

SEVEN TRENDS IN U.S. TEACHER EDUCATION, AND THE NEED TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES



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Education Deans for Justice and Equity
In partnership with the National Education Policy Center

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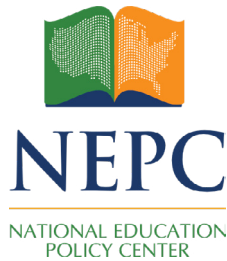
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SEVEN TRENDS IN U.S. TEACHER EDUCATION, AND THE NEED TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC INJUSTICES

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Teachers are important, as is their preparation. We, Education Deans for Justice and Equity, support efforts to improve both. But improving teaching and teacher education must be part of larger efforts to advance equity in society.

Whether crediting teachers as the single most important factor in student success or blaming and scapegoating them for failing schools that only widen social and economic disparities, many of the stories that circulate about education presume that *it's all about the teacher*. Concerned less with the system of education and more with the individual actor, this rhetoric tends to reduce the problem of education to the shortcomings of individuals. The solution correspondingly focuses on incentives and other market-based changes.

Without a doubt, teacher-education programs cannot and should not operate as if all is well, because it is not. Several current efforts to reform teacher education in the United States, however, are making things worse. Although stemming from a wide range of actors (including the federal government, state governments, and advocacy organizations), these trends share a fundamental flaw: They focus on “thin” equity.

In their recently published book, *Reclaiming Accountability in Teacher Education*,¹ Marilyn Cochran-Smith and colleagues contrast two understandings of equity. “Thin” equity defines the problem as the curtailing of individual rights and liberties, and the resulting solutions focus on equal access and market-based changes. In contrast, “strong” equity defines the problem as the legacies of systemic injustices, and the resulting solutions focus on increasing participatory democracy. Because thin-equity reforms obscure the legacies of systemic injustices, and instead focus narrowly on student achievement, teacher accountability, rewards, and punishments, improving teacher education requires moving away from these and toward strong-equity reforms.

Below, we identify seven current trends impacting teacher education (including at many of our institutions) that are grounded in thin-equity understandings. In a number of ways, these approaches lack a sound research basis, and in some instances, they have already proven

to widen disparities. Following a discussion of these trends, we present our alternative vision for teacher-education reform.

First, marketizing teacher education. Most teacher education in the United States happens at universities, and with much variability. Nonetheless, the long-touted claim that higher education's "monopoly" over teacher education results in mediocrity and complacency has resulted in increased competition by way of "alternative" routes—some that meet state standards (and some that do not), and some that involve little to no formal preparation via fast-track programs. These include non-university-based programs like the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence; programs that partner with universities, like Teach For America; and programs that identify as institutions of higher education, like the Relay Graduate School of Education. Such faith in the market to drive improvement frames Congress's recent rewrite of Title II of ESSA, which allows for public funds to support both non-profit and for-profit alternative certification programs and routes. The problem? Merely expanding competition without building the capacity of all programs to prepare teachers has led not to improvement, but to widened disparities among students and increased corporate profiteering off of education.²

Second, shaming teacher education. The assumption that shaming will spur effort to compete is another way to place faith in the market to drive improvement. Such is the approach of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) in its annual Teacher Prep Review, which scores (and, for the most part, gives failing grades to) teacher-education programs using an eight-dimension framework. Since its inception, the vast majority of programs nationwide have opted not to participate and share materials for review, citing NCTQ's faulty methods of review and the lack of research basis for its framework.³

Third, externally regulating teacher education at the federal level. The twice-proposed, Obama-era Teacher Preparation Regulations were never implemented, but their "value-added" logic reverberates in other reforms, including NCTQ's review and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) accreditation. Measurement experts warn that the use of value-added modeling to determine the effectiveness of teachers to raise test scores, and in turn, the effectiveness of programs to prepare teachers to do so, are neither reliable nor statistically valid.⁴

Fourth, externally regulating teacher education at the state level. Across the country, states are "raising the bar" by increasing the minimum GPA and/or passing scores for both national and state-specific tests needed for certification. Research has not determined that such increases produce a higher quality teaching force; however, research has shown that such increases significantly shrink the racial diversity of the teacher pipeline, which is already sorely lacking in diversity and inclusiveness.⁵ Years of advocacy against this trend resulted in the recent removal in Illinois of "basic skills" tests as program-entrance requirements, with parallel initiatives in a growing number of states like Indiana and New York.

Fifth, internally regulating teacher education. Amid growing public criticism and external regulation, CAEP (the merger of two previous organizations) formed several years ago as the sole national accrediting body for teacher-education programs. Although intended to embody the profession regulating itself, CAEP has faced criticism from within the profession

for promoting problematic standards, use of data, and value-added modeling. As a result, teacher educators are increasingly calling for changes to CAEP, an alternative to CAEP (such as with the newly forming Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation), state exemption from or non-reliance on CAEP, or an entirely different way to think about profession-led regulation.⁶

Sixth, assessing teacher candidates. Also in response to growing public criticism and external regulation, teacher educators have developed several instruments over the past two decades to assess and determine readiness of pre-service teacher candidates, with the edTPA (marketed by Pearson) as the most widely used, and in some states, as the only allowable option. The edTPA was long championed by the main national professional association for teacher educators, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, despite early calls among its membership for more review and discussion of its design regarding what counts as standards, documentation, and review, as well as its use for high-stakes decisions. Aside from research by the developers of edTPA, there is limited empirical research on the validity of this assessment, but there is abundant empirical and anecdotal evidence that, like other high-stakes tests and costly mandates, when used in this way it overly prescribes the curriculum⁷ and decreases the racial diversity of the population that passes⁸ while contributing to corporate profits. Some teacher educators are developing instruments (still at the pilot stages) that offer an alternative to the edTPA's logic of what practices count as effective, what performances demonstrate one's preparedness, and how to assess these; however, even these alternative instruments could fall into the same consequential-validity trap if used in similar ways.

Seventh, prescribing practices. The notion that effective teaching can be reduced to a set of practices (or, that one set of practices lie at the heart of effective teaching) is not new. This was, for instance, the logic behind the Bush-era What Works Clearinghouse that purported to identify those practices proven by research to be best practices. Then and now, scholars have raised concerns about the narrow parameters within such initiatives of what counts as effective (for what population, in what way, towards what end) and as proven (through what methods, within what paradigms), as well as tendencies toward one-size-fits-all, quickly learned techniques that substitute for learning in context. But this trend continues to persist and expand, informing not only how to teach K-12 students, but also how to prepare teachers to teach. The prescribing of such best or core practices is perhaps expected in alternative routes and programs that provide little formal preparation in how to teach. The problem that we are flagging here is not the goal of using research to assess various practices and then to inform teacher education; rather, the problem is engaging in research without more deeply diving into one of the most fundamental of questions in teacher education: towards what end are we preparing teachers to teach? Thus far, the resulting solution has been a narrow and prescriptive framing of practices that posits outcomes for students (e.g., raised achievement) and for teachers (e.g., trained in a set of practices) that come with only peripheral attention to diversity and systemic injustices.⁹

In his recent book, *The Struggle for the Soul of Teacher Education*,¹⁰ Kenneth Zeichner describes the tendency of so-called "reformers" to criticize university-based teacher education as outdated, ineffective, and defending the status quo, or what reformers call "Teacher Prep 1.0," which he contrasts with the market-based, corporate-driven reforms of the purportedly

new and improved “Teacher Prep 2.0.” There are big differences between 1.0 and 2.0, but also key similarities, including that both revolve around a teacher-centric view of education that fails to account for the essential role of the community. He calls for a new “Teacher Prep 3.0” that works actively to dismantle systemic inequities and injustices by building the capacity of teachers to work in solidarity with communities to more tightly link their work inside classrooms with the broader social and political contexts of their schools, including bringing teacher-education programs into deeper collaboration with families and communities. Teacher education would be better served by reforms that center the community, not the market, and that address the overall system, not merely the individual actors within.

Such goals lie at the heart of the new Framework for Assessment and Transformation, a tool for collectively engaging in institutional assessment and strategic planning that was developed by the recently formed collective of deans of colleges and schools of education across the United States, Education Deans for Justice and Equity.

Our framework calls on teacher-education programs to confront head-on the reality that educational institutions have never been, and cannot ever be, neutral politically or ideologically. Educational inequities and broader societal injustices harm children, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. These same inequities and injustices weaken the fabric of our democracy. Colleges and schools of education play a vital role in perpetuating as well as transforming such problems. That is, knowingly or not, and intentionally or not, colleges and schools of education have long perpetuated injustices and are not immune to discrimination and prejudice or to subtler forms of bias, even as we work to intervene. A central and unavoidable contradiction of our work is that injustices—everything from racism and sexism, to colonialism and neoliberalism, to other “isms”—permeate and endure even when we engage in justice- and equity-oriented work.

Teacher education should be guided by a deep understanding of the roles of schools and universities within a larger society that is strikingly unequal. Our framework supports programs in identifying these legacies in various aspects of our work, and then strategizing our interventions and changes. As education deans who are committed to justice and equity and to meeting the daunting responsibility of preparing educators for our nation’s schools, we call for and commit to a retreat from the thin-equity reforms described above, and simultaneously, a move toward strong equity and Teacher Prep 3.0 that hold the most promise for improving education and advancing democracy.

Notes and References

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Author Note: [Education Deans for Justice and Equity \(EDJE\)](#) is a nationwide alliance of current and former deans of colleges and schools of education.

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