

# The Profession Responds

I read with real interest Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's article "Elevating the Teaching Profession," in the Winter 2009-2010 issue of *American Educator*, hoping to see support for teachers overwhelmed by today's politically driven testing mania, and by state and local administrative efforts to strip experienced teachers of their well-earned salaries and tenure, all in the name of test-determined "student progress." It came as no surprise to me that Secretary Duncan referred to his past position as "CEO of the Chicago Public Schools," since his views on teacher evaluation parallel what most administrators offer as the main solution to improving student progress: fix the teachers. And fix them by threatening their tenure, salaries, and even certification yearly, depending on how well they can impress state and local administrative evaluators and off-site testers. I wonder how long legislators would retain their jobs and salaries if they were evaluated yearly on how well people obeyed the laws they passed. This is how teachers feel about being held accountable for student performance on tests originated by people who are not in the classroom.

I work in the only middle school in a county with one of the highest unemployment rates in my state, Indiana. For 19 years, I have struggled to overcome barriers to learning like generational poverty, gang influence, drugs, and lack of parental interest or support. If the students in my eighth-grade English class learn to read more fluently, speak more effectively, and write more coherently, then I feel they have been successful and have shown "progress." This also, I feel, makes me an effective teacher. But the mania for "data-driven education" that afflicts the nation from Secretary Duncan down to local administrations has turned my classroom and my own instruction largely into mere test-prep and proctoring, with "remediation" on standards not yet "mastered" according to the tests.

I could use many different, more versatile assessments to determine student progress and adjust instruction individually

Secretary Duncan attempts to allay the fears of teachers about his proposed changes to evaluating them, even though he scoffs at the fact that "more than 95 percent of teachers are rated as good or superior, even in schools that are chronically underperforming."

Most teachers enter the classroom believing that they can improve the minds of their students, and many succeed. However, the Secretary states categorically "that the single biggest influence on student growth is the quality of the teacher," a position he supports with overstated anecdotes, like recalling the teacher who taught you to "write like a novelist." Though true at times, such outcomes are not representative. More importantly, such exaggeration is a denial of decades of educational research

that has documented that the socioeconomic and educational level of a student's parents has been the stronger force on and more reliable predictor of student achievement.

In a large and diverse country like ours, with innumerable institutional, cultural, and social variables, how can a fair evaluation be imposed from a federal office? Considering the farcical evaluation schemes and underfunding of the current federal school improvement plan, "No Child Left Behind," many teachers have serious reservations about trusting the Department of Education again.

**-JOE WOJTYS**  
Lowrey Middle School  
Dearborn, Mich.

I completely agree with Secretary Duncan that "it's time, once and for all,

and meaningfully, since I am the classroom teacher. But my students "progress" will not be measured by what I can determine, but by what the tests determine. The calls to tie test success to teacher evaluation are becoming more strident. As we see from Secretary Duncan's article, he favors linking salary, tenure, and even certification to administrative evaluation, including student "progress" as one of the principal benchmarks. Unless teachers are treated with respect and trusted to evaluate student progress, then I don't see our profession being "elevated" at all. I see us being reduced to drudges who answer only to the siren call of high test scores, not the needs of our students.

I approve of standards-based instruction because it gives teachers a clear focus for planning, teaching, assessments, and reteaching. But if politicians and administrators really want students to become prepared for tomorrow's workforce, which will require flexibility, innovation, creativity, and collaborative problem solving, then they need to trust the classroom teacher and give him or her support through professional development, adequate materials, and instructional freedom.

**-DAVID W. BURKS**  
Connersville Middle School  
Connersville, Ind.

to make teaching the revered profession it should be." However, I disagree with several of his premises.

For example, I have a problem with the general thinking that because teacher preparation is often "inadequate" and professional development is often "inadequate," teachers cannot adequately do their jobs. Most teachers put in huge amounts of time outside of school to prepare lessons, grade papers, and help their schools improve. We elevate *ourselves* through our sincerity and work ethic.

My teacher preparation and professional development experiences have been more than sufficient, and often outstanding. I get out of it what I put into it. I work long, hard hours every day to bring rich content and scaffolded skill



development to my students. I serve on the school improvement team and numerous other committees. And I continue to improve my craft from year to year while teaching and learning environments, and schools themselves, continue to decline.

So, what is the problem? In my 9th- through 12th-grade classes, I'm given students who are three to five years below grade level. They were promoted to high school based on their age, not their knowledge and skills.

I suggest we get back to basics: Let's follow a national core curriculum in science, arts, world languages/cultures, mathematics, reading, and writing, with rich content. Let's read the research on cognitive development. Let's eliminate the K-12 structure based on age, and create levels of mastery in which, to pass from one level to the next, a student must demonstrate proficiency (through a rigorous verbal and written examination by a panel of teachers and parents, including the child's own parent) with 90 percent of the knowledge and skills in his or her current level.

If you want to "revere" the teaching profession, listen to what I have to say about how I am teaching and reaching many of my students, and also what I have to say about the students I'm not reaching. You can elevate us by revering us for what we do in the classroom every day. If you want results, change the model. Teachers are not the problem. Teachers are dedicated to all students being successful. We are ready to meet the challenges we are faced with. Why don't we focus on building effective schools, creating a national core curriculum, and developing mastery-based criteria for grade-level promotion instead of trying to fix the teachers? We teachers will be able to do a much better job if we are provided with the tools and conditions to succeed.

—MICHAEL L. WERTH  
Textron/Chamber of Commerce Academy  
Providence, R.I.

Arne Duncan tells us that exemplary teachers, by his definition, "shell out of their own pocket to pay for supplies." This is not a revelation to anyone who knows a teacher. To say that it is part and parcel of being an exemplary teacher, without any critique that this happens in the richest

country in the world, is a travesty.

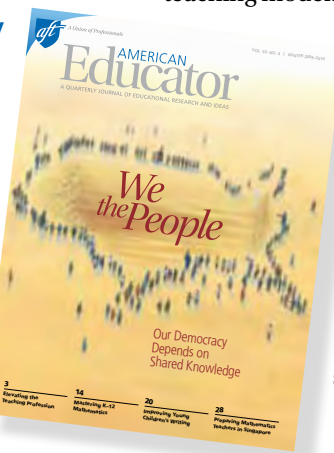
Duncan goes on to say that the way to uplift the profession is through changing compensation and basing it on merit. I suppose this is how the exemplary teachers who shell out their own money will finally be reimbursed. Duncan says that public education is stuck in a factory model. That may be true. But his remedy of corporate competition promises to set back the struggle for public education in this country. We in the American Federation of Teachers should not buy into it. This is not my idea of what it means to be a union teacher.

—GARRET VIRCHICK  
Coeditor of *Boston Union Teacher*

## Education for Democracy

Thank you for featuring E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s views in "Creating a Curriculum for the American People," in the Winter 2009–2010 issue of *American Educator*.

Education today is so much on the side of the progressive anti-curriculum movement that I did not expect your journal to dare mention Hirsch's opinions. When Hirsch described how his course on cultural literacy was opposed in his own university, he got off easy. There are cases where people lost jobs or were forced to take sensitivity classes just because their views were deemed anti-progressive.



—LOI AN LE  
P.S. 179  
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Perhaps E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s Core Knowledge curriculum project offers some hope that the singular focus on higher-order thinking over basic knowledge in elementary curricula has run its course—but I doubt it. There's too much momentum and too many educational policymakers behind the high-minded notion that we can teach kids to run before they can walk. The pie-in-the-sky emphasis on thinking skills rather than core knowledge does the most harm to our neediest kids whose future success lives or dies with what we give them in elementary school.

—MATTHEW FRISCH  
P.S. 163  
Queens, N.Y.

## More on Math?

I found Hung-Hsi Wu's article on teaching elementary mathematics fascinating ("What's Sophisticated about Elementary Mathematics?" in the Fall 2009 issue), and I agree with his proposal to bring specialized teachers to grammar school. I would appreciate a discussion of how this might be developed further. Perhaps it's time to consider a more sophisticated structure, where children have a "homeroom" teacher and peers, but specialized instruction throughout the day.

In the 1970s, I attended a grammar school that experimented with alternative teaching models. We had team teachers

for the lower grades, and flexible walls that allowed students to move from room to room, and to join with other classes. It was a wonderful educational experience, and I was sorry when I was moved to another district with a standard teaching structure.

—DINA CIRAULO  
City College of San Francisco

While I agree that our teachers need to become more skilled mathematicians themselves before they can do a proper job of educating young minds on the subject, I think you should address something a bit more pressing: we are teaching far too many topics each year. The notion of "coverage" ensures that understanding is compromised and real learning does not take place. We cover almost three times as many topics as schools in Japan.

—KRISTEN DiRE-DEHLER  
Washington Street School  
Franklin Square, N.Y.

## Editors' reply:

We agree and are pleased to direct you to two articles by William H. Schmidt that address this problem: "What's Missing from Math Standards? Focus, Rigor, and Coherence" in the Spring 2008 issue, and "A Coherent Curriculum: The Case of Mathematics" in the Summer 2002 issue. Both are available at [www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm](http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/issues.cfm).