

Teacher Preparation: Learn from the Masters

by [Barnett Berry](#)
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There's little consensus about the best way to prepare teachers for today's schools. Education reformers and academics continue to punch and counterpunch as they circle the ring, trying to gain the advantage in what has become one of education's most hotly contested policy fights.

The contestants don't dispute whether good teaching makes a difference in student performance. Study after study has shown that students -- whatever their backgrounds and innate abilities may be -- achieve more when they have high-quality teachers.

No, the feisty think tank folks are feinting and jabbing over how best to *produce* a high-quality teacher.

Advocates on one side believe teachers should prepare for their classroom careers in the traditional way: attending schools of education where they learn a lot about teaching technique (but often spend too little time learning academic content). The other side favors fast track alternative certification programs that emphasize a prospective teacher's knowledge of the content he or she will teach.

So they bob and weave, round after bruising round, hurling false dichotomies.

Punch: Teachers must be trained in pedagogy.

Counterpunch: Teaching has no body of knowledge, so why waste time and resources on teacher education?

Punch: It's one thing to know your subject matter, but something quite different to teach it to children and adolescents.

Counterpunch: Can't we simply recruit new teachers from a pool of recent graduates or mid-career switchers who know their subjects? They're smart -- they'll figure out how to teach once they're in the job.

These skirmishes -- which usually take place in education journals and magazines -- must seem pointless, and would be laughable if they didn't often spill over into politically charged decision-making environments.

Common sense tells us that effective teachers have to know not only what they're teaching but also how to teach it in a roomful of students with wide-ranging backgrounds and abilities. So the real question becomes, How do we make that happen? An important part of the answer is something neither side is talking much about: teaching apprenticeships.

Why not? We suspect it's because too many policy makers, school administrators, and university officials are concerned that apprenticeships would overturn teaching's occupational applecart. More investments would need to be made in master teachers who, in turn, would have more say-so in the design of university-led teacher education and school districts' novice teacher-support programs. Resources that pay for central-office supervisors and campus-bound university professors might need to be diverted to where the action is -- the schools and classrooms of master teachers.

That would be a very good thing.

Other nations, especially those with whom we compete economically, are not divided over teacher policy, as the United States is. They prepare all teachers more extensively. They offer novices significant apprenticeships with master teachers. They also provide more opportunities for professional development and joint planning time with accomplished veterans, and generally pay teachers more in relation to other highly skilled occupations.

In Germany, for example, teachers are expected to earn two academic majors and complete a two-year teaching internship in which college- and school-based faculties observe and evaluate at least twenty-five lessons. Meanwhile, in Japan, first-year teachers have a reduced teaching load and work closely with mentor or master teachers, receiving considerable in-school and outside training. In many countries, novice teachers are never left to sink or swim on their own.

Why shouldn't American teachers learn a lot about the content they plan to teach, then concentrate on gaining a prerequisite set of teaching skills (either in college or in an intensive after-college preparation program)? Then, once they have this combination of knowledge and skills, let them apply and expand on what they've learned under the tutelage of a master teacher. It makes sense, but, for the most part, we just don't do it that way in the United States.

Needed: Focused Prep Time

Let's ask some master teachers -- individuals who practice their profession with great success every day in America's public school classrooms -- what they think about high-quality teacher preparation.

Members of the [Teacher Leaders Network](#) [1] -- a virtual community of 340 experienced, highly accomplished educators who teach in more than twenty states - voluntarily participate in daily online discussions where they explore and debate what works in education and what doesn't. These experts, many of whom are state and local educators of the year, teachers with National Board Certification, Milken Award winners, and recipients of other teaching honors, have wisdom and insights to share that seldom surface in national education-policy debates.

Gail Richardson, a board-certified teacher at North Forsyth High School, in Cumming, Georgia, began teaching in a private school after earning degrees in English and French and maintaining a 4.0 grade point average throughout her undergraduate career.

"I was a train wreck as a teacher," she says. "I understood French very well, but I had no idea how to teach it. I also had no idea how to relate to teenagers from a position of authority. Needless to say, my classroom was completely out of control. They ran all over me. I was a terrible teacher. I look back at it now and realize what a deep disservice I did to those kids, and I am ashamed. But at the time I was doing my best, with no training and no mentor. I was so naive about school politics and how to work with parents. The only reason they didn't fire me was because they couldn't find anyone else to do my job."

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Carol Midgett, leadership-program coordinator at the North Carolina Partnership for Improving Mathematics and Science and also a board-certified teacher who entered teaching through alternative certification, says she learned that "without focused, formal preparation, the challenge to succeed is much greater and the chances for survival are limited."

Even when teachers benefit from high-quality preservice teacher education, more preparation is needed. Brenda Dyck, a middle school teacher in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, offers some ideas.

"I needed to know a lot more about how to pace myself through curriculum and deal with dicey parental issues in my school," she says. "I also needed to learn how to design instruction to meet the needs of all the different students in my classroom and develop more real assessments -- not just pen-and-paper tests -- for my students that capture what they know but also how they know it."

Higher standards and greater expectations are driving reforms in teacher education across the United States, and more of the 1,200 plus colleges and universities that prepare teachers are doing a better job than they have in the past. But most education schools are not sufficiently funded to deeply prepare teachers in clinical settings such as those engineering, nursing, and pharmacy programs utilize.

Even when new teachers are well prepared, they are often assigned to the most challenging schools and classes and given the more demanding extracurricular duties. Many novices have considerable difficulty in on-the-job learning, especially in settings where students have challenging academic, social, and emotional needs, or where novices have no time to watch or learn from seasoned, expert colleagues. Subsequently, many of our nation's most challenging schools are rife with teacher turnover; half of all novices leave the profession within the first five years.

Often, school districts and teacher unions claim to offer on-the-job support for novice teachers, but these support programs are often superficial and unhelpful, as two Oregon teachers attest.

"I felt like I was thrown into teaching without any contact with other teachers or supervisors for my first year of teaching," says one teacher. "I have still never had anyone observe me teach."

Another teacher asserts, "I think our school could definitely be more helpful to their new teachers by giving more feedback on classroom management and how to deal with a host of cultural concerns and all the diverse students that most of us haven't dealt with our entire lives."

Some critics of teacher education argue that mid-career switchers often have other teaching experiences in their personal or professional lives that reduce the need for formal pedagogical training. Linda Kelly, a board-certified teacher who changed careers and entered high school teaching in Virginia, says she values her experiences teaching young people in Sunday school, in youth organizations, and as a private piano teacher. But working with students who typically had few problems and were from advantaged families, she adds, "did not prepare me for public school teaching and the need to reach every student and to work with students whose daily lives sound like a soap opera."

In a 2000 national survey that studied the experiences of new teachers, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) [2] found that less than 50 percent of the participants received mentoring, even monthly interaction, and what they receive is extremely uneven.

Most programs do not have a detailed process for selecting mentors, nor do they invest significant time or money into training mentors on what activities or supports are most effective in training new teachers. Some provide mentor training, but it is rarely focused on specific strategies. Furthermore, most programs provide their mentors with only a nominal stipend and little, if any, release time. For these reasons, quality and content of mentoring vary based on a given mentor's individual teaching style, interest, and personality.

Most school districts -- especially those that serve high-need populations and hire the most new teachers -- have little capacity to train and mentor novices uniformly and unilaterally. In the absence of well-considered, adequately funded programs, new teachers are thrust into a classroom, assigned a nominal teacher "mentor" who has a full teaching load of his or her own, and perhaps invited to attend a support group for novice teachers, where participants meet at the end of a school day and often sit in a circle and wonder why they don't get the professional support they need.

A More Hopeful Future

Both the research and the insights of accomplished teachers tell us that high-quality university-based teacher education is necessary but insufficient. Traditional teacher education can provide enough theory, knowledge, and strategies to allow novices to make basic sense of the challenging and complex work of teaching, but then we must have apprenticeships that go far beyond the few months of student teaching typically required of pre-service teachers.

In the apprenticeship envisioned, novices will have the time and space to learn a great deal from experts. In sharing a classroom, beginning teachers, working in cohorts, will learn specifically how to plan and critique lessons by watching their mentors teach and then having seasoned veterans watch their own teaching practices. Novices will learn how to use new technologies and find and use subject- and age-specific materials and resources that will engage their particular students. In doing so, new teachers will be able to stave off most of the classroom-management problems most novices face.

Because they are not fully responsible for a class of their own, novices will have the opportunity to engage in a semester-long case study of an individual student in which they have a chance to systematically figure out what helps that child learn and how to work effectively with the family. Their findings will then be presented to teachers and administrators. In addition, novices will learn how to construct an interdisciplinary curriculum, with specific time dedicated to connecting with other new teachers and experts in a virtually learning community such as the Teacher Leaders Network. We imagine, during their apprenticeship, they will build a portfolio that documents their growth and performance as new teachers and sets them on a course for advancement in the profession, including later applying to become a National Board Certified Teacher.

When we asked the members of the Teacher Leaders Network to brainstorm about an ideal teacher-preparation and teacher-induction program, here's what they imagined:

- A coherent system that offers both college-age teaching aspirants and mid-career switchers in-depth opportunities to learn to teach -- not separate university coursework and school district induction programs, but teacher academies where school and university faculty members team up to teach a range of topics, from research-based literacy strategies and learning theory to interdisciplinary concepts in the sciences and the humanities to managing a classroom filled with high-energy adolescents. Joint university-school budgets would leverage scarce resources and push education-school faculty and K-12 teachers to work more closely with each other.
- These courses and workshops would be grounded in what prospective and new teachers are experiencing in their internships and residencies. For example, at Chicago's [Academy for Urban School Leadership](#) [3], two interns are assigned to team-teach with a master teacher, and graduate-level teacher-education coursework is integrated with their daily teaching so they can immediately apply their new knowledge and skills.

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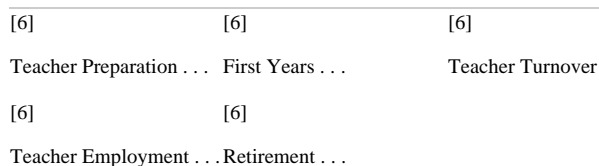
- Every apprentice would learn how to teach in diverse communities and work effectively with parents and families. For example, [Center X](#) [4], at the University of California at Los Angeles (see "Two Programs That Work," in the sidebar below), requires its teacher-education students to intern in Los Angeles-area schools with racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse low-income student populations. The two-year program places future teachers in cohorts and offers unique experiences in both teaching and community activism.
- Novices (whether they come directly from college or from other careers) would be appropriately teamed with and supervised by a cadre of highly experienced, trained experts (such as board-certified teachers) who would groom them to become the teachers they need to be. Various teaching roles and responsibilities in a school would mirror the varied degrees of knowledge, experience, preparation, and expertise of novices and veterans alike.
- To augment new-teacher support, Web-based collaboration tools and video-streaming technologies would be used to connect novices and experts in virtual communities unbounded by time or place. Working online, accomplished teachers would have 24/7 opportunities to not only cultivate their own leadership but also support the content-specific learning needs of novices and help solve their classroom-management and lesson-planning dilemmas.

We believe it is time for the policy pugilists to put down their gloves, listen to the words and wisdom of some of our nation's best teachers, and help policy makers create and fund the kind of teaching apprenticeships that will make a difference for teachers and the students they serve.

Barnett Berry is founder and president of the [Center for Teaching Quality](#) [5], and John Norton is an education writer and teacher networker with the center's Teacher Leaders Network initiative.

On the Move

Click thumbnails below for larger images.



Two Programs That Work

Center X

The Center X program at the University of California at Los Angeles is a two-year program that prepares future educators for California's racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse children. In this postbaccalaureate program, Center X's teacher candidates, who already have a college major, must complete a program that includes at least four connected courses in literacy (with an emphasis on second-language learners).

The program's second-year residency is a paid teaching assignment that has many of the characteristics of an apprenticeship. For example, the culminating exam is an extensive research project that can focus on how a teacher intern has come to know how to assess student learning and work effectively in a low-income school community. UCLA offers a significant induction program for its graduates, providing a variety of opportunities to continue their learning. Since its inception in 1995, Center X has attracted racially and ethnically diverse candidates, and two-thirds of its current students are members of an ethnic minority. More than 1,200 teachers have graduated from the program, and an ongoing assessment reveals that only 10 percent of graduates leave teaching after three years, compared to more than half in most other urban schools.

The Academy for Urban School Leadership

Chicago's Academy for Urban School Leadership recognizes the importance of seriously preparing prospective teachers for the challenges they will face in urban school settings. Founded by prominent Windy City business and civic leaders, the AUSL offers a \$30,000 salary and a tuition-free master's degree in teaching to talented recent college graduates and mid-career professionals who commit to teach in the city schools for five years. Recruits complete a twelve-month leadership-development and teacher-preparation program that includes graduate-level coursework and a ten-month teaching residency.

During their residency, AUSL students learn how to develop standards-based lessons and build assessments that allow them to more fully understand how students learn. They participate in daily grade-level team meetings and work with parents and families to build their personal leadership capacity. They are challenged to take on an increasing amount of responsibility, culminating in designing, preparing, and implementing curriculum units. And though the residents' "home school" is a well-designed, high-functioning inner city school, they have structured mini-internships in some of Chicago's most challenging neighborhood schools in order to prepare them for the teaching and leadership obstacles they will face once they begin teaching.

Source URL: <http://www.edutopia.org/learn-masters>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.teacherleaders.org>
- [2] <http://nces.ed.gov>
- [3] <http://www.ausl-chicago.org>
- [4] <http://www.centerx.gseis.ucla.edu>
- [5] <http://www.teachingquality.org>
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