interview directly with individual schools where committees of

teachers would recommend candidates and principals would approve them. Too often, teacher selection occurs only at the district level or only at the school level; either one without the other is insufficient. Districts must control the quality of its teachers (given that the state would no longer do so), and those at the school level must have the opportunity to ensure that new teachers have the personality and philosophical approach that would be effective within the particular school. Given that this recruitment and selection strategy aims to attract individuals who do not necessarily have a background in teacher education, districts and schools would avoid using selection criteria that presuppose textbook knowledge of teaching strategies and learning styles.

These recruitment and selection strategies would represent a radical departure for most public school personnel offices. However, teachers, principals, and district personnel officers from across the country rave about the quality of Teach For America's corps members. One assistant principal in Los Angeles recently told me, "Your teachers are like the teachers we used to see thirty years ago." She was referring to their energy and commitment level, and to the enthusiasm with which they assumed additional responsibilities. Corps members approach their jobs with a deep sense that they have a lot to learn from their more experienced teaching peers. Their dedication and humility go a long way to mitigate possible negative reactions or resentment felt by teachers who might be skeptical of those who enter the classroom without having satisfied the training requirements to which they themselves have been held.

#### IV. PROVIDING PRE-SERVICE AND ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In order to ensure that their teachers have knowledge of learners and a broad and growing repertoire of teaching strategies, schools should commit themselves to providing effective pre-service and ongoing professional development for the teachers they hire. Schools and districts could provide such programs in-house, or they could contract with universities and other organizations to develop special programs tailored to the schools' needs.

Teach for America is far from able to present a complete proposal for the effective collaboration of school districts and universities in teacher training. We have, however, learned a great deal about teacher professional development and support over the past two years by talking with and surveying corps members, experienced teachers who work with them, and their principals.

We learned from our corps members that the single greatest determinant of beginning teacher satisfaction is the degree of support they receive from principals and "mentor teachers," experienced teachers within the school who are paired with new teachers. Ideally, the mentors receive training about effective mentoring and "release time" for observing, planning, and providing feedback to the beginning teacher.

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Support for new teachers does not always occur spontaneously, which is why we now assign experienced teachers from outside the school setting the responsibility for beginning teacher support. These “Support Directors” attempt to establish strong relationships with principals and ensure that each new teacher is paired with a mentor teacher within the school. As someone not connected with the particular school’s politics, Support Directors also provide additional perspective and guidance through classroom observations and one-on-one conferences. We have found that corps members appreciate classroom observation and feedback from someone who is clearly not playing a valuative role.

Additionally, we have seen the immense value of the support network that has spontaneously developed among our corps members. Because they meet during the summer and then move together to new locations, and because they are often united by similar goals and beliefs, they are bonded by a remarkable *esprit de corps*. They room together and socialize together, share ideas and frustrations. They keep each other going. We have often thought of a marathon analogy: how many people would run twenty-six miles alone? We promote this camaraderie through local newsletters and social events, and by providing a resource center where corps members gather to use copying facilities, a library, and computers.

Finally, we have dramatically revised our notions about pre-service training and its relationship to ongoing professional development. We are currently in the process of developing a two-year professional development program which includes a pre-service institute, an on-site orientation program, three or four regional weekend conferences during the academic year, and a second summer program. This effort is a result of our discovery that there is a great need for a “seamless” program of pre-service and ongoing professional development. Approaches taught in a pre-service program can be overwhelmed by the realities of the classroom. It is essential to pull the beginning teacher back from his or her experience, and to reinforce continually the themes conveyed in the pre-service program.

The professional development model we create will call upon corps members to complete portfolios demonstrating mastery of certain teaching techniques and theories. We will support them in completing these portfolios by offering the guidance of a faculty of experienced teachers and teacher educators and by providing a great variety of resources—workshops, seminars, video libraries, libraries, and so forth. Rather than dictate a process they must complete in order to attain a credential, this model emphasizes the outcomes we want corps members to achieve. We developed the portfolio approach after spending two years essentially replicating the practices of most schools of education in our six-week pre-service Institute. Our corps members, after practice-teaching in the mornings, would attend an intense schedule of mandat-

ed classes and lectures. The result was a frustrated group of individuals who lacked control over their own learning and were thus turned off to the entire process. By calling upon corps members to assume the responsibility for their own education as teachers, we hope to capitalize on their individual initiative, commitment, creativity, and problem solving skills.

Teach for America is still working to resolve, through evaluation and continuing discussions with corps members and more experienced educators, a number of questions about teacher professional development. What should be included in pre-service professional development, and what is best left until later? What is the best format (case studies, projects, lectures) through which to impart the history of education, theories about learning styles and child development, and so on? As school districts take a more active role in seeking the answers to these questions and many others, states and universities can contribute immensely by evaluating district practices and by communicating information about the best of them to the education community at large.

#### V. EVALUATING AND REWARDING TEACHER PERFORMANCE

Systems to evaluate teacher performance must complement mechanisms for teacher recruitment, selection, and development. Our experience indicates that, all too often, teachers are on their own the minute they enter their classrooms. Too many principals abdicate their role as managers and do not communicate expectations to teachers, provide feedback, or evaluate performance. Effective principals not only set expectations and establish mechanisms for constant feedback and evaluation, but they also have the desire and ability to act on the results of these evaluations.

Moreover, in order to achieve the results that states and parents demand, districts must reward teachers who perform well. I believe that teachers will begin to gain the respect and rewards they deserve once schools and school districts assume the responsibilities I describe. District and school officials will advocate better teacher compensation once they themselves assume the responsibility for actively competing with other sectors to recruit and retain top candidates. And society at large will begin to respect the profession of teaching, and to support better teacher compensation, once it perceives that teachers are qualified to make more money. Active recruitment efforts, competitive selection processes, and rigorous evaluation mechanisms will do much to convince the public that teachers deserve more.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

This article is not a call for the reform of schools of education. It is a call for states to get out of the way as our school districts take action to recruit,

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select, develop, and evaluate teachers. In order to help defray the increased cost which districts will incur, states should allocate to districts monies which were previously allocated to licensure boards and to public schools of education. Rather than micro-manage personnel decisions, states should focus directly on levels of student achievement.

Anything less than this global and dramatic approach will fall short of what is needed to improve our schools. State officials may decide to respond to calls for a simpler licensure system that does less to deter good candidates from entering teaching. Such efforts, independent of other initiatives, are unlikely to go very far unless state officials gain confidence in the quality of teacher recruitment and training mechanisms.

In the absence of a global approach to reform, districts and schools of education are not equipped to transform teaching staffs. Districts are forced to limit their searches to those who will meet licensure guidelines and who will be effective given current mechanisms for support and ongoing professional development. Proceeding independently, education schools are limited by their poor reputation among university officials and students and by the inaccurate assumption that most teacher development should occur before someone enters the classroom. Furthermore, there is little reason to expect that schools of education, disconnected from school-based education reform, will produce the teachers demanded by tomorrow's schools.

The first step in any given state, then, must be for districts, universities, teacher associations, and state education departments to come together with an open-minded and sincere commitment to global reform of the educational human resources system. Each actor must be willing to let go of current roles and to assume new and probably more demanding ones. This article has examined the role that districts must assume. Universities and teacher associations should utilize their extensive knowledge about teacher development by working closely with districts in developing and implementing new human resources systems. State education departments will have to determine the expectations they have for the school districts' performance, establish mechanisms to evaluate districts' progress towards those expectations, reward districts that meet them, and develop a way to work with those that do not meet expectations.

Districts that assume full control of recruiting, selecting, and developing their educational human resources will gain more than a better teaching force. They will empower themselves to take part in the nascent education revolution. The innovative school models promised by Chris Whittle and Lamar Alexander will impact the public system when, and only when, schools and school districts succeed in building a talented, committed teaching force which embraces change and buys into the philosophical approach of those models. Public school districts which succeed in this will do more than respond to

external models. They will become dynamic, learning organizations which themselves will invent and continually improve our schools of the future.