

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

Abell Salutes: Patterson Park Community Development Corporation: Providing housing for refugees, repopulating a rebound- ing neighborhood

They come from Bosnia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, and they step off the plane at Baltimore-Washington International Airport with mixed feelings—relief at their new-found safety, but uncertainty about their future. They are political refugees, fleeing from persecution; they cannot speak the language and though they have skills (some are lawyers and doctors), these skills often are not marketable in this country. But they all arrive with the same questions: How and where will I live? And work? And raise a family?

America has historically, with some interruptions, been hospitable to political refugees; government, sectarian agencies, and private philanthropy have a richly deserved reputation for providing food and clothing to refugees in need. But housing, by its nature, has been always been a more difficult problem to solve—finding, furnishing, paying for and maintaining. And although the local social service agencies have had good success in finding housing for the refugees in the counties surrounding Baltimore, few were locating refugee housing in Baltimore City. In June of 1999, Ed Rutkowski, director of the Patterson Park Community

continued on page 4

Teacher Certification: An Idea Whose Time Has Gone

Academic research attempting to link teacher certification with student achievement is astonishingly deficient.

This month The Abell Foundation will be releasing a major report looking at 50 years of research exploring the value of teacher certification for improving student achievement. Two versions of the report are available on-line at www.abell.org; one that includes an analysis of Maryland policies, and secondly, an abridged version suitable for national audiences. A hard copy version of the Maryland (which contains all of the material found in the national version) can be obtained free of charge by contacting The Abell Foundation, 111 S. Calvert St., Baltimore, MD 21201, abell@abell.org or by calling 410-547-1300.

Maryland's requirement that individuals must complete a prescribed body of coursework before teaching in a public school is deeply misguided. This process, known as teacher certification, is neither an efficient nor an effective means by which to ensure a competent teaching force. Worse, it is often counterproductive.

The importance of good teaching to the academic success of students is intuitively obvious to any parent and is well substantiated by a body of sound research. Correspondingly, ensuring that good teachers staff public schools is a critical policy objective in Maryland and across the nation. All states, including Maryland, have developed regulatory policies under the seemingly logical theory that requiring credentials of teachers is simply good government in action. These regulations prescribe the process for certifying teachers, whereby individuals who want to teach must first complete extensive coursework (usually completed in an undergraduate program), both in the field of education and in the subject they intend to teach.

At the heart of this policy is a claim by the education establishment that taking the coursework needed to obtain certification is not only the best, but also the only acceptable means for preparing teachers. This assertion, some claim, is supported by a body of research consisting of 100 to 200 studies. This study reveals in detail the shortcomings found in this research. In fact, the academic research attempting to link teacher certification with student achievement is astonishingly deficient.

To reach this conclusion, every published study or paper cited by prominent national advocates of teacher certification was reviewed. These included roughly 175 studies, going back 50 years, which explored or purported to explore the relationship between teacher preparation and student achievement. There has been no comparable effort by analysts to drill down through these layers of evidence in order to determine what lies at the core.

The following deficiencies characterize the work advocating teacher certification:

continued on page 2

- Research that is seen as helping the case for certification is cited selectively, while research that does not is overlooked.
- The lack of evidence for certification is concealed by the practice of padding analyses with multiple references that appear to provide support but, on careful reading, do not.
- Research is cited that is too old to be reliable or retrievable.
- Research that has not been subjected to peer review is given unmerited weight, with particular reliance on unpublished dissertations.
- Instead of using standardized measures of student achievement, advocates design their own assessment measures to prove certification's value.
- Basic principles of sound statistical analysis, which are taken for granted in other academic disciplines, are violated routinely. Examples include, failing to control for such key variables as poverty and prior student achievement, using sample sizes too small to allow generalization or reliable statistical inference, and relying on inappropriately aggregated data.

Seeking Effective Teachers

For as long as the teacher certification process has existed, there has been dissatisfaction with it. One after another reform of the process has been promoted, usually from within the ranks of the education establishment. These reforms do not address a fundamental weakness of the certification process: its crude capacity for ensuring quality. This process consists primarily of counting course titles, (showing no regard for the possibility that knowledge can be acquired by means other than coursework, the actual content of a college course, the quality of the

▲

There are no direct consequences to State officials for poor school performance, yet these officials are the gatekeepers of the teaching profession.

▼

instruction, the educational standards of the college, or even the grade earned). These omissions render the process incapable of determining the true quality of teacher candidates.

Certification deems substandard all uncertified candidates, no matter what other attributes they possess, including those attributes that research correlates with effective teaching.

There is a scientifically sound body of research, conducted primarily by economists and social scientists, revealing the attributes of an effective teacher, defined as a teacher who has a positive impact on student achievement. This research does not show that certified teachers are more effective than uncertified teachers. In fact, the background and attributes characterizing effective teachers are more likely to be found outside the domain of schools of education.

- **Teacher quality is a critical determinant of how much students, rich or poor, white, Hispanic or black, will learn.** Estimates by even the most skeptical researchers have produced findings revealing the powerful effect of teacher quality. In the course of a single school year, students who are assigned to a good

teacher can learn a full grade level more than students who are assigned to a bad teacher.

- **Experienced teachers are more effective than new teachers.** Some research has found that teachers get better with a few years of experience; but at some point their effectiveness drops, viewed as an inverted U-shaped pattern of effectiveness and perhaps caused by “burnout.”
- **Teachers who have attended more selective colleges produce higher student achievement.**
- **At the secondary level, teachers who know more about their subject matter are generally more effective.**
- **At the elementary level, there is no research indicating the amount or type of college coursework that is necessary or optimal for teachers to have taken in the academic disciplines taught in elementary grades.**
- **Teachers who have master's degrees are not significantly more effective than teachers without them, unless the teacher is at the secondary level and the master's degree is in the academic discipline being taught.**
- **The content and skills learned in preservice education coursework is not subsequently reflected in a teacher's classroom practice.**
- **New teachers who are certified do not produce greater student gains than new teachers who are not certified.**
- **The most consistent finding is that effective teachers score higher on tests of verbal ability and other standardized tests.**

Most researchers understand verbal ability, usually measured by short vocab-

continued on page 3

continued from page 2

ulary tests, to be a measure of a teacher's general cognitive ability. Recent research has significantly altered our understanding of cognitive ability or intelligence. A person's cognitive ability is no longer understood to be an innate quality that depends entirely on our genetic composition at birth. Verbal ability is to some degree plastic in nature, capable of being advanced at all levels of schooling, including college.

Not surprisingly, the importance of verbal ability aligns with similar findings that teachers who have attended selective colleges are more likely to raise student achievement. Private school principals routinely seek out teachers who appear to be bright and use the selectivity of the teacher's college as one possible indicator of a teacher's aptitude. On the other hand, Maryland and its public school districts not only fail to recognize the importance of these qualities, but also often eschew them, a rejection that contains a strong undercurrent of anti-intellectualism.

Certification is an inhospitable process, deterring from public school teaching careers many capable individuals who possess the most powerful teacher attribute identified for raising student achievement.

The Practice in Maryland

The Maryland State Department of Education appears to place considerable confidence in the traditional teacher certification process, without any evidence that its certification regulations improve teacher quality. It has never sought to determine the value of its costly and time-consuming certification process. Absent any Maryland study justifying teacher certification, the state cites 12 national studies, newsletters, and articles as proof of certification's value. Only three of these even attempt, none successfully, to make the case that teacher certification improves student achieve-

ment. The remaining nine make no such case and any references to research in them are ambiguous.

Maryland, not unlike other states, lists in its regulations 66 different kinds of teaching certificates. This regulatory excess contrasts with medicine, law, accounting and dentistry where states typically issue only one license. Teach for America, a national organization that supplies teachers to under-resourced school districts, identifies Maryland's regulations "as the most stringent" in its fifteen regions located across the United States.

If Maryland's complex regulations governing teacher credentialing do not accomplish their purpose, and, in fact, undercut that purpose by discouraging potentially excellent teaching candidates, then deregulation is in order.

In its 1990 report, the Maryland Governor's Commission on School Reform put education reform at the forefront of policy changes needed in the State. The report called for the elimination of rules, regulations, and other structures that constrain school staffs, specifically citing its suspicion that state teacher certification requirements impede quality education.

The Commission's findings led to some early and important reforms, including the creation of the State's alternative teaching certification program, known as the Resident Teacher Certificate, along with a reduction of education coursework required for traditional certification. However, these reforms were largely eroded in the late 1990s, mainly by a 30-percent increase in the requirements for education coursework created by the State's reading initiative. This initiative, though well meaning, is flawed:

1. The State mandated this coursework without any apparent strategy to measure its impact on state reading scores.
2. The rationale for the high number of courses was never articulated adequately.

3. There is reason to believe that some of the new reading courses may be the same existing ineffective courses, now under new titles and descriptions, according to a recent investigative series by *The Baltimore Sun*.
4. The initiative may be regulatory overkill, requiring those teachers who do not need to teach reading fundamentals to take courses in the subject.
5. The regulations do not distinguish among the needs of different schools in the State.

Maryland has also placed further regulatory obstacles on the issuance of its Resident Teaching Certificate. Never embraced by State or local district education officials, this alternative route has provided only 500 new teachers since its inception in 1990, though nearly 50,000 teachers have been hired in the State during this same time period. Resident Teachers, by virtue of the high academic requirements for the certificate, bring strong academic credentials, outscoring traditionally trained teachers on the National Teacher's Exam, a good indication that they have higher verbal ability, on average, than the traditional teacher candidate.

While the State holds its nearly 1,400 schools accountable for their student outcomes by attracting various punishments and rewards, it restricts schools' ability to freely decide the single most important variable to student achievement: the quality of their teachers. In contrast, the State is accountable to no one. There are no direct consequences to State officials for poor school performance, yet these officials are the gatekeepers of the teaching profession.

Private Schools and Public Colleges

In contrast to its policy regulating public school teachers, Maryland does not regulate private and parochial school

continued on page 4

teachers, nor does it regulate teaching faculties at either public or private colleges and universities. Given this disparity and the lack of research to support its regulations, Maryland's zeal for certifying public school teachers does not appear to be premised on certification's ability to safeguard teacher quality, but rather on protecting the power wielded by the State's education establishment and national organizations such as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCATF) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Their overwhelming self-interest rests with rigid state regulation of the teaching profession.

Recommendations

1. Maryland should eliminate the coursework requirements for teacher certification in favor of much simpler and more flexible rules for entry. The only fixed requirement should be a bachelor's degree and a passing score on an appropriate teacher's exam. This exam must assess foremost a teacher's verbal ability, along with the basic knowledge and skills needed by an elementary teacher and the specialized content knowledge needed by secondary teachers.
2. As an accountability measure, the Maryland Department of Education should report the average verbal ability score of both teachers in each school district and of teacher candidates graduating from the State's schools of education.
3. Maryland should devolve its responsibility for teacher qualification and selection to its 24 public school districts. It should encourage these districts to place hiring decisions primarily in the hands of school principals.
4. School districts and principals should rely on more productive methods for helping teachers gain the instruction-

ABELL SALUTES: *Continued from page 1*

Development Corporation (PPCDC) came forward with a plan not only to help refugees find housing in the city, but at the same time, to help Baltimore City repopulate and stabilize the Patterson Park area.

Translating vision to reality, a representative of a supporting agency meets a refugee or his or her family at the airport and, where PPCDC housing is appropriate, transports the refugee to an apartment or house in the Patterson Park neighborhood. The rental units will have been furnished largely through donations, and the family then looks to the marketplace for employment. Thom Kolton, community refugee liaison for the PPCDC, speaks to the refugees' needs: "There are basics to be taken care of—food and clothing and job searches. We not only work with them on these problems, but on the vast cultural problems to overcome. We try to teach them how to be good neighbors—about keeping their units clean and how to relate in a wholesome way with the neighbors. For example, this small thing with large consequences: Not knowing about keep-

ing the shower curtain inside the tub—especially when living on the second floor." And in the planning stages to provide additional support, is, according to Rutkowski, "a community resource center that will be offering educational, vocational, and social opportunities for self-improvement."

Resettlement data testify to the program's success in increasing the numbers of refugees settling into the area served by the PPCDC. Andrew Robarts, regional director of the Baltimore office of the International Rescue Committee, provides numbers: "About 390 refugees have moved through the resettlement process and are living in an area of Patterson Park served by the PPCDC. About 320 remain as residents."

The Abell Foundation salutes Patterson Park PPCDC for creating a program that addresses the need for housing among refugees arriving in Baltimore, and at the same time, helps repopulate the historic and rebounding community of Patterson Park.

al skills and knowledge needed to be effective: comprehensive new teacher induction programs, reduced teaching loads for first-year teachers, ongoing professional development closely associated with the curriculum, including the teaching of reading, and outcomes-based performance evaluation.

Unless hiring authority is delegated to individual schools, hiring decisions will shift only from a state-level bureaucracy to a district-level bureaucracy. School principals, most appropriately, must bear the responsibility for their hiring decisions, and both the State and the school districts must hold these leaders

accountable for results. A principal's judgment may be fallible, but it is certainly no more fallible than the current regulatory approach to deciding who teaches.

This overhaul represents a direct threat to schools of education and other education groups that support the flawed certification process. Although these groups will admit readily that the teacher preparation system is in dire need of repair, their reform agenda leads consistently to heavier state regulation, more time for prospective teachers in schools of education, and a crackdown on alternative certification methods and waivers. It is patently insufficient to consider re-tooling, once again, the certification process. Reinvention is in order.