



Who Is In Charge of Teacher Preparation?

By Jenny DeMonte June 17, 2013

Everyone agrees that teacher quality is important and that every student deserves competent—and ideally, excellent—instruction. We say it over and over again because it is true: Having a good teacher can improve the life of a student far beyond school.¹ But then comes the hard question: How do we make sure that every student has a good teacher and receives high-quality instruction? If we wanted to begin somewhere, that starting point might be to align the work of teacher preparation with the needs of K-12 schools and students. The challenge, however, is that for the most part the institutions governing teacher-training organizations are not governed by the bodies charged with overseeing K-12 public education.

That type of fragmented governance makes the United States unusual in the world: Nations with the highest-ranked educational systems almost always have congruence between teacher preparation and schooling. Moreover, they don't have an assortment of teacher-education programs that are not aligned with the needs of the schools they serve, and they don't share a common curriculum for training teachers.² The challenge in the United States is aligning the needs of K-12 schools with the programs responsible for training teachers, the majority of which are located in colleges and universities. Getting those at the helm of these two separate but interconnected systems—K-12 schools and higher education—to talk to each other is often challenging because in most states each system is regulated and governed by different authorities that aren't required to share or collaborate to improve education for children.

To complicate matters further, there are at least 16 different groups that are partially responsible for or involved with the standards, accreditation, program content, and program approval of teacher preparation.³ In its 2012 teacher policy yearbook, the National Council on Teacher Quality highlighted this very point, documenting that the authority to approve teacher-preparation programs varies from state to state. In 11 states and the District of Columbia, it is the responsibility of the chief state school officer. In another 25 states, it is the state board of education that has authority to approve teacher training. In the remaining 14 states, some other government body such as a governor-appointed commission or standards board, a committee appointed by the chief state school officer,

or another similarly constituted state government organization is charged with overseeing teacher-preparation programs.⁴ It is difficult, given the unique governance structure in each state, to offer a how-to guide for holding teacher-preparation programs accountable for training teachers who are capable of delivering competent instruction that leads to successful K-12 student learning.

Yet there is a growing consensus that traditional teacher training is not sufficient and is in need of improvement. The Council of Chief State School Officers, or CCSSO, issued a report outlining specific steps that state education officials can take to improve the quality of teacher preparation.⁵ Likewise, the American Federation of Teachers, one of the nation's two-largest teachers unions, suggests in a recent report a number of ways to improve teacher training.⁶ The National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit research and policy group, has also weighed in on the issue, releasing two reports in the past two years evaluating teacher-preparation institutions on the quality of student teaching and on what is being taught related to K-12 assessment—noting that most teacher-preparation programs fell short in these areas.⁷ In addition, the National Council on Teacher Quality, in partnership with *U.S. News & World Report*, is set to release a rating of teacher-training institutions on June 18, 2013, and by all indications will reveal huge variations between and within programs on how new teachers are trained.

These reports correctly identify weak teacher-preparation programs as being key to the failure of public education to improve instruction for all students. According to recent figures, nearly a third of the U.S. teaching workforce is in its first five years on the job, which underscores the importance of having a high-quality pre-employment-training infrastructure to prepare new teachers.⁸ In order to meet students' needs, new teachers—and there are 200,000 of them each year—must be able to offer competent instruction from the first day they set foot in the classroom. Yet a survey of 500 new teachers by the American Federation of Teachers found that fewer than half thought that their teacher-training program adequately prepared them for their first year of teaching.⁹ Clearly, there is room to improve the quality of teacher education.

The higher-education complication

Traditional teacher-training programs are generally located in colleges and universities, where faculty members are given a great deal of academic freedom to determine what they teach and how they teach by the authority governing the institution. As a result, policymakers have difficulty in requiring faculty charged with preparing teachers to change their instruction.¹⁰ What's more, most state institutions of higher education have their own governance structures, which adds yet another layer of complexity. Even if a chief state school officer or a state board of education has authority over teacher preparation, if that teacher preparation is offered at an institution of higher education, then more than likely a different governing body is charged with overseeing that training.

Consider the situation in Missouri. Its state board of education—composed of eight members appointed by the governor—has responsibility for K-12 education, including teacher preparation. But the board’s website specifically states that while the board can set standards for and approve educator-preparation courses and programs, it does not have direct authority over institutions of higher education.¹¹ Another state governmental body, the Missouri Department of Higher Education, oversees program approval for Missouri’s public colleges and universities.¹² Moreover, private institutions of higher education in Missouri have their own governance structures, separate from the state and the state Board of Education. Most states’ governance structures for teacher preparation are similar to the system in place in Missouri. The lack of coordination between the needs of K-12 education and the work of preparing teachers in higher-education institutions can easily lead to a mismatch between what teachers learn and what K-12 schools and students need.

New ways to empower governance of teacher preparation

Some states have created structures or have taken steps to make changes to push for greater alignment of K-12 and teacher preparation offered in institutions of higher education. What follows are three examples of states where there have been efforts to more closely align the work of preparing teachers with the authorities in charge of K-12 education. Note, however, that these are not necessarily the only states taking action to improve teacher education.

Louisiana: A joint task force unites K-12 and higher education

After more than a decade of collaboration between governing authorities of higher education and K-12 education, with help from other stakeholders, Louisiana’s teacher-preparation programs are starting to produce new teachers who perform as well as experienced teachers in helping students achieve.¹³ The latest report, released in May, is evidence that redesigned teacher-preparation programs are preparing teachers who are more capable than past graduates.¹⁴

The state started on the work of aligning teacher preparation with the needs of K-12 schools in the mid-1990s, when school-district leaders in Louisiana told state officials that they were concerned that the new teachers hired from the state’s colleges of education were not prepared sufficiently to help students meet state achievement standards. Their comments prompted then-Gov. Murphy J. Foster, Jr., the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Louisiana Board of Regents, which coordinates all public higher education in the state, to create a commission dedicated to improving teacher preparation—the Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence.¹⁵ While other states have, on occasion, attempted to form groups across

K-12 and higher education around the issue of improving teaching, Louisiana is perhaps the only state that has for so long supported such a group as part of its stated education accountability and redesign effort.

Louisiana's Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence, a task force of 36 members—including state, business, university, K-12, and community leaders—is charged with recommending improvements to university-based teacher-training programs in the state to help raise the quality of the teacher workforce in the state.

Shortly after forming, the commission issued a sweeping and dramatic report with wide-ranging recommendations for improving teacher quality—recommendations that were endorsed by the Louisiana Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which oversees all public higher education and K-12 education in the state.¹⁶ Because representatives from governance organizations for K-12 and higher education served on the Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence, it made it easier for its members' parent organizations to enact the commission's recommendations and press teacher-preparation institutions to adopt them. Among the initiatives, the commission called for linking the achievement of students in a teacher's class (when such test data were available) to the specific program where the teacher received his or her training.¹⁷ At the same time, the commission asked all teacher-preparation institutions in the state to redesign curricula to improve teacher training.

From 2006 to 2007, when teacher-training institutions received the first report that linked graduates of their programs to student achievement, the results surprised some who learned that their programs had specific weaknesses in certain areas. A program's graduates in secondary mathematics teaching, for example, might be raising student achievement, while graduates from the same institution's elementary-teaching program might be less successful in the classroom. That data made the redesign and improvement of programs more urgent. The leader of one of the programs says because of changes made to his teacher-training curriculum, he now fully expects his graduates to be better at improving student learning, which will result in K-12 students having higher test scores.¹⁸

The structure of the commission—uniting K-12 education with teacher preparation—continued to bring accountability for teacher-preparation performance on student learning into focus. As data about teacher preparation emerged, programs were rated on a five-point scale, with one being the most effective and five the least effective. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education created a policy to require those teacher-preparation organizations with scores of four or five to enter what is termed “programmatic intervention,” where organizations are required to develop and implement plans to address the weaknesses in program content. So far, programs have demonstrated improvement, and none of the programs have been recommended for closure.¹⁹

New York: K-12 and higher education under a single authority

New York state's single governing authority over both K-12 and higher education—the Board of Regents—can more easily allow for new forms of teacher preparation to serve schools. Since 2010 the Board of Regents has taken several steps to do that, including:

- Approving the first new graduate school in education in the state in more than 50 years
- Allowing nonuniversity programs to prepare teachers at the graduate level, including a program offered by the American Museum of Natural History
- Approving and financing several pilot teacher-preparation programs designed to emphasize clinical training, which means teacher candidates spend a greater amount of time in schools alongside practicing teachers²⁰

New York state's educational activities in both K-12 and higher education are united in a single department—the New York State Education Department—which is governed by the Board of Regents, a group of 17 members, known as regents, who are elected by the state legislature.²¹ The regents govern the state Office of P-12 Education, the Office of Higher Education, the Office of the Professions—which includes all state-regulated licensing for professions—as well as several other organizations.²² The regents also appoint the commissioner of education—currently John B. King, Jr.—to act as the chief administrative officer for the state Department of Education.²³ This unusual arrangement allows for the regents to have authority over independent elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions, as well as all public institutions.²⁴

The unique arrangement also allows the regents to consider the state's education system as a whole, rather than in a fragmented way. Case in point: Seven regents sit on both the P-12 subcommittee and the higher-education subcommittee. This dual status allows them to consider education-reform proposals more broadly, in addition to having authority over the implementation and accountability of the reform in both settings.²⁵ The advantage of New York state's single-authority structure is that the state's Department of Education has been able to consider and implement reforms to teacher education that are more dramatic and wide ranging, according to educational observers.²⁶

The Board of Regents, for example, asked organizations—and not just institutions of higher education—to submit proposals in partnership with at least one high-needs school to develop a teacher-preparation program. One of the organizations that applied for and received state funds was New York City's American Museum of Natural History, hardly a traditional teacher-preparation institution. One of the goals of the museum's program is to train teachers to fill areas where urban school leaders say there is a shortage—particularly math and science. As part of the program, teacher candidates will work alongside scientists associated with the museum, leading to a graduate degree from the Board of Regents.²⁷

Recently, other state governors, including Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber (D) and Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick (D), have created education-governance structures similar to the one in New York that unite early-childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education.²⁸

Texas: An extra layer of bureaucracy that might not be needed

An unwieldy bureaucracy that has been the bane of many state's education efforts has historically been a problem in Texas as well. But the Lone Star State seems to be on the verge of paring down its governance structure by eliminating at least one of its governing bodies and consolidating oversight for teacher preparation under the leadership of the Texas chief state school officer.

Inside the Texas Education Agency, which is itself governed by an elected state Board of Education, there is another board that is separate and independent—the state Board for Educator Certification—which has traditionally been responsible for the governance of teacher preparation and licensure. The Board for Educator Certification has 11 members appointed by the governor, including teachers, school administrators, and members of the public, along with a staff member of the state educational agency, a dean of a college of education, and a staff member of the higher-education coordinating board.²⁹

The Board for Educator Certification is responsible for accrediting teacher-training institutions, despite the fact that it has only superficial authority over the delivery of teacher preparation in higher education.³⁰ At the same time, its members are not part of the Texas Education Agency, which is responsible for K-12 education. The state Board of Education, another separate authority, is also responsible for the content of teacher preparation.³¹

The redundancy and fragmented structure of the governance of teacher training has not been lost on policy officials in Texas. As a matter of fact, the Sunset Advisory Commission, an agency of the state legislature, which conducts an annual review looking for waste and inefficiency and then makes recommendations for the elimination of state programs and agencies, in December 2012 recommended that the state Board for Educator Certification be eliminated. It proposed that the state commissioner of education handle the board's work of reviewing teacher preparation.³²

While eliminating the certification board would bring authority for educator preparation closer to the center of the state's education agencies, it would not bring K-12 governance together with higher-education governance. In Texas, the state's role in higher education is through governor-appointed boards that oversee the state's public university systems and by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, dedicated to making college affordable and accessible to students.³³

Unfortunately, the abolishment of the Board for Educator Certification is not likely to happen soon. Legislation that included all of the Sunset Advisory Commission’s recommendations for the Texas Education Agency did not get through the legislature, and it is not clear when the recommendations might again be put to the legislature.³⁴

Conclusion

When it comes to reforming teacher preparation, states could do themselves a favor by setting up governance structures that will ensure that the right people are at the table making decisions. That means blurring the boundaries of governance between the higher-education system that prepares teachers and the K-12 system where teachers work so that teacher educators can respond to needs in K-12 schools. It means that the governance of teacher preparation cannot be isolated from the needs of the K-12 systems, nor tucked into institutions of higher education that may not be responsive to calls for reform to public education. If institutions that prepare teachers work closely with institutions that will ultimately hire those teachers, everyone in the system will be better served—especially the schoolchildren whose futures depend on great teachers.

Jenny DeMonte is the Associate Director for Education Research at the Center for American Progress.

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