

## **The Status of the Teaching Profession and the Promotion of Highly-Effective Teaching**

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### **Abstract**

The question of whether or not elevating the status of the teaching profession will enhance societal value and contribute to the outcome that our students are globally competitive is complex. The task of proposing answers to the question is complicated by two problems at the outset – the difficulty of defining “status” and the challenge to find consensus about the essential attributes of “profession.” There are issues that merit substantive attention in a comprehensive response to questions about teacher status and professionalization that will, for reasons of efficiency, be given insufficient attention here because those issues are explored in depth in other narratives. Those issues are teacher compensation, standards, and professional development. They contribute to the health and the productive outcomes of a system of education and are vital considerations in any discussion about teacher status and professionalization. Teaching should be regarded as a profession. It requires content and pedagogical knowledge and skills beyond that of a layperson. A specialized vocabulary, professional associations, and a set of ethical standards are associated with its practice, which is recognized by licensure that must be earned and updated. Yet, teaching is not characterized, as other professions are, by a high degree of decision making empowerment and individual autonomy nor a tradition of oversight of its own standards with the ability to sanction peers. Society, as well as the individual practitioner, accrues benefit from the professional status and strength of its care-giving professions. Our state depends on the sense of personal and collective responsibility that public educators assume for the wellbeing of all students entrusted to their expertise and diligent service. And teachers depend on the support and acknowledgement of their professional service – a key responsibility of our state.

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North Carolina faces a paradox: a growing state with increasing need for K-12 teachers on the one hand, and on the other hand, declining rates of young people entering the teaching profession and veteran teachers who stay until retirement. The superintendent of North Carolina Public Schools, June Atkinson, is quoted as saying, “We know that our teacher preparation programs across the state have told us they have fewer people enrolling. If we do not raise teacher salaries, the master’s degree payment, and we do not show we value our teachers, then I am worried about the supply of quality teachers to teach our young people.” The number of teachers leaving the classroom in North Carolina reached a five-year high during the 2012 – 2013 school year, according to a report made to the General Assembly, *The Annual Report of Teachers Leaving the Profession*. Concerns about teachers in our state rightly consider professionalization and status as part of both the explanation for and proposed solutions to the problems associated with this predicament.

The imperative to improve the status of teachers has persisted in our state for decades but has accelerated to become front page news, board room agenda, and a kitchen table topic with new urgency in the last two years. The status of teachers, as addressed here, considers not only the regard in which teachers are held by the public and by themselves and their colleagues. It also considers their relative socio-economic standing. Status is inferred from a description of the level of value placed on the importance of their work and their competence to perform this work, and by evidence provided by data on the remuneration, benefits and working conditions of teachers in North Carolina.

Working conditions are the focus of a survey of over 100,000 public school teachers that was completed in 2012 called *The North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey* (NCTWC). Its summary of findings gives particular attention to the issues of school leadership, teacher empowerment to make decisions, and availability of time to complete important responsibilities that emerged as particularly significant aspects of working conditions. Some of the same variables considered in the survey commonly appear in definitions of a type of work as a “profession.”

The word “profession,” though widely used and commonly understood, is essentially subjective. As with status, it has relative meaning for comparison and contrast only in a defined context; yet we use these terms extensively and without clarity of definition in both informal conversations and policy statements. Sociologists, economists and policy analysts define the two concepts using a variety of essential elements and criteria. There is a lack of consensus among social scientists and no universally accepted definition of what makes a type of work unequivocally a profession instead of a semi-profession or professionalized career. Furthermore, it is difficult to

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get individuals to agree on the relative value of the variables used to identify status in society as it relates to work. Nevertheless, status and professionalization are useful and important points on which to focus as part of a more comprehensive discussion of the future of education and public schooling in our state. The attributes of empowerment to make decisions and self-management of practice and working conditions, however, are those that also tend to confound attempts to define teaching as a profession and elevate its status through professionalization.

Several recent studies have featured models that have been used for teacher involvement in structuring the professionalization and practice of teaching. In 2012, a Washington-based non-profit organization, The Education Trust, issued a report titled “Building and Sustaining Talent” that profiles five school districts in the United States, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg in North Carolina. All five districts showed concerted efforts to enhance the development and support of teachers through leadership initiatives and professional development involving collaboration among teachers. In a summary of their findings from the study, The Education Trust urged districts to be deliberate and strategic about providing strong leadership focused on creating a climate of staff cohesion and teacher empowerment.

The 2012 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher reported a 15% drop in teacher satisfaction since 2009, its lowest point since 1989. The survey on which the study is based suggests that both education budget cuts and a lack of pay raises to keep pace with cost of living increases contribute to declining morale. On the other hand, adequate time for professional development and collaboration with colleagues appear to enhance professional satisfaction of teachers and characterize models of successful teacher involvement in professionalization, as noted in the MetLife Survey.

Concern exists over whether teachers across the state generally feel that they are adequately represented in models and efforts to professionalize teaching and its practice. According to the reports cited above, schools need to recognize, reward, and support good teaching, and include teachers in reform efforts by routinely providing them with opportunities to work with others and hone their craft. The studies suggest that such opportunities could be enhanced by the presence of expert teachers who are available as resources for their colleagues and who have opportunities to advance even as they stay in the classroom. The report from The Education Trust asserts that states increasingly focus on improving teacher-evaluation systems as a first step to improving teacher quality, but current measures remain insufficient to sustain and retain a vital corps of teachers or improve student learning outcomes.

There is a growing body of literature surrounding models of practice and research findings that are relevant to professionalization and the status of teachers from a global perspective. International comparative studies identify a number of significant factors. Favorable working conditions, a sense of career efficacy, decision making power, and affiliation with professional colleagues—all recognized as aspects of professionalization—emerge as significant variables associated with recruitment and retention. Particularly in Finland and Singapore, the attractiveness of teaching is associated with the following practices: being treated as a professional; having substantial, designated and protected time to collaborate and consult with

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colleagues and administrators; and having opportunities to advance in pay grade and authority while staying in the classroom as a teacher.

The imperative to improve education and professionalize teaching is pervasive both around the world and across the United States. The Varkey GEMS Foundation, a non-profit organization in the United Kingdom, surveyed over a thousand individuals age 16 to 70 in 21 countries in 2013 with the aim of informing the global conversation about teacher status. In their summary of data, the investigators found great variety in the regard in which teachers are held. They connected status with the appeal of the profession and the relative level of financial compensation. They found no clear causal relationship between teacher status and student outcomes, and separated perceptions of teachers from perceptions about the quality of the education system. The conclusion of the Executive Summary of the Report, however, asserts that the social status of teachers "...informs who decides to become a teacher, how they are respected, and how they are financially rewarded. This affects the kind of job they do in teaching our children and ultimately how effective they are in getting the best from their pupils in terms of their learning."

Another study with American teachers similarly reported no causal relationship between advanced professional knowledge, a critical attribute in definitions of a profession (and in this case represented by holding a master's degree) and student learning outcomes. A study published by the Center for American Progress in 2012 reports that teachers with master's degrees are no more effective, on average, than those without them; yet, American teachers were paid an extra \$14.8 billion for master's degrees in 2007-08. Thirty-three states—not including North Carolina—require teachers to have master's degrees.

Status may be associated with teacher evaluation if status is perceived to relate to salary and if a teacher's evaluation is tied to his or her paycheck. Approaches to evaluating teachers are varied in worldwide models, as is the practice of tying performance to pay. In the United States, recent trends toward national standards and assessments are increasingly accompanied by teacher evaluation schemes tied to student performance. From an international perspective, many countries have had national curricula and standardized tests far longer than the U.S. There is also a relatively new and interesting trend in some places abroad to move away from these student tests as the primary measure of teacher effectiveness. For example, Finland and Canada have rejected merit pay for teachers based exclusively on student test scores because of a lack of evidence that it serves to improve outcomes or incentivize teachers.

In Singapore, teachers do receive promotions and financial rewards for performance that is appraised annually and by a number of individuals. However, the assessment includes not only student test score outcomes, but also consideration of the teacher's professional behavior, contribution to the school, instructional practices and collaborations with students, parents, other constituents and colleagues. While student test scores are not the singular markers of quality for either teachers, the school or the larger system, in Singaporean schools—as in China, Finland and elsewhere—there is a conspicuous and conscientiously developed system of school level accountability that factors into not only test-based student assessments, but also the professional

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values of teachers that they associate with their work and job satisfaction as well as the expectations of the community that supports the school.

Finland, China and Singapore get a great deal of attention in the United States as educators and policy makers attempt to account for the relatively higher ranking given to student test scores outcomes within these countries on internationally comparable measures. Researchers who compare school systems, teacher preparation and educational policies on a global scale identify trends and practices that appear to contrast with our own. For example, in Finland, only one of every 10 applicants is accepted into teacher preparation programs after two rounds of consideration by admissions committees. Their standards for new teachers were recently made more rigorous than they had been in the past. This effort resulted in a perceived enhancement of the status of teachers and a subsequent rise in the number of applicants for entry into the profession. Analysts suggest that teaching in Finland is understood to be a profession that requires specialized expertise and the ability to make decisions instead of one that views teachers as a skilled employee of the state who implements standards and is expected to produce satisfactory outcomes on mandated tests.

The issues of control and empowerment—factors commonly identified with professionalization—consistently appear in studies of teacher status. A number of time and place related factors are associated with the profession, specifically how teachers perceive their power to control their own status. Schedules and working conditions should facilitate and enhance professional practice. Classrooms, teachers' study and planning spaces, and daily schedules should be designed to account for the complexity and demands of work with high concentrations of energetic youngsters. Those who do the work know best what structures and resources most effectively and efficiently help them meet their individual and collective responsibilities to instruct and serve children's needs, make decisions, and plan. Teachers should be considered integral to the process of making decisions about their work. In the world of business and industry, as in the most highly regarded professions, the most successful and desirable fields are noted for their attractive working conditions and schedules.

The rationale for teachers' integration into policy decisions and for looking to teachers to design new models of practice is relatively simple, according to researcher Richard Ingersoll. This approach will help assure that quality teachers are sustained and retained. Ingersoll points out that a revolving door of teachers leaving or of teachers being unsatisfied and disappointed serves no school system well. From that point of view, it is difficult to imagine how a learning environment and the children in it are not adversely affected when the teachers feel demoralized and struggle to make ends meet. Although it is complex and demanding work, teaching is also tremendously rewarding when situated in an environment in which learning and competence is both the outcome and the pervasive element in the atmosphere of the school. Shortages do not exist in careers that are well respected and well paid; there should be no shortages of teachers in North Carolina's future, either.



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