

How Do We Raise the Quality of Teachers?

Three experts exchange ideas; One is to change the job description

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By Leslie Brody

While many influences contribute to a student's academic achievement— drive, family background—research suggests that the single most important factor inside the school itself for K-12 students is the quality of the teacher.

Concerns about the lackluster performance of U.S. students on international assessments and other measures have spurred urgent calls for improving schools, and much of the focus has been on how to attract the most talented teachers and prepare them for the job.

But differences over the best way to improve the U.S. teaching force have stirred fierce debate among educators, policy makers and advocates. We asked three experts in the field to take part in an email panel discussion on the question: How do you raise the quality of teachers?

The participants were: Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality; José Luis Vilson, a middle-school math teacher in New York City and author of "This Is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class and Education;" and Daniel Weisberg, chief executive of TNTP, formerly known as The New Teacher Project, a New York-based nonprofit that trains educators and promotes stringent teacher evaluations.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Low standards

WSJ: *What is the main obstacle to improving teacher quality in America, and why?*

MS. WALSH: It is far too easy to get into a teacher preparation program and far too easy to graduate from one. Three-quarters of the programs in the U.S. will admit students from the bottom half of college-goers. One-in-four programs set a lower bar to get into teaching than the academic standards set by the National Collegiate Athletic Association for qualifying to play college football.

Coursework is far too easy: A teacher candidate is 50% more likely to graduate with honors than all other graduates on the same campus. States have such low standards on licensing tests that candidates who get more answers wrong than right still get their teaching license. That lack of rigor in preparation for such a demanding profession is just unacceptable.

The public debate in this country on teacher quality has focused primarily on issues like evaluation and tenure—measuring the effectiveness of teachers already in the classroom. Instead of just looking downstream, we need to go up river to the source and focus on the entry point of the profession.

MR. WEISBERG: You're right about the need to look "up the river" to get to the root of teacher-quality issues, and I agree that we need to elevate our entry standards for the profession. But I'd frame the problem even more broadly. Though we need to raise the hurdle aspiring teachers need to overcome to enter the profession, more important, we need to redesign the job so that we have enough talented people who want to overcome a higher hurdle.

There is a huge disconnect between what the teaching profession is and what it needs to be. Think about the kinds of things that make a profession attractive to top college graduates. Competitive pay. Respect. Prestige.

The chance to work alongside other amazing people. Opportunities to advance your career and take on new challenges.

Teaching typically offers almost none of this. If you choose to go into teaching, here's what you're likely signing up for: Training that often has little to do with the actual job. You'll have to wait a decade or more to earn enough money to start a family or buy a house. Your only chance to advance your career is to leave the classroom—to become a school administrator or do something else entirely.

Above all, you'll get the message every day that mediocrity, or even worse, is perfectly OK. Teachers who struggle to help their children learn at all are treated exactly the same as those who lead students to huge gains year after year—they get the same evaluation ratings, the same raises, the same job security, the same recognition (i.e. none at all).

It is as though we've gone out of our way to construct a profession that attracts people in spite of itself, or that we're just hoping the intrinsic rewards that come from working with students (which are very real) will trump everything else.

How Teacher Evaluations Can Fluctuate

Percentages of teachers whose effectiveness rankings change, from class to class, year to year and according to statistical model used

	By 1 or More Deciles	By 2 or More Deciles	By 3 or More Deciles
Across models	56-80%	12-33%	0-14%
Across courses	85-100%	54-92%	39-54%
Across years	74-93%	45-63%	19-41%

Source: Newton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, Thomas; Education Policy Analysis Archives, 2010

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MS. WALSH: Lately I've just grown weary of us all talking about how bad it is to be a teacher. I am not talking about "teacher bashing" but "profession bashing." We're all guilty of this profession bashing, everyone from education reformers to union leaders—spending a lot of time talking about all the reasons why no one who is sane should consider a career in teaching.

I am worrying a lot lately that our negative portrayal of the job may be doing more to dissuade people from considering it as a career than any of the other factors we have put on the table.

I believe teaching continues to be among the most rewarding professions there is, in spite of the problems we all point out on a regular basis. Each of us could tick off all the reasons why our own jobs can be decidedly un-fun at times. But we don't, because we not only take pride in what we do, but it isn't in our self-interest to do so.

For those of us in the education-reform camp, we advance our agenda by reminding everyone about how broken the system is. For unionists, they too advance their agenda by the same negative framing.

This steady drumbeat in which teachers or teacher candidates are told that they must be martyrs—or suckers—to teach cannot be good for teacher quality.

Helping even one child overcome a learning challenge probably ranks right up there as one of life's most special moments. Multiply that many times and I can think of no job more important, inspiring and rewarding.

MR. VILSON: Much of the debate misses context. The bar is low because no one was coming into the profession, and the bar never moved because, in some ways, our country still treats the profession as a second-rate job. Our country doesn't pay teachers well enough as a competitive profession and doesn't create good working conditions for students to succeed or for teachers to feel professionalized.

Teacher prep in pedagogy is critical in this discussion. It is less about "rigor," but about the ways in which we connect what new teachers are learning in their colleges of education and what's happening at their own school. Teachers often say they're not ready for a particular challenge not because they don't know the material, but because schools are different from building to building, staff to staff, child to child.

This idea of "teacher quality" would be better served if we opened the doors for teachers to have more voice in advancing our profession. Continuous, constructive feedback, strong professional development, and chances to determine one's own path while still in the classroom are just some of the recommendations I'd make.

MS. WALSH: Most teacher-preparation programs today don't teach teacher candidates universal, research-based strategies for managing a classroom, making learning stick or teaching reading, to name a few examples. It is frustrating to witness the degree to which teachers are deprived of this knowledge (and practice!), which would allow them to walk into any classroom and be more effective.

That is not to say that their assignments don't vary or that adjustments must be made in every setting. Of course that must happen. But the notion that the expertise needed is going to vary so much that what makes a teacher highly effective in one assignment isn't going to be relevant to another assignment is what has led U. S. teacher-prep programs to empty their pedagogical training of more meaningful content.

The best evidence of what I am talking about is research on what it takes to be effective with English-language learners. Of all the factors that have been examined, it turns out that teachers who were most likely to be effective with ELL children were teachers who were just plain effective, regardless of population.

WSJ: *From a teacher's viewpoint, what kind of professional development works?*

MR. VILSON: Professional development has to cover a series of effective practices for context. For instance, teachers got so tired of so-called outside experts who had never been in the classroom, they created their own professional, educator-driven learning groups (EdCamp and Science Leadership Academy come to mind here).

Just as students need personalization and differentiation for their learning, so do the adults we serve.

We know chefs can prepare easy dishes, but their courses will largely depend on the restaurant, locale and the restaurant's theme. We know basketball players should know how to shoot and dribble, but their skills will depend on their position on the court and the coach's playbook. Teachers should have a set of researched best practices, but we would do well to help educators learn how to be nimble as well.

Change the job description

WSJ: *Given the funding constraints, how would you attract more high-quality candidates to the field?*

MR. WEISBERG: Here's one place to start: the job description. Right now, teachers are asked to be great at a lot of different things: planning lessons, forging real connections with students, engaging families and designing assessments, just to name a few. They do all this and more with basically no support team, and they have to do all of it from day one.

Most professions don't work this way. For example, I was a lawyer in a past life. That is another multifaceted job, but there is no assumption that every lawyer is expected to be great at every part of it from day one. I wasn't asked to lead a jury trial my first week as a lawyer. I had the opportunity to learn the craft doing discrete tasks like legal research while learning more advanced skills from more accomplished lawyers. The same basic approach occurs in medicine, engineering, accounting, you name it.

Why couldn't we do the same in teaching? Imagine a school where, instead of having to do everything themselves on day one, teachers begin in discrete jobs like data analyst, lesson planner, curator of content, parent engagement specialist, maybe even a homework grader, reporting to a teacher whose job it is to manage a team responsible for ensuring that a group of students succeed academically and otherwise.

In this scenario, the "teacher" role is something you'd work up to over time, based on your experience and success in some of these support roles. This approach would create a real career pathway toward teaching, and would allow teachers to get the prestige, rewards and respect that come with a senior professional role. It would also solve some of the teacher-preparation problems we're talking about, because graduates of those programs wouldn't be expected to be proficient in every part of the job on day one.

MR. VILSON: That might appeal to some. The job of a teacher is essentially to manage these pieces and use their professional judgment to see to it that it is a cohesive experience for the students in front of them.

I think there is ample opportunity for teachers to create their own roles while still having one foot in the classroom. Things like "data analyst," "content curator," (which sounds like a curriculum developer anyway) or "parent-engagement specialist" might pique the interest of many teachers. I just don't think it is all that interesting for teachers to come into schools just to grade papers or just to analyze data for someone.

What it takes to become a good teacher is already embedded in the current job. We do have to pay closer attention to how much we give to teachers and what above the basics we give, too.

For example, if someone told me I could be a management specialist, I wouldn't want any part of it because that is what teachers should be able to do. If someone told me I could help train other teachers for one-third of my time while teaching for two-thirds, that would be an appealing prospect. For hundreds of teachers, that creates a pathway for professionalism that doesn't make someone an administrator.

MS. WALSH: I think that Dan Weisberg's analogy is really interesting and thought-provoking. I do think you can make the case that teaching already consists of a great deal of specialization, that one trains to be an elementary teacher or a special-ed teacher or a high-school history teacher—and that one isn't expected to know how to teach children how to read, for example, if you train to become a high-school physics teacher.

In any case, I do think that teachers need a lot more support than they get currently; the kind of support activities that Dan raises here, as areas in which new teachers coming into the profession might specialize.

One of the reasons great teachers often gravitate to charter schools is that they often find the kind of support in those schools in much the same ways that Dan envisions, not from other teachers on their faculties but from a huge cadre of support staff.

I recently met with the winners of TNTP's Fishman Prize—four great teachers identified by Dan's organization who are given a cash prize in honor of their achievements. As one teacher reported, there were literally 20 nonteaching positions for every 10 teachers.

However, there was a big trade-off: a considerably lower salary. The teacher in question thought it was well worth it, that even though she made much less money, her job was so much less stressful. It was actually doable!

Ms. Brody is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal in New York. She can be reached at leslie.brody@wsj.com.