

Certified Versus Qualified

The current system of restricting entry to the teaching profession is flawed.

By Frederick M. Hess

Sarah is a 28-year-old business consultant with an honours math degree from the University of Toronto. After working for a consulting firm, where she demonstrated strong interpersonal skills and work habits, she is looking for a more fulfilling position.

Even though there is a serious shortage of math teachers, Sarah's application to teach math in the public school system wouldn't even be considered. Why? Because Sarah isn't a certified teacher.

Why shouldn't a principal or school board hiring committee be allowed to look at Sarah's application and judge her qualifications against those of other candidates? Instead, we have a bureaucratic requirement that handcuffs the capable and incapable alike and supposedly keeps weak teachers out of the classroom. But, having turned away Sarah and hundreds like her, school boards are forced to resort to filling math posts with teachers from other fields.

This is not to suggest, even for a moment, that candidates with "real world" experience or strong academic qualifications are necessarily equipped to become teachers, or that professional preparation for teachers is unimportant. It is only to say that some applicants might be more effective than the certified teachers who are currently available to public schools.

The allure of certification rests of three implicit assumptions: first, that the training one receives is so useful that the uncertified will be relatively ill-prepared; second, that certification weeds out unsuitable candidates; and third, that certification makes the profession more attractive as a career.

Unfortunately, none of these assumptions is justified.

Valuable Training

As a general principle, certification is most effective when the licensing body ensures that aspiring professionals have mastered essential skills or knowledge — and denies a license to inadequate performers.

The oversight challenge in education is very different from, say, engineering or medicine, because educators have still not established a specific, measurable body of skills or knowledge that teachers must master. Educators themselves argue that teaching is so complex that it can be difficult to judge a good teacher outside of a specific classroom context.

If clear standards of professional competence do not exist, we typically (and appropriately) hesitate to prohibit some individuals from practising a given profession. This is not to say that we think incompetence is acceptable in such a profession — only that we recognize licensing as an ineffective and potentially-pernicious way to control quality.

Unsuitable Candidates

While certification can serve to screen out aspirants who fail to meet a minimal performance standard, our current system is not designed to do so. Generally speaking, schools of education flunk out few if any students for inadequate performance. The licensing exams are simple, and standards for passage are generally so low that they exclude only the "weakest of the weak" from classrooms.

Attractive as a Career

Especially for anyone who didn't complete a teacher-training program as an undergraduate, the costs of certification can be significant. Most post-graduate teacher-training programs require a full-time commitment of one academic year or a part-time commitment that can stretch to three years or more. In addition, tuition costs several thousand dollars.

These barriers make other professions relatively more attractive, so that potentially-talented teachers who are unsure about their interest are less likely to try teaching. The result is that many who might make fine teachers never enter the profession.

It is the most talented and hardest-working individuals who have the most career options and who sacri-

fice the most by entering a profession where compensation is unlinked to performance and opportunities for advancement are few. They may wish to teach but be unwilling to forgo work for a year, sit through poorly-regarded courses, and jump through hoops.

It is candidates with fewer attractive options who will find the tedious, intellectually-undemanding requirements of certification less problematic. In this way, certification can actually harm the public's perception of teaching as a profession.

The cost of certification far outweighs its benefits. Furthermore, a world without certification would have added advantages. For example, once faculties of education could no longer rely on a captive body of aspiring teachers, weaker programs would fall by the wayside. Teachers and schools would become more involved in professional development.

Critics may fear that the elimination of licensure requirements will mean the end of teacher preparation and professional development. Such concern is unfounded. Allowing uncertified individuals to become teachers does not mean they must be viewed as "completed" professionals. Such a mindset is one of the vestiges of our current system, which is based on a premise that all teachers are certified and therefore competent.

Here a better model might be medicine or law, where entering professionals begin their careers with a trial period during which their full panoply of skills is developed and monitored. At the end of the day, the individuals best equipped to assess the qualifications of prospective teachers are the principals who will be responsible for them.

(Adapted with permission from Tough Love for Schools, reviewed on page 3. Dr. Hess is director of educational policy studies at the [American Enterprise Institute](#) in Washington.)