



Current U.S. Policies on Education and Educator Preparation: Where the Syracuse University School of Education Stands

Implementation of the Common Core State Standards has been a lightning rod for critique across the United States. Syracuse University School of Education staff, faculty, students, and alumni share others' concerns about various aspects of this implementation and related policies. We are especially concerned about those aspects of educational "reform" that marginalize learners.

As a result, even though we are committed to preparing educators who can address new standards, we are compelled to advocate for revision of current educational policies. We applaud Congressional efforts to reconsider the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, especially amendments that favor inclusion of all learners in today's educational opportunities. The sections that follow outline how current educational initiatives interface with our values. We also explain how we address these initiatives in our work. Finally, we recommend alternative policies to better address the educational needs of all students.

Common Core State Standards

Current Federal policy, known as Race to the Top (RTTT), stemmed from worry about U.S. students' global competitiveness. RTTT funds were awarded to states, including New York, to implement more rigorous, aspirational common college and career readiness standards. Much about these new Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics is research-based and commendable, including requirements that students learn to use complex texts and mathematical knowledge to solve authentic problems. At the same time, there are serious omissions, such as attention to the arts, that are central to our well-being and for which we continue to advocate.

Recommendations have proliferated about addressing the standards, only some from credible research-based sources. Few offer support for English language learners or students with disabilities, and some even suggest giving students challenging tasks and letting them struggle. There are also expensive new standards assessments that many parents, educators, students, and researchers feel are unfair: students spend much time preparing for and being evaluated against criteria they have not had time to master, that are given too frequently, and that have not been suitably tested. These implementation issues have generated significant negative backlash to the Common Core State Standards themselves.

We in the School of Education are invested in helping all students navigate the standards. We are committed to preparing graduates who:

- Understand the content knowledge, skills, and big ideas that are required by any standards they may be asked to address as educators.
- Use and advocate for culturally responsive, inclusive pedagogies and assessments—without spending extensive time on narrowly defined test preparation.
- Balance goals for all students to achieve college and career readiness and celebrate individuals' and communities' identities, needs, and resources.

Understand who advocates for standards, who pays for them, who benefits from them, and who does not benefit from them.

Value-added Educator Evaluation

Educational critics argue that teaching and school leadership have been largely under-evaluated. Such evaluations were traditionally based on relatively subjective classroom observations. Ratings could seem inflated when students underperformed compared to peers. Value-added evaluation, instead, gauges educators' effectiveness by considering how much their students' achievement changes from one year to the next.

Advocates see value-added measures as more reliable than using test scores alone because value-added measures account for past performance and context. However, critics note wide variability in value-added outcomes, variability that can stem from environmental factors not in teachers' control, such as poverty, ill health, or lack of resources. Such outside influences on outcomes can reduce educators' willingness to work in some communities.

We prepare our graduates to do well when they are evaluated, even as they demonstrate commitment to working with all students. We prepare them to:

- Collect multiple formative and summative data sources to reflect students' understandings and needs, and to gauge their own teaching effectiveness and need for support.
- Corroborate assessment interpretations with colleagues within and across grades, and generate hypotheses about needed instruction that are refined with ongoing data collection and analyses.
- Advocate for multi-dimensional teacher evaluation that combines attention to student outcomes, self-assessment, and peer and supervisor observations with clear criteria for instructional quality.
- Work effectively in many educational contexts, including schools and communities with limited resources.

Competition from Alternative Sources of Educator Preparation

University-based educator preparation is experiencing threat from a variety of directions. Some critics blame teacher preparation for U.S. students' lack of global competitiveness. Widely publicized critiques have impacted enrollments in preparation programs across the U.S. Practicing educators who are evaluated by narrow value-added measures and forced to use unreasonable pedagogical practices discourage potential recruits. Incendiary magazine cover stories are especially discouraging to those considering a career in education.

Alternative preparation programs, such as Teach for America or New York City's Teaching Fellows Program, draft high achieving college students into short-term teaching positions in high-needs schools before initiating careers in other, more lucrative areas. Some high-needs schools bypass traditionally prepared teacher candidates with plans for long-term careers in favor of these less expensive hires, which leads to a damaging lack of stability for children in these schools. The U.S. Department of Education funds both traditional educator preparation programs and alternative certification routes.

School of Education faculty members believe that our schools deserve educators who:

- Develop rich disciplinary knowledge with an enthusiasm that invites learners to do the same.
- Possess extensive understanding of research-based teaching methods that enable them to embrace learners' strengths and address their needs in high achieving, inclusive classrooms.
- Participate in clinically rich educator preparation designed to help them become effective teachers and school leaders in a wide range of educational settings.
- Sustain long-term educational careers in service to all learners, including those in high needs schools.

Assessment of Educator Preparation

As we've noted, educators and their preparation programs shoulder much public blame for ostensible U.S. lack of competitiveness. In response, political leaders proclaim a desire to increase the prestige of the teaching profession by enlisting only the "best and the brightest." This rhetoric marginalizes those who want to teach but may not typically be identified by such a profile. To compound the errors of value-added educator evaluation by tying our program ratings to their results is to dissuade us from sending our graduates to work in the most complex and rewarding school settings.

To ensure educator excellence, reformers argue that educator preparation programs, regardless of where they are housed or how they are accredited, should be rigorously evaluated. New efforts to evaluate educator preparation program involve our students in extensive and expensive content and pedagogical knowledge tests, detailed educator performance assessments, and value-added measures of our graduates' student outcomes. Unfortunately, much about these assessments rewards academic skills and not the ability to work effectively with youth and colleagues.

School of Education educator preparation faculty members are committed to recruiting a diverse array of educators to our programs and preparing them to be effective practitioners. As such, we:

- Collaborate with an array of P-12 partners to train and evaluate our candidates, as well as track their successes after graduation.
- Graduate educators who are skilled at supporting the learning of so-called marginalized populations, including special education, literacy, and English language learners.
- Employ multiple, challenging accountability mechanisms to foster program improvement and ensure our candidates' professional readiness, including mechanisms specified by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).
- Continue to research new methods of teaching, educator preparation, and assessments that evaluate learners, teachers, and our own work.

Recommendations for Alternative Policies

Our supporters can help us by advocating for or sponsoring the research and development that will be needed to improve the standards and their implementation. You can also encourage colleagues, students, and state and U.S. legislators to:

Correct those who critique teaching effectiveness. Describe Common Core implementation issues, including teaching recommendations and too frequent assessment that is not consistently research-based and inclusive. Argue, instead, for less assessment and more support of educators who co-plan assessment-based instruction that benefits all students.

Explain that instructional time spent on too frequent testing and test preparation can be better spent in rich study of the disciplines, led by knowledgeable practitioners who weave formative assessment into instruction and collaborate to ensure that all students' needs are being met.

Explain how value-added educator evaluation that puts too much weight on student test scores may be influenced by environmental factors that are not easily impacted by instruction. More effective educator evaluation is multidimensional and includes self-, peer-, and supervisor observations using clear criteria, as well as multiple indicators of student outcomes.

Discuss how alternative educator preparation programs are driven by misguided notions of who ought to teach and provide only superficial guidance about teaching compared to rich, clinically-rich study, like that which is available at Syracuse University.

Encourage potential educators to apply to one of our educator preparation programs. We will teach them to address the Common Core and any other standards they encounter in their careers, and in inclusive ways. We will also help them to become advocates for inclusion, as well as help them become lifelong learners who can face evolving demands and become the next generation of educational leaders.

These are interesting times for educator preparation. After decades of neglect, many different entities are paying attention to our work. We hope you will join us in educating others about what it takes to be an excellent educator, about needed changes to current initiatives, and about how our educator preparation programs prepare excellent educators on a daily basis. We thank you for your efforts on our behalf.