

Re-professionalizing Teachers

School choice is likely to improve the excellence of the average teacher.

By Caroline M. Hoxby

Hardly anyone talks about how the growing movement toward parental choice and competition, in the form of vouchers and charter schools, will affect the teaching profession. Yet economic theory suggests that school choice would change the teaching profession for the better.

In short, theory predicts that schools that faced stronger competition would favour teachers who raised the schools' ability to attract students. These schools presumably would strive to attract and retain teachers who were especially talented or hard-working or who possessed rare skills. In turn, you would expect their tolerance for less-effective teachers to wane.

You would expect, in other words, that teaching would be transformed into a true profession, where workers are rewarded not only on the basis of seniority but also on the basis of their skills and performance.

In the current system, the teachers' unions tend to compress wages so that teachers with the same seniority and the same degree are likely to receive similar salaries. So teachers who excel at their jobs or teach hard-to-staff subjects, such as math and science, are paid the same as if they were mediocre or could be replaced easily.

This is one reason why teaching, as it stands, is not as attractive to candidates with high aptitude, a strong work ethic, or math and science skills. The evidence suggests that such people are less likely to start teaching than their lower-aptitude peers (even when those being compared are all certified to teach) and less likely to remain in teaching.

This situation has worsened over time, as other professions such as management, law, and medicine have opened their doors to women. Women with high aptitude for math and science skills have chosen such professions over teaching, perhaps because these professions do reward workers based on their skills and performance.

By making teaching a more market-oriented profession, school choice might also make it a more attractive career to people who would thrive in such an environment.

Without evidence, of course, this is just a theory. And without full-fledged school choice, it is a tough theory to test, though not impossible.

Comparisons between public and private school teachers already give us some insight into how choice might affect the teaching profession. After all, the revenues of private schools depend on their ability to attract tuition-paying students. They thus have an added incentive to hire teachers who will help them do so. What do they look for?

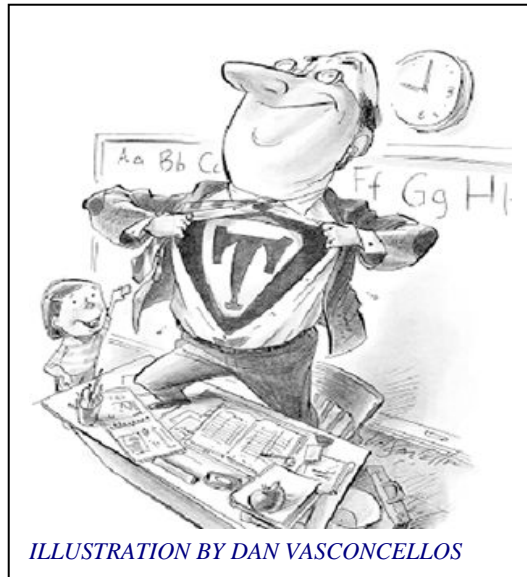


ILLUSTRATION BY DAN VASCONCELLOS

In a comprehensive comparison of private and public school teachers, economists Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky found that, in making hiring decisions, private schools value high aptitude more than public schools do. They also found that salaries in private schools correspond to aptitude and scarce skills (such as math and science skills) more than they do in public schools.

Private schools, however, are not a perfect guide to what teachers will experience under a system of school choice, since they face financial con

straints that a true school of choice would not. As a result, they typically pay teacher salaries that are about 60% of local public school salaries.

To get a broader picture of how choice affects teachers, I used data both from traditional forms of schools choice (choice among public schools through choice of residence and choice among private schools) and from charter schools.

In general, my findings suggest that enhanced competition and choice raise the demand for high aptitude, skills in math and science, subject-area expertise, effort, and perhaps independence among teachers. Choice also seems to lower schools' demand for certification and master's degrees.

These findings further suggest that school choice has the potential to create a professional environment for teachers in which more motivated and skilled teachers earn high pay for such qualities. For new teachers, this could quickly change the profession in areas where a growing number of choice schools offer a large share of the new teaching positions.

It would take longer for veteran teachers to feel the pinch. They would notice a change only when their schools began to feel competition pressures and, as a result, began to demand teachers whose characteristics attract parents.

Some teachers, obviously, would dislike such changes. Less able or less motivated incumbent teachers might find themselves earning smaller salary increases than some of their peers and might be more likely to leave the teaching profession. That would be a welcome reversal of the current pattern, where the most able teachers are also the most likely to exit early.

(Adapted with permission from "Changing the Profession" in Education Next, Spring 2001, www.educationnext.org. Dr. Hoxby is professor of economics at Harvard University.)