**THE EDUCATION PROFESSION:**

**BENEFICIARY OR CASUALTY OF 30 YEARS OF EDUCATION REFORM?**

**DIANA POUNDER**

*College of Education - University of Central Arkansas*

**Abstract:** This article asks the question of whether the education profession has benefited or suffered due to the education reform trends and dynamics of the past 30 years. Specifically, the article discusses some of the major education reform trends derived from the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report and focused on improving the teaching profession. The article follows with suggested research and policy considerations related to the investigation of the impact of 30 years of reform on the education profession.


In the mid-1980’s, about the same time I entered the professoriate, the blue ribbon report entitled *A Nation at Risk* was released (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report was cited broadly in the media and education policy and professional circles, repeatedly emphasizing the report’s most well-recognized mantra, “the rising tide of mediocrity” in America’s education system. The report was framed in terms of concerns for U.S. student academic achievement compared to that of prior decades or to that of other nations. In large part, the report was motivated by implications for America’s economic and competitive edge in an increasingly global market. The report called attention to concerns about school curriculum, student academic and behavioral expectations, classroom time, and teaching.

Berliner and Biddle (1995) and other critics of the report provided compelling evidence that the U.S. education system had not failed as was widely reported by the media. Rather, they argued, the U.S. education system needed to devote more attention to equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for low income students, students of color, and other historically marginalized student populations. Increases in learning outcomes for these populations should be the focus of educational improvement, rather than comprehensive educational reform. Nonetheless, for the most part, the media focus on education over the past 30 years has assumed broad-scale failure in public education and assumed the need for broad-scale educational reform.

Due largely to my own research interests, it is the report’s focus on *teaching* that caught my attention and that addressed what I would refer to as ‘human resource issues’ in the education profession --- such as attracting and retaining high quality teachers, preparing and developing teachers, supervising and evaluating teachers, compensating teachers, and improving working conditions for teachers. The Commission expressed concerns, “……that not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key
categories” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1995, p. 22). More specifically, the Commission findings stated (pp. 22-23):

- Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quartile of graduating high school and college students.
- The teacher preparation curriculum is weighted heavily with courses in "educational methods" at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught. A survey of 1,350 institutions training teachers indicated that 41 percent of the time of elementary school teacher candidates is spent in education courses, which reduces the amount of time available for subject matter courses.
- The average salary after 12 years of teaching is only $17,000 per year, and many teachers are required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment. In addition, individual teachers have little influence in such critical professional decisions as, for example, textbook selection.
- Despite widespread publicity about an overpopulation of teachers, severe shortages of certain kinds of teachers exist: in the fields of mathematics, science, and foreign languages; and among specialists in education for gifted and talented, language minority, and handicapped students. (pp. 22-23)

Correspondingly, the Commission recommended that:

- Persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline. Colleges and universities offering teacher preparation programs should be judged by how well their graduates meet these criteria.
- Salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. Salary, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated.
- School boards should adopt an 11-month contract for teachers. This would ensure time for curriculum and professional development, programs for students with special needs, and a more adequate level of teacher compensation.
- School boards, administrators, and teachers should cooperate to develop career ladders for teachers that distinguish among the beginning instructor, the experienced teacher, and the master teacher.
- Substantial non-school personnel resources should be employed to help solve the immediate problem of the shortage of mathematics and science teachers. Qualified individuals, including recent graduates with mathematics and science degrees, graduate students, and industrial and retired scientists could, with appropriate preparation, immediately begin teaching in these fields. A number of our leading science centers have the capacity to begin educating and retraining teachers immediately. Other areas of critical teacher need, such as English, must also be addressed.
- Incentives, such as grants and loans, should be made available to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession, particularly in those areas of critical shortage.
- Master teachers should be involved in designing teacher preparation programs and in supervising teachers during their probationary years. (pp. 30-31)

The report concluded with recommendations for “Leadership and Fiscal Support,” proposing that policymakers, including school boards, governors, and state and federal legislators have key responsibilities for assuring that the report recommendations were implemented and appropriately funded.

This seminal report has spawned three decades of evolutionary education reform, with considerable influence by the National Governor’s Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, state and federal legislatures, and multiple education constituent groups including professional education organizations and even philanthropic groups. These reform initiatives have included considerable public accountability regulation, including high stakes testing of public school students and educators, increasingly more teacher performance evaluation systems that include evidence of student learning outcomes, and higher academic standards for teacher preparation candidates (e.g. more content preparation, higher admission and exit requirements such as grade point averages and standardized test scores).

While public education has experienced increased regulation, paradoxically, competing market theories and ideologies have been used to argue for deregulation of some education sectors or alternative provid-
ers. Market theory assumes that if market competition increases, education quality will correspondingly increase. Market theorists also argue that if alternative education providers create more effective educational strategies, then public education could adopt those same strategies to improve educational outcomes. Thus, market competition proponents have proposed and been instrumental in implementing more choice and less regulatory control in some education sectors, including charter schools and alternative teacher preparation pathways (typically ‘non-university-based’) such as Teach for America.

In spite of increased regulation of public education over the past three decades, some state and federal politicians and well-funded education constituent groups continue to gain media attention by arguing that public education quality is inadequate while correspondingly promoting the interests of alternative education providers. To date, there appears to be little loosening of regulation on public education to reflect market theory approaches and little cross-over of alternative provider educational strategies to public education sectors, perhaps because evidence of educational effectiveness for large-scale implementation is limited.

The question arises, has the education profession been the beneficiary or a casualty of education reforms and their related dynamics? Or perhaps more specifically, in what ways has the education profession benefited from these changes and in what ways has the education profession suffered due to these reform trends? These are important research and policy questions for today’s education researchers to address if we are to know how to sustain and strengthen the education profession for the future.

Education Reform Trends

The reform trends affecting the education profession have come from multiple and sometimes contentious or competing sources. Some of the changes have been initiated and tightly regulated by state and federal legislatures or bureaucratic agencies. Some of the changes are a result of market forces and ideologies, especially those of market competition. Some are reforms initiated and implemented by the education profession itself. Below I will briefly highlight and discuss, from my point of view, some of these reform trends affecting the education profession over the past 30 years – particularly those derived from or evolving from the original Nation at Risk recommendations.

Teacher Preparation Standards and Practices

Many states have implemented more rigorous standards for the preparation and development of teachers. To some degree these more rigorous standards are a result of legislation and regulatory oversight by state or federal government (e.g. No Child Left Behind’s Title II “highly qualified teacher” provision of the 2001 Reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, West 2003). However, to some degree these increased standards are a reflection of change promoted from within various arms of the education profession itself, such as professional accreditation bodies and professional education organizations (e.g. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] or Teacher Education Accreditation Council [TEAC], now Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP] and related Specialized Program Association’s [SPA’s]).

These changes include more rigorous academic standards for entry into and exit from teacher preparation programs. These standards typically include substantially greater content preparation for all teacher candidates, with most secondary education candidates required to complete a content major rather than a degree in education. Additionally, teacher candidates are held to higher academic qualifications such as admission and exit grade point averages higher than that of other college graduates and admission exam requirements beyond that of other college applicants. Also, educator candidates are held to licensure and exit exam performance in content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, evidence of classroom performance skills and dispositions to teach. Often teacher candidates must take as many as a half-dozen national standardized exams to complete admission and exit requirements of a teacher preparation program.

Although A Nation At Risk did not focus specifically on clinical experiences in teacher preparation, their recommendation that ‘master teachers’ serve in shaping teacher preparation programs spoke to the need to tighten the relationship between university preparation experiences and actual teaching roles and responsibilities in the schools. Further, research on teacher preparation has highlighted the critical and potent role of in-depth and authentic clinical experiences in effective teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Zeichner, 2010). As a result, highly.
Effective classroom teachers are routinely used to supervise teacher candidates during their internship experiences, and are often included on preparation program advisory groups. School district personnel are widely utilized in various roles relevant to teacher preparation, and more recently, collaborative partnerships between universities and school districts have been promoted as one of the more effective models for teacher preparation. These partnerships are designed to strengthen the authenticity and ‘hands-on’ elements of teacher preparation programs.

In some states, these teacher preparation practices are regulated by the state and in some instances these preparation practices are a reflection of professional accreditation standards such as those of the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2013). In general, accreditation bodies have put increasingly more emphasis on evidence of candidate outcomes such as candidate knowledge and skills, candidate program completion and job placement rates, and more recently candidate teaching effectiveness as novice teachers. Few, if any, professions require as much comprehensive evidence about candidates’ professional preparedness and resulting job competence as the education profession. Unfortunately, in spite of the thorough attention to improved teacher preparation standards, critics of the education profession, the public at large, and even some policymakers are largely ignorant of these more rigorous teacher preparation standards and practices that have been implemented over the past couple of decades.

Continuing Professional Development of Teachers

Today’s teachers are typically required, either by state or district regulation, to participate in a requisite amount and type of professional development to renew their state teaching license or prepare for district educational initiatives. These requisite professional development activities have placed greater and greater demands on teachers’ time and skill development. These requirements are likely to assure that teachers’ knowledge and skills stay current to remain eligible for licensure and continuing employment. However, some find that many professional development initiatives and opportunities are not designed in a way to have much impact on enhanced student learning. Others report feeling that their professional development lacks coherence or focus relevant to major reform initiatives (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Amson, 2010).

Expectations for greater teacher professional development may also be reflected in extended contract time, although teacher pay has not increased appreciably with extended year contracts as initially conceptualized in the Commission’s 1983 recommendation. Few, if any, school districts have implemented 11-month contracts as suggested in A Nation At Risk, although in some locales the academic school year and/or school day has been increased slightly, and correspondingly, the teacher contract year. Where the academic year has been extended, the primary objective has been to increase teaching and learning time for students rather than to increase teachers’ compensation or professional development opportunities.

Teacher Supervision and Evaluation

Teacher supervision and evaluation has long been an important and well-recognized human resource function to promote teacher quality. However, in the past couple of decades, teacher supervision and evaluation has been influenced by other education reform trends discussed below (e.g. compensation, standardization and accountability). For example, some states have promoted or required that all schools and districts utilize the same teacher supervision/evaluation system so that the system is standardized across the entire state. Similarly, some teacher supervision and evaluation systems now require more evidence of annual student learning growth so that teachers can be evaluated, in part, on student learning outcomes. Additionally, some districts or states attach performance incentive monies to evidence of student learning growth --- for the school as a whole, or in some instances, for the individual teacher. These changes have resulted in teacher supervision and evaluation having a more ‘high stakes’ feel. One only has to look at YouTube ‘Hitler-esque’ video spoofs on teacher evaluation systems to understand how these systems may be experienced by classroom teachers (e.g. Hitler Evaluation Model, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=en08k-zp1XA).

Teacher Compensation

Although teacher salaries have surely risen since 1983, relatively speaking, teaching salaries may not be proportionately higher than 30 years ago in many locales. Even where salaries may have been adjusted upward to be more competitive, for the most part, school dis-
Districts do not employ market-sensitive or performance-based pay systems. Although some school districts have implemented school-based performance reward systems for school-wide student achievement and improvement, fewer have implemented individual merit or performance-based pay. Although performance-based pay plans are popular among policy-makers, states have had limited success with implementation until they have developed stronger performance review systems — most of which are based on performance review by the school principal and reliable and valid student learning growth evidence (Podursky & Springer, 2011). Peer review performance systems are very rare at this point in time, and there appears to be little pressure or incentive to implement this type of performance review.

Differentiated Teacher Roles and Career Ladder Plans

Career ladder plans were implemented in many states and districts following the 1983 Commission report. These career ladder plans were intended to differentiate the roles and responsibilities of novice teachers versus experienced teachers versus master teachers. Although greater emphasis on teacher leadership roles and teacher decision participation have continued since the 1983 Commission report, most of the initially proposed and developed career ladder plans faded away or were modified to the point that they met little of the initial policy intent (Smylie, 1997). There are multiple explanations for the discontinuation of career ladder plans, but inadequate resource support may be the strongest influence (Cornett and Gaines, 1994). School districts simply did not have adequate financial resources to substantially differentiate pay based on steps in the career ladder. Additionally, they did not have adequate personnel to utilize master teachers to supervise or mentor more novice teachers during the school day or engage in other key school improvement initiatives. Few districts have sufficient personnel budgets to utilize teachers for non-teaching responsibilities during the school day because teachers are needed for direct instruction time with students.

Addressing the Teacher Shortage

Alternative routes to teaching, especially high need content disciplines and/or high need locales, have been employed in most states for a decade or more. Although the alternative routes to teaching may vary dramatically from one state to the next, or even within a given state, they have been particularly well-received when addressing teacher shortages in such high need areas as math, science, special education, or school districts that have difficulty attracting teachers due to a remote location or a difficult inner-city context. There have been both state and federal financial incentives for non-educators with appropriate content degree preparation to enter the teaching profession, although the numbers still tend to be less than needed or desired to address teacher shortages in some areas. Reports of the long-term retention and effectiveness of these teachers have been mixed (Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2005; Feistritzer & Haar, 2010).

Additionally, many states have implemented financial incentives for students to enter the teaching profession. These incentives often include grants or loans with limited pay-back requirements if one stays in the state’s teaching profession for a requisite number of years. The federal government also has sponsored Transition to Teaching and Troops to Teaching grants that subsidize teacher candidates’ educator preparation expenses such as university tuition. Again, reports of the effectiveness of these incentive programs may vary, often depending on the strength or valuing of the available incentives (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Henry, Bastian, & Smith, 2012; Steele, Murnane, & Willett, 2010).

Standardization and Accountability

The teaching profession has also been affected by increased standardization and accountability regulations, largely from state agencies, but occasionally from state or national professional organizations. Standardization initiatives are often focused on curricular requirements, required textbooks or teaching materials, and required student assessments. Sometimes, even specific teaching methods are prescribed or scripted for teachers. The most recent curricular standardization initiative, the Common Core (http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards), was promoted by the National Governors’ Association for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (2010).

Similarly, teaching now involves considerably more prescribed student assessment and accountability reporting — with a particular focus on evidence of student learning growth from one year to the next. These accountability requirements have led to consid-
erably more classroom time devoted to student testing (and practice testing), as well as analysis and reporting of assessment data, by classroom, grade level, subject area, school, district, and state. These standardization and accountability requirements have changed the nature of teaching sufficiently that today’s teachers experience markedly different working conditions than teachers of 30 years ago.

Although A Nation at Risk tended to focus on adverse teacher working conditions such as student behavior or learning problems, teachers today may include additional issues on their list of adverse working conditions. State-mandated curricular requirements with highly standardized content and materials, and sometimes even highly prescriptive teaching methods or teaching scripts, are often identified as unnecessary constraints on the individual creativity and expertise of competent classroom teachers. Further, accountability regulations pertaining to student learning have dramatically increased educator time devoted to assessing, analyzing, and reporting student learning outcomes. These accountability and ‘teacher proofing’ initiatives are often a source of complaint for teachers – especially those who are more experienced and highly competent. One only needs to read the social media entries of teachers to hear their expressions of frustration that the joy and creativity of the teaching enterprise is being killed in the name of standardization and accountability.

Collectively, these and other education reform trends have both favorable and adverse implications for the teaching profession. In some cases, it may not be the education reform concepts themselves that are problematic, but the way or extent to which the specific initiatives are implemented. Unraveling the nuances of these various reform influences may reveal the more beneficial policies and practices that should be sustained versus the more adverse policies and practices that may have little ‘value added’ to the education profession in terms of the profession’s desirability, holding power, status, quality of working conditions, or effectiveness.

**Implications for Education Research and Policy**

Let me now suggest some research and policy considerations that could elucidate some of these issues and generally address the question of how the past 30 years of reform may have benefited or hurt the education profession. First, in 1975, Dan Lortie’s book, *Schoolteacher*, was published and received widespread acclaim and utilization over the next decade or more. His sociological study documents the work and work lives of classroom teachers. A replication of this in-depth sociological study would provide excellent comparative evidence of how teachers’ work and work lives have changed over the past 30 years – perhaps, in part, due to specific educational reform initiatives of the past few decades. Similarly, Wolcott’s ethnographic study, *Man in the Principal’s Office* (1973), could provide the foundation for a comparative study of school principals’ work and work lives. Similar studies comparing characteristics of teachers 30 years ago to characteristics of today’s teachers would perhaps suggest how these reforms are influencing who goes into the education profession. Or, studies comparing teachers’ attitudes about their work years ago compared to today could address the influence of some of these reforms.

A second line of inquiry with implications for practice might address public education communication and credibility challenges in the Information Age. For example, what types of public education accountability evidence are accessed, understood, valued, and respected by the public and policy-makers? How can evidence of educator and school effectiveness be communicated so that it is credible to its audience? How can this same type of evidence be communicated so that the media find it newsworthy? Further, how can we stop the double standard in which public education must provide extensive amounts of hard evidence of its effectiveness whereas alternative education providers can simply use marketing and sales techniques to create and manage impressions of their effectiveness?

A third line of inquiry with corresponding policy implications revolves around education and educator accountability. For example, as accountability requirements have increased and demanded more focus on student learning outcomes, how have the corresponding costs to districts and states increased? Have ‘older’ process accountability requirements been reduced to offset these increased costs? Have differentiated models of accountability been considered or implemented – similar to the concept of differentiated supervision of educators? That is, when a school or district consistently demonstrates high levels of student learning or other favorable organizational outcomes, are the organization’s reporting require-
ments reduced to every two to three years versus annual reporting? How might this differentiated accountability model provide performance incentives while conserving administrative and bureaucratic resources?

A fourth line of inquiry might explore why there has been so little crossover in educational practices from alternative or non-traditional education providers to the public sector – especially when so many of the alternative practices are touted as effective? Is replication of these practices on a large scale in the public sector do-able or successful? Or are these alternative providers destined to be “boutique schools” serving a very small proportion of the population? Similarly, what evidence is there to suggest that market approaches utilized in education sectors are producing the desired or favorable results intended?

Some of these or related questions are being addressed by today’s researchers. However, too often, our knowledge development in education is not as fully realized as it might be if there were tighter coordination between research conducted utilizing qualitative methods or inductive reasoning versus research conducted utilizing quantitative methods or deductive reasoning. As our methodological sophistication has increased, we have become more specialized and often do not fully connect or play off of work done with methods substantially different from our own. Thus, to address most of these suggested lines of inquiry, a combination of inductive and deductive methodological approaches are needed to both posit theoretical explanations for our observations and to test these theories empirically.

**Closing Comments**

I suppose at this point the reader may have discerned that concerns about the education profession are very personal to me due to my long-term commitment to excellence in the education profession. I believe that some of the reforms described above have strengthened teacher expertise and improved the quality of classroom teaching and learning processes. I further believe that teacher expertise is more nearly maintained over the course of one’s career due to many of the licensure and professional development regulations enacted in the past 30 years. I am certainly pleased about reforms that enhance the professional knowledge and expertise of educators. However, in spite of these improvements and the correspondingly enhanced public accountability and reporting, the regulatory influences on public education continue to increase and the adverse characterization of public education in the media persists. My fear is that the degree of regulation, coupled with the persistent negative attention to public education, only serve to drive away the most competent, creative, motivated, and confident critical thinkers in our field. My fears are fueled by: (1) anecdotal stories from experienced, highly respected educators who advise their own children not to go into the education profession; or (2) stories from highly effective and well-regarded educators who state that if they had it to do over again, they would not go into the education profession, given the changes that have occurred. My fear is that the current regulatory, policy, and media environment can only be tolerated on the long-run by more compliant followers who are not highly invested in constructive problem-solving and are willing to leave change initiatives to those outside of the profession. Ironically, the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report’s objectives to strengthen the teaching profession are perhaps being undermined by some of the very reform trends and dynamics that have evolved from that initial report. I certainly hope that my concerns and perceptions are exaggerated, because not only do America’s students deserve the best possible education available as espoused for the past 30 years, but also America’s education professionals deserve the respect, appreciation, and regard of students, parents, and policy-makers for their professional expertise, commitment, and diligence.

**References**


