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Perspectives on the NCTQ/USNWR Review of Teacher Education
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Thoughts about the NCTQ/USNWR Review of Teacher Education Programs

The NCTQ review of teacher education programs, while seemingly well intended, falls far short of the mark NCTQ staff have set for themselves and the country. The rationale for the review as presented on their website is that a review of teacher education programs is needed if the country hopes to improve academic performance in our schools. It is noted that “very little is known about the quality of teacher preparation programs—their selectivity, the content and pedagogical knowledge that they demand that their teacher candidates master, or how well they prepare candidates for the rigors of the classroom.” While this statement could certainly be debated given the extensive research on teacher education published by AERA and AACTE as well as the multiplicity of journals that contain teacher education research, it is accurate to say that a nationwide comprehensive review of teacher education programs has never been conducted and is needed. NCTQ staff indicate that students interested in teaching as a career need the opportunity to make informed choices about where to study, employers need to know where to find well-prepared teachers, and policymakers need a means “to sanction poorly performing education schools.” NCTQ Executive Director Kate Walsh has also indicated that the review will help transform teacher preparation and improve the pipeline of teachers coming into our schools. It is a tall order to expect this review, as conceived by NCTQ, to achieve these many purposes. It is particularly challenging to anticipate these lofty outcomes actually resulting from a review that has as its primary product the publication of a single letter grade assigned to each teacher preparation program in the nation. The promise to provide some analysis of their findings regarding individual institutions on the NCTQ website is equally unlikely to achieve these stated goals and intended outcomes.

When a single assessment tool claims to serve multiple purposes, such as prediction of future achievement, diagnosis of a disability, and planning for intervention, it most often fails to achieve any purpose well. We need specialized assessments that are reliable and valid for their stated purpose far more than we need one efficient instrument that does nothing well. Such is the case with the NCTQ survey of teacher education programs that is structured around relatively innocuous standards and indicators that are characterized by Art McKee of NCTQ in personal correspondence with me (regarding concerns of Tennessee institutions of higher education related to the study, which can be found on the NCTQ website in the Transparency Section under Tennessee) as being “based on the best available scientific research, the experience of states and counties with high-performing educational systems, and common sense.” In that same communication, he characterizes the InTASC standards as “written in such a way as to make it virtually impossible to determine if a program has failed to meet them.” NCTQ has also critiqued National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards as lacking adequate specificity. I would argue that the NCTQ standards are equally subject to interpretation. In fact, I would argue that standards and even indicators for reviews such as this one or accreditation must be sufficiently broad to be of any use. However, it is the actual operationalization of standards, performance measures, or indicators that gives them meaning and value. Although the NCTQ standards and indicators are fairly narrow and specific, NCTQ does not provide any information regarding how they will be measured or what will be sufficient to meet them. For example, The indicator for *Standard 4: All Children Can Learn* is that all teacher candidates experience “(through activities ranging from structured observations to student teaching) traditional or public charter schools, or individual classrooms that are successfully serving high needs populations, with success defined as exceeding expectations on state assessments and in graduation rates.” Even though the indicator is specific and provides a definition of success, we still do

not know the actual criteria that will earn a passing evaluation or cause one to fail the standard. We do not even know whether the review will result in a yes/no, partial credit, a three-point scale, a five-point scale, or any other measurement. Will a single instance of students visiting a high-performing school that successfully serves students living in poverty be sufficient, or will two visits, or a visit and observations through live cameras? Will visits from teachers and administrators of such schools hold any value, or must the standard be met by on-site visits to the schools? Who sets the expectations for schools and who determines if a school/classroom has exceeded them? Schools of education that chose to partner with struggling urban schools, as many are declaring is our obligation, would fail to meet the standard because they do not restrict themselves to schools that are already successful. Certainly the intention of the standard and its sole indicator are worthy, but remain subjective in application. NCTQ indicates that they have highly trained educational analysts reviewing the material, but will not offer any further clarification of their scoring measurements or rubrics (if any exist) or how they will determine adequacy of a standard. They presumably know their scoring criteria and process, but will not share either with those who are to be evaluated. With such insider knowledge, I imagine that their standards might seem straightforward and easily documented. However, they are unwilling to share such details of their methodology. It is like taking a test without being allowed to see the questions. Furthermore, I wonder how disruptive repetitive visits would become to the target schools were all institutions to incorporate them into their requirements with the intention of improving their rating on an annual NCTQ review.

Although not exclusively, the NCTQ review relies primarily on inputs, such as reading textbook selection, student teaching handbooks and policies, course syllabi, and curricular requirements rather than the performance of program completers. The review also includes student teaching standards that place an emphasis on an outdated model of student teaching, which further impedes this work from achieving its intended outcomes. Many teacher preparation programs have established or are in the process of establishing technically reliable and valid measures of teacher performance through the Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium and other similar efforts. Residency models, particularly those associated with the Urban Teacher Residency Institute have developed clinical components consistent with the recommendations presented in the recent NCATE report, *Transforming Teacher Education through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers.* Student teaching as the culmination of a course-of-study in teacher education is not the most effective means of incorporating clinical experience into teacher preparation. It would be a significant step backward for teacher preparation programs that offer programs with fully integrated clinical components to return their programs to practices outlined in the NCTQ student teaching standard for the sake of a good grade in *USNWR*. Leading teacher preparation programs that have developed programs that offer well-integrated, extensive clinical practice; rely on problem-based and case-based teaching; integrate the latest technology into their programs for microteaching with avatars; and push their students to understand cultural identity and cultural relevance in our classrooms should be the ones that stand out in a national review of teacher education. It should not be the ones that line up to these limited notions of a student teaching experience. We must resist being drawn to the lowest common denominator that is easily accessible, such as what textbook is used for our reading education courses, the ACT score of our students, or the topics listed on a course syllabus for math education.

We have seen schools narrow the curriculum for students whose families face struggles associated with economic distress. Literacy development and mathematics now consume the majority of the day for many elementary students. Children in the early grades in schools serving these communities receive little or no exposure to the science or social sciences curriculum because teachers and administrators are so focused on the improvement of reading and math test scores. When these students advance to the middle grades they may lack the academic vocabulary and knowledge base needed to learn science and social sciences content intended for their grade levels. Were the NCTQ review standards to become the driving force behind changes to our teacher education programs, we could see a similar narrowing of the curriculum down to literacy and math because the standards and the survey instrument itself focus attention on

these two areas of the curriculum. It is not a direction that is wise to take or consistent with this country's need to improve student achievement in the STEM fields.

I ask NCTQ to redirect its resources, passion for education, and commitment to improving the academic outcomes of children in our schools to work collaboratively with educators who are engaging in innovative, clinically-based teacher preparation. It is not the weak universities that spearheaded the resistance to this survey. It has been the education deans, provosts, and even presidents of the nation's elite teacher preparation programs sitting at the top of the *USNWR* rankings that have organized against this fear-based approach to reform. They are the same ones who have been driving changes to our accreditation systems. They understand and embrace the need for the quality of education in our public schools that serve economically struggling communities to improve. Have we gone too far in this "no-holds barred" debate to put down our defenses and establish a working relationship built on trust between those engaged in the best teacher education available in this country and the impatient reformers who are tired of the status quo?

Thoughts on Evaluating Teacher Education Programs

The effectiveness of teacher education programs can best be determined by evaluating program completers. We can then analyze the data coming from such evaluations to determine which components of our programs have the desired impact and which might need further refinement or removal. We can identify gaps and develop new components from such analysis. These evaluations of teacher candidates should include their developmental performance both during and after program completion, which allows us to document change and growth over time. Candidates that teacher educators ultimately recommend for licensure should demonstrate the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for classroom success. Although an exhaustive list of these characteristics is virtually impossible to compile, here is a worthy start:

- Requisite content knowledge—you cannot teach something you do not know
- Solid understanding of child development, motivation, and principles of learning
- Demonstrated skill in a wide array of pedagogical strategies particularly relevant to the content being studied and designed to reach students of varying backgrounds and abilities
- Commitment to seeking a wide array of instructional strategies for children who struggle to succeed in school
- Willingness to engage in collaborative work with colleagues to strengthen and support school-wide efforts to improve student achievement
- Possession of an outlook of academic optimism for all students
- Dedication to life-long learning even when it means becoming a learner along with their students.

In order to determine a program's efficacy in selecting and developing candidates who possess the potential to display these characteristics we must draw sample data from the following key program elements.

Clinical Component: How well does the program partner with school districts in the development and delivery of the clinical component of the program? What are the opinions expressed by superintendents and central office administrators, building-level administrators, and mentor teachers? How well integrated into the program is the clinical component? Do school systems hire and retain program graduates? Are there connections between the LEAs and the IHE beyond the clinical experience component of the program, such as collaboration on alternative licensure programs, professional development, advisory councils, urban residencies, teacher leadership academies, innovative grants, and so forth? Are there collaborative resources and initiatives associated with mentoring support during induction years for novice teachers? Answers to these questions require multi-point data collection using surveys, site visits, and interviews.

Content Knowledge: What is the depth of content knowledge of candidates? Typically grades in specific courses and content-based examinations serve as indicators of content knowledge. As Common Core Standards in Math and English become operationalized throughout the country, teacher education programs will also closely align their curricular requirements to these standards, increasing capacity to measure content knowledge across institutions and states.

Demonstrated Pedagogical Skills: Programs document candidate capacity to plan, teach, assess, reflect, adjust and reteach, and manage classroom settings through multiple measures and observational tools. The Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (TPAC) is an excellent example of the work being done in this area, but is by no means the only worthy performance-based observational system in use or in development.

Demonstrated Dispositions: Programs document candidate possession of the attitudes and behaviors necessary to be effective in the classroom. Such dispositions range from punctuality and the wearing of professional attire to holding academic optimism for all students. University faculty and school-based mentors and supervisors observe and document candidate demonstration of these dispositions using checklists and narrative as needed.

Production of student learning: Programs document that students being taught by program completers are learning. While this can be done on a limited basis during the pre-service period through action research projects and teacher performance assessment, it is the ongoing capacity to generate student learning as novice teachers become instructors-of-record that must be woven into the assessment of teacher education programs. The connections between programs and their graduates who are teaching are difficult to maintain. As is possible, it is worthwhile to make connections that include student performance on examinations of content connected to the content area of preparation, honors and awards achieved by students, Advanced Placement examination performance, and student evaluations of their teachers. Further development of the connections between programs and the performance of the students of in-service teachers will only be robust when numbers are large enough to wash out confounding variables present in every school, such as the ratio of new teachers in the building, mentoring and induction support available, collegiality, leadership capacity of principals, and instructional resources. Data quality control and data systems capable of tracking teachers across state boundaries must be developed to bring validity to this approach to teacher education evaluation.

Persistence and Professional Commitment: Programs document that their graduates remain in education, advance to serve as teacher leaders or educational administrators, assume positions of leadership and responsibility in professional organizations, pursue advanced study and expanded knowledge/skills, earn National Board Certification, and achieve other indicators of professional success. Again, the institutional capacity to track graduates as they advance in their careers must be developed for this to become a meaningful component of any evaluation system.