

Associated Press

Study Says Teacher Training Is Chaotic

By Ben Feller

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Aspiring teachers emerge from college woefully unprepared for their jobs, according to a study that depicts most teacher education programs as deeply flawed.

The damning review comes from Arthur Levine, former president of Teachers College at Columbia University.

His report, released Monday, comes as public schools are under federal orders to have a qualified teacher for every class. It casts doubts on the most basic aspects of how teachers are taught. Teacher quality has a huge influence on whether students pass or fail.

The coursework in teacher education programs is in disarray nationwide, the report says. Unlike other professions such as law and medicine, there is no common length of study or set of required skills.

Then there are a host of other problems: low admissions standards, disengaged college faculty, insufficient classroom practice and poor oversight, according to Levine's study.

"Teacher education right now is the Dodge City of education: unruly and chaotic," said Levine, who now heads the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. "There's a chasm between what goes on in the university and what goes on in the classroom."

In taking on his own field, Levine said he is not out to bash teacher education. Rather, he said he hopes his candid assessment and recommendations will lead to changes.

He found some exemplary programs but said most are poor or mediocre. He called for turning education schools into professional schools, rooted in practical experience.

The response from Levine's peers was mixed. Representatives of the teaching profession embraced many of Levine's themes but took exception to some ideas as misguided or elitist.

The four-year study is based on surveys of deans, faculty, alumni and school principals, along with 28 case studies of various kinds of education schools.

In those surveys, school principals gave teacher education programs low grades. Many teachers who graduated from the programs said they were often unprepared for their jobs.

"The findings are sobering, and we take them seriously," said Sharon Robinson, president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, which represents 800 schools. She said Levine's motives are true and his "tough love" findings have credibility.

But she took issue with some ideas, such as shifting more teacher training to the top doctoral universities, where Levine said the programs are strongest. Bolstering programs at public colleges and universities makes more sense, Robinson said.

"That's what people can afford," added Donna Cooper, Pennsylvania's secretary of planning and policy, who joined other speakers for the report's release in Washington.

Levine said accreditation the process by which schools are judged for quality must be revamped to put more focus on how students perform. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education said it has already been working on such measures.

Yet as long as accreditation is optional for teacher colleges, some weak schools and selective schools will keep opting out, said Arthur Wise, president of the council.

"We might all wish that elite institutions would produce a more significant share of America's teachers," Wise said. That's not likely, he said, because "the sad truth is that teacher education is not an important part of the mission at some elite institutions."

The study is the second in a series known as the Education Schools Project. Last year, Levine reported that principals and superintendents also have inadequate training. The research is paid for by the Annenberg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Wallace Foundation.

The country has more than 1,200 schools, colleges and departments of education, covering a spectrum of nonprofit and for-profit programs, undergraduate and graduate.

Robinson, the leader of the teacher college association, challenged Levine to help turn many of his ideas into action. Levine said he would.

He said his report was meant to be optimistic.

"I've spent most of my career at education schools," he said. "I really believe in them."

On The Net:

The Education Schools Project: <http://www.edschools.org/index.htm>