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Teacher Certification: Who Decides Who is Prepared?

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TEACHER CERTIFICATION: Who Decides Who is Prepared?

My problem began when one of our sociology majors asked me to help her change her major to education.

No problem, I thought. I would merely read through the certification requirements for Massachusetts and help her fill out the paperwork. Wrong. It turned out that the certification of teachers in Massachusetts had become more complicated than instructions for the assembly of a gas grill.

I think it would be a service to the readers of *Bridgewater Review* to try to describe the events leading to recent changes in teacher certification and, to the extent possible, to clarify where things stand now. There have been about 70 "education reforms since the days of Horace Mann, the "father" of teacher training "normal schools" like Bridgewater was in its beginnings. The current education reforms, like those before it, seem to have been driven by a combination of the political system and the public sentiments which it both follows and manipulates.

Traditionally teacher certification was earned by completing an undergraduate degree in education. Public institutions like Bridgewater State College, and private schools such as Boston University, offered a range of majors in education focusing on elementary or secondary education, and later in areas such as special education.

Technically, colleges and universities did not certify a person to teach in Massachusetts; the Commonwealth did through its Department of Education. They periodically sent teams to the colleges and universities to evaluate and approve their programs. During the years this was the pattern, the state also had some waiver provisions (relatively rarely used), which typically allowed an applicant to teach while finishing a college certification degree. In addition, some people did pursue master's degrees in education for a number of reasons including: 1) gaining certification when they were not yet certified at the undergraduate level, a relatively uncommon route to certification, 2) achieving double certification, often in a specialized area such as special education or reading and 3) advancing one's career in a school system. But between the end of World War II and very recently, the overwhelming proportion of certifications were achieved by finishing an undergraduate education major in a Massachusetts college or university. Then the appropriateness of this system was challenged.

Franklin Jennifer was hired as Chancellor of Higher Education in Massachusetts by then Governor Michael Dukakis. Reform was a theme of the Dukakis administration, as it was in the nation generally, and the governor brought Jennifer to Massachusetts on the basis of his reputation as an education reformer in New Jersey. Jennifer argued that the teachers we had been certifying in Massachusetts were inferior and that the reputations of teachers generally would be enhanced by making the preparation for the profession more rigorous. He claimed that the education major had a tainted reputation relative to other departments in colleges and universities, largely because education courses that focused on teaching techniques took up too much of a major's time, and left a student with inadequate time to study in subject areas such as math or En-

glish. In short, he thought our teachers were being prepared to run classrooms, but not to teach subjects. Of course, there was great protest from teacher education departments, among others, but there was also strong support of Jennifer's views in the political arena. The issue, then, was how a balance might be struck between the aims of preparing teachers in a subject area, and preparing them to run classrooms and deal with their students as people.

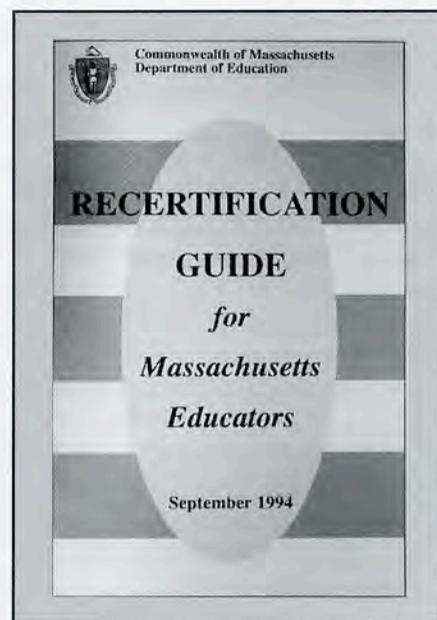


PHOTO: MARIE DENNEHY

In a perfectly rational world, the truth of such criticisms and the need for such reforms would be determined before reform was started, but the debate about these issues continues to rage (and I *mean* "rage") long after reform has been enacted. After all, Jennifer and other reformers had the political power and will to begin the process over the noise of the debate. Jennifer convened a broadly representative group called the Joint Teacher Training Preparation Commission (JTTP) and charged them with studying the issue. With its large and diverse membership (some 50 representatives of education at all levels, politicians, citizens and so on), JTTP met less than a dozen times and produced the

kind of document one might expect from a reform-minded administration that had hired a chancellor with a reputation for reform. It should be no surprise to those familiar with the deliberations of groups this large that they tend to produce documents reflecting the views of those that convene them.

JTTP recommended to the Governor that changes be made to the certification process in Massachusetts, especially with respect to the role of higher education. First, teachers-in-training would be required to major in a liberal arts subject at the undergraduate level. Second, certification would be split into a two-stage process, provisional and full certification. Third, full certification required the completion of a clinical master's degree. The date for the implementation of these changes was set as October 1, 1994, which gave the teacher training institutions in Massachusetts approximately 18 months to change their education programs and to coordinate them with the liberal arts majors that students would be required to take. It is understating the case to report that colleges responded in different ways, and that the debates about what was in everyone's best interests was often rancorous. Education majors that had been developed over decades were now to be severely cut back, or even reduced to a minor. What courses should be dropped, and how would their elimination damage the students' preparation? At stake were jobs, professional reputations, and lots of money and markets for student preparation. And at the center of it all was the student who wished to become a teacher, eventually.

JTTP was not legislation, but regulation implemented within the executive branch of the state government. At about the same time there was a second component of education reform in the works within the legislature. Representatives of the Massachusetts Senate and House Education Committees

worked together to draft the Education Reform Bill of 1993 which mainly focused on kindergarten through high school education, though it also influenced teacher certification.

The core of these legislative changes was that the Education Reform Bill reinforced JTTP by requiring that all applicants for certification hold a liberal arts undergraduate degree, effectively eliminating the education major as the primary route to teacher certification. The bill also maintained the two-stage certification process (which it called "provisional" and "standard"), but unlike JTTP it prohibited the requirement of a master's degree for standard (full) certification. So a person who had completed an undergraduate liberal arts degree with some professional education preparation (minor or major) would be provisionally certified to teach in Massachusetts. For full certification an approved master's degree could be completed, but for the first time it would be possible for school districts to establish their own, non-higher education certification programs. There seem to be a number of ways in which school districts would be able to certify their provisional teachers, including varieties of mentoring by veteran teachers and certification courses set up by and within the school districts. To this point, districts have not established such programs, largely due to the expense and complexity of doing so.

Lastly, the Education Reform Bill required renewal of all certifications every five years to demonstrate continuing development as a professional teacher. This could be accomplished by some combination of college courses, workshops conducted at the workplace (called inservice workshops), attendance at conferences, work on curriculum at the workplace and so on. There has been a great deal of debate about the relative value of these activities for the accumulation of the required points for recertification. However,

there is no debate that the system for certification has been thrown into turmoil by all these changes. For undergraduate students the path to certification has been made more complex and demanding. At the least, the master's degree has effectively become a requirement. Maintenance of certification has opened the door to the creation of a range of courses, near-courses and workshops (whatever they might be) that promise to become a new education industry.

As for Bridgewater, the education major has not disappeared since it is still possible for a student to achieve certification by completing both a liberal arts major such as math, English or psychology and an education major. Such double majors from approved programs are provisionally certified as teachers on graduation from undergraduate schools. For the time being, undergraduate students who choose to be certified by completing the double major (liberal arts and education) have the advantage of not having to complete certifying programs during their first years on the job. They at least know what the requirements are. However, the disadvantage of the double major is that it is extremely demanding since it requires so many hours of courses in each area. But students with whom I have spoken seem to be willing to fulfill these increased requirements for certification, including the master's degree, as long as the rules are clear, do not change, and there will be a job at the end of the long haul. As for the future of teacher certification, it seems likely that since the changes in requirements for certification have been generated by political and economic processes, they will continue be. We can only hope that the students, teachers-in-training and professionals whose lives and careers are influenced by these processes will not be lost in the struggle.

W.L.