

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American K–12 education system is under fire—and schools of education are no exception. Even the U.S. Secretary of Education and the presidents and deans of many teachers colleges and education schools themselves number among the critics. Alternative certification programs are blossoming in every corner of the land, competing for the bread and butter of these once-dominant institutions. Even as efforts to improve the teaching profession stretch beyond the walls of education schools, professors who teach within those walls have a clear stake in the policies that will affect their students.

Cracks in the Ivory Tower?, therefore, goes to the source—our nation’s teacher educators, responsible for preparing most of our children’s classroom teachers—and asks for their perspectives on the pressing questions surrounding teacher education and school reform today. How do they view their own roles and those of their institutions? How do they respond to criticism? What do they think about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), teacher tenure, state and national standards, measures of accountability, and alternative certification programs—their competition?

Results show that education professors hold divided views on many issues. Balanced against a remarkable willingness to criticize their own preparation programs is a fair degree of defensiveness. In several areas, the views of teacher educators conflict with the policies that school districts and states pursue in today’s public schools—and with the express needs of teachers themselves. Many attitudes have shifted since an original iteration of this study in 1997,³ even as other attitudes have barely budged. Two particular subsets within the professoriate are so intensely different that we have named them Reformers and Defenders.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Idealism, good intentions, and progressivist thinking suffuse what education professors strive to impart to prospective teachers, despite tension between these values and the policies pursued by school districts and states. Teacher educators show only modest concern for real-world challenges such as managing classrooms and student discipline, implementing differentiated instruction, and working with state standards—even though K–12 teachers often say these are among the most difficult elements of teaching.
- The vast majority of education professors (82 percent) think it is absolutely essential to develop teachers who are themselves lifelong learners.

3. Farkas, Steve and Jean Johnson, with Ann Duffett. 1997. *Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education*. New York: Public Agenda.

- They are far more likely to believe that the proper role of teacher is to be a “facilitator of learning” (84 percent) not a “conveyor of knowledge” (11 percent).
- Asked to choose between two competing philosophies of the role of teacher educator, 68 percent believe preparing students “to be change agents who will reshape education by bringing new ideas and approaches to the public schools” is most important; just 26 percent advocate preparing students “to work effectively within the realities of today’s public schools.”
- Only 24 percent believe it is absolutely essential to produce “teachers who understand how to work with the state’s standards, tests, and accountability systems.”
- Just 39 percent find it absolutely essential “to create teachers who are trained to address the challenges of high-needs students in urban districts.”
- Just 37 percent say it is absolutely essential to focus on developing “teachers who maintain discipline and order in the classroom.”
- The vast majority of education professors (83 percent) believe it is absolutely essential for public school teachers to teach 21st century skills, but just 36 percent say the same about teaching math facts, and 44 percent about teaching phonics in the younger grades.

2. Most professors of education believe their field needs to change. Sizable majorities point to serious deficiencies with teacher-preparation programs, prospective teachers, and even their colleagues. Yet they are ambivalent about alternatives that recruit teachers through nontraditional paths. Teach For America is one exception to this ambivalence.

- Sixty-six percent believe that the present system of university-based teacher education has some good qualities but “also needs many changes.”
- Half (50 percent) agree that “teacher education programs often fail to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the real world.”
- Seventy-three percent favor “holding teacher education programs more accountable for the quality of the teachers they graduate.”
- A strong majority (73 percent) believes that “most professors of education need to spend more time in K–12 classrooms.”
- Only 7 percent say that institutional accreditation is a guarantee of quality—they are far more likely to say it merely assures a baseline of acceptable quality (46 percent) or procedural compliance (41 percent).
- Regarding alternative teaching routes, 42 percent oppose recruiting candidates based on their success in other fields and 51 percent oppose programs run by school districts or charter management organizations. Sixty-three percent, however, favor programs like Teach For America.

3. Professors of education offer some support for a number of policy initiatives aimed at improving the teaching corps—e.g., holding educators more accountable, changing salary structures and incentives, and loosening tenure protections. They evince support for academic standards and even tepidly endorse *national* standards. Overall, however, professors oppose the use of student assessment data to evaluate teachers.
 - *Loosening tenure protections:* Seventy-nine percent support “requiring a minimum of five years for tenure and strengthening formal teacher evaluation,” and 86 percent favor “making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers—even if they are tenured.”
 - *Changing salary structures and incentives:* Eighty-three percent favor financial incentives for teachers who work in tough neighborhoods with low-performing schools; but just 30 percent favor financial incentives for teachers whose students routinely score higher than similar students on standardized tests.
 - *Holding educators and students more accountable:* Seventy-eight percent favor requiring public school teachers to pass tests demonstrating their proficiency in key subjects before they are hired; 61 percent feel the same about testing students in key subjects before they can graduate.
 - *High standards:* Seventy-eight percent support a core curriculum with specific knowledge and skill standards spelled out for each grade, K–12.
 - *National standards:* Forty-nine percent believe state governments should adopt the same set of educational standards and give the same tests in math, science, and reading nationwide; 36 percent think different standards and tests in each state are acceptable.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on survey findings from a nationwide, randomly selected sample of 716 teacher educators in four-year colleges and universities. The margin of error for the overall sample is plus or minus four percentage points; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. Findings are also based on qualitative data from three focus groups conducted in Ohio, North Carolina, and California, which serve to contextualize the survey data. The complete methodology is included in Appendix A, and the entire questionnaire and survey results may be found in Appendix B.