

A CERTIFIED SHAM

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Repeatedly in discussions of education, one hears the refrain that one of the problems dogging our public schools is the lack of certified teachers. Every classroom—it is said—must have a certified teacher at its helm. The presumption behind this assertion is that a certified teacher—and only a certified teacher—is a competent teacher, and that certification guarantees competence.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Anyone who has endured the certification process should know that such programs are a sham. One could say of a teaching certificate what Hollywood producer Sam Goldwyn once said of a verbal contract: it “isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.”

The charade begins in the education departments themselves. Their typical courses are unchallenging, undemanding, and unrealistic. Their sole *raison d’être* is that they are virtually bottomless cash cows for the schools that offer them.

They claim that for a teacher to be effective, indoctrination in conventionally accepted teaching techniques is more important than a solid competence in subject area knowledge. This claim is both fallacious and dangerous.

They insist that we have to teach teachers how to teach, without demanding that teachers know what to teach. This is like saying that we have to teach architects how to hammer, saw, and drill, without demanding that architects know what buildings are.

The certification tests reflect this bias. In the two states in which I have taken certification exams (Pennsylvania and Texas), on the English certification exam, less than 10 percent of the questions tested one’s knowledge of literature. One could pass without having any of them correct. The rest of the exam tested classroom-teaching strategies. Since I also had to take a separate test devoted to professional knowledge (knowledge of teaching theory and practice), at least 90 percent of the English exam was pointless redundancy. I could have become a certified English teacher with virtually no knowledge of English literature.

Because I knew from the sample question pamphlets (and my education courses) the biases that would be favored in the teaching method questions, when I took the test, I put aside my own considered opinions, answered in line with the biases, and passed easily.

Thus, the calls for certified teachers in every classroom are inane and uninformed.

Until recently, private schools, whose overall superiority to public schools is widely accepted, have been staffed largely with non-certified teachers. They have sought out teaching candidates with strong academic subject knowledge, regarding that as the *sine qua non* for a competent teacher.

Sadly, public perceptions are driving even these schools to seek certified teachers. The predictable result of this shift is that their excellence diminishes yearly. If the trend continues, in another generation, they will be indistinguishable—except perhaps in ambience—from public schools.

Furthermore, we now have a national certification process, over and above varying individual state processes. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards governs this highly competitive process, for which only a minority of teachers applies, and less than half of those succeed. One might call this process “American Teaching Idol.”

The judges of the national certificate applicants are infected with the same flawed pedagogical ideology that dominates the education establishment. Moreover, in the absence of unannounced visits to the applicants’ classrooms, each candidate submits a videotape. Such videotapes are easily staged, and there is no guarantee that they are truly representative. There is every reason to believe that the very best teachers are too busy studying and preparing their classes to take the time to participate in such self-aggrandizement, even though obtaining the certificate brings with it a salary increase.

The whole certification process is fatally flawed, not only academically, but even pedagogically. Hence, it is less surprising that so many teachers are incompetent than that any are competent.

There is more. One aspect of the normal certification process is so exploitative of students as to verge on slavery, namely the student teaching requirement. An education student is assigned to the classroom of a supervising teacher in an accredited public school for a year. During that tenure, the student takes increasing responsibility for teaching those classes. The students are not paid for their work, yet they have to pay their schools’ full tuition. This is a scandalous social and financial injustice perpetrated on young persons at that moment of existential and financial vulnerability when they are on the verge of seeking their first major adult employment.

This whole apparatus could be scrapped without making our schools any worse than they already are with it. If we substituted for it strong academic subject requirements, and if each candidate for a teaching position were invited to give a sample class, the process would be fairer and educationally sounder. Perhaps too we would begin to attract the top third of our students into public school teaching instead of the current bottom third.

If only those who hired teachers were truly competent educators themselves, this change alone would improve American education dramatically.

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