

PROFESSORS WITH COMPETING WORLD VIEWS

The nation’s system for training teachers is in flux—and full of controversy. A special analysis of the survey results reveals two small but distinct groups of education professors whose starkly divergent thinking embodies some of the key fissures, tensions, and choices facing the system—to the point of meriting special attention. One segment—Reformers—is strongly dissatisfied with the status quo; they point to weaknesses in education programs and agitate for change. Another segment—Defenders—sees criticism as without merit and is mostly comfortable with the status quo. A close look at these two groups reveals opposing forces at work in teacher education.

To be sure, Reformers and Defenders are small sub-groups of the overall sample of teacher educators—12 percent and 13 percent, respectively—and we caution the reader to keep sample size in mind when contemplating the following results. That said, the differences between the two groups on key items reported here are meaningful and statistically significant.

DEFINING REFORMERS AND DEFENDERS

Reformers are unhappy with the current state of teacher education—particularly with its overall quality, prospective teachers, and even fellow professors. Reformers are stronger advocates for change. To be categorized as a Reformer, a professor must hold the following beliefs:

- That the teacher education system needs fundamental overhaul or many changes (i.e., rejecting the view that the U.S. system of university-based teacher education works very well and needs only minor tinkering);
- That the statement “Teacher education programs often fail to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the real world” comes very close to their view; and
- That the statement “Teacher education programs need to do a better job weeding out students who are unsuitable for the profession” comes very close to their view.

Defenders, in contrast, are mostly content with traditional teacher training and schools of education as they are. They are far more sanguine about their colleagues and the students that come through their programs. As a segment, Defenders resist education reform, especially alternative pathways to classroom teaching. To be categorized as a Defender, a professor must hold the following beliefs:

- That the system of university-based teacher education, on the whole, “works very well—it only needs minor tinkering”;
- That the statement “Teacher education programs are often unfairly blamed for the problems facing public education” comes very close to their view; and

- That the statement “Teacher education programs often fail to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the real world,” is not too close or not close at all to their view.

THE SYSTEM IS SERIOUSLY OFF COURSE. OR DOING GREAT.

Reformers are far more disapproving of university-based teacher training when compared with Defenders and the rest of the sample. As their defining characteristics (above) suggest, Reformers are more likely to be dissatisfied with their colleagues, their programs, and the quality of both prospective teachers and existing public school teachers. Note how Reformers stand apart when compared to Defenders and the rest of the sample (see Figure 13).

In stark contrast, Defenders are optimistic or at least contented. They believe that the majority of the prospective teachers they encounter will go on to become great teachers. Most Defenders have faith in the professional accreditation process for education schools. And they think that education programs are scapegoats for the problems facing education today (see Figure 14).

EDUCATION REFORMS: RIGHT TRACK OR WRONG TRACK?

The data show Reformers to be energetic supporters of teacher-tenure reform, while Defenders are far less critical of the tenure system. Similarly, Reformers are avid supporters of academic standards and formal measures of accountability, while Defenders show a lack of enthusiasm for such initiatives. For their part, Defenders are worried about alternative paths to teaching that bypass schools of education, believing they will undermine the quality of teachers and undercut the traditional system of teacher education (see Figure 15).

The wide range of responses from Reformers, Defenders, and the rest of the sample show that education professors are strikingly divided over the future of their profession and their schools. In terms of the most divergent views, Reformers and Defenders may be competing internally over the direction of the nation’s education schools. Or they may be quietly co-existing. But their presence suggests that stakeholders looking either to reform the public schools or to uphold the status quo will each find allies within the academy.

Figure 13

REFORMERS TAKE AIM

	Reformers (n=85)	Defenders (n=98)	All Others (n=555)
Strongly favor “holding teacher education programs more accountable for the quality of the teachers they graduate”	66	15	29
“Most professors of education need to spend more time in K–12 classrooms” is very close to their view	65	20	33
“Too many cooperating teachers lack the disposition and skills to be effective models for today’s student teachers” is very close to their view	57	4	13
“Fear of litigation has made it harder to remove unsuitable teacher candidates from teacher education programs” is very close to their view	52	17	22
“Often” come across students who they “seriously doubt have what it takes to be a teacher”	37	3	15

Figure 14

DEFENDERS STAND STRONG

	Reformers (n=85)	Defenders (n=98)	All Others (n=555)
“Most” or “virtually all” graduates from their programs will be “great” teachers	25	78	48
Professional accreditation of education programs guarantees a level of quality that is “top-notch” or at least “a baseline of acceptable quality”	46	66	51
“Teacher education programs are often unfairly blamed for the problems facing public education” is very close to their view	35	63	36

Differences are statistically significant at the .05 confidence level.

Figure 15

EDUCATION REFORM THROUGH THE EYES OF PROFESSORS

	Reformers (n=85)	Defenders (n=98)	All Others (n=555)
<i>On teacher tenure</i>			
“More often than not, teacher tenure is an obstacle to improving the schools” is very close to their view	37	8	13
Strongly favor “Making it easier to terminate unmotivated or incompetent teachers—even if they have tenure”	78	39	49
Strongly favor “Requiring a minimum of five years before tenure is awarded and strengthening the formal teacher evaluation process”	60	40	39
<i>On academic standards and accountability</i>			
Strongly favor “Having a core curriculum with specific knowledge and skills standards spelled out for each grade level”	45	27	26
Strongly favor “Requiring teachers to pass tests demonstrating proficiency in key subjects before they are hired”	54	26	37
Support adopting the same standards and exams in math, science, and reading for all states	60	41	49
<i>On alternative paths to teaching</i>			
Alternative certification programs not run by schools of education “threaten to compromise the quality of the teaching force in the public schools”	38	72	43
“Teacher preparation programs administered by school districts or charter management organizations that certify their own teachers” are a bad idea	42	72	48
“Recruiting people for school leadership who have proven track records of success from other fields such as business, law and the military” is a bad idea	35	60	40

Differences are statistically significant at the .05 confidence level.

CONCLUSION

Stepping back to consider this study as a whole, we see an array of views depicting a profession in flux and under stress. Focus-group conversations proved revealing: Professors were sometimes divided among themselves, and occasionally suspicious of the researchers. Some were reflective, chastened by the challenge of responding to real-world problems, while others spoke as if nothing could be more distant from their reality than the K–12 public school system. Clearly, education professors are trying to find their way in challenging times, and the findings captured in this survey mirror their struggle.

This was revealed in numerous ways. For example, many of the questions yielded near 50-50 splits, indicating a profession that is increasingly segmented into opposing camps. In fact, mining the data more deeply, we uncover two segments—Reformers and Defenders—holding views that are diametrically opposed. The former is a constituency advocating for change; the latter, stalwart advocates for the status quo. Such divisions might portend continued tension within the field. Many of the survey questions also garner an unusually high percentage of “not sure” responses, as if respondents are asking, “How do you expect us to settle on a response when things are complicated, the jury is still out, and more information is necessary?”

We also see trends in identically-worded questions that show shifting views since 1997. The profession—or at least portions of it—is evolving, perhaps in response to real-world changes, perhaps as a consequence of generational replacement.

Finally, the content of the survey itself reflects the changing times facing schools of education. Topics such as alternative teacher training programs were barely at issue during the 1997 iteration. In the end, the response of schools of education and their professors to the changes occurring in their field—and their own view of the role they should play in its transformation—will determine whether they remain the dominant players in the teacher training arena.