

# **BREAKING THE CYCLE OF MEDIOCRITY**

THE CHALLENGES OF  
TRANSFORMING U.S.  
TEACHER PREPARATION

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# INTRODUCTION

Recently, there's been a great deal of debate over the failure of colleges of education to teach the science of reading driven in part through a series of podcasts by Emily Hanford which was also featured in print by the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> Hanford concluded that “colleges of education—which should be at the forefront of pushing the best research—have largely ignored the scientific evidence on reading” and reported that “It’s not just ignorance. There’s active resistance to the science, too. I [interviewed](#) a professor of literacy in Mississippi who told me she was ‘philosophically opposed’ to phonics instruction. One of her colleagues told me she didn’t agree with the findings of reading scientists because ‘it’s their science.’”


The situation is so bad that when the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) published its annual review of teacher prep programs earlier this year,<sup>2</sup> it was considered positive news that a little more than half (51%) of all teacher preparation programs were found to be teaching scientifically based reading instruction, up from 35% seven years ago. At this rate, every teacher prep program will be teaching scientifically based reading in the year 2041.

Compared to other university departments and to teacher preparation programs in higher-achieving countries, U.S. teacher-training programs are generally found to have lower admission standards; easier grading of teacher candidates’ work; and a lower bar for graduation and licensure.<sup>3</sup> Other shortcomings include:

- Curricula that emphasize theory over practice,
- Weak coursework building subject matter knowledge,
- Lack of quality clinical training and experience regarding both pedagogy and classroom management,
- Failure to adequately assess graduates and measure their effectiveness, and
- A lack of supports for teachers in their first few years of teaching.

Every field with broad social importance undergoes, at some point, a transformation to catch-up to societal expectations and advances in knowledge. Modernization leads to qualitatively different approaches to training, which in turn enhance professional prestige. In this era of international benchmarks and higher expectations, it is just as unfair to thrust teachers into a classroom when we know they have been poorly prepared as it is to place students with them whose futures hinge on the outcome.

Yet, this is far from a new problem. Opportunities to improve teacher recruitment and preparation have been missed in the past. In fact, efforts to improve teacher preparation in the U.S. proceed through a recurring, closed loop cycle. First, a report is issued identifying serious shortcomings in the way teachers are recruited, trained, and inducted. Second, college presidents and education school deans pledge to make the



necessary changes called for in those reports. Third, little if anything actually happens. Teacher-training programs maintain the same feckless and outdated policies. In time, another hard-hitting report results in urgent calls for action that go largely unheeded. Our opportunity for success will only be realized if we radically depart from what has previously been tried.

The good news is that over the past several years some innovators have begun to break the cycle. These trailblazers, operating largely outside of the traditional, university-based system, have created alternative teacher preparation programs that do many of things that experts agree all teacher preparation programs should do and teachers say they wish their training programs had done. These approaches should be both models of innovation for others and potential candidates for increased investment so that they can be scaled up and reach more prospective teachers. This report will review several of these leading programs and discuss whether and how they can be models and foundations for long-term systemic change.

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This is not to say that traditional teacher preparation programs are not trying to improve. Institutions of higher education have started down a path of change to address current shortcomings, most notably through the Council of Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The jury is out, however, on whether current efforts will succeed where past attempts to turn around schools of education have failed. While the obstacles—as we discuss below—are formidable, we are cautiously optimistic that this time around things will be different.

Similarly, we are not saying that all non-traditional teacher training programs are perfect. Far from it. When it comes to quality, we see some alternative educator preparation programs that rank just as low as the worst traditional programs. Nonetheless, the innovative programs we discuss here suggest that we should be pushing for change not just within the current system, but also outside of it.

## BROAD CONSENSUS ON THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Some of the sharpest criticisms of U.S. teacher preparation have always come from those within the system: education school deans, distinguished academics, and the heads of both major teacher unions. In the 1920s, Henry Wyman Holmes, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education opined:

*A more serious conception of the place of the teacher in the life of the nation is both necessary and timely. [I urge] changing the systems that support poorly trained, paid and esteemed teachers.<sup>4</sup>*

Jacques Barzun, former Dean of Columbia University Graduate School, who was awarded 2010 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama, put it most succinctly when he said: “Teacher training is based on a strong anti-intellectual bias, enhanced by a total lack of imagination” and, in even stronger terms “It would be wrong to say that the young recruits are brainwashed—they are brain soiled.”<sup>5</sup>

And a seminal study by NCTQ similarly concluded, based on course offerings and curricula, that teacher education programs: “have become an industry of mediocrity, churning out first-year teachers with classroom management skills and content knowledge inadequate to thrive in classrooms with ever-increasing ethnic and socio-economic student diversity.”<sup>6</sup>

“Teacher training is based on a strong anti-intellectual bias, enhanced by a total lack of imagination.”<sup>7</sup>

–Jacques Barzun (1907-2012), former Dean of Columbia University Graduate School, awarded 2010 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama.

The call for change often comes from teachers themselves. A recent Educators for Excellence survey found that only 10 percent of teachers believe teacher preparation programs actually do a good job of training teachers for “realities of the classroom,”<sup>8</sup> and too often focus on theory over practice. A veteran Boston teacher, through her work with Teach Plus, described her first-year experience this way: “As the class of high schoolers erupted into laughter and tears burned my eyes, a thought erupted in my mind: ‘My teacher education program did not prepare me for this first year.’ Not only was I miserable, but students could not learn in the classroom I had created.”<sup>9</sup>

The teacher who wrote this, Lillie Marshall, eventually attained the skills and knowledge that she did not have the opportunity to acquire in her formal training. Seventeen years after her negative experience as a novice teacher, she is still in the profession. Unfortunately, not all teachers are so lucky or resourceful.

The deliberate inaction on such criticisms by those institutions whose job it is to select and prepare teachers constitutes educational negligence of the highest order. Levine’s (2006) study of schools of education<sup>10</sup> found that education school deans and faculty “complained that teacher education research was subjective, obscure, faddish, impractical, out of touch, inbred, and politically correct, and that it failed to address the burning problems in the nation’s schools.” E.D. Hirsch recounted the hegemony of ideology present in higher education and teacher preparation in his 1996 book, “The Schools We Need, and Why We Don’t Have Them:” “[N]ot only do our teacher-training schools decline to put a premium on nuts-and-bolts classroom effectiveness, but they promote ideas that actually run counter to consensus research into teacher effectiveness.”<sup>11</sup>

## CONFLICTING INCENTIVES TO CHANGE

Colleges and universities have traditionally not made investments in the quality of their teacher preparation programs a high priority. In fact, an overwhelming number of insiders have asserted that colleges and universities generally siphon money out of schools of education to pay for departments elsewhere in the institution that have higher prestige and more clout. Katherine Merseeth, a senior lecturer and director of teacher education at Harvard said:

*The dirty little secret about schools of education is that they have been the cash cows of universities for many, many years, and it's time to say, 'Show us what you can do, or get out of the business.'*<sup>12</sup>

However, new evidence suggests that teacher preparation programs may no longer be as strong a revenue stream. In fact, the instructional cost education courses are \$300 per credit hour—only engineering and nursing were more expensive.<sup>13</sup>

While this could suggest that institutions are choosing to increase investments in teacher preparation schools, it's also likely that rising costs could actually be tied to decreased enrollment. Between 2010 and 2018 enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs declined by 43 percent nationwide. Rather than choosing other professions, many prospective teachers may be simply choosing an alternative path: alternative certification programs saw a 42 percent increase over the same time period.<sup>14</sup> However, given that traditional programs still train 75% of prospective teachers, it's unclear if the increased competition from alternative programs will spur institutions to make desperately needed changes to their programs.

Current accountability measures provide few real incentives for institutions to change their practices. While the Higher Education Act (HEA) requires states to oversee educator preparation programs, seven states have no processes in place to report under-performing programs. Perhaps more troubling, only six states identified at least one program as low-performing, and only 13 identified at least one as “at-risk.”<sup>15</sup> While this could indicate strong programs, given widespread criticism, it more likely indicates a systematic lack of oversight on the part of states.

“It’s high time that we broke up the cartel...of the nation’s 1,300 graduate teacher training programs, only about 100 [are] doing a competent job; ‘the others could be shut down tomorrow.’”<sup>16</sup>

- Katherine Merseeth, Director of Teacher Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education

And state licensure requirements do little to incentivize institutions to increase program rigor. Only 12 states currently require prospective elementary school teachers demonstrate knowledge of the science of reading,<sup>17</sup> and only 10 require testing and licensure for each secondary science content area.<sup>18</sup> Until states are willing to hold traditional teacher preparation programs’ feet to the fire, they are unlikely to change.

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

The overriding philosophy in university-based programs that prepare America’s teachers is at odds with research and practice. Not only that, it is a philosophy that is highly

resistant to change. But programs developed outside the existing framework, unbound from this belief system, have the intellectual freedom to explore new approaches of preparing teachers—methods that are unlikely to be carried out successfully from within the current system, given the existing cycle of inaction.

Programs developed outside the existing system, unbound from pervasive systemic beliefs, have the intellectual freedom to explore new ways of preparing teachers, ways that are unlikely to be initiated from within the system.

### ***What We're Learning from Key Innovators***

Our [recent series on innovative educator preparation programs](#)<sup>19</sup> showcased six very different approaches: High Tech High (HTH); National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR); Relay Graduate School of Education (RGSE); Match Residency/Sposato Graduate School of Education (SGSE); TNTP; and Urban Teachers. Again, we are not claiming that any of these programs is perfect but rather that, collectively and individually, they do have key characteristics that can inform the improvement of educator preparation more broadly. Here are some of their major advantages:

**Clinical Experience and Support.** In its 2018 review of educator preparation programs, NCTQ proposed<sup>20</sup> the following standard:

*To increase the quality of the clinical experience, programs should, at minimum, take two actions that have been shown to be effective by research. First, programs should play an active role in identifying qualified mentor teachers by collecting meaningful information that allows the programs to confirm the skills of each mentor teacher, instead of leaving their selection entirely in the hands of principals or other school district staff. Mentors should be effective instructors (as measured by evidence of student learning) and capable mentors of adults. Second, programs should require supervisors to provide candidates with frequent observations accompanied by written feedback.*

NCTQ concluded that only 6% of traditional programs effectively vet mentor teachers in this way, compared to more than a third of residency-based programs. Ninety percent of internship programs run by for-profit operators fail to do so.

Five of the six alternative programs we reviewed place a heavy emphasis on pre-service clinical practice. For example, first year students enrolled in SGSE work full-time in a partner residency. Those enrolled in Urban Teachers complete a 14-month residency in partner schools. Similarly, RGSE participants spend their first year as residents at a partner school in their respective region, while completing graduate coursework and training in the evenings and on weekends. Partner schools predominantly serve low-income students and are selected based on a number of factors including mission, pipeline, and programmatic alignment and a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Moreover, these programs tend to have high-quality mentoring and support. In National Teacher Residency programs, mentor teachers must complete an application and selection process that includes an interview, classroom observation, and screens for key characteristics. Urban Teachers Residents complete 1,500 hours of co-teaching and receive 36 hours of one-on-one coaching from a local, designated Johns Hopkins

clinical faculty member. Clinical faculty have an average of 10 years of classroom experience. Coaching is conducted through a recurring cycle of support, practice, and reflection. Coaching formats include:

- **Planning meetings:** Dialogues centered around a specific area of teacher practice.
- **Classroom observations:** Coaches provide participants with targeted, evidence-based, constructive feedback.
- **Comprehensive coaching cycles:** A “metacognitive” approach in which the coach works with a participant to develop a lesson, observes the practice of that lesson, and provides feedback.
- **Focused observation:** Coaches observe, for a short duration, a discrete behavior or instructional practice.
- **Cross-visitations:** Participants conduct site visits to other K-12 classrooms viewed through Urban Teachers’ clinical practice rubric.
- **Data-driven goal setting:** Coaches work with participants to examine student data, identify the successes and challenges in their work, and set goals for future practice.

Even the one program we studied that did not require a residency placed a heavy emphasis on providing high-quality support to novice teachers. TNTP coaches regularly observe participants either through classroom visits or video review and provide actionable guidance and concrete strategies to apply in future lessons. Coaches may also pull participants into small skill-building sessions to address development needs.

**Selectivity.** NCTQ has found that just 14 percent of traditional and 23 percent of alternative certification programs have rigorous admissions criteria. All six of the programs we reviewed, however, seem to have rigorous admissions criteria.

Applicants to Urban Teachers, for example, must have earned a bachelor’s degree with exceptional academic performance and passed state pre-professional exams, either the Praxis Core (Baltimore, Washington, D.C.) or Pre-Admission Content Test (Dallas). Applicants must also complete interviews and exhibit core competencies, such as a commitment to children in underserved areas, perseverance and resilience, a growth mindset, and professional skills.

The alternative programs we reviewed had distinct advantages over traditional programs including clinical experience and support, high selectivity, strong curricula, and diverse candidates.

NCTR applicants also undergo a rigorous selection process, which includes written applications, phone and in-person interviews, sample teaching lessons, and screening for key characteristics such as growth mindset, persistence, and ability to be reflective. Other admissions criteria include a bachelor’s degree, required state exams, background clearances, and any additional criteria the partner college or university may require, such as GPA and SAT/ACT. Criteria for admission to TNTP and standards for completion of the Teaching Fellows program are highly selective. Only 10% of applicants meet all standards.

**Curricula.** The quality of curricula is much harder to gauge than other quality indicators such as clinical practice and support, and program selectivity. In the 2020 NCTQ Teacher Prep review, two of the programs we focused on—MATCH Residency and Urban Teachers—received B’s on the quality of their early reading curricula, two—RGSE and TNTP (NOLA)—received D’s. NCTR’s programs vary somewhat by location and, as such, those rated by NCTQ ranged from B to D. The remaining program, High Tech High, was not evaluated by NCTQ.

More broadly, we would point to some highlights among the six programs we studied. For example, Urban Teachers offers certification in one of three content areas—elementary education, secondary literacy, and secondary math—and also requires certification in special education. Urban Teachers is one of only a handful of programs, alternative or traditional, that mandates special education certification. Participants in the Dallas area, where about 40% of students are English Language Learners, must also earn certification in English as a second language.

At High Tech High, courses are aligned to the California Teacher Performance Expectations and topics include culturally responsive pedagogy, classroom management and structures, building relationships with students and families, equity and diversity, instructional methods, English language acquisition, differentiation and inclusive environments, assessment, and subject-specific methods. The majority NCTR’s program completers earn certification in high-demand areas, including STEM, English as a second language, and special education.

**Diversity.** Research indicates that when it comes to recruiting and inducting teachers of color, alternative teacher preparation programs do a much better job than traditional programs.<sup>21, 22</sup> We certainly found this with regard to the six programs we studied. For example, an evaluation of the NCTR program in Boston<sup>23</sup> found that those teachers completing the Boston residency were more diverse than Boston novice teachers on the whole. Urban Teachers makes a concerted effort to recruit ethnic minorities and 52% of participants identify as people of color. At RGSE, 70% of program participants identify as people of color.

A new incentive structure—one that relies on output-based standards and encourages new, innovative programs—is possible through the creation of an alternative accreditor that is not beholden to traditional teacher preparation programs.

## WHAT’S NEXT?

In order for promising alternative programs to break up the near monopoly held by traditional teacher preparation programs, the system of accreditation needs an entirely new incentive structure. As we outlined in *New Colleges of Education*,<sup>24</sup> current accreditors are financially dependent on the programs they monitor, which encourages lower standards and discourages revoking accreditation status. Similarly, accreditors are largely governed by members of existing institutions, making them resistant to new competitors.

Even more problematic, the current system of accreditation relies almost entirely on a wide range of process-oriented inputs, such as facilities, faculty degree levels,



curricula, admissions, and student support services. Very little attention is given to quantifiable student outcomes like completion rates, employment rates, or student loan repayment rates—never mind actual student learning. As a result, traditional—and alternative—teacher preparation programs are held to low standards that provide little indication of the extent to which graduates are becoming successful educators.

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Simultaneously, new, innovative programs lack access to federal financial aid funds. Without this, these programs face immense barriers to entry and growth, because:

- traditional accrediting agencies rely on traditional input-based guidelines for quality based primarily on brick-and-mortar colleges; and
- without accreditation, it is difficult to expand and enroll students who cannot afford to pay exclusively out of pocket (or borrow private loans).

The U.S. Department of Education has the authority to waive existing requirements for accreditors designed for traditional institutions. Doing so would reduce the burden for a new accreditor and be better suited for non-traditional programs.

A new incentive structure—one that relies on output-based standards and encourages new, innovative programs—is possible through the creation of an alternative accreditor that is not beholden to traditional teacher preparation programs. This agency—either a new accreditor or a restructured existing one—would be run by those with a direct stake in the quality of graduates (employers, states, districts, and charter management organizations), rather than institutions effectively rating themselves. While this new accreditor would not replace the existing structure for traditional programs, it would reduce the barriers to expansion innovative programs currently face.

By reducing the barriers to entry and expansion, a new accreditor could allow promising innovative teacher preparation programs to disrupt the current system of teacher preparation that is content with mediocrity. These new accredited programs will be held accountable to standards that ensure teachers are prepared for the realities of the classroom, elevating the teacher profession and increasing student access to high-quality teachers.

## ENDNOTES

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