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## RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

### Reversing the Deprofessionalization of Teaching

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Education policy over the past quarter century has been dominated by the twin reforms of school choice and testing. These two policies represent the broader reform emphases of: (a) deregulation and free-market ideology, and (b) outcomes-focused and standards-based testing to drive accountability and school improvement.<sup>1</sup> In some ways, these two emphases are in tension, but they have combined to drive an era of deprofessionalization. This brief describes today's deprofessionalization pressures and the resulting easy-entry, easy-exit approach to the hiring and firing of teachers. It also offers policy options to address some of the damage currently being done.

### Background

A solid “62% of public school parents said they trust and have confidence in the nation’s teachers.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, “55% of Americans and 63% of public school parents oppose including student scores on standardized tests as part of teacher evaluations.”<sup>3</sup> But these sentiments are not reflected in current policies, which seek to remove professional responsibility from teachers and to evaluate them based in large part on students’ test scores.

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Professor Richard Milner, the Helen Faison Endowed Chair of Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh, looked closely at the issue of deprofessionalization in a policy brief he wrote for NEPC.<sup>4</sup> He grouped teacher deprofessionalizing activities into three broad categories: (1) alternative (fast-track or no-track) teacher preparation and licensure; (2) the adoption of policies that evaluate teachers based on students' test score gains, and specifically, those based on value-added assessment; and (3) scripted, narrowed curricula. The first two of these were mentioned above, and the third is a natural consequence of the first two.

Each of these three is considered below, in the context of a 10 percent drop in enrollment in teacher preparation programs from 2004 to 2012; California saw a 53% plummet from just 2008 to 2012.<sup>5</sup> Correspondingly, teachers' satisfaction with their jobs dropped from 62 to 39 percent between 2008 and 2012, its lowest level in 25 years.<sup>6</sup> These trends raise ongoing concerns for students, teachers, schools and society.

## Fast-Track Teacher Training

When No Child Left Behind became law in 2002, it included a "highly qualified" teacher provision, mandating full state certification or licensure, as well as a provision requiring notification of a community when a school falls short of meeting this requirement. But Congress and the last two presidents have allowed "interim" teachers to be considered highly qualified, which opens the door for "Teach For America" core members and similar *alternative* approaches for entering the classroom.

Deregulation and free-market ideology have driven this shift toward alternative routes into the classroom. When a job is treated as a profession, employment is grounded in a deep body of knowledge and set of skills. There are no alternative routes to medicine, and such routes to law are almost non-existent. In many ways, the profession of teaching has never reached the level of medicine or law, but throughout the past five or six decades it did rise to a genuine profession. This is now changing. In 2011-12, about 15 percent of those who completed teacher education programs did so through an alternative route.<sup>7</sup>

This shift is motivated in part by the contention that students' test scores are not well predicted by the specific education program attended by a student's teachers<sup>8</sup> and in part by the contention that labor market incentives—loosened entry restrictions in combination with performance incentives—will increase teacher quality.<sup>9</sup> These contentions devalue professional knowledge and rely heavily on trust in a deregulated market.

## Evaluating Teachers by Students' Test Scores

Job evaluations of teachers include both formative and summative elements—those designed to improve and those designed to rate.<sup>10</sup> Charging that these evaluations have been insufficient in scope and rigor, critics have changed their policy focus to student outcomes. The 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report precipitated a shift toward test score gains as the most important way to evaluate the quality of schools,<sup>11</sup> culminating in the No Child Left Behind act. Following suit, the Obama administration used its Race to the Top policy and its NCLB "Flexibility" waiver policy to prod 42 states and the District of Columbia to adopt test-based teacher evaluations.<sup>12</sup>

Growth-modeling approaches attempt to isolate each teacher's effect on test scores, often

using regression analyses. Among the problems that have arisen are: (a) tests measure only a slice of what we hope students learn from teachers; (b) a student's learning often depends on more than one teacher; (c) a student's learning always depends on factors not included in the regression equations, such as peer effects and learning opportunities in the home and community; (d) factors included in the equations can be poor proxies for what they hope to measure (e.g., using "free- and reduced-price lunch status" as a proxy for family socio-economic status); and (e) practices such as *teaching to the test*, narrowing the curriculum, and even outright cheating result in distorted data.

The growth numbers yielded by these approaches are only weakly related to other effectiveness measures (such as classroom observations and teacher surveys).<sup>13</sup> The American Statistical Association is highly critical of the use of value-added models (VAM) for educational assessment. The ASA found "Most VAM studies find that teachers account for only 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores." It cautions, "Ranking teachers by their test scores can have unintended consequences that reduce quality."<sup>14</sup> The American Educational Research Association (AERA) followed suit in their statement, "Accordingly, the AERA recommends that VAM...not be used without sufficient evidence that (the) technical bar has been met in ways that support all claims, interpretive arguments, and uses (e.g., rankings, classification decisions)."

Since teachers are now being dismissed on the basis of these policies, at least 14 court cases have been filed across seven states.<sup>15</sup>

## Scripted and Narrow Curriculum

Prescribed curriculum is not new to American education. From the McGuffey Readers of more than a century ago, to the Basic Skills Movement of the 1970s,<sup>16</sup> to approaches such as Direct Instruction in today's classrooms, policymakers have sought to provide tight curricular guidance to teachers. Specified curricula can be scripted down to the minute.<sup>17</sup> For beginning or struggling teachers, this can provide a handy road map. But it can handcuff and demoralize teachers who are expert professionals.<sup>18</sup> Further, with the increasing cultural diversity in the nation's schools, a single model, based on a single culture, may prove constricting and self-defeating of more pluralistic social goals.<sup>19</sup>

The current test-based standards and accountability movement attempts to align curriculum and performance standards with classroom curriculum and assessment.<sup>20</sup> The test results can result in sanctions for teachers and schools, as well as remediation for students. Given these high stakes, it is not surprising that schools have limited teacher discretion to wander from the script.<sup>21</sup> A clear danger to teaching and learning is to reduce it to a rote set of repeated exercises.

As the Center on Education Policy found in their multi-state analysis, teachers and principals narrowed the curriculum and focused on those skills they expected to be tested.<sup>22</sup> The result was the arts, social studies and other non-tested subjects were reduced. With the recession of 2008 and the subsequent cuts in school budgets, the mandated tested areas were less subject to cuts.<sup>23</sup>

The result was curriculum narrowing was further accelerated. Since the penalties are most likely to be imposed on the schools with poorer populations, the broad effect is for poorer schools to have a less rich curriculum, more drill and practice and the end result is a school

program markedly lower in quality than that provided to their more affluent peers.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Fast-track preparation programs undermine teaching as a profession that requires special knowledge and experience. High-stakes teacher evaluations based on measures of student growth measures are prone to teacher misclassification and improper high stakes decisions. Narrowed curriculum can demoralize expert teachers and stultify learning by reducing teaching and learning to a mechanical process. It is a poor reflection on our society's sense of justice that these policies are concentrated in our poorest areas, where students already face an opportunity gap. We therefore make the following recommendations:

- Teacher education programs should be strengthened, with increased focus on developing the pedagogical content knowledge and expertise that should be demanded of professionals.
- State education agencies should not recognize or approve teacher education programs or accreditation agencies that fail to provide a full teacher preparation program. Furthermore, they should not license teachers who have not successfully completed such a program and an appropriate field experience.
- Teacher evaluations should also be strengthened, making use of established approaches that create the supports and incentives to improve teaching and learning, such as peer assistance and review.<sup>25</sup>
- As test-based policies such as value-added teacher assessment are prone to misclassification and do not validly measure the range of skills necessary for effective teaching, a moratorium should be placed on their use.
- Scripted, narrow curricula can serve a valuable role for novice teachers and in locations where an articulated curriculum is not available. They do not, however, represent the full range of necessary learning opportunities for all students in all locations. Thus, a broadening, not narrowing, of the curriculum is needed. This can only be accomplished by a partial or complete decoupling of test scores from the high-stakes consequences that compel a narrowed curriculum.

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*The mission of the **National Education Policy Center** is to produce and disseminate high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence. For more information on NEPC, please visit <http://nepc.colorado.edu/>.*

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