

# Are Teacher Colleges Turning Out Mediocrity?

By Gilbert Cruz Friday, Oct. 23, 2009



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There has been a mantra of sorts going around education circles over the past few years: "Nothing matters more to a child's education than good teachers." Anyone who's ever had a Ms. Green or a Mr. Miller whom they remember fondly instinctively knows this to be true. And while "Who's teaching my kid?" is an important question for parents to ask, there may be an equally essential (and rarely remarked upon) question — "Who's teaching my kid's teachers?"

On Thursday, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan went to Columbia University's Teachers College, the oldest teacher-training school in the nation, and delivered a speech blasting the education schools that have trained the majority of the 3.2 million teachers working in U.S. public schools today. "By almost any standard, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom," he said to an audience of teaching students who listened with more curiosity than ire — this was Columbia University after all, and they knew Duncan wasn't talking to them. It was a damning, but not unprecedented, assessment of teacher colleges, which have long been the stepchildren of the American university system and a frequent target of education reformers' scorn over the past quarter-century.

But Duncan's speech raises another question: If most teacher colleges are "mediocre," does that mean the teachers they produce are equally lackluster?

One of the major problems with answering that question, says David Steiner, New York's education commissioner, is that we simply don't know, *can't* know. It is nearly impossible in many states to tell which teachers produce the best student outcomes, let alone which teacher colleges. "And if we can't identify the skills that make a difference in terms of student learning, then what we're saying is that teaching is an undefinable art, as opposed to something that can be taught," says Steiner. Until recently, Steiner served as dean of Hunter College's School of Education, where he was a vocal critic of the typical ed-school approach, in which teachers-in-training study theories and philosophies of education at the expense of practical, in-the-classroom experience. Steiner maintains that institutions need to turn their eyes toward the practical and away from the hypothetical.

Which brings people like Steiner to a central concern: What good are teachers' credentials if we can't tell how much their students are learning?

To that end, Duncan said, "I am urging every teacher-education program today to make better outcomes for students the overarching mission that propels all their efforts." He suggested that more states mimic a model currently being used in Louisiana in which student test scores in grades 4-9 are traced back to their teachers, who are in turn traced back to their place of training, whether it be an ed school or an alternative certification program like Teach for America.

"If you want to get more-effective teachers, one of the obvious places to begin is to look at the supply side," says George Noell, a researcher at Louisiana State University who has worked for several years on the state's Teacher Quality initiative. "You need to know who's coming into teaching, how they were prepared and where they were prepared. Then you can make a link between who taught a kid, who trained the teacher and the overall efficacy of that teacher." Although such measures may seem a prelude to punitive measures on ed schools, "we aren't seeking to close people down," says Noell. "That's not the point." Rather, the ideal situation would be to have schools use the feedback to improve the quality of their instruction. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette, for example, increased admissions standards and added other programs after data from the initiative alerted the school to its weaknesses.

Concern over the ability of teacher colleges to produce effective teachers has long existed and only increased as the focus of education policy has turned to accountability and data. As Duncan points out, one of his predecessors, Richard Riley, put ed colleges on notice a full decade ago. The difference, as Duncan never misses an opportunity to say, is that the Federal Government now has financial incentives through which to effect change — a \$4.35 billion pot of competitive innovation grants and \$43 million to support "residency" programs that put budding teachers in classrooms for longer periods of time under the watchful eye of a veteran teacher, in much the same way that medical residents are supervised by seasoned staff for their first few years out of med school.

Smart as they may be, trace-back programs are still likely to meet resistance. "Who wakes up one morning and says, 'I want to be publicly accountable?' " says Noell of teacher colleges. "That's kind of scary for anybody. Nobody wants to be embarrassed."