

Book Review

Educating School Teachers

By Arthur Levine

New York: The Education Schools Project, 2006

Reviewed by Lynn Melby Gordon

California State University, Northridge

No one really likes bad news, but Arthur Levine's bold and compelling policy report, *Educating School Teachers*, is a must-read for anyone involved in teacher education. Levine, who is the well-respected president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and former president of Teachers College, Columbia University, supervised a comprehensive four-year study of America's education schools. The project was supported by the Annenberg, Ford, Kauffman, and Wallace Foundations. The shocking data Levine sets forth and his candidly critical conclusions deserve the unflinching attention of all teacher educators. According to the study, three quarters of all the nation's 1,206 colleges and universities are failing to prepare adequately the teachers they produce.

This well-written report is based on extensive data including sweeping national surveys of education school alumni, principals, education school deans and faculty, and also on case studies conducted on a diverse sampling of 28 education schools. The data are clear, and Levine, a perceptive insider, calls us to account for these findings. He outlines nine criteria for judging the quality of teacher education programs, describes weaknesses endemic to the field, profiles the features of four exemplary teacher education programs, and offers five recommendations for action. While *Educating School Teachers* is not the only recent influential research report to publicly censure teacher educators (Snow, Burns, &

Lynn Melby Gordon is an assistant professor of education at California State University, Northridge. She can be contacted: Lynn.Gordon@csun.

Griffin, 2005; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006), Arthur Levine's scholarly manifesto has possibly received the most press (Feller, 2006; Finder, 2006; Winter, 2006) and precipitated immediate professional hullabaloo (Association of Teacher Educators, 2006; Honawar, 2006; Robinson, 2006).

A Troubled Field

Levine's noteworthy findings include:

- Standards for admitting students to the nation's teacher education programs are too low.
- Future elementary teachers whom education schools admit are less academically qualified than their university peers.
- Poor teacher education programs and departments are treated as cash cows by their colleges or universities, some displaying the tendency to admit almost anyone who applies.
- Too often there is little connection between what students learn in college classes and what they use in the schools.
- Most professors tend to emphasize theory over practice.
- Time spent in clinical settings is too short and involvement of the university professors is too brief.
- Student teaching sites are sometimes not appropriate and performance of student teachers is insufficiently monitored.
- Teacher education curriculums are often out of date.
- The majority of teachers are graduating from weak schools with low graduation standards.
- Research in teacher education is generally poor and ignores basic research conventions, failing to study major issues in practice and policy such as the impact of teacher education on student learning.
- There is a growing market for cheap, easy degrees in teacher education that meet liberalized alternative licensing requirements.
- Teacher education accreditation does not assure program quality. There was no significant difference in student math or reading achievement based on whether the teachers were certified at NCATE or non-NCATE accredited institutions.

- Students whose teachers were prepared at master's level I universities (defined as awarding 40+ master's degrees per year across 3+ disciplines) show lower growth in math and reading than do students whose teachers were prepared at doctoral universities.

Levine's report deftly combines statistical charts, commentary, and quotes from interviewed students, alumni, principals, deans, and college faculty. In one memorable example, a student from a college in the South reported that the elementary reading course did not match the state standards or the curriculum that was taught in the local schools; the course was described as "awful" and the approach to literacy was characterized as "extinct, like the dinosaur." Interestingly, also in 2006, the National Council on Teacher Quality (Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006), analyzed syllabi and textbooks assigned in reading methods courses in the United States and found that only 15% of the teacher education institutions sampled actually taught all the components of the science of reading, as identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000). This regrettable mismatch between what is taught at the university level and what is taught in classrooms must be reconciled as soon as possible (Moats, 2000).

Five Recommendations

Levine wants the nation's teacher education programs to meet the needs of today's standards driven, accountability-driven classrooms, where student achievement is honored as the highest measure of instructional success. He proposes five sensible and straightforward suggestions:

1. Transform education schools from ivory towers into professional schools focused on classroom practice.
2. Focus on student achievement as the primary measure of teacher education program success.
3. Rebuild teacher education programs around the skills and knowledge that promote classroom learning and make five-year teacher education programs the norm.
4. Establish effective mechanisms for teacher education quality control.
5. Close failing teacher education programs, strengthen promising programs, and expand excellent programs by creating incentives for outstanding students and career changers to enter teacher education at doctoral universities.

Levine does not lay all blame on teacher education programs. He acknowledges schools and departments of education cannot easily attract the best and brightest when other professions lure top students with greater status and income. Levine recommends that states fund teacher raises to make teaching competitive with those professions and they should fund higher salaries for high-quality teachers willing to work where they are most needed: in low-performing schools. He also suggests salary scales be tied to teacher qualifications and performance. Unfortunately, Levine does not address practical difficulties related to the implementation of these laudable proposals. How will the states afford highly competitive and substantial teacher salaries? If schools implement merit pay plans, how will they establish reliable and valid measures of teacher competence? Can merit pay plans win the long-term endorsement of wary unions and principals? But we should not dismiss Levine's suggestions. Finessed versions of his salary recommendations probably need to be implemented if we are to achieve dramatic nationwide improvement in teacher education.

The Teachers America Needs

Levine's unvarnished criticisms may be viewed as mutinous by some, but thoughtful teacher educators should obtain and read the complete 140-page report, which is available in PDF format on the Internet (Levine, 2006). Listen carefully to this dignified fellow who warns us that our curriculum is in disarray, our lessons are too theoretical, our admissions standards are too low, and our quality control is inadequate. Levine's message is that teacher education is in trouble and that we must act now to change the way we do things. His message is essentially optimistic, but he warns, "The quality of tomorrow will be no better than the quality of our teacher force" (p. 11).

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