

The State of Teacher Education

A Commentary

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Introduction

Teacher education is a complicated and nuanced field to study. From the beginning of normal schools to state comprehensives; from “teacher training” to a body of research on the education of teachers, from the Holmes Group to the AACTE Futures Task Force, teacher education is a hotly debated, often criticized topic, and seen as requiring “reform.” At AACTE, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the belief in a university or college-based teacher preparation program is at the core of our work, yet that basis for preparing the best teachers is being eroded. Even in California, a state that prides itself on strong university-based teacher education, only 58% of newly-credentialed California teachers in 2020-21 were fully prepared in teacher preparation programs (Patrick, Darling-Hammond, & Kini, 2023).

As President and Chief Executive Officer of AACTE, I develop national and international viewpoints on the state of teacher education here in the United States and throughout the world. My focus is aggregating data from teacher educators, teacher candidates, and deans through AACTE and through my work with the Global Network of Deans of Education (GNDE; <https://www.education-deans.org/>). Consistent themes emerge related to the current state of teacher education.

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Volume 33, Number 1, Spring 2024

For the sake of this commentary, I will focus on four of those specific themes as follows:

1. Lack of interest in teaching as a profession: The decline in those pursuing teaching degrees and teacher shortages are worldwide.
2. Consequences of federal and state policies: Either intentionally or unintentionally, federal and state policies can create havoc for teacher preparation programs.
3. The job for which we are preparing our candidates: In the 21st century, continuing to teach through a one teacher-one classroom model does not serve teacher education, teaching, or our students well.
4. The impact of the current political climate: Divisive issues legislation creates a chilling effect on university-based teacher education, teachers, and students alike.

Lack of Interest in Teaching as a Profession

The decline in those pursuing teaching degrees and teacher shortages occurs worldwide. According to the UNESCO International Task Force on Teachers for Education (2023) “this global shortage of teachers is hindering access to education, with a projected deficit of 44 million teachers to achieve primary and secondary universal education by 2030. The result is overcrowded classrooms, diminished teaching quality, and limited learning opportunities, especially in underserved communities” (UNESCO, 2023, p. 1). With global migration “[d]iversifying the teaching force has become a priority in many migrant-receiving jurisdictions worldwide with the growing mismatch between the ethnic backgrounds, cultures, languages, and religions of teachers and those of students and families” (Schmidt & Schneider, 2016, abstract).

Here in the United States, AACTE has thoroughly documented the long-term decline in enrollments in teacher preparation programs in reports such as *Colleges of Education: National Portrait* (2022). However, in the most recent Issues Brief from AACTE, *Data Update: Degrees and Certificates Conferred in Education* (2024) the author notes:

The enrollment decline that occurred after the Great Recession of 2008 appears to have abated. From a low of 82,600 in 2018-19, the number of bachelor’s degrees conferred in education rose to 93,270 in 2021-22, an increase of 13%. This is especially encouraging given that many students suspended enrollment—or dropped out entirely—during the pandemic. (J. King, 2024, p.2)

While the stabilization of enrollments in teacher education is promising, for university-based teacher education there is great caution. In *AACTE Update: Teacher Preparation Program Trends 2010-11 to 2020-21* (2024), the author notes:

After precipitously declining during the first half of the 2010s, total enrollment in teacher preparation programs has stabilized in recent years at approximately

600,000 teacher candidates annually. However, the distribution of that enrollment across program types has continued to shift as enrollment in non-IHE-based alternative programs has more than doubled and enrollment in IHE-based comprehensive programs has declined by 45%. (J. King, 2024, p. 2)

In the non-IHE-based category, which includes “programs run by school districts, state education agencies, charter schools, local or national nonprofits (like Teach For America), and for-profit companies. The for-profit sector—most notably, Teachers of Tomorrow, which operates in eight states, including Texas—dominates the growth in this category” (Will, 2024, p. 5). In AACTE’s report *The Alternative Teacher Certification Sector Outside Higher Education* (2022), King and Yin note that “despite growing enrollment, the number of students completing non-IHE alternative certification programs declined by 10 percent from academic year 2010-11 to 2018-19, illustrating that the expansion of this sector has not alleviated the United States’ teacher shortage” (King & Yin, 2022, p.2) . While there is growth of participation in non-IHE based preparation, which I would argue does not always fully prepare a candidate for the classroom, those programs are also falling short of addressing the teacher shortage.

Add to this overall shortage the continued dearth of teachers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the 2020 TNP study, *The Broken Pipeline*, when 2017-18 U.S. Department of Education data were analyzed, the study found that enrollees at teacher preparation programs were nearly 64% white, with 43 states having a diversity gap of 10 or more percentage points, 21 states having a gap of 20 or more percentage points, and three states having a gap of 30 or more percentage points (TNTP, 2020). These statistics are all the more concerning since only 47% of the nation’s public school students are white. Distinct efforts continue to be made to diversify the teacher candidate pool, such as the U.S. Department of Education National Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign, developed in partnership with TEACH.org and One Million Teachers of Color, encouraging LatinX and African American youth to join the teaching profession (U. S. Department of Education, 2023). Yet the lack of diverse candidates and diverse teachers continues to plague our profession nationally and internationally. How teacher education can grow and thrive to meet the needs of students worldwide clearly is a deeply unresolved issue.

Unintended Consequences of Federal and State Policies

Education is the foundation of democracies. An educated population is the basis for an engaged citizenry. Therefore, how governments invest in education matters deeply. Historically, teacher education/educator preparation worldwide has been under consistent, and sometimes invasive, scrutiny by national and international entities. Given the foundational role of education to uplift each and every learner and the impact education has on economic growth and societal advance-

ment, governments have a logical interest in the quality of education and those who are preparing to educate.

While governments do have this logical interest in education, often federal and state policies either intentionally or unintentionally create havoc for teacher preparation programs. One example from the AACTE Consortium for Research-Based and Equitable Assessment (CREA), is that while State Education Agencies/ State Departments of Education/State Boards of Education/Professional Standards Commissions set cutoff scores for entrance licensure examinations, the frequency with which the state evaluates cutoff scores is unknown, and that often those scores were set arbitrarily, thus creating an unintended barrier to entrance into teacher education programs (Fenwick, 2021).

Another example is the wave across the country of the “new” science of reading. Since 2019, 47 states and Washington, D.C., have passed at least one bill related to reforming reading instruction. The new rules apply to areas like school curriculum, professional development for teachers, screenings for dyslexic students, and requirements for testing (Cohen, 2023; Fensterwald, 2024). In Colorado, The READ Act (<https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy>) requires that educator preparation programs receive approval by the Colorado Department of Education (<https://www.cpr.org/2023/06/13/colorado-teacher-prep-programs-reading/>), which was seen by many teacher educators as unduly intrusive into college and university literacy instruction. AB2222 (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB2222) in California seeks to legislate how to teach reading. According to Fensterwald (2024, p. 1):

The bill would shift the state’s decade-old policy of encouraging districts to incorporate fundamental reading skills in the early grades, including phonics, to demanding that they do so. This would depart from the state policy of giving school districts discretion to choose curriculums and teaching methods that meet state academic standards” and further strengthen the accountability of teacher preparation program in the science of reading.

This perceived intrusion is not limited to the United States. In their paper *Learning is Scotland’s Future?* (2023) Chapman and Donaldson identify existing barriers to the progress of educational change and improvement in Scotland, which can be applied beyond the Scottish context:

1. National policies that unintentionally encourage schools to narrow educational experiences.
2. Administrative structures that limit the freedom of practitioners to experiment.
3. Fragmentation within education systems that inhibit opportunities for sharing expertise; and
4. Cultures and structures that discourage the sharing of expertise.

This worldwide shortage of teachers, particularly influenced by the global pandemic, has exacerbated the behavior of policymakers and others as they seek to “fix” what is perceived as “broken” in the preparation of teachers. Yet “the history of educational innovation and change cautions against top down, delivery-oriented models of change. Such mechanistic attempts to improve outcomes fail to catalyze significant, sustained success” (Chapman & Donaldson, 2024).

Another example of perceived policy overreach occurs in England. In the book *Teacher Education in Crisis: The State, The Market and the Universities in England*, editor Viv Ellis also warns against what he calls “the state’s authoritarian interventions” (Ellis, 2024, p. 213) into initial teacher education (ITE). One example of this is that ITE must deliver the government’s core curriculum “with compliance micromanaged nationally by central government” (Ellis & Childs, p. 1).

There are innumerable actors in the work of teacher education. The jockeying that occurs in the federal and state policy space often leaves teacher education in an unenviable reactive mind-set. The ability to strategize and be proactive is curtailed as a result. It is though we are driving using our rear-view mirror instead of the windshield.

The Job for Which We Are Preparing Our Candidates

I have long spoken about the job of the individual teacher in the classroom as being untenable. Even prior to the global pandemic, the job of a teacher in the 21st century has, in my opinion, become far too big for any one human to fulfill. Academic, mental, and physical health needs of students abound. One example—according to the U.S. Department of Education on *Our Nation’s English Learners*, “over 4,800,000—10 percent of the total K-12 student population, are English learners” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020, p. 3). The ever-growing needs of students are taxing veteran teachers, never mind those who are just entering classrooms. “Most teachers are prepared and operate in one-teacher, one-classroom models as novices—sometimes with very little classroom teaching experience—and are expected to produce the same student outcomes as their veteran colleagues” (Basile, Maddin, & Lennon, p. xii). Yes, advances have been made in clinical practice, in residencies, and in creating apprenticeships for teacher candidates. Those longer-term experiences with a mentor teacher are effective. However, I would argue that the one-teacher one-classroom model does not serve us well and has become nearly impossible. Just ask any teacher. Our job moving forward is to study the job of the teacher and consider that our challenge may not be one of shortages, but rather the creative restructuring of the work of the teacher.

At the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University, the Next Education Workforce (Basile, Maddin, & Audrain, 2023) seeks to challenge the one teacher-one classroom model. Regardless of enrollment drops in teacher education, the authors argue that “we have the quantity of qualified individuals

that we need. This crisis in the education profession is not a teacher supply problem. The exodus from the profession, as well as the efficacy of the profession, is a function of how we have constructed the education workforce . . . we face a workforce design problem” (p. xii).

The Next Education Workforce asks that those of us in education see the potential of building teams of educators with distributed expertise. In the book *The Next Education Workforce: How Team-Based Staffing Models Can Support Equity and Improve Learning Outcomes* (2023), the authors first examine “normal”—everything from one-teacher one classroom to one-size-fits all teacher preparation and professional learning. The authors then outline the components of the Next Education Workforce: teams of educators and distributed expertise; delivering deeper and personalized learning with teams and technology; entry, specialization and advancement; and approaching equity. What follows are three school models in elementary school, high school, and a rural K-8 school.

I believe that the Next Education Workforce can be a catalyst for looking at systems-level change in both higher and K-12 education. Furthermore, by moving teaching from the one-teacher one-classroom model to a team-based approach to educating students, the actual job of a teacher can move from daunting to possible. When our vision for teaching shifts from a singular approach to a team approach, it opens our opportunities to attract more diversity, expand skills, and broaden those engaged with our students. A team approach cultivates creativity and resiliency.

The Impact of the Current Political Climate

The current political climate is creating a chilling effect on teachers and students alike. Legislation that targets teaching about issues related to civil rights and America’s history of systemic discrimination are sweeping across the country. According to PEN America, 17 states have enacted laws or executive orders that restrict the speech of educators in K-12 and/or higher education. Recently, Florida passed the first legislation focused directly on educator preparation programs. This new proposed legislation, as seen in newly passed bills HB 1291 and SB 1372, plans to regulate the content of educator preparation courses, explicitly targeting the teaching of “identity politics” and perspectives that examine how systemic factors such as racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege may be inherent within the structures of American institutions.

The impact on teaching and on students has been chilling. In a 2022 NPR segment entitled “From slavery to socialism, new legislation restricts what teachers can discuss,” in reviewing the impact of anti-LGBTQ legislation, it is noted as follows:

So it really puts teachers in an impossible situation. In a contemporary high school or middle school, even earlier in elementary school, these sorts of topics arise. And in particular, it would put LGBTQ teachers in a really difficult situ-

ation when they're forced, essentially, to disguise their identity or the status of their relationships in order to fend off running afoul of these bills.

Since this 2022 segment the “Don’t Say Gay” bill in Florida, HB 1557, there has been a legal settlement on the bill “allows discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity as long as it happens outside instruction” (Najarro, 2024, p. 1). This means, in theory, that an LGBTQ teacher can put a family photo on their desk, for example. Or that any teacher or counselor can place a “safe space” sticker on a classroom wall or window. However, I would argue that regardless of the legal settlement, the chilling effect of HB 1577 remains for those interested in pursuing teaching, current teachers, and certainly LGBTQ+ students.

It gets even more interesting as one tracks legislation or executive orders in other states. For example, Grossman and Young (2023, p. 3-4) write:

In South Dakota, however, the enforcers of divisive concepts policies are taking no chances: Executive Order 2022-02, issued by Governor Kristi Noem in April 2022, implemented a ban on divisive concepts in K-12 schools and directed the state Department of Education to review its policies and content standards. That review, in turn, led to changes in teacher preparation at the college level . . . The next step for the DOE, according to the report, is to “engage the Board of Regents, private colleges, and tribal colleges, encouraging them to undertake a similar review [of teacher preparation programs] to ensure alignment with the EO.” Yes, you read that right: the South Dakota Department of Education wants tribal colleges to remove information about “bias, stereotyping, assumptions, etc.” from their Indian Studies curricula for future educators. And they want public and even private colleges and universities to do the same . . .

The long-term implications of these pieces of legislation and executive orders on teacher education, higher education, and K-12 education remain to be seen.

Conclusion

As I began this commentary, I cited four themes that I believe have an impact on the current state of teacher education: lack of interest in teaching as a profession; consequences of federal and state policies; the job for which we are preparing our candidates; and the impact of the current political climate. While there are great challenges described, I do believe that there are rays of hope. There are many high school students throughout the U.S. in pathway programs to teaching like Educators Rising (2024), one form of the increasing growth of Grow Your Own (GYO) programs throughout the country. Another GYO effort, the establishment and expansion of registered apprenticeship programs (RAPs), are facilitating relationships between school districts, the university/college teacher education program, and the state to broaden the pool of teacher candidates. Examples of positive state and federal support for teacher education are evident in the growth of apprenticeship programs, from the support of First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and the

launch of the Department of Education-Department of Labor investment in registered teaching apprenticeships (AACTE & Pathways Alliance, 2023) to work in states such as Tennessee (Melnick, 2024) that began the first federally registered apprenticeship in teaching. The Biden Administration's commitment to prioritizing education was front and center in the President's recent State of the Union address, where Biden stated, "to remain the strongest economy in the world we need the best education system in the world" (Blad, 2024). The work of the Next Education Workforce continues to expand throughout the U.S. and internationally. And while there has been a great deal of divisive issues legislation passed, so too have many (many) bills been defeated.

As I continue to speak on the state of teacher education worldwide, I want to balance the reality of the challenges we face with much optimism as well. Our nations depend on our ability to innovate and create positive educational experiences for each and every learner. As educators, legislators, and citizens, we must engage in the work of education required by our democracies.

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