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REVIEW OF *SMART, SKILLED, AND STRIVING: TRANSFORMING AND ELEVATING THE TEACHING PROFESSION*

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Summary of Review

This report from the Center for American Progress offers ten recommendations for improving the public perceptions of and experiences of classroom teachers. While elements of these recommendations would likely be beneficial, they also include policy changes that would increase surveillance of teachers, reduce teachers' job security, evaluate teachers by students' test scores, and create merit pay systems that would likely have the opposite effect. For evidence, the report relies too heavily on popular rhetoric, sound bites, opinion articles, and advocacy publications to advance a policy agenda that in many ways could do further harm to the teaching profession. However, many of the report's recommendations do align with policy reforms currently being proposed for the Higher Education Act and included in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorizations and are therefore important to read critically and consider carefully. In advancing evaluation of teachers by test scores, the report goes against the cautions and guidelines recently released by the American Statistical Association and the American Educational Research Association. Other than a review of contemporary issues, the report offers little of substance to advance the teaching profession.



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REVIEW OF *SMART, SKILLED, AND STRIVING: TRANSFORMING AND ELEVATING THE TEACHING PROFESSION*

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I. Introduction

The title is catchy and positive: “*Smart, Skilled, and Striving: Transforming and Elevating the Teaching Profession.*”²¹ It sounds like a teacher-friendly approach to improving the perceptions and experiences of teachers working in classrooms. However, this report published by the Center for American Progress uses popular rhetoric and sound bites to advance a policy agenda that in many ways could harm the teaching profession. The authors present ten recommendations to “raise the quality” of how teachers are recruited, trained and evaluated in order to “elevate” the profession. Although the report purports to advance a “progressive vision and policy agenda” a deeper analysis indicates that the recommendations are more aligned with conservative, individualistic, accountability-based approaches to educational reform.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The goal of the report is summarized on the first page of the executive summary with the following statement: “This new CAP report outlines a vision for how to elevate and modernize the teaching profession so that every student is taught by great teachers.” The title and the tag line sound non-controversial enough; however, a closer examination of the content reveals several policy reforms that could seriously harm the future of the teaching profession. The report argues that if we do not change the perception of the teaching profession, schools will not be able to recruit “high achieving young people” into teaching. The authors assert that low public perceptions of teaching play a large part in impacting who chooses to become a teacher. The implication is that the quality of teaching in U.S. schools has fallen or has always been low, and as a result we must reform teacher preparation programs along with the entire pipeline through the profession. In order to accomplish this, the authors make ten recommendations to “shift toward a respected, modernized, and elevated teacher workforce” (p. 5).

The ten recommendations are worded in such a way that the reader might be inclined to agree with the proposals, but the report essentially suggests the following reforms:

1. Increase the selectivity of teacher preparation programs using standardized test scores (SAT, ACT, GRE) and grade point averages
2. Require teacher preparation programs to provide more data on their effectiveness
3. Make licensure exams more rigorous
4. Raise teacher compensation and provide salary increases for “high performing teachers”
5. Create teacher induction programs that provide a more gradual “on ramp” to full time teaching
6. Redesign school schedules to allow more teacher collaboration time
7. Hold school districts accountable for spending professional development funds on activities “aimed at improving student learning outcomes” and evaluating teachers
8. Increase compensation and leadership opportunities for “high performing” teachers
9. Make tenure harder to attain and reduce due process protections
10. Support the development of principals and school leaders

These recommendations provide the foundation for a new initiative that the Center for American Progress is calling #TeachStrong (teachstrong.org) which has a long list of partners including many national educational organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ). Other partners include groups offering alternative pathways to teacher preparation such as National Center for Teacher Residencies, Relay Graduate School of Education, Urban Teachers, and Teach for America. It is important to attend to who is already endorsing this initiative as it indicates a strong preference for alternative licensure pathways and organizations that are moving away from traditional university-based teacher education programs. This is in spite of research indicating that colleges of education produce more qualified and effective teachers than many alternative licensure programs.^{2,3}

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

The rationale the authors provide for their recommendations is based on their argument that expectations on today’s teachers are high and that there is a need to “modernize” and “elevate” the teacher workforce. The authors mention that “research is demonstrating the

powerful effect that teachers can have on student learning and illuminating the ways in which great teaching is more important than ever before” (p. 1), but the footnotes provided to support this assertion link back to websites such as Edutopia.org and opportunityculture.org. The implied message is that current teacher preparation programs are outdated and not rigorous enough for the modern realities in schools, or that great teaching hasn’t always been important to effective schools.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

Although “research” and “studies” are referenced in the text, there are few peer-reviewed studies or scholarly publications cited in this report. The majority of the references included in the report are editorials, opinion pieces, and polls reported in national news outlets (PBS, NPR, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Huffington Post, EdWeek) and reports by groups such as the National Bureau of Economic Research, National Council for Teacher Quality, The Center for American Progress, and The Third Way.

To better understand some of these sources, it is helpful to learn more about the organizations producing the reports. For example, The Third Way describes itself as a “centrist think tank” and has a very similarly-themed report on their website titled, “Teaching: The Next Generation”⁴ that has a more overtly critical and negative tone regarding public perceptions of teaching, and shares many of the same recommendations as the Center for American Progress’ report. For those unfamiliar with NCTQ, it is an organization that tries to influence teacher preparation and professional development but garners very little respect from those within the profession. The Washington Post described the National Center for Teacher Quality as, “an organization that is funded by organizations that promote a corporate-influenced school reform agenda” and a leading scholar in teacher education, Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond, strongly critiqued their methodology and reliance on impartial and inaccurate data in evaluating teacher preparation programs.⁵ Also, the frequent citations of reports from NBER indicate how strongly economics and business models are influencing the ideas presented in this publication. Therefore readers are encouraged to be critical of the sources and the data selected for inclusion in this report.

V. Review of the Report’s Methods

There is no section that describes their methods for determining that the teacher workforce is in need of “transformation and elevation” or for how they selected the reports and opinion pieces used as evidence for their recommendations.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The first recommendation is to: “ensure that teacher preparation programs select teacher candidates carefully and purposefully.” This implies that the educational opportunities one had before starting teacher licensure are more important to “good teaching” than the learning that takes place in the context of a licensure program. It also aligns with a controversial element of the new national standards for teacher accreditation as outlined by Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). In CAEP’s standard 3.2 that states programs must “select teacher candidates carefully and purposefully,” they outline that schools of education should set increasingly high standards for admission using GPA’s and standardized test scores aiming to only admit students who rank in the top 33% by 2020.⁶

There are several problems with establishing such rigid cut scores using SATs, ACTs, and GREs. The first is that these tests were never designed to predict the effectiveness of a teacher. These tests were designed to predict success in college courses. We know that excellent teachers have to have strengths in addition to “doing school”, and most of these cannot be measured or predicted using standardized tests. Secondly, these tests are strongly correlated with family income,⁷ and thus tend to be biased against groups who have limited economic opportunities including: students of color, students living in poor school districts, and

These tests were never designed to predict the effectiveness of a teacher.

English language learners. As a result, such cut scores will continue to restrict the avenues for underrepresented populations to enter the teaching profession. Which, ironically, is a goal listed in CAEP standard 3.1: “plan for recruitment of diverse candidates who meet employment needs.”

The second recommendation is to “require teacher preparation programs to improve coursework and offer higher-quality clinical training experiences.” Embedded in this recommendation is the call to have states collect and publish data on the effectiveness of their teacher preparation programs. This recommendation reflects some of the December 2014 proposed revisions to the Higher Education Act that would include more regulations on teacher preparation programs. These federal requirements received significant backlash from thought leaders in teacher education due to their proposed narrow data collection and onerous reporting requirements.⁸ There already are measures of accountability for teacher preparation programs in place, and states already do have the authority to suspend programs that do not meet state or national accreditation standards.

Recommendation three addresses the need to improve licensure exams to be more rigorous and “rooted in the skills and knowledge that teachers need.” They make an explicit call for more widespread adoption of expensive assessments like the nationally normed EdTPA, administered by Pearson, or the Educational Testing Service’s Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers (p. 26).

Recommendation four proposes to raise teacher compensation and create a pay scale that

allows for “performance” increases and “the opportunity to earn more by taking on additional responsibilities.” While many would agree that teacher salaries are too low, some of the proposed ways to help teachers increase their salary are quite controversial, including, “offering compensation systems that are differentiated by roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness that are based on a high-quality evaluation system” (p. 29). In districts that have implemented bonuses and salary increases based on student performance there have been concerns with how “performance” is measured and quantified,⁹ and problems with teachers and schools helping students cheat on the standardized tests that are partially used to calculate such bonuses and the “value added” by a single teacher to a student’s learning.¹⁰ The American Educational Research Association and the American Statistical Association have both issued statements about the limitations of VAM (value-added models) due to the widespread misuse of such data in evaluating educator effectiveness.¹¹ Despite concerns, merit pay is also allowed as part of Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which passed the House of Representatives in December 2015 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization process.¹²

The next set of recommendations focus on teacher professional development and read as follows:

5. “Invest in new teachers by supporting their professional growth early on.”
6. “Redesign school schedules to support improvements in teacher practice.”
7. “Improve professional development by aligning it to the needs of students and teachers.”
8. “Provide more opportunities for teachers to assume leadership roles.”

These are all promising recommendations that most educators would agree have the potential to benefit the workplaces and ongoing development of classroom teachers. Unfortunately, recommendation five is linked to arguments for more alternative licensure pathways such as residency models that tend to put underprepared teachers in their own classrooms right away and then offer coaching and courses while they teach – which seems to contradict the larger message of this report. These accelerated licensure pathways are supported by provisions in the new ESSA and are even elevated to be recognized as “at least the equivalent of” a Masters degree.¹³ Recommendation six is one strongly supported by teachers’ organizations and has scholarly research to support it, although this is not mentioned in this report.

In terms of recommendation seven, the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) is named as an exemplary model of professional development (p. 40), but it is controversial with teachers’ unions due to its links to performance-based compensation.¹⁴ It is also important to attend to the fact that these are all elements that are currently being proposed as part of HR 4269 “The Great Teaching and Leading for Great Schools Act of 2014.” This bill would mandate the four recommendations listed above and require that 50% of Title II funds be spent on principal effectiveness. Additionally, it would require school districts to implement

a teacher evaluation system that includes student academic outcomes (as measured on standardized tests) as part of teachers' "performance ratings". This is a controversial approach to teacher evaluation that has no basis in research and has been critiqued by a team of leading educational scholars.¹⁰ These critiques are offered to help readers be more cautious of recommendations that sound good in principle, but in practice, may impose strict guidelines and economic restrictions that ensure a narrow range of accountability-linked practices get implemented.

Recommendation nine asserts that we need to reform tenure by setting a "high bar" and "streamlining due process." Again, not many people would disagree with the fact that there should be high standards for granting teacher tenure; however, making it harder to attain would actually be a disincentive for people interested in pursuing a career as a teacher. Reducing job stability and making it take longer to secure a permanent position in a school district goes against the stated goals of recruiting more highly qualified people into the profession. The authors are arguing for a quicker and cheaper way to remove teachers from the profession by reducing due process protections, and restricting the supports provided by teachers' unions. This is a change advocated for by many conservative reformers¹⁵ and an operating procedure present in many charter schools that often have high turnover, which in turn has negative impacts on student learning. Finally, recommendation ten addresses the need to ensure that school leaders are trained to support teachers. This links back to some concerns identified with recommendations five through eight and the sorts of training and accountability systems that would be required by the policy reforms being advanced in HR 4269.

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

While some of these recommendations might sound appealing to a general audience, many of the proposed reforms are grounded in conservative ideological rhetoric about individual accountability and economic efficiency that ignores more systemic issues. These recommendations advocate for increasing surveillance of teachers, reducing job security, implementing evaluation systems that use standardized test scores inappropriately and in ways that negatively impact teachers working in under-resourced schools, and compensating teachers based on narrow definitions of "high quality" without considering all the various impacts of their current professional environment.

This report disseminated by the Center for American Progress compiles recommendations that are currently popular with conservative educational reformers and offers thin evidence to support its claims. The report initially looks like pro-teacher policy agenda, but it actually boils down to a series of reforms that are often resisted by teachers' organizations. The usefulness of this report lies in examining the exemplar districts, programs, and sources of evidence to better understand how certain ideas would actually play out if the proposed pol-

icy changes were implemented. Instead of advancing teacher professionalism, recommendations such as merit pay, reduced job security, teacher evaluation by student test score and merit pay would likely have the opposite effect.

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