

LESSONS

Richard Rothstein

Forming the Hand That Holds the Chalk

KENT, Ohio
Many states hand out a teacher's license to any graduate of an education college approved by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, a consortium of education colleges, teachers' unions and other established public education groups.

In the past, this has not assured that beginning teachers would be effective. For example, the council checked to see whether colleges offered courses in pedagogy but did not ask whether students learned anything useful in them.

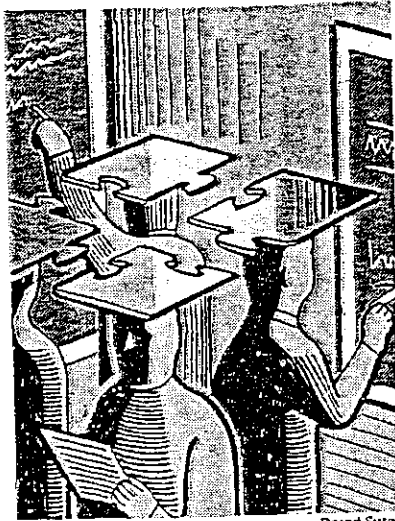
But the council revamped its standards this year. It now accredits education colleges only if graduates get good scores on tests of subject matter and teaching skills. And it demands evidence that teacher candidates actually can teach.

Here in central Ohio recently, a team of six council examiners visited Kent State University to investigate whether the new standards were being met.

Education majors typically do a full semester of practice teaching just before graduation. But Kent State students must now also engage in fieldwork for many courses, observing and evaluating students at nearby schools and occasionally conducting the lessons.

Such experiences generate portfolios that include lesson plans and samples of pupils' work from classes the college students taught, diagnoses of real pupils' learning difficulties written by the teacher candidates, journals in which Kent State students evaluate actual teacher lessons and pupil behavior, critiques of lessons found on the Internet and assessments by experienced teachers of the students' instructional skills. Some videotapes of these candidates making their first stabs at teaching are also included.

Kay Hegler, a professor of education at Doane College in Nebraska, was one council examiner who pored through the portfolios. Dr. Hegler says she was able to conclude that



David Suter

Ways to measure apprentice teachers, and those teaching them.

the apprentice teachers' work led to significant learning by pupils they taught.

The new accreditation rules require extensive cooperation from neighboring schools. When candidates got almost all their teaching practice in one semester, host teachers were often uninvolved in evaluating them. But now, with standards demanding careful documentation of continuous fieldwork, universities like Kent State require more help from principals and experienced teachers to design training and rate future teachers.

The standards also aim to end the isolation of education schools from university arts and sciences departments. At Kent State, joint projects of education and regular academic departments are now more common.

In one case, math and math education professors co-taught classes to ensure that students — future teachers and future mathematicians — experienced techniques that student teachers would later be expected to use.

Scheduling of regular academic courses and those in teaching methods is also better coordinated, so candidates can take them in proper sequence. This did not always happen when professors of education worked independently from those in arts and sciences.

The accreditation council is not solely responsible for such changes. Some were already under way at Kent State before the new standards were adopted.

The council could strengthen its impact by broadening its teams, now almost entirely made up of educators. The Kent State examiners were led by the retired dean of the University of Nevada's education school, and one team member was said to represent the public — as an officer of the National School Boards Association. Examiners are able to recognize good teaching, but their report may still lead critics to see the process as stacked in favor of an "education establishment." Why not include business leaders or legislators? Public members like these might not discern technical flaws in lesson plans but could enhance the credibility of the process.

Research indicates that brighter teachers (those who score higher on math and reading tests) get better results from their students. Some critics of teacher hiring procedures conclude from this that states should simply end certification rules for teachers. Then, the critics say, principals could hire bright college graduates who never attended an education school.

But if accreditation visits like the one at Kent State become the norm, the critics' conclusion may be unwarranted. For research also shows that taking education courses leads to improved student achievement. Rather than bypass certification, it makes more sense to improve graduation standards at colleges of education, ensuring that certified teachers actually have the skills to be effective. Enforcement of the new accreditation rules could then render obsolete the kinds of national debates we now have about teacher quality.