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Summary

“Great Teachers and Great Leaders” (GTGL) is one of six research summaries issued by the U.S. Department of Education in support of its Blueprint for Reform. This review examines the presentation of research about improving teacher and administrator quality in GTGL. The review concludes that there are serious flaws in the research summary. The report, however, lacks sufficient analytic depth, does not present its evidence in a logical manner, makes sweeping claims, and draws conclusions based on weak data..

REVIEW OF *GREAT TEACHERS AND GREAT LEADERS*

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I. Introduction

In March 2010, the Obama administration released a *Blueprint* outlining its proposals for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).¹ In May 2010 the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) followed with a set of six documents offered as “research summaries” supporting the administration’s plans.²

The second of these six reports is titled “Great Teachers and Great Leaders” (GTGL). It is divided into three sections: “Effective Teachers and Leaders,” “Teacher and Leader Pathways,” and “Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund.” The summary includes bibliographic references to approximately 80 sources and has five sidebars to illustrate case studies and examples.³

The content and form of the research summary departs from the usual standards for social science research syntheses. It distorts evidence by showcasing articles from the popular press, government publications, and advocacy think tank reports while ignoring a great deal of relevant peer-reviewed scholarship.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

“Great Teachers and Great Leaders” begins by setting out three claims: (a) “the interaction between teacher and student is the primary determinant of student success”; (b) “[r]esearch shows that top-performing teachers can make a dramatic difference in the achievement of their students”; and (c) it is very important for teachers and principals to access “meaningful information about their practice and [to] support them in using this information” (p. 1). Building on these basic principles, the research summary then spells out several specific evidentiary claims and policy proposals.

The first section of the GTGL research summary is called “Effective Teachers and Leaders.” It emphasizes that teachers and principals are “the key” to student success and points out that educators’ pay is generally not based on performance, but on years of service and courses taken. We do this, according to the report, despite there being “no evidence” (with the exception of mathematics teachers with content degrees) “that teachers with master’s degrees perform better” (p. 6). Further, it argues that professional development does not compensate for the purported ineffectiveness of graduate study, since teachers have insufficient professional development opportunities. It also argues that the quality of professional development is lacking.

Effective principals and teachers, the report argues, should be as available to high-poverty schools as they are to other schools. Yet, identifying effectiveness is problematic. The report confidently asserts that “teacher qualifications” are not a predictor of student learning despite

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acknowledging in the summary that “Most of the current teacher evaluation systems that are used fail to provide feedback [to help] differentiate effective from ineffective teachers” (p. 5). The summary also claims that an area of particular deficiency is teacher access to formative data that would improve instruction, giving teachers timely information helpful for adjusting teaching.

The first section concludes by noting that most compensation systems do not pay incentives for teachers to seek employment in challenging schools or in shortage areas such as math and science and that, consequently, “high-poverty and high-minority schools are least likely to have qualified and effective teachers” (p. 7). This contention is also made concerning the distribution of highly rated principals and other school leaders.

Generally, GTGL recommends performance pay based on outcomes more broadly defined than in the current ESEA. It argues for implementing incentives for professional development and for creating a school environment more flush with data that, in turn, would drive decision-making about this and other school processes. GTGL also strives for greater equity in school staffing to counter the tendency for outstanding teachers to avoid schools impacted by poverty.

The second section of the research summary, “Teacher and Leader Pathways,” begins with two key assertions: (a) that “[m]any teacher preparation programs—traditional and alternative routes—are not preparing educators to succeed in today’s classrooms,” and (b) that “[m]any teacher preparation programs are not highly selective and do not set high standards for completion” (p. 17). Alternative programs are singled out for a lack of selectivity. The summary also contends that there are promising models in operation, particularly ones that emphasize practice and reflection as well as performance or portfolio-capstone activities.

The report argues that improved principal preparation should focus on leading turnaround efforts and should emphasize instruction and leadership standards. Recruitment should be “selective and purposeful” (p. 18). Clinical experiences and school-based internships should be central to these programs.

The third section, “Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund,” calls for the development of differentiated-compensation systems for educators based on existing exemplars. It goes on to critique districts that mismanage hiring and other human-capital-management systems and to argue that tenure and licensure do not take performance into account often enough.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The stated rationale for GTGL and its companion documents is “to inform conversations around ESEA reauthorization.... These documents outline the research base around each section of the blueprint.”⁴ The research summary includes many conclusions that are said to be drawn from the research literature, and the claim that GTGL “outlines the research base” around teacher and principal education invites a high standard of scrutiny.

IV. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The task of assessing the rigor of the research summary requires consideration of two central issues: the quality of the cited research and the connection of that research to the conclusions drawn and policies recommended in the *Blueprint*. The first issue, concerning the research base, is addressed in the next two sections of this review. The second issue, discussed here, is one of the logic of GTGL’s arguments.

The validity of GTGL hinges on its premises’ quality and their use in argument. For example, GTGL claims, “Of all the work that occurs at every level of our education system, the interaction between teacher and student is the primary determinant of student success” (p. 1). Shortly thereafter, it asserts, “The key to student success is providing an effective teacher in every classroom” (p. 3). Yet, while it is arguably true that, *of school factors*, teacher quality is the primary determinant of success, it does not follow that school factors are the factors most vital

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in ensuring or limiting student success. The problem here is that the research summary and the *Blueprint* proposals relating to teacher quality demonstrate a point of view that ignores out-of-school factors. GTGL is, in fact, silent on this issue. And since the report proposes tying measures of teacher quality to student outcomes, this oversight is extremely important.

It should be acknowledged that the report shows deep concern for students in high-poverty and high-minority schools. Moreover, the larger *Blueprint* includes support for “Promise Neighborhoods” modeled on the Harlem Children’s Zone, which does take into account out-of-school factors. But when it comes to high-stakes judgments of teacher quality, the research summary implies by its omission that out-of-school factors are extraneous. The research base tells us otherwise,⁵ and the fact that these out-of-school issues are considered elsewhere in the *Blueprint* does nothing to help here. The data regarding teacher effectiveness—a pillar of GTGL—are misleading if not examined in light of variations due to social context. For instance, one cannot assume that what makes for an effective teacher in a privileged setting makes for one in more challenging settings.

Of course better teachers are a boon to students in any situation. Where the research summary falls short is in not adequately supporting its more ambitious claim that teachers are *the* “key” to student success. The scant research offered includes no meta-analyses or other comprehensive reviews. Instead, these points are supported by only one journal article (in *Econometrica*) and two reports (from the Wallace Foundation and McREL) that bear only on the claim’s leadership aspect—not the teacher aspect—and a self-published document by value-added proponent William Sanders.⁶

The summary and the research cited are overwhelmingly grounded in the assumption that student test scores are the only important outcome of interest. This presumption is built into GTGL by repeated, confident references to claims of “achievement” gains that would more accurately be called “test-score” gains. Euphemisms embodying this assumption include “improving academic outcomes,” “greatly improve student achievement,” “recognize and reward effectiveness,” “successful at increasing student learning,” and “take performance into account.” This is not to say that standardized test scores have no bearing on judging quality, but the validity of GTGL’s argument would be stronger if clear and limited language were used and if other recognized points of view and outcome measures were acknowledged.

Similar problems underlie the prescription of performance-pay and incentive-pay for providing and retaining well-qualified teachers for challenging schools (or shortage areas). The reliance on pay-for-performance is most stark in the “Teacher and Leader Innovation Fund” section of GTGL. Teacher motivation is assumed to be powerfully economic, as though no other motivations are relevant. This assumption is particularly faulty with respect to human service professions such as teaching, since entering many of these professions is a choice to abjure the unbridled path to economic gain in favor of nurturing other life and career values.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

As noted, GTGL looks at only a limited spectrum of the relevant existing research and theory in drawing its conclusions and does not identify or explain this narrow perspective. In judging school quality through standardized testing, for instance, GTGL implicitly adopts one school of thought without any suggestion that there are alternative criteria for evaluation⁷ or mention of the widespread criticisms of the high-stakes testing approach.⁸

Further, the GTGL research summary never cites or considers the extensive body of research concerning the specific disciplinary knowledge of teacher education—the sorts of knowledge insights developed by practitioners of any profession. There is not a single reference to key journals in the field such as *The Journal of Teacher Education*, where such unique professional knowledge might be revealed (see the discussion of citations later in this review).

Similarly, GTGL asserts that meeting the “highly qualified teacher” criterion of NCLB does not predict that teachers will be successful at improving student learning. This may be true, but the research review is an incomplete and skewed survey of the available evidence and thus misleads readers. For example, it omits any discussion of the variability of quality in the teacher education programs that lead to teachers being designated “highly qualified.” Standards such as

a bachelor's degree and state certification are vague and uneven. State licensing and regional accreditation vary widely.

Voluntary professional accreditation is divided between two organizations,⁹ and such accreditation is not mandatory in many states.¹⁰ These accreditation issues are not mentioned in the report -- a major omission. This variation is also illustrated by the fact that in California approximately 20% of teacher preparation is done by two private universities, Chapman

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University and National University, through their transported (off-campus) programs,¹¹ operating throughout the state without professional accreditation and with, at best, a modicum of full-time, doctorally prepared faculty.¹² All these variables are swept into a single term: "highly qualified." This designation—with its admitted lack of predictive ability—is then used as the basis for the *Blueprint's* policy choices.

The same problem arises with the research summary's assertion that, except for mathematics teachers with content degrees, there is "no evidence that teachers with master's degrees perform better."¹³ Such a sweeping claim has little practical meaning or value. To be useful for detailed policymaking, the research cited would need to control for the nature of the master's degree programs, but no such research is provided. This omission is highlighted by GTGL itself acknowledging that teachers with secondary mathematics master's degrees do "perform better." Whether institutions accredited by NCATE (the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) offered the graduate programs, for example, would be germane. Whether the programs were related to the acquisition of a new license or endorsement would also be important, as would whether degrees were awarded by off-campus programs with a one-professor instructional scheme. GTGL ignores all these types of variability in certification and graduate teacher education.

The GTGL research summary also misleads through the selective and narrow choice of research cited about the relevance and selectivity of teacher-education programs, pointing to the relatively low SAT scores of teacher candidates. SAT scores are not the *sine qua non* of selectivity. Studies in the *Journal of Teacher Education* and elsewhere have shown teacher education students outperform other students in their general education coursework.¹⁴ Research has also shown that teacher test scores are a poor predictor of "value-added" teacher effectiveness.¹⁵ This finding is presented, among other places, in the conclusion from a peer-reviewed meta-analysis: "After reviewing a rather large body of validity evidence, we discovered that test scores have been less related to teaching performance than [teacher education] students' success levels in the preservice programs the tests were designed to hold accountable."¹⁶ Finally, for well over two decades NCATE-accredited programs have imposed restrictive admission requirements.¹⁷ At such institutions, teacher education has long since lost its status as a major of last resort.

GTGL celebrates as emerging innovations “promising models” that are basically the same field and clinical experiences that have been required in NCATE-accredited programs since the 1970s. These include focusing on work in classrooms, capstone projects, and portfolios. The report lacks a basic awareness of the landscape of teacher education, including the wide variability among the states in licensure standards and adherence to professional accreditation. The reforms promoted by reports such as GTGL—such as greater selectivity in admissions and a strong component of clinical and field experiences—are well-established practices at hundreds of colleges and universities. When we look at over 650 NCATE-accredited institutions, which taken together are a good representation of mainstream teacher education, we get a view of teacher education that is more selective and more likely to use the practices and approaches favored by the report. Unless we make such groupings, the generalized approach of GTGL leads us to neglect the established successes on which reform can be built. The research summary misses the trees for the forest.

VI. The Report’s Use of the Research Literature

The GTGL research summary is not well grounded in the literature of teacher education. To illustrate, in 2005 as the result of an extensive deliberative process, the American Education Research Association published *Studying Teacher Education*,¹⁸ edited by eminent scholars Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kenneth Zeichner. In 2006, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, another prominent organization) awarded *Studying Teacher Education* its Outstanding Publication Award, describing it as a work “that will serve as a guide to the profession for years to come.”¹⁹ This volume is not cited in GTGL. Nor are Cochran-Smith, Zeichner, or the 14 other panel members who contributed to writing that seminal book.

The Journal of Teacher Education, a publication of the AACTE and arguably the most prestigious journal pertaining to teacher education, keeps current a list of “The 50 Most-Frequently Read Articles.”²⁰ About 100 authors are represented among these articles. In GTGL, the work of just one of these authors is cited. *The Journal of Teacher Education* also publishes a list of “The Most-Frequently Cited Articles.”²¹ Approximately 70 authors are represented in these articles. Again, publications from only one are cited in GTGL. In both cases, the person cited was the same—the work of Linda Darling-Hammond, a respected scholar who played a prominent role in the Obama presidential campaign.²²

Of the 80 or so sources used for the report, approximately 10% are drawn from peer-reviewed journals. Although some of the other references are worthy of citation, GTGL’s overall sampling of the research base is inadequate.

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

Since *A Nation at Risk*, we have become accustomed to the federal government repeating the errors propagated by advocacy think tanks and publishing reports that present themselves as

science but which lack the essential characteristics of research or scholarship. Such reports blur important categories, cherry-pick from a narrow band of publications, and ignore much of the mainstream practice and research in the field. *Great Teachers and Great Leaders* is unfortunately part of this genre. It offers itself as a targeted review of teacher-education knowledge when it is in fact a partisan political text that starts with a conclusion and then finds evidence to support it.

Notes and References

- 1 U.S. Department of Education (2010). A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved June 7 2010, from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>.
- 2 U.S. Department of Education (2010). Research Behind the Obama Administration's Proposal for Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved June 7 2010, from <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/05/research-behind-the-obama-administration>.
- 3 U.S. Department of Education (2010). Great Teachers and Great Leaders. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved June 20, 2010, from <http://ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/great-teachers-great-leaders.pdf>.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education (2010). A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Washington, DC: author. Retrieved August 6, 2010, from <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>.
- 5 The extensive work on this subject by economist Richard Rothstein, for example, is neglected. See Rothstein, R. (2008). *Grading education: Getting accountability right*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the black-white achievement gap*. New York: Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College Press.
- 6 As cited in GTGL: Hanushek, E.(2009). Teacher deselection. In D. Goldhaber and J. Hannaway (eds.), *Creating a New Teaching Profession*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press. Retrieved on February 23, 2010, from <http://edpro.stanford.edu/hanushek/admin/pages/files/uploads/Hanushek%202009%20CNTP%20ch%208.pdf>.
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- 7 In the Edison High School sidebar, an increase in graduation rate is mentioned as an indicator of school success. This is a welcome exception to the general thrust of the report, which relies on standardized test scores.
- 8 For example, Nichols, S. & Berliner, D. (2007). *Collateral damage: How high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Koretz, D. (2009). *Measure for measures: What do standardized tests really tell us about students and schools*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

9 The two accrediting agencies, NCATE and TEAC, are now planning a merger, which should help resolve some ambiguity in the field. See “Toward a unified accreditation system for educator preparation.” Retrieved August 6, 2010, from

http://www.ncate.org/public/011309_UnifiedAccredSys.asp

10 Comparison of membership lists with lists of all colleges and universities preparing teachers for certification. Retrieved August 6, 2010, from

<http://www.ncate.org/institutions/institlist.aspx?ch=106>,

and from

<http://www.teac.org/membership/teac-members/>

11 For the percentage of California teaching graduates at these universities, see

http://www.ctc.ca.gov/reports/TS_2008-2009_AnnualRpt.pdf , Retrieved August 6, 2010. Exact numbers for National University: 2,115; for Chapman University: 1,091; grand total for California in 2008-9: 17,797.

12 For questions about Chapman University’s use of full-time faculty, see

<http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/accred-reports/Chapman-University-2000.pdf>, pg. 12.

Chapman University is currently a candidate for TEAC accreditation; see

<http://www.teac.org/membership/teac-members/>, retrieved August 6, 2010.

For questions about National University’s use of full-time faculty, see

<http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/accred-reports/National-University-2002.pdf>, retrieved August 17, 2010.

Here is an example of a stipulated “concern” by the accreditation team (pg. 18): “The University’s commitment to hiring part-time practitioners has the effect of increasing the responsibilities of the small cadre of full time faculty.”

13 Retrieved June 20, 2010, from

<http://ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/index.html>, pg. 6.

14 Matczynski, T. J., Siler, E. R., McLaughlin, M. L., & Smith, J. W. R. (1988, May). A Comparative Analysis of Achievement in Arts and Science Courses by Teacher Education and Non-teacher Education Graduates. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(3), 32-36.

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15 D’Agostino, J. V. & Powers, S. J.. (2009, March) Predicting teacher performance with test scores and grade point average: A meta-analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 146-82.

16 D’Agostino, J. V. & Powers, S. J.. (2009, March) Predicting teacher performance with test scores and grade point average: A meta-analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 46(1), 165.

17 A current example of how accreditation examples are written in this regard can be found at

<http://www.ncate.org/institutions/unitStandardsRubrics.asp?ch=4> (Retrieved August 6, 2010).

18 Cochran-Smith, M. & Zeichner, K., *Studying teacher education*. (2005) New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

19 Retrieved June 20, 2010, from

<http://www.aera.net/opportunities/?id=999>.

20 Retrieved June 20, 2010, from
<http://jte.sagepub.com/reports/most-read>.

21 Retrieved June 20, 2010, from
<http://jte.sagepub.com/reports/most-cited>.

22 The research summary cites one of Darling-Hammond's books, as well as two reports she co-authored.