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REVIEW OF *A NEW AGENDA:* *RESEARCH TO BUILD A BETTER* *TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM*

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Summary of Review

Bellwether Education Partners' report, *A New Agenda*, calls for a “rational” and “rigorous” research agenda for teacher education. Although the report’s rationale is not fully explicated, it asserts that programs are “blindly swinging from one popular reform to the next” and that decades of input- and outcome-based research has failed to improve teacher education. Instead, the report calls for “rapid cycle evaluations.” Regrettably, this depiction of past research includes mischaracterizations and also omits a wide swath of relevant literature about teacher education. Further, the report does not adequately explain what “rapid cycle evaluations” would entail or how they would work to improve teacher preparation program design, nor does the report offer a research foundation for this approach. The report also fails to recognize the socio-political context of teacher education, wherein programs are often left scrambling to meet competing accountability expectations. *A New Agenda* leaves practical questions unanswered, muddies the waters about promising research avenues, and ignores important bodies of literature in teacher education. Ultimately it represents a missed opportunity to offer guidance to either policymakers or institutions.



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REVIEW OF *A NEW AGENDA: RESEARCH TO BUILD A BETTER TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM*

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I. Introduction

Bellwether Education Partners, a nonprofit educational consulting and policy organization that “has no tolerance for drama or the politics of education affecting our work,” aims to develop and promote strategies across U.S. education to more effectively educate underserved students.² *A New Agenda: Research to Build a Better Teacher Preparation Program*, which is authored by Bellwether analysts Ashley LiBetti Mitchel and Melissa Steel King, is based on the assumption that in order to improve teacher quality, the field must first improve teacher preparation program design.³ The report asserts that despite decades of research, it is still unclear how to design an effective teacher preparation program and as a consequence states, programs, and analysts have been “blindly swinging from one popular reform to the next” (p. 19). The Bellwether report calls for a new “rigorous” research agenda that “explores a multitude of possible improvement strategies, testing which components of program design are effective” (p. 3). The report’s title echoes Elizabeth Green’s popular book, *Building a Better Teacher*.⁴ This locates it squarely within the context of the “ed reform” movement and its operating assumptions, borrowed from business, about failing schools, teachers as both culprits and saviors, and innovation supported by evidence as a major driver of reform. Despite its call, the Bellwether report is long on general critique and short on clarity and details about the new agenda it champions and how it could actually work.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The Bellwether report draws three major conclusions about the past, present, and future of research about teacher education, each captured by a section heading. The report asserts that although rigorous research is the key to teacher education improvement, neither of the two “loudest arguments” (p. 3) about how to improve—what the report calls a focus on input-based standards vs. a focus on completer outcomes—has ample evidence to support it. The report’s first conclusion is stated in the section heading, “research on inputs provides

little guidance for program design” (p. 4). In terms of *candidate* inputs (i.e., SAT/ACT scores, high school or undergraduate GPA, selectivity of candidates’ undergraduate institutions), the report concludes that the impact of teachers’ academic ability on effectiveness is small, and the inputs research does not provide guidance about program design. In terms of *program* inputs (i.e., number of required courses, content courses, pedagogy courses, student teaching hours), the report concludes that it is unclear how much or what kind of coursework and clinical fieldwork are necessary. The report’s second major conclusion is “outcomes-based efforts are on the right path, but can’t yet drive program improvement” (p. 9). According to the report, outcomes-based teacher education research builds on state accountability systems that hold teacher education programs accountable for the achievement of their graduates’ eventual students. The report argues that although it is more promising than inputs research, outcomes-based research is generally not useful for improving program design because there is often no difference between programs. Even when there is, the report claims, this approach doesn’t tell us how programs should be redesigned. The third conclusion is that “future research must be useful for program design” (p. 11). The report asserts that research should concentrate on how and why programs or practices are effective and should be “actionable in real time, use multiple measures of teacher performance, and produce strategies that can inform program design and practice” (p. 12).

Along these lines, the report makes three recommendations (p. 15):

- Researchers should rethink the focus and design of future studies.
- Teacher preparation programs should be a source of new research and effective strategies.
- State and federal policymakers should foster innovation and collaboration.

III. Rationale for Findings and Conclusions

The authors do not explicitly state a rationale for their conclusions, but this can be inferred from the assumptions they make. First the report assumes that teachers are critical to students’ achievement and that high-quality teacher education programs are critical to the quality of teachers. Although there is some debate and critique here, this first assumption is fairly broadly accepted. The second assumption is that teacher education programs are weak and may not be worth the money teacher candidates spend on them; the report assumes that this is largely because programs are crafted on the basis of reform fads, theory and ideology, or by guessing about what seems promising. This assumption echoes the “ed reform” rhetoric, but the report offers no evidence for this claim and ignores the policy constraints that are placed on programs.⁵ The third assumption is that the key to teacher preparation reform is rigorous research about program design. The report rejects inputs research, which it claims has produced little, as well as large-scale outcomes research, which the report calls a “blunt instrument.” Rather the report asserts that the goal of teacher education research

must be reframed so that it focuses on producing strategies that inform program design and practice. This may or may not be a good idea, but the report offers neither an evidence-based rationale nor a persuasive logical argument for this. In fact the vague and very general recommendations the report offers could have been made without the benefit of research.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The Bellwether report argues that previous research on teacher preparation has failed to produce knowledge that informs program redesign, even though this is key to improvement. The report attempts to capture the recent history of teacher preparation research in terms of two big categories: inputs-based and outcomes-based research. This is a problem. Although the shift from inputs to outcomes works reasonably well as a description of changes in teacher education accountability over the last several decades,⁶ it does not work as an effective way to characterize the recent history of research on teacher education, and it is confusing to boot. What the Bellwether report calls inputs research is actually also highly interested in outcomes—for example, research that asks whether higher teacher candidate GPAs (which the reports calls inputs) are correlated with greater student achievement clearly focuses on the outcome of student achievement. Similarly what Bellwether calls outcomes research is actually also highly interested in inputs—for example, research that investigates whether particular entry pathways into teaching are correlated with distribution of teacher quality and/or with student achievement (which the report calls outcomes) is highly interested in the input of entry pathway. The Bellwether report's use of inputs-outcomes as an organizing frame for assessing the contribution of teacher education research to program redesign ultimately does more to muddy the waters than clarify them.

Although the Bellwether report is about teacher preparation program redesign, it focuses on policy research with many citations to working papers from organizations such as CALDER and NBER or to articles in economics and policy-oriented journals. Policy research on teacher education, which includes both what the report calls inputs-based and outcomes-based research, is primarily intended to study the effects and effectiveness of the human capital policies and personnel practices of states, local school districts, and teacher preparation providers. This work is not particularly generalizable to individual program design components or to how candidates learn to teach. Meanwhile the Bellwether report cites only a handful of articles or chapters from teacher education journals or handbooks, omitting a huge body of research about teacher education programs and practice, some of which is indeed relevant to program design.⁷ For example, teacher education scholars who are also practitioners often conduct research to examine the course, program, and fieldwork contexts that support teacher learning and to explore how and under what conditions teacher candidates learn to teach. Some of this work is quite relevant to teacher education program design, so its omission is both puzzling and problematic. (This is discussed further below).

V. Review of the Report's Methods

There is no section that describes the report's research methods. In addition it is not clear whether or how the report's recommendations are grounded in research. The Bellwether report itself is an argument—even a call to action—rather than an analysis or a systematic review. The argument is crafted through popular rhetoric, borrows examples from other fields, and provides a loose “ed reform” account of teacher education research with glaring omissions and an inappropriate organizational frame. This undermines the potential the report's approach may actually have for teacher education.

VI. Review of Validity of Findings and Conclusions

The Bellwether report strongly asserts that nuanced and actionable research with multiple measures of teacher performance is the key to “building a better teacher preparation program.” The report concludes that researchers should rethink the study of teacher education, programs should be a source of new research and strategies, and policymakers should support innovation and collaboration. None of these recommendations is necessarily a bad idea nor are they new. However none of them represents a valid conclusion based on the evidence and arguments offered in the report. Thus, the report presents an inaccurate and incomplete account of teacher education research, ignores programs of research that could be helpful, and offers virtually no useful examples.

Specifically the Bellwether report calls for “rapid cycle evaluations” in teacher education, suggesting that teacher education is uniquely situated to conduct these. Born in the health care field and touted because they are inexpensive, fast, and informative for policymakers,⁸ rapid cycle evaluations are now being used in some education contexts. But this information is not provided in the report. Presumably the Bellwether report's call for rapid cycle evaluations is connected to the larger concepts of “improvement science”⁹ and the improvement models developed by Tony Bryk and others to improve K-12 schools and higher education.¹⁰ Given that Bryk's work is arguably the best-developed application of the concepts of improvement science to education, it is more than puzzling that this work is never mentioned in the Bellwether report. In fact, the report does very little to explain what rapid cycle evaluations actually are, let alone how they could be used in teacher education research.

In addition the Bellwether report reflects a limited knowledge of research in teacher education, and does not consider three existing bodies of work that could conceivably be the building blocks for the kind of research the report favors. First, the larger field of research on teacher education includes *design research* in the content areas, particularly in math and science, wherein courses and instructional strategies are considered as “interventions,” “re-designed” activities, and “innovations,” drawing on models from engineering and the design sciences.¹¹ A central feature of design research in teacher education is that researchers investigate a set of ideas about how to foster a particular form of learning, which are

then either confirmed or refuted by systematic collection and analysis of data.¹² Second, there is also a burgeoning body of research in teacher education wherein researchers aim to identify *high leverage* or *core practices* as well as new teacher learning contexts, such as simulations, practice-centered methods courses, and clinical partnerships.¹³ Researchers in this area use cross-institutional cases and mixed methods to investigate program designs and pedagogies such as cycles of rehearsal and enactment and mediated field placements.¹⁴ Third, there is a great deal of existing *practitioner research* in teacher education wherein individuals or teams of teacher educators explore the design and impact of coursework and fieldwork arrangements in order to improve practice and enhance teacher candidates' learning in relation to specific issues, such as working with diverse populations.¹⁵ Our purpose here is not to elaborate the strengths and weaknesses of these three—or other—programs of research. Rather we point out that with one exception,¹⁶ the Bellwether report fails to cite any of the existing teacher education research that examines the conditions under which teacher candidates learn to teach with the express purpose of improving the structures and pedagogies that support teacher candidates' learning. Given the obvious connections of this existing research to the research the Bellwether report favors, this is unfortunate.

Finally, by suggesting that programs “blindly swing” (p. 19) among popular reforms, the Bellwether report shows little awareness or consideration of the current policy and political context of teacher education. In the U.S., many new teacher education accountability initiatives have been layered on top of older accountability forms, and new education reformers, advocacy groups, and entrepreneurs have entered the teacher education arena, bringing new accountability demands and expectations. The current scene is thus characterized by multiple coexisting accountability expectations, rising uncertainty about the consequences of accountability, and conflicting expectations for professional work.¹⁷ Programs are not “blindly swinging” among popular reforms, but scrambling to meet multiple competing accountability expectations.

The Bellwether report wants to offer a new approach to teacher education program design. But to do so, it is necessary to understand the complicated teacher education landscape. This includes multiple accountability schemes with differing goals and targets as well as new (and old) regulatory, professional, and advocacy actors who work from competing ideas about what is wrong with teacher education and what it would take to fix it.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Although the recommendations of the Bellwether report are not necessarily bad, they are overly general, and the report offers little useful evidence-based guidance for policy or practice. In order to reform teacher education and “build a better teacher education program” for the future, as this report aspires to do, it is necessary to fully examine past research and to fully understand the present context of the field. The Bellwether report does neither. The report completely ignores multiple programs of research in teacher education that are potentially relevant to program redesign. At the same time it reflects little awareness of teacher education's

complex accountability context, including the multiple forms of data that teacher education programs already collect and use for continuous improvement. More than anything else, then, the report is a missed opportunity.

Notes and References

- 1 The authors of this review are members of Project TEER (Teacher Education and Education Reform), a group of scholars and practitioners who work collectively on issues related to teacher education, policy, and politics. The group is directed by Marilyn Cochran-Smith; the names of other group members are listed alphabetically and should be considered co-equal second authors.
- 2 Bellwether Education Partners. (2017). Retrieved February 24, 2017, from <http://bellwethereducation.org/>
- 3 Mitchel, A.L., & King, M.S. (2016). *A new agenda: Research to build a better teacher preparation program*. Sudbury, MA: Bellwether Education Partners.
- 4 Green, E. (2015). *Building a better teach: How teaching works*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- 5 For example, in a major policy brief on teacher education accountability, Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) found that the policy environment for teacher education is extremely complex with competing accountability demands and expectations.
- 6 Cochran-Smith, M. (2005). The new teacher education: For better or for worse? *Educational Researcher*, 34(7), 3-17.

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Hess, F. & McShane, M. (2014). *Teacher quality 2.0*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 7 Cochran-Smith, M., Villegas, A.M., Abrams, L., Chavez Moreno, L., Mills, T. & Stern, R. (2016). Research on teacher preparation: Charting the landscape of a sprawling field. In D. Gitomer & C. Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (5th ed., pp. 439-547). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- 8 Shrank, W. (2013). The Center For Medicare And Medicaid Innovation’s blueprint for rapid-cycle evaluation of new care and payment models. *Health Affairs*, 32(4), 807-812.
- 9 Lewis, C. (2015). What is improvement science? Do we need it in education? *Educational Researcher*, 44(1), 54-61.
- 10 Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America’s schools can get better at getting better*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- 11 Borko, H., Whitcomb, J.A., & Byrnes, K. (2008). Genres of research in teacher education. In M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman Nemser, J. McIntyre, & K. Demers (Eds.) *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (3rd ed., pp.1017-1049). New York, NY: Routledge.
- 12 See Cochran-Smith, M., Villegas, A. M., Abrams, L., Chavez Moreno, L., Mills, T. & Stern, R. (2016), where design research in science teacher education is reviewed as part of a larger review of the full landscape of teacher education research.

13 For example, see:

Ball, D.L., & Forzani, F. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 60(5), 497-511.

Grossman, P., Hammerness, K., & McDonald, M. (2009). Redefining teaching, reimagining teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 15(2), 273-289.

14 For example, see:

Kazemi, E., Franke, M., & Lampert, M. (2009, July). Developing pedagogies in teacher education to support novice teachers' ability to enact ambitious teaching. In R. Hunter, B. Bicknell, & T. Burgess (Eds.), *Crossing divides: Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia* (Vol. 1, pp. 12-30). Palmerston North, New Zealand: MERGA.

15 See Cochran-Smith, M., Villegas, A.M., Abrams, L., Chavez Moreno, L., Mills, T. & Stern, R. (2016), where this work is reviewed. Also see Cochran-Smith, M. & Zeichner, K. (2005) *Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers; this volume includes analyses of research on teacher education programs, pedagogies, coursework, and fieldwork.

16 The Bellwether report contains a single endnote that highlights TeachingWorks and TNTP as programs that are designing teacher preparation around “high impact practices” (p.16).

17 Cochran-Smith, M., Baker, M., Burton, S., Carney, M.C., Chang, W-C., Fernández, M.B., Keefe, E.S., Miller, A., Sánchez, J.G., & Stern, R. (2017). Teacher quality and teacher education policy: The U.S. case and its implications. In M. Akiba & G. LeTendre (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of teacher quality and policy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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