Let’s Professionalize Teaching

Educators, legislators, parents, and the general public all seem to agree on one thing: the quality of education delivered to a student has more to do with the quality of the classroom teacher than any other factor. Yet, the quality of classroom teaching in America has not improved one iota over the past 50 years. As a matter of fact, in a study conducted by the Milken Family Foundation, principals reported that the quality and quantity of teacher applicants in their schools has declined and that they expect the decline to be more dramatic over the next five years.

It’s time to look at the teacher crisis and examine why fewer and fewer academically able candidates choose teaching as a career. We believe teaching has to be reinvented and made into a real profession, similar to medicine and law.

The most important component in the professionalization of teaching is the creation of a career ladder—a multi-tiered structure in which different teachers have different job descriptions and responsibilities. Starting from the bottom, the ladder would have these rungs:

Teaching interns. These are graduate or undergraduate students who work full-time in classrooms as part of a degree-granting program. They would be classified as junior faculty and have part-time classroom teaching responsibilities under the close supervision of a professional teacher.

Associate teachers. These are novice, first-time teachers who would participate in an intensive two-year period of induction, during which they would teach classes part of the week while receiving constant supervision and mentoring. At the end of two years, they would become fully licensed teachers.

Teachers. They would be licensed after a minimum of two years of teaching experience, possession of a master’s degree, and performance assessments that include a portfolio of videotaped lessons, written evaluations, and student work. Teachers could opt to remain at this career level indefinitely if they prefer to devote their professional lives to classroom teaching without assuming other professional responsibilities.

Professional teachers. These are veteran teachers with a master’s degree, several years’ experience, and certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Professional teachers would develop and maintain portfolios that track the progress of their work, pass a competency exam in all subject areas, and undergo a rigorous performance assessment. In addition to classroom teaching, their responsibilities would include one or more of the following: supervising interns; mentoring associate teachers; and engaging in teacher research and/or curriculum development.

Chief instructors. These are leaders whose primary responsibilities would be the supervision and mentoring of teachers and the facilitation of staff development. A chief instructor must be an expert in curriculum content and development, as well as student learning and assessment, and must demonstrate the ability to translate relevant research into practice. Chief instructors would meet with, and report regularly to, the principal.

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This model would not only transform the teaching profession, but create a culture in which mentoring, supervision, and professional development are no longer “add-ons,” but integral components of a system built on power-sharing, teamwork, and collaboration.

When teaching becomes a real profession, more academically able people will be drawn into it, colleges will be forced to improve the quality of their education, and better-prepared teachers will enter our classrooms.

It won’t be easy. Principals need to understand that sharing their curriculum and supervisory responsibilities empowers everyone in the process, and even makes the principal’s job easier. Unions must also be brought on board if significant reforms are to be made. And we aren’t forgetting the role that must be played by superintendents and school boards.

But if enough educators and organizations take up this cause, the professionalization of teaching could move forward, as it must if we are to achieve the level of teacher quality we need and our students deserve.

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HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

You just read a strong argument for professionalizing teaching by creating a multi-tiered structure in which teachers would have different job descriptions and responsibilities. How would this affect the principal’s role as instructional leader? Would you be willing to surrender some of your decision-making authority to designated chief instructors? Let’s have your thoughts and comments at www.naesp.org/speakingout.