OCPA Policy Brief

Forming Teachers: The Education School Challenge

By Greg Forster | August 2019

Executive Summary

Colleges and graduate schools of education are of critical importance—they prepare the teachers who will in turn prepare the rising generation of Americans for adult life and citizenship. Unfortunately, it has been clear for some time that education schools are, on the whole, not delivering the level of formation and training for teachers that parents, schools, and society have a right to expect. These problems do not arise merely from post-1960s radicalism or special-interest politics. Real as those issues are, the deeper roots of the trouble with education schools go back a century. Modern education schools were created as part of a radical movement that rejected the traditional understanding of education as an extension of the home, helping parents in their job of nurturing children and preparing citizens. Education schools were created with a new, technocratic view of the teacher as child development expert, and an ambition to use schools as a political tool to transform the social order in a new image. We shouldn't abandon education schools, and we probably couldn't abandon them if we tried. However, neither leaving the schools to reform themselves nor trying to reform them directly by political force is likely to work. Instead, a few simple (though politically difficult) policy changes could create an incentive structure that would make reinvention plausible, attractive, and sustainable for the schools over the long term.

Duncan's Candor: Education Schools Are Failing

Concern about the quality of education schools is nothing new. In 2009, the Obama administration's new education secretary, Arne Duncan, said that "by almost any standard, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom." Speaking at Teachers College, the nation's most prominent education school, Duncan said he had met hundreds of teachers who told him their education schools hadn't prepared them for the classroom.[1]

Unlike many cabinet secretaries, Duncan was not just some politician put into his post without knowing anything about the topic. When President Obama appointed him, he was already a highly respected figure in the education world. He made his bones building up a mentoring program for some of Chicago's most at-risk youth. Eventually he turned it into an independent charter school. Then he got a job in the Chicago public school system and rose to become the citywide head of public schools from 2001 to 2008. Say what you will about Duncan, his words carry weight.

When he spoke so frankly about education schools in 2009, Duncan was only expressing what every sensible person in the education world had long known. The only thing striking about Duncan's remarks was their candor.

Fully 62% of teachers say education schools don't prepare teachers to teach. If anything, Duncan wasn't candid enough. The most important contemporary study of education schools, published in 2006 by former Teachers College President Arthur Levine, documented a track record for which "mediocre" seems far too mild a term: low admission standards, chaotic curricula, professors lacking much experience as classroom teachers, and a dearth of meaningful quality control. Among many other findings, Levine found that 62% of teachers agreed with this statement: "Schools of education do not prepare their graduates to cope with classroom reality."[2] That's a strongly worded statement, so the fact that almost two-thirds of teachers agree with it—not reformers or critics, but the teachers themselves—makes a fitting summary of Levine's 140-page litany of ed-school failure. Levine concluded that "current teacher education programs are largely ill-equipped to prepare current and future teachers for new realities."[3]

Teacher education makes no visible difference to student achievement. Another report from 2006 is equally damning. A team of scholars with the Brookings Institution graphed the academic achievements of students taught by traditionally certified teachers, by teachers certified through alternative means that circumvent the traditional education-school route, and by uncertified teachers. The three lines on the graph line up almost precisely. Teacher certification, in which education schools play the dominant role, produces no visible difference.[4]

Note that none of the above evidence comes from right-wing sources. Arne Duncan, Arthur Levine, the Brookings Institution, and America's teachers have neither a motive nor an ideological predisposition to say that education schools are failing—none, that is, but a desire to tell the truth.

Not Optional: Why Education Schools Are So Important

The question is not whether education schools are malfunctioning, but whether they're worth saving. They are, for two major reasons:

Teacher quality has a huge impact on quantitative outcomes like test scores. A large body of research finds that teacher quality is associated with big changes in student achievement. For example, leading researcher Eric Hanushek found that even on the most conservative estimates of how big the impact of teacher quality is, replacing America's 8% least-effective teachers with average teachers would eliminate the gap between the U.S. and high-ranking Canada; replacing 12% would catapult the U.S. into a tie with world-leading Finland. If teachers are even more im-

portant than the most conservative estimates imply, we might need to replace as few as 5% of teachers to match Canada and 7% to match Finland.[5] Improving education schools may require a Herculean effort, but the potential payoff is also of Herculean proportions.

The formation of future teachers could have an equally huge effect on qualitative outcomes. We care about a lot more than test scores. We want our kids to grow up with character qualities like honesty, diligence, self-control, and generosity. And, like it or not, a huge part of their personal formation is going to happen in schools. Attempts to produce these kinds of qualitative outcomes through formal programs and curricula have a dismal track record. A comprehensive evaluation of seven character-education systems widely used in schools found that none of them was effective in forming students with the desired qualities.[6] If we want better formation of kids, we should look at the formation of teachers. You can't teach it if you don't live it, and the content of education school curricula signals to teachers what personal qualities and goals are core to the task of teaching.

The Deep Roots: A Century of Technocratic Transformationism

Critics of education schools tend to focus on two issues that are important, but miss the deep roots of the problem. One is the widespread presence—even dominance—of indoctrination into political radicalism in education-school curricula. The other is the role education schools play in the special-interest coalition that dominates the electoral politics of education policy.

It is well-established that education curricula are extensively colonized, not by "progressive" ideology in the ordinary, liberal sense of that term, but by far-left agitprop well outside the mainstream even of liberal progressivism. Education schools do not teach the kind of views that inform the politics of mainstream American progressivism; they teach the views routinely denounced as dangerous and extreme by mainstream American progressivism. Jay Schalin reviewed hundreds of syllabi from three top education schools and found them positively dominated by figures who embrace extreme ideologies such as communism and critical race theory.[7] Other studies find results somewhat less extreme than Schalin's, but all produce findings that place the center of gravity in the education curriculum not only to the left of center, but to the left even of liberal progressivism.[8]

Oklahoma is no exception. On a random day in 2018, I scrolled through the Twitter feed of the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. In the previous week, four events were advertised, of which two were on "environmental moral reasoning and sociomoral reasoning" and "social justice in education." The week before that was "social justice in education week," which got two weeks of hype. By contrast, a lecture by an expert in special education got only one tweet—after it was over.[9]

In his 2009 remarks, Duncan emphasized a different angle: the political protection that education schools get from special-interest politics. Echoing a common line of attack on education schools, Duncan said education schools can get away with doing a lousy job because they are "cash cows."[10] Teachers need credentials from education schools to do their jobs, or to advance professionally, because of arbitrary requirements created by laws, public policies, and collective-bargaining agreements. These artificial barriers to entry (or progress) in the profession leave students as hostages to the education-school system. The requirements are, in turn, politically protected by the big and powerful coalition of education special interests protecting the status quo—a coalition of which the education schools are part, alongside teacher and staff unions.

Both these explanations point to real problems, but the deeper question is how we got here. If we don't understand the underlying dynamics that produce this situation, we won't be able to change it. And, in fact, we have not been able to change it. Decades of scolding education schools to lay off the agitprop, and of exposing their role as players in special-interest politics, have produced no visible progress in dealing with these issues. Clearly, we need to think bigger. The history of the education school goes back further than the radicalism and the school-union politics of the 1960s. The seeds of the present failure in education schools were sown in the very creation of those schools in the early 20th century.

Education schools were created to replace nurture with development. Before the dramatic change in thinking about education that took place in the early 20th century, the dominant understanding of education in American culture was that the school was an extension of the home. Teachers were there to assist parents in their natural task of nurturing children for life and good citizenship. Against this, a different view of education emerged among those who first created the modern education school as we know it. This view replaced nurture with development. Nurture was something that parents and teachers did to children, helping them conform to high standards of moral and intellectual excellence. Development is something that comes from within children, who have a right to grow on their own in whatever way works for them, and into whatever kind of people they feel they should be.[11]

This put education schools in direct opposition both to parents (as technocrats) and to the civic order (as transformationists). The advocates of the new approach understood themselves to be rational and scientific, as against the ignorance and prejudice that supposedly dominated traditional nurture by parents. High-level training and expertise were needed for teachers—hence the creation of education schools—because teachers were to be technocratic experts whose rational, scientific knowledge would allow them to detect how each child's development was hindered by the ignorance and prejudice of the parents at home, and know how to counteract that hindrance. And because they were going to raise up new generations who would possess unprecedented enlightenment, the advocates of the new approach understood themselves to be heralds of a new social order, one that would for the first time really deserve to be called "democratic." The democratic political traditions inherited from earlier generations—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the liberal regime built upon them—were products of the ignorant and prejudiced past. They were at best only steps on the road toward the larger democratic transformation that could only be produced by a scientific, rational education that would liberate child development.[12]

Reinvention, Not Reform: Seeing Our Education School Troubles in Bigger Perspective

Understanding the philosophical origins of education schools gives us a very different perspective on how to address their current problems. The dominant approach is one of "reform." However, after decades of attempted reform with no results, we must recognize that something on a larger scale—reinvention—is needed.

To seek "reform" of education schools makes sense to people in part because it fits easily within the larger umbrella term of "education reform," widely used to describe the push for such policies as school choice and improved standards. The idea of "reform" has become widely used for these efforts because it presupposes that there already exists a proper "form," from which we have fallen away or become corrupted, and to which we must strive to return. This makes sense for most education policy agendas, which usually do seek to restore some sort of status quo ante—whether reversing the debauch of academic standards or the unionization of teachers in the 1960s, or reversing the government monopolization of schooling in the 19th century.

However, we cannot fix education schools by "reforming" them back to where they were before the 1960s, when they were infected by political radicalism and recruited into a special-interest coalition. The deeper philosophical defect that was the cause of those problems would still be there, and would inevitably produce similar problems again. "Reforming" education schools to their pre-1960s state would be like stopping a boat before it went over Niagara Falls, then dragging it up the Niagara River and releasing it again. It's going to be headed for the same ultimate destination.

The technocratic "teacher as expert" model is inconsistent with training teachers for real effectiveness. Education schools generally don't prepare teachers to teach well because they were created to perpetuate a faulty definition of what it means to "teach well." The whole justification for the existence of modern education schools is that teachers need to be rational experts who understand child development better than parents, who lack the teachers' special training. But this technocratic understanding of education is too narrow to include any substantive vision of what it means for children to be well-educated. All the really important questions—What is a truly good human life? What must a person know to be liberally educated? What is good citizenship?—involve philosophical, moral, and religious beliefs that were kicked out of education with the expulsion of the supposedly ignorant and prejudiced nurture model, with its deep ties to the home and its demanding standards of excellence. The rationalistic rump left over after the technocrats have banished all higher questions about meaning and purpose simply doesn't equip teachers to prepare students for life.

Technocratic transformationism creates an intellectual void that must be filled with ideological claptrap and/or interest-group politics. The aspiration to transform society by improving education, rather than to prepare students to be good citizens of the liberal-democratic constitutional order we have inherited, has been deeply embedded in the institutional and cultural structures of modern education schools from their beginnings. However, as we have already observed, the rationalistic/technocratic understanding of education as expertise in child development leaves the schools with no substantive vision toward which this transformative education ought to be directed. The revolution was undertheorized.[13] The combination of an urgent demand for a substantive social vision and the inability of any rationalistic view of "child development" to supply one creates a huge and painful vacuum. Because this vacuum cannot be filled in an intellectually legitimate way, it must be filled with irresponsible politics—"irresponsible" either intellectually (claptrap and agitprop) or morally (unscrupulous interest-group politics to extract rents through arbitrary barriers to entry).

Plausibility Policies: Making Reinvention Plausible, Attractive, and Sustainable

It would be easy, in the face of this daunting challenge, to simply write off the education schools. But taking the easy path is usually not the sound approach. It often ends up making things even harder on you in the long run! That is one of those deep truths about life that our parents teach us, but the technocratic transformationists expelled from the classroom.

We can't and shouldn't abandon education schools. We can't because this country employs millions of teachers and it is going to educate them somehow, somewhere. We shouldn't because the potential benefits of good teacher training—if we can recover a real sense of what that might be—are too large to pass over responsibly.

Levine is right when he says that "the U.S. lacks a common vision of how to prepare teachers to meet today's new realities, leading to the rise of divergent and opposing approaches to reform."[14] Unfortunately, most of the proposed solutions arising out of these "reform" approaches—such as those in Levine's own report—are either naïve or cynical. Expecting the schools to reform themselves, such as by telling them how they ought to change the content of teacher education (stop assigning agitprop, start focusing on practical classroom skills), is naïve. By and large the schools will not do it, or else they would have done it long ago. Meanwhile, proposals that involve using political force to directly impose reforms upon the schools would be doomed, for the same reason No Child Left Behind and Common Core have failed to achieve their objectives: you can use force to make people do things, but you cannot use force to make them do things well. The expectation that we can improve people by force—either by passing laws requiring specific practices or by holding schools accountable for performance on "high stakes" quantitative metrics—grows out of the same rationalistic, technocratic mentality that has done so much damage to education in the past century.

But a few simple—if politically difficult—changes to public policy could create an incentive structure that would make a reinvention of teacher education plausible, attractive, and sustainable for the schools. This would have to happen over the long term, and probably the very long term, as in a generation or more. Imposing a ruinous false ideology of teacher training upon the profession was not all done in a day. And fixing things takes more time than ruining them, not less.

The first step is to take seriously Levine's observation that America does not have an educational consensus. We agree on neither the goals nor the methods of education. Hence we need public policies that do not attempt to impose the "right" view of education from on high. Instead, we need public policies that reward education schools for producing teachers who are judged to be high quality by those who ought to have the authority to make that judgment.

Empower principals to hire and fire teachers, and let parents and communities hold the principals accountable. While the problem is much deeper than short-term interest-group politics, the reformers are certainly right that education schools are protected from pressure to improve by laws, policies, and collective-bargaining agreements that skew the teaching profession toward those with ed-school credentials. Identifying and removing these barriers would be simple, if politically difficult. Removing other unnecessary barriers to the hiring and (especially) firing of teachers would greatly magnify and accelerate the benefit of such a change. If principals had full authority to hire and fire teachers, education schools would not be able to attract students unless they could show that principals value their graduates. To the extent that principals are accountable to parents and local communities, as they ought to be, education schools would be incentivized to produce graduates who are judged to be good teachers by parents and local communities—the people who ought to be in charge of those judgments. Over time, reinventing teacher education would be rewarded by this incentive structure. Just as important, because the incentives for change would come from parent and community preferences rather than brute political force, this approach would make reinventing teacher education plausible and attractive for the schools.

Adopt information systems focused on transparency, so we know which schools produce which results. An incentive structure requires more than a chain of decision-making authority. It also requires good information, so everyone in the chain can connect decisions to results. While the more ambitious aspects of No Child Left Behind have failed, one major part of that law has been an unqualified success: the requirement that states report more data on what is going on in their public schools. While national accountability does not work and would be wrong even if it did, national transparency is appropriate. (Critics of the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind typically make their case using data that are only available because of that law's reporting requirements.) A similar large-scale transparency effort for education schools would allow principals, and by extension the parents and local communities to whom principals ought to answer, to judge which schools are doing their jobs. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality recommends testing education school graduates and publishing the results—testing them not on their mastery of education theory, much of which is agitprop and almost all of which is beholden to the technocratic child-development paradigm, but on their mastery of content knowledge in the core academic disciplines.[15] Even more valuable would be an education-school equivalent of the school-quality website GreatSchools, which pairs a wealth of quantitative data on public schools with parent ratings and community comments. A GreatEdSchools website could combine school data with comments from students—and from principals who hire the graduates.

Allow parents and communities to judge schools by qualitative as well as quantitative metrics. The deep roots of our ed-school problem lie in the technocratic philosophy of child development, as against the older view of education as nurture. One of the most revolutionary movements in education today is the development of qualitative metrics for "character outcomes" and other non-cognitive outcomes. On one level, this effort is still in its infancy and its toolkit is spare and untested. (There is a great opportunity here for more education professors to quit playing around in the agitprop sandbox and redirect their research agendas into work that really is cutting-edge and intellectually challenging, and can help build the education paradigms of the future.) But on another level this represents a return to the ancient and time-tested model of education as nurture, which aligns the classroom with the home and the civic community. Policymakers can get law and public policy out of the way of this restorative movement, not only by letting principals hire and fire, but also by repealing or at least reforming heavy-handed quantitative accountability regimes, incorporating qualitative measurements into evaluation standards for public schools, strengthening local school governance (such as by requiring school board elections to be held at the same time as other elections), and expanding school choice.

Conclusion

Duncan and Levine are right: education schools are underperforming. But the traditional reform agendas of the past generation—hector the schools to change their curricula, and shame them for participating in unscrupulous interest-group politics—have no results to show for all their work. The intellectual vacuum at the heart of teacher education must always be filled by irresponsible politics until the cause of the vacuum, the technocratic rationalism of child-development theory, is removed. Policymakers cannot reinvent education schools to remove technocratic rationalism; only the education schools themselves can do it, and even with favorable conditions it would be the work of a generation. However, by giving principals control over teacher hiring, demanding transparency, and then allowing parents and local communities to judge teachers in qualitative as well as quantitative terms, policymakers can create an incentive structure that would make the reinvention of teacher training plausible, attractive, and sustainable for education schools. The stakes in the education of future teachers are enormous, so the substantial political costs of these simple policy changes would be well worth paying.

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Endnotes

[1] Jennifer Medina, "Teacher Training Termed Mediocre," *New York Times*, October 22, 2009.

[2] Arthur Levine, "Educating School Teachers," *The Education Schools Project*, September 2006, p. 32.

[3] Levine, "Educating," p. 12.

[4] Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, "Identifying Effective Teachers Using Performance on the Job," Brookings Institution, April 2006, p. 8.

[5] Erik Hanushek, "Valuing Teachers," *EducationNext,* Summer 2011, p. 43.

[6] Kevin Ryan, "The Failure of Modern Character Education," *Revista Española de Pedagogía* 71:254 (January-April 2013), pp. 141-146.

[7] Jay Schalin, "Radically Transforming the Nation," James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, February 20, 2019.

[8] See for example Frederick Hess, "The 2018 RHSU Edu-Scholar Public Influence Rankings," *Education Week*, January 10, 2018; and David Steiner, "Skewed Perspective," *EducationNext,* Winter 2005.

[9] Greg Forster, "Who Teaches the Teachers?" *Perspective,* Oklahoma Council on Public Affairs, March/April 2018.

[10] Medina, "Teacher Training."

[11] For an excellent review of the change in thinking about education in this period, see James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character,* Basic Books, 2000.

[12] Hunter, 2000.

[13] *Dewey's Democracy and Education* treats all substantive goals of education in past eras as merely arbitrary social conventions, but proceeds on the assumption that democracy (or rather Dewey's theory of "democracy") provides a genuinely substantive goal capable of independently and non-arbitrarily guiding the content of education. Why Dewey's idea of democracy—or that of Paulo Freire or any of the other radicals who have taken Dewey's place—should be real and substantive, where those of Aristotle or John Adams cannot be, is (to say the least) unclear.

[14] Levine, "Educating," p. 14.

[15] "Maintaining Strong Elementary Content Requirements for Prospective Teachers," National Council on Teacher Quality, 2019.