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THE MARYLAND'S TEACHER UNION IS WRONG ABOUT CERTIFICATION REFORM

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In a series of articles posted on its website, the Maryland State Teachers' Association has come out strongly against the alternative certification program offered by the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence—a program that was recommended by the Governor's Commission on Quality Education in Maryland.¹ Following is a point-by-point rebuttal of the primary article in the series, titled "ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill." Each paragraph from the MSTA website appears in italics and is quoted verbatim.

1. *"Like the owners of puppy mills who churn out litters of puppies for instant gratification, new teacher certification schemes like the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence aim to supply states with teachers, but where is the quality control?"*²

The article begins with some rhetorical excess and a vague suggestion that the American Board somehow lacks quality control, but offers no spe-

cific criticism either of the quality of the American Board's tests or of the candidates that have become teachers through its Passport to TeachingSM program. To claim a lack of quality control, the union would have to show that teachers certified through Passport to Teaching were unfit to teach. The MSTA has offered no such evidence, but unfortunately that has not stopped it from making the suggestion.

On the other hand, the typical American Board certified teacher is 40 years old with significant work experience, and 40 percent of the candidates have advanced degrees.³ In contrast, the typical candidate coming through the traditional certification process is a recent college graduate with little work experience. New Jersey candidates coming through its alternative certification program actually scored higher on the National Teachers Exam than traditional candidates, despite being less likely to have a major in the teaching area.⁴

1. Governor's Commission on Quality Education in Maryland, "Full September 2005 Report," Recommendation No. 11, pp. 14 and 26, available at <http://www.gov.state.md.us/GCQE/GCQE-FINAL-LO.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2005).
2. "ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill," Maryland State Teachers Association/NEA, available at www.mstanea.org/teaching_learning/issues/0405_01.php (accessed November 8, 2005).
3. Andrew Campanella, Director of Marketing & Communications, American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, interview on September 20, 2005.
4. Ray Legler, Ph.D., "Alternative Certification: A Review of Theory and Research," *Educational Policy*, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002, available at www.ncrel.org/policy/pubs/html/altcert/re.htm (accessed November 8, 2005).

What really matters, however, is not which credentials a candidate brings, but whether or not the candidate is effective in the classroom. Kate Walsh of the Baltimore-based Abell Foundation reviewed 150 studies that purported to show that traditional certification mattered. Her report found:

...the academic research attempting to link teacher certification with student achievement is astonishingly deficient...Instead of using standardized measures of student achievement, advocates design their own assessment measures to prove certification's value...Basic principles of sound statistical analysis are violated routinely.⁵

Even in well-conducted studies offering evidence that certification matters, the difference between certified and uncertified teachers is often small. As the National Council on Teacher Quality reports, "Even if...the research is considered uncritically, at best the conclusion is that the traditional certification process may only add some marginal value."⁶

If traditional certification were as important as the union argues it is, one would expect that having a traditional credential would consistently add more than marginal value, but both older and more recent evidence show this is not the case. Almost 40 years ago the president of Harvard University concluded, "Do [state certification] policies effectively serve the purposes of those concerned with teaching? They do not."⁷ In the January 1973 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, researchers noted,

James Popham demonstrated on three separate occasions that students taught by teachers trained in teachers colleges do no better than laymen (housewives, automobile mechanics, and electricians) in promoting student achievement.⁸

More recently, in 2003, the president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) said,

[C]urrent teacher licensing...does not do what it is intended to do. It does not differentiate clearly between those who are qualified to teach and those who are not...Because of the unevenness of teacher preparation, the preparation experience provides an uncertain basis for public confidence in the quality of beginning teachers.⁹

So despite the union's claim that traditional certification implies ability, it appears that the *traditional* certification process is in need of better quality control and that it has needed it for some time.

2. "Since 2001 the federal government has supported groups like the Education Leaders Council (ELC), the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCQT) [sic], and the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), all which seek to eliminate what the groups deem "barriers" to entering the teaching profession. Over \$35 million has been granted to these groups with little accountability."¹⁰

There is little doubt that candidates face unnecessary barriers to entering the teaching profession. Under the rules for the Resident Teacher Certificate, Maryland's current alternative certification program, candidates must complete 180-270 hours of study to become a teacher. A private school teacher with five years of experience would not be considered qualified without taking this coursework, but a candidate fresh from college with a semester-long teaching internship and an education degree is considered qualified. A math professor with decades of teaching experience and multiple teaching awards would not be considered qualified to teach basic algebra in the public schools without completing the required courses, but a below-average math stu-

5. Kate Walsh, "Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality," The Abell Foundation, 2001, pp. iii-iv, available at www.abell.org/pubsitems/ed_cert_1101.pdf (accessed November 8, 2005).

6. Kate Walsh and Christopher O. Tracy, "Increasing the Odds: How Good Policies Can Yield Better Teachers," p. 5, available at www.nctq.org/nctq/images/nctq_io.pdf (accessed November 8, 2005).

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Testimony of Arthur E. Wise, President, NCATE, to Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, May 20, 2003, available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/hearings/108th/21st/teach52003/wise.htm> (accessed November 8, 2005).

10. *Ibid.*

dent with mediocre teaching performance during his or her student teaching experience is considered fully qualified. Maryland's barriers to entry do the opposite of what good certification requirements should do: they allow weaker candidates in while discouraging stronger candidates from applying.

The accusation that the American Board somehow lacks accountability is unfounded. The U.S. Department of Education granted the American Board a \$5 million, two-year grant to create an alternative certification program. After the American Board successfully used those funds to create certification tests in several subjects, the Department of Education granted an additional \$35 million over the next five years to enable the organization to continue its work. In the four years that the American Board has been in existence it has successfully created certifications in six subject areas with several more under development. Several states have already accepted the American Board certification, and many more are considering it. Far from avoiding accountability, in the short time it has existed the American Board has fulfilled its charter to create a first-rate alternative certification program.

3. *"The most active group, ABCTE, tends to concentrate on content only as criteria for entering the classroom, essentially ignoring the professional refinement of basic teaching skills such as instruction techniques, best practices, differentiated instruction, and classroom management."*¹¹

This accusation is simply false. The Passport to TeachingSM certification requires passing both a test of professional teaching knowledge and a test in the subject area. The topics covered on the teaching knowledge exam include instructional design and strategies, classroom management, behavior change strategies, assessment for both regular and special education students, effective teaching practices to accommodate diverse learners, and working with parents, just to name a few.¹²

One key advantage of the American Board's professional teaching knowledge test is its basis on research of the highest quality and avoidance of pedagogical fads. When it comes to instructional techniques, there are two schools of thought in education: the so-called student-centered and teacher-centered approaches. Most traditional certification programs lean toward the student-centered approach, in which the teacher is a facilitator who guides children to discover things such as mathematical algorithms on their own. In contrast, the teacher-centered approach emphasizes instruction by the teacher, whose role is to explain concepts and skills that have been carefully sequenced to facilitate learning. Both approaches can be used effectively, but many traditional certification programs either de-emphasize teacher-centered techniques or present them as examples of what not to do.

This lack of balance has been to the detriment of students. The largest and most expensive study ever conducted in America, Project Follow Through, lasted almost three decades, involved close to 10,000 children, cost nearly a billion dollars, and concluded that direct instruction—a teacher-centered approach—was the only model to consistently and significantly raise the achievement of children in poverty.¹³ Jeanne Chall, who was considered by many to be the top reading researcher in the country prior to her death in 1999, concluded in *The Academic Achievement Challenge* that

Quite consistently, when results were analyzed by socioeconomic status, it was the more traditional education that produced the better academic achievement from low-income families.¹⁴

The American Board's test of professional teaching knowledge expects candidates to know about a full repertoire of techniques, including teacher-centered approaches such as direct instruction, phonics, and mastery learning, and student-centered approaches such as cooperative, discovery, and

11. "ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill," Maryland State Teachers Association/NEA, available at www.mstanea.org/teaching_learning/issues/0405_01.php (accessed November 8, 2005).

12. Descriptions of these tests may be found at The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence at www.abcte.org/masterteacher and www.abcte.org/passport (accessed November 8, 2005).

13. Cathy L. Watkins, "Follow-Through: Why Didn't We?" *Effective School Practices*, Vol. 15 No. 1, Winter 1995-96, available at <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~adiep/ft/watkins.htm> (accessed November 8, 2005).

14. Jeanne S. Chall, *The Academic Achievement Challenge* (Guilford Publications, New York: 2000) p. 99.

project-based learning. Far from “ignoring the professional refinement of basic teaching skills,” the American Board takes the balanced and thorough approach of presenting the best available research-based techniques regardless of their originating school of thought. By including techniques that are well-supported by research, the American Board is recognizing the importance of teaching skills and is ensuring that its certificate holders will be equipped to help all students learn.

4. *“This idea that content knowledge is the only necessary requirement for teacher certification sadly belies what statistics show to be true: one-half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years with much of the dissatisfaction stemming from failures in teacher preparedness and professional support.”*¹⁵

This argument is misleading in two ways. First, as mentioned above, the American Board tests content knowledge and teaching skills and has never claimed one was more important than the other. Second, though the article does not quote any statistics to support its statement that “much of the dissatisfaction stems from failures in teacher preparedness,” if this is true it only underscores the point that the traditional certification process is failing to prepare teachers. Only 1 percent of Maryland’s teachers have been alternatively certified through its Resident Teacher Program, which also requires traditional education coursework.¹⁶ Ninety-nine percent of Maryland’s teachers have been prepared through Maryland’s traditional certification process or have been granted reciprocity for having another state’s certification. This means that virtually all the teachers that the union claims are leaving largely due to poor preparation have undergone the traditional certification that the union suggests will improve retention.

Though New Jersey found that its alternatively certified teachers were more likely to stay in teaching than traditionally certified candidates, other

studies show little difference in retention rates.¹⁷ However, whether alternatively certified or traditionally certified candidates have greater longevity in the profession should not be a deciding factor in the debate over whether Maryland accepts the American Board certification, any more than the retention rates of accountants, doctors, and lawyers should factor into the licensing standards for those professions. The central issue in the debate is about setting the right entry standards for teachers, not whether those who pass these standards might one day leave.

5. *“Research and practice have shown that licensing standards should require beginning teachers to possess a wide range of skills before they enter the classroom. These include a deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, a firm understanding of how students learn, the ability to help all students achieve to high standards, the capacity to diagnose and respond to various learning needs, and the aptitude to instill a passion for learning in students.”*

*“Over and over again, teacher quality is cited as the single most important factor in improving student achievement and delivering on the promise to “leave no child behind.” With highly qualified teachers being the sought after end result of the No Child Left Behind Act, this hardly seems the time to relax standards.”*¹⁸

While it is important to expect that teachers would have a “wide range of skills before they enter the classroom,” these skills can be acquired through means in addition to attending college classes. Many American Board candidates have teaching experience when they begin the certification process, and all work with an experienced teacher who recommends resources to prepare for the certification exams.

The suggestion that the American Board somehow lowers standards is unsubstantiated. Indeed, the Praxis I and II tests required by the current cer-

15. “ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill,” Maryland State Teachers Association/NEA, available at www.mstanea.org/teaching_learning/issues/0405_01.php (accessed November 8, 2005).

16. Kate Walsh, “Teacher Certification Reconsidered,” www.abell.org/pubsitems/ed_cert_1101.pdf, p. 35.

17. Linda Brannan and Robert Reichardt, Ph.D., “Alternative Teacher Education: A Review of Selected Literature,” Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, Aurora, CO; and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, Boulder, CO, 2002, available at www.mcrel.org/PDF/TeacherPrepRetention/5021RR_4007_AltLitReview.pdf, p. 22.

18. “ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill,” Maryland State Teachers Association/NEA, available at www.mstanea.org/teaching_learning/issues/0405_01.php (accessed November 8, 2005).

tification process are not very challenging. The Praxis I assesses basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and most questions are set at approximately an eighth grade level.¹⁹ The Praxis II tests assess subject matter knowledge and pedagogy. The Education Trust reviewed the Praxis II math test in 1999 and concluded,

In general, the tests assess mostly tenth to eleventh grade level content. Nothing in either of the Praxis II tests...probes the intellectual substance of college mathematics that should equip high school teachers with robust backgrounds for dealing with the myriad ideas that will emerge from discussion with students.²⁰

The Education Trust report shows that other subject areas contain similar problems and goes on to explain that “the tests have undergone a validation process designed to assure that they can withstand potential legal challenge...Such concern has led test developers to include only content that they can prove a beginning teacher actually uses in his or her practice. This practice reduces the likelihood that tests will contain content higher than the high school level.”²¹ In contrast, the American Board tests are set at the college level and designed to assess the full breadth and depth of knowledge that one would expect from a college graduate. By setting a high bar, the American Board is raising standards, not relaxing them.

6. *“Discounting such information, the ABCTE offers certification to anyone with a bachelor’s degree who passes the online ‘Passport to Teaching’ test, a federal background check, and hands over \$500.”*

“ABCTE has developed three ‘Passports’ to certification in elementary education (K–6), mathematics (6–12), and English (6–12). The core requirement is passing content knowledge and brief pedagogy (teaching skills) multiple choice assessments. There is an option for on-line advisement but it is not required. No student teaching or internship is

*required. The cost of a Passport assessment is \$500.”*²²

The tone of this statement is misleading. The American Board requires that candidates have a bachelor’s degree and pass two rigorous examinations that are conducted in secure testing centers worldwide. The Board is not handing out certification to anyone who pays the application fee. Some candidates will not be able to pass the certification exams and will not earn certification.

The suggestion that student teaching or an internship should be required is an argument worthy of consideration. Teachers who come through traditional certification programs usually cite their teaching experience as being the most valuable part of their training. Like many job skills, teaching skills are best learned on the job. As the provider of a national certification, the American Board was wise to not require specific student teaching requirements and to give states the flexibility to craft additional entry requirements as they see fit. Though Maryland could certainly set an additional requirement at the state level for an internship, it is preferable that local districts be granted flexibility in this regard.

Local administrators and principals, who, unlike the state, actually meet the candidates, are in the best position to determine the length and nature of an internship if they wish to require one. Some districts may want to require an internship of all candidates. Others may wish to waive the internship requirement for candidates with prior teaching experience or who meet other criteria, such as successfully teaching sample lessons. Rather than lock all districts into a specific model, Maryland should encourage districts to try different approaches. By adopting the American Board certification as one route into the profession and giving districts the flexibility to define other requirements, Maryland would have the best of both worlds: consistently high entry standards across the state, and freedom

19. “Not Good Enough: A Content Analysis of Teacher Licensing Examinations,” *Thinking K-16*, Vol. 3:1, Spring 1999, p. 9, available at www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/5F7B8FCA-2400-47DE-9C40-AC948D934836/0/k16_spring99.pdf (accessed November 17, 2005).

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. “ABCTE: Creating a Teacher Mill,” Maryland State Teachers Association/NEA, available at www.mstanea.org/teaching_learning/issues/0405_01.php (accessed November 8, 2005).

for districts to be innovative in their hiring practices.

7. *“Currently six states recognize ABCTE certification: Pennsylvania, Florida, Idaho, New Hampshire, Utah, and Texas. However, very few teachers have received certification. A look at the ABCTE’s website found no reference of the number of teachers who have sought and/or received ABCTE certification.”*²³

The American Board’s certification has only been around for a few years, so the fact that relatively few teachers have received certification is an unfair basis for criticism. Knowing the number of teachers who sought and received ABCTE certification is important information that the American Board should release once the sample size is sufficiently large to be meaningful. Notably, however, unlike the traditional certification process, the American Board has designed its process to incorporate a longitudinal study of how well the students taught by its certified teachers are learning. Rather than focusing on the process teachers undergo to get certified, as the advocates of traditional certification tend to do, the American Board is focusing on the thing that matters most: student achievement.

8. *“In response to an item on the Frequently Asked Questions page of the website: Is Passport to Teaching certification accepted as a teaching certificate by school districts? The reply is: If a state recognizes American Board Passport to Teaching certification, the school districts will as well. However, NEA reports that many districts within the states who have adopted this option will not hire ABCTE teachers.”*

Districts are well within their rights to not hire ABCTE teachers, or traditionally certified teachers, or any other candidate they wish not to hire. The unwillingness of some districts to hire ABCTE teachers is a testament to the challenges of changing the status quo, not an indication of the quality of ABCTE teachers. Districts that categorically refuse to hire ABCTE teachers are cutting themselves off

from the opportunity to meet these candidates and judge for themselves whether these teachers could help student achievement in their schools. The idea that every ABCTE teacher is unfit to teach is just as illogical as the idea that every traditional candidate is well-qualified. Schools hire individuals, not credentials, and should consider everything candidates bring to the table.

9. *“The ABCTE assessments have no track record of validity or legal credibility. The Educational Testing Service, the creator of the Praxis exams, has been very negative about its development. The American College Testing organization, who was the initial contractor for development, dropped out over technical concerns. No evaluations have been completed regarding its effectiveness in identifying qualified teachers who will remain in the profession.”*²⁴

The U.S. Secretary of Education has recommended the American Board’s program to the states.²⁵ The Educational Testing Service would be, predictably, “very negative” about the development of a test that competes with its exams, since ETS has a financial interest in ensuring its dominance in the market for teacher testing services. Allowing a competitor into this market threatens its status as the nation’s primary provider of teacher assessments.

While it is true that evaluations have not yet been completed to determine how effective ABCTE teachers are in the classroom, the American Board recently awarded a contract to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. to perform such a study. The ABCTE certification is still in its early stages but has already started the process of evaluating how much students taught by ABCTE teachers learn. In contrast, Maryland’s traditional certification process has been around for decades, and the state has neither conducted such an evaluation nor announced plans to do so. The union appears to be holding ABCTE to a double standard and should encourage Maryland to evaluate the effectiveness of its certification as well.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Higher Quality Teachers: Improving Teacher Quality State Grants*, ESEA Title II, Part A, “Nonregulatory Guidance,” Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Dept. of Education, revised August 3, 2005, page 4, available at www.ed.gov/programs/teacherqual/guidance.doc (accessed November 8, 2005).

10. *“The bottom line is that many credible alternative certification programs are in existence. But most quick-fix solutions, such as the ABCTE, lead to novice teachers who are unprepared for the classroom and quickly leave the profession. It devalues the teaching profession and further distances teachers from their counterparts in law and medicine that value comprehensive assessment for entry and continued professional development to support high standards.”*

In the preceding paragraph in this article, the union stated, “no evaluations have been completed regarding its effectiveness in identifying qualified teachers who will remain in the profession.” If no evaluations have been completed, then how can the union claim a paragraph later that “solutions, such as the ABCTE, lead to novice teachers who are unprepared for the classroom and quickly leave the profession”? Such a claim would require an evaluation. These arguments are contradictory and questionable in their basis.

The American Board certification offers higher standards with lower barriers. The union wants the opposite. Consider the comments of Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, the parent organization of the MSTA, who said,

I don't necessarily want the best and the brightest...I want somebody who's gone through a teacher education program ...

one that is certified and qualified like that. The best and the brightest, fine. But a lot of times it's not the best and the brightest. I want somebody that can really identify with these young people, and I think we made a mistake by always saying that we want the best and the brightest. For the best and the brightest may not be the one who wants to come into our profession.²⁶

The union argues that the best and brightest may not want to become teachers, so its strategy appears to be to set low standards for entry but insist on “continued professional development” to try to raise teacher ability to support high standards. This is the wrong approach. By insisting on high standards from the start, the American Board reduces the need for remedial professional development. With one of the most well-educated populations in the nation, our state is in a great position to recruit top-notch candidates. We can provide Maryland's children with more teachers who excel academically, who relate well to students, and who know how to teach—if only the union will stop insisting on keeping them out.

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26. “Making the Case for Public Education: Q&A with NEA President Reginald Weaver,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*, Vol. 20, Issue 5, January 24, 2004, available at www2.nea.org/presscenter/blackissuesqa.html (accessed November 8, 2005).