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# REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

## For better public schools, why not tap the disciplines?

**Commentary** | By Cyrus Veese, Lori Bikson | Education

March 30, 2010 — U.S. colleges and universities continue to be world leaders. Annual surveys of higher education consistently rank a disproportionate number of American institutions in the top 100. Yet U.S. primary and secondary schools do poorly compared to top-performing systems worldwide. What explains the dichotomy?

Many factors no doubt contribute to the excellence of American postsecondary education and the mediocrity of our public K-12 system. Many recent reports [emphasize the need to recruit “high-performing college graduates”](#) for teaching positions. [Nicholas Kristof](#) quotes a [study by McKinsey & Company](#) that 47 percent of K-12 teachers graduate in the bottom third of their college class. The same report notes that talented college graduates avoid teaching not only because of poor compensation but also because of the field’s low prestige and lack of “peer-group appeal.”

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To overcome this “prestige gap,” perhaps we should take a closer look at the categorical separation of K-12 and postsecondary education. Public school teachers are required to take many courses in pedagogy, while the Ph.D. programs that produce college faculty usually offer no coursework at all on teaching methods. Few public school teachers hold advanced degrees in a discipline, while few graduate students in the disciplines plan to teach “below” the college level. State licensing is required for K-12 teachers but not for college faculty. The gap between the preparation and regulation of K-12 and postsecondary instructors is indeed striking.

The training of future college professors is not, however, all sweetness and light. A recent longitudinal study of Ph.D. completion rates by the Council of Graduate Schools found that less than 57 percent of all doctoral candidates had successfully completed their studies after ten years. Attrition rates approach 50 percent in the humanities and social sciences; they are lower but still high in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).

The reasons for not finishing a doctorate vary, but studies confirm that few of those who leave are “washouts.” Studies confirm that grad students leave programs because they lack funding, feel iso-

lated, face family pressure, or simply decide that the world of “publish or perish” is not for them.

In short, our public and private universities spend millions of dollars annually to provide students with deep disciplinary knowledge that, in many cases, is lost to the education system. Why not structure programs that capture this lost talent for our public schools?

This huge cohort of “attriting” grad students is not the only potential source of talented teachers for our public schools. In many disciplines there is a shortage of tenure-track jobs even for those who do complete their doctorates.

Many Ph.D.s and ABDs — those who have completed “all but the dissertation” — work for years as adjuncts, shouldering heavy teaching loads but having no job security, benefits, or pension plan. Given the right incentives — including enhanced prestige — some adjuncts would no doubt swap uncertainty and low pay for the security, salary, and benefits offered by employment in a public school.

The search for highly qualified classroom teachers in our public schools has led to alternative certification programs for former Peace Corps volunteers, veterans of the U.S. armed forces, and mid-career professionals. These different life experiences give teachers distinctive strengths in the classroom. Since the focus of our schools is education, however, why not specifically target a cohort of intensively trained specialists in the disciplines?

Drafting graduate students, ABDs and untenured Ph.D.s into our public schools should be part of a larger set of changes. Talented new teachers could use the research focus of doctoral programs to update curricula and create engaging, inquiry-based projects for students. Like other teachers, the disciplinary recruits should be offered a career path that rewards outstanding performance, verified by student achievement, especially in difficult-to-staff schools. They should be encouraged to improve their schools beyond the classroom they “own.”

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To break down the wall between K-12 and postsecondary education, teachers should have incentives to attend National Endowment for the Humanities and National Science Foundation seminars, conduct research and publish in their fields, and share lessons, projects, experiments and other activities that successfully engage students in the dynamic of discovery.

Doctoral programs would also have to change. Graduate faculty would have to abandon their view of teaching below the university level as “career death.” Graduate departments would need to create programs to channel interested and capable doctoral candidates into K-12 teaching. And those depart-

ments would need to create a path specifically for college graduates who had an interest in deep subject-matter knowledge in a discipline and a primary desire to teach, not engage in research. All those changes would reinforce the public service mission of public and private universities.

There are, of course, many reasons to be circumspect about the possibility of recruiting talented graduate students, ABDs, and Ph.D.s into our public schools. Rhetorical commitment to the promotion of college-level critical thinking skills has not been matched by the adoption of curricula that actually encourage such skills. And attempting to achieve excellence in public education while ignoring gross inequality in such areas as housing, health care and employment puts an impossible burden on our public schools.

Nevertheless, taking steps to close the gaps between K-12 and postsecondary education may help us prepare young people for a future that will require both competence and innovation — and enhance our society’s respect for teachers in the process.

*This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/better-public-schools-why-not-tap-disciplines>*