Can the Teaching Profession Be Trusted?

If teaching is to be treated as a profession, it must act like a profession. Mr. Hitz argues that acting like a profession means having a single set of national standards and only one accrediting body for the nation’s teacher preparation programs.

By Randy Hitz

Teacher preparation and licensing are constantly under attack from both national and state policy makers. The extraordinary reporting requirements imposed on university-based teacher preparation programs through Title II of the Higher Education Act and the promotion of “alternative routes” to teacher licensure by the federal government and some states are indicative of the negative attitude toward and mistrust of the teaching profession.

Policy makers realize that teacher qualifications are important, but they do not trust the teaching profession to hold itself to high standards for preparation. Policy makers and the community at large are crying out for direction, and, as we in the profession struggle to reach consensus and unity, other entities fill the leadership void. The disunity in our teaching profession makes the profession vulnerable to harmful micromanaging and bad policy decisions. The result is poorly prepared teachers in too many classrooms, especially classrooms serving the students who are most at risk.

Over the last 20 years we have seen progress in building consensus on teacher standards. The creation of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the research undergirding its efforts, and its remarkable success in assessing teachers have had a profound impact on our ability to define and assess good teaching. The work of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium has brought greater coherence and unity to teacher standards throughout the nation. The new performance-based standards from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the group’s emphasis on assessment are profoundly changing the preparation of professional educators, even in those institutions that have chosen not to be accredited. NCATE’S partnerships with specialized professional associations and with near-
ly every state strengthen the unity of the profession. Many states have essentially adopted NCATE standards. And most states have made good progress in redefining their teacher standards and their relationships with teacher preparing institutions.

On the other hand, several actions have run counter to these accomplishments and have created less unity in the profession. The development of alternative preparation programs, the reduction or elimination of licensure requirements, and the addition of a second national accrediting body for teacher education suggest that there is less agreement today about accreditation and licensure than was the case 10 years ago.

We are at a crossroads as a profession. Either we will become trustworthy by uniting around consensus standards for teachers, or we will give in to the forces that believe teaching is not and should not be a profession that governs itself as do other mature professions.

Attacks on teacher education and licensure of teachers are not new. In the 1950s and 1960s there was considerable talk about teacher quality, but attempts to raise standards for teachers were undermined by the teacher shortage then, just as they are today. The teacher corps program was developed in 1965 and was quietly folded into a block grant in 1981, when the teacher shortage had subsided.

In 1983, President Reagan accepted *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which was critical of teacher education and contributed to the creation of several national efforts to reform the way teachers are prepared. Recommendation B of the report reads “that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission.” Recommendation D, which deals explicitly with teacher education, calls for teacher preparation programs to be judged in part by how well their graduates meet high standards.

Several major reform efforts were initiated soon after the commission released its report, including that of the Holmes Group, with its three reports outlining a reform agenda; 2 John Goodlad’s National Network for Educational Renewal; the Renaissance Group; the Project 30 Alliance; and the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was created with considerable support from Congress, and this board has developed standards and an assessment process for advanced certification. NCATE also significantly changed its standards to include much more assessment based on teacher candidates’ performance.

Despite these efforts, Congress was not satisfied with the progress. In the last reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, Congress imposed reporting requirements on all schools and colleges of education through Title II as an attempt to ensure the quality of teacher education programs. Claiming to use data from the Title II requirement, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report, *Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge: The Secretary’s Annual Report on Teacher Quality*, that states: “The data collected for this report suggest that schools of education and formal teacher training programs are failing to produce the types of highly qualified teachers that the No Child Left Behind Act demands.” The report further states that “scientific evidence also raises questions about the value of attendance in schools of education” (p. 8) and goes on to promote alternative teacher education programs and “streamlining the process of certification” (p. 15).

Some critics of teacher education and licensure have called for deregulation rather than higher standards. Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky argue that the market, rather than state licensing boards, should determine who may enter and stay in the profession. Sandra Vergari and Frederick Hess fear that teaching could become like law or medicine by imposing more rigorous standards and requiring all those entering the field to complete nationally accredited teacher preparation programs. They write:

> NCATE’s standards reflect the collective judgment of teachers, teacher educators, and their representatives, and at worst they will probably do no harm to the enterprise of teacher training. The real concern is that NCATE and its sister organizations will succeed in tightening their grip on entry to the teaching profession itself. Once NCATE convinces states that all teacher-training programs must be NCATE-accredited, it is easy to imagine states requiring that all teachers pass through NCATE-accredited programs. That is precisely what happened in fields like medicine and law.

But teaching is not medicine or law. While the curricula of accredited medical schools must instruct students in the “fundamental principles of medicine” and accredited law schools must impart the “basic principles of public and private law,” the essential and fundamental principles of teaching have yet to be established. 3

Contrasting education to law and medicine, Vergari and Hess continue:

> No one debates whether doctors or lawyers should have to undergo professional training in a university or college environment, but there is still debate over the very value of teacher-training programs.
Indeed, it is questionable whether any form of accreditation is useful or appropriate in a context of widespread disagreement about what skills, dispositions, and methods are essential to good teaching.6

Vergari and Hess present the foundation for mistrust of teacher education as they argue that teaching is not a profession, at least not in the same sense as law or medicine. Therefore, they conclude that licensing requirements do little more than create unnecessary barriers to entry into teaching. This argument cannot be ignored, for it is a popular one that undermines the professionalism of teaching and leads to greater mistrust among policy makers.

**HALLMARKS OF A PROFESSION**

Members of a profession possess knowledge and skills that are unique and that can be obtained only through considerable, rigorous education and training. Professions have a research and knowledge base that is substantial and guides practice. Because they have special knowledge and skills, professionals have a responsibility to use them to serve society. Providing services to communities and clients is thus the primary mission of any profession.

But with this service mission and unique knowledge base comes a responsibility for professionals to set high standards of conduct for themselves and to hold themselves accountable. This means, among other things, that the profession has clear and rigorous standards for preparation, for admission to the profession, for ongoing professional development, and for discipline or removal of those who do not meet standards.

In education, we have a significant research and professional knowledge base. For example, the National Research Council report *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* provides an excellent summary of research on learning. *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*, sponsored by the National Academy of Education, outlines core concepts and strategies that, based on the best available research, should inform initial teacher preparation.7

Of course there is much we do not know, and a report from the American Educational Research Association, *Studying Teacher Education*, while providing an outstanding review of the literature on teacher education, makes this very clear.8 Nevertheless, as a profession, we owe it to students and to the community to ensure that we apply the research base we do have to teacher education and practice.

Too often we unfairly condemn our own knowledge base in education. We all know that medical professionals have a great deal to learn about most diseases, their causes, and their cures. That does not prevent the medical profession from having standards of best practice based on the knowledge available today. I do not expect my physician to know everything, but I do want her to know what the best available research says and what her profession considers to be best practice.

In education, we have no universally accepted set of standards to guide our practice or our preparation programs. In his recent critique of teacher education, Arthur Levine avers that, as a profession, we lack “basic agreement on what an entry-level practitioner should know and be able to do.”9 In fact, Levine says, educators are not even clear about whether we wish to be a craft or a profession.

The current editors of the *Journal of Teacher Education* call for the creation of a study group composed of seasoned and wise classroom teachers, teacher educators, and teacher education researchers who, they believe, could “articulate a more coherent teacher education curriculum framework and clear images of acceptable performances of understanding.”10

NCATE is governed by teachers and teacher educators, and it claims to have created consensus standards for the profession. As noted above, even critics of teacher education acknowledge that NCATE’s standards reflect the collective judgment of teachers and teacher educators. But Levine expresses little confidence in NCATE, and the editors of the *Journal of Teacher Education* do not even mention accreditation in their editorial.

The NCATE standards are the closest thing we have to an agreed-upon set of national standards for teacher preparation. However, we do not behave as a profession that shares consensus standards when only about half of the teacher preparation programs in the nation are held to those standards. In other words, while we approach professional conduct with the NCATE standards, until those or some other consensus standards are required — or at least well accepted by most teacher preparation programs — we are undermining the professional status we supposedly seek.

**PURPOSES OF ACCREDITATION**

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, which approves the accrediting agencies associated with myriad universities and university programs, there are three major purposes for accreditation: self-scrutiny, advancing academic quality, and accountability.
Policy makers see accreditation primarily as a means of holding institutions accountable. To them, it is a form of consumer protection. Students and the general public cannot be expected to fully understand the complexities of universities or of professional programs. Nor can they be expected to have the time to do the difficult work of evaluating program quality.

I am thankful that hospitals and medical professionals must meet standards. I do not know exactly what those standards are, nor am I qualified to judge them, but I take comfort in knowing that they exist and that there is a process for thoroughly assessing the extent to which medical facilities and physicians meet those standards. As a consumer of services, I want assurance that the systems and the professionals in them are held to reasonably high standards.

What can the education profession promise to parents and community members about the quality of education professionals in different parts of the country? Are the teachers in Hawaii as well prepared as those in Maine or Florida? How would we know? For that matter, can we even assure the public of the quality of teaching from one school to another or from one classroom to another? One teacher in a school may have been prepared in a five-year university-based program with extensive practicum and student teaching experiences, while another teacher across the hall may have no formal pedagogical preparation and may simply have passed a written test to demonstrate competence.

Ours is a large and complicated profession, but it is not unreasonable to expect us to create consensus standards for preparation and professional practice. Our credibility with members of the public and the confidence they feel regarding our work can be enhanced only to the extent that we communicate our consensus on important standards of practice. Multiple sets of standards, developed by multiple accrediting agencies, create confusion and mistrust on the part of students, families, and communities.

I have confidence in the preparation of physicians in this country because I know that, regardless of where they received an education, they had to meet the same set of high standards, since every one had to graduate from a program accredited by the same accrediting agency. The same can be said of engineers, pharmacists, optometrists, physical and occupational therapists, veterinarians, and dentists, but not of educators.

When faced with challenges as difficult as the teacher shortage, policy makers will, as they should, ask hard questions about the profession and about our standards for preparation and licensure. Unfortunately, the answers we give them are too often confused and inconsistent, and our practices contradict our rhetoric.

In the absence of any unified professional voice, policy makers are left to choose their preferred sides or to make decisions based on something other than research or professional consensus. When policy makers hear conflicting and confusing messages, the profession loses influence, and policies are created that do not serve the community well.

I am not suggesting that any profession can ever be totally united on every aspect of practice or policy. But the teaching profession is less united than most. We cannot meet our obligations to policy makers, to students, or to the wider community when we are as divided as we now are. For the sake of our students, we must unite around principles and standards that will serve them well.

LESSONS FROM OTHER PROFESSIONS

In order to gain insight into issues of accreditation, I looked into the nature of accreditation in 11 other professions: medicine, nursing, engineering, optometry, veterinary medicine, social work, pharmacy, dentistry, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and law. I chose these professions because they have strong licensing systems and requirements.

Of the 12 professions I reviewed (including teaching), 10 have a single accrediting agency at the national level. Only nursing and education have two accrediting agencies. In nursing, the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission, Inc., is the oldest accrediting body, and it currently accredits 980 programs at all types of institutions, including those at two-year colleges, four-year universities, and research universities. The Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education was formed in 1996 by baccalaureate and higher-degree-granting nursing education programs, and it currently accredits 475 programs. Some programs are accredited by both accrediting agencies. All of the top-ranked university nursing programs are accredited.

Eight of the professions require individuals to complete nationally accredited programs before they can become licensed. Nursing, social work, and education do not require that individuals complete nationally accredited programs.

In most states, individuals must complete nationally accredited law school programs before they can sit for the bar exam. Anyone who completes an American Bar Association (ABA) accredited program may sit for a licensing exam in any state, but some states do not require licensure applicants to have completed ABA-accredited programs. Nevertheless, all of the top-ranked
law schools are accredited by the ABA.

The U.S. Department of Education has approved two accrediting agencies for teacher education: NCATE and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). Education stands out among these professions for its multiple accrediting agencies and its lack of national accreditation of the top-ranked colleges of education. All of the top-ranked universities in the other professions are nationally accredited. In education, less than 60% of the top 50 schools, as rated by *U.S. News and World Report*, are nationally accredited. Whatever the reasons, the lack of involvement of so many major universities is a serious sign of disunity in the field, and it has a significant impact on the perceived credibility of national accreditation within the profession as well as with the general public.

The education profession does not need to be like other professions. But when our policies and practices differ so greatly from others, we must at least ask ourselves why this is so. We must also ask whether or not we are doing what is best for members of the profession and, more important, for those we serve.

UNITING THE PROFESSION THROUGH ACCREDITATION

Accreditation of professional programs is designed to provide a process for self-assessment, program improvement, and accountability. It is possible for a profession to address the first two of these purposes without having a single national accrediting body. But we best serve the public and hold ourselves accountable if we have a single set of national standards for the profession.

Both the TEAC and NCATE processes require that individual programs state clear expectations for candidates and then measure the extent to which those expectations are met. In this regard, both address the purposes of accreditation to some extent, and that includes accountability. However, it is one thing for an individual program to state what candidates should know and be able to do, and it is quite another for a profession to do so. While both statements are important, the community at large can have confidence in a profession only when individual programs meet the expectations of the whole profession.

NCATE standards are developed by representatives of 33 of the nation’s major education organizations and can legitimately claim to represent professional consensus. TEAC does not even attempt to reach professional consensus. It was formed without consultation with the leaders in education, and none of the organizations representing the profession are involved in its governance or standard setting. Unlike NCATE or any accrediting agency in other professions, TEAC stands apart from leading organizations in its field.

Having multiple sets of teacher preparation standards developed by multiple accrediting agencies creates confusion and mistrust on the part of students, families, and the community. Professional programs must hold themselves accountable to standards developed by the profession in order for the profession to be accountable to the larger community.

In recent months the American Association for Colleges for Teacher Education has worked with NCATE and TEAC to begin conversations on how to create a single accreditation system. People have entered the discussions in good faith, and I am hopeful of a positive outcome.

For the sake of the profession and the students we serve, the teaching profession needs to adopt consensus standards for teacher preparation and require that all preparation programs meet those standards. At this time, the NCATE standards and accreditation process are what we have. We can support NCATE or replace it, but we cannot afford to ignore the role of standards or to remain divided over the issue of accreditation with multiple accrediting agencies. If the teaching profession is ever to be trusted to manage its professional affairs, we must unite around principles and standards that will serve students and the community well.

6. Ibid.