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“Who Should Teach Our Children?” by Gary Gutting

As at most colleges, our semester at Notre Dame ends with student evaluations of their teachers. Each time I wonder what the students — and their parents — make of this exercise. “Wait,” I imagine them saying, “we’ve just paid you tens of thousands of dollars in tuition to take courses at your school, and now you’re asking us to tell you if the teachers you hired are any good? If you didn’t already know that they’re first class, you had no right taking our money.”

Attracting an elite professional class of K-12 teachers requires more than just higher salaries.

We don’t hear this kind of response because, in fact, the large majority of teachers at Notre Dame do a good job. We don’t depend on our students to judge our basic competence as teachers, although they often suggest helpful adjustments in our pedagogy (and can call attention to cases of clear incompetence or irresponsibility when they occur). Over all, schools like Notre Dame hire people that they are confident will be competent teachers. And, although there are criticisms and room for improvement, students, parents, graduate/professional schools and employers are, over all, well satisfied with results.

Who are these successful teachers? Ph.D.’s from first-class programs, of course, but that’s because college teaching and research require a high level of specialist knowledge. Beyond this knowledge, college teachers do a good job because of qualities that they already have when they complete their undergraduate education: a high level of intelligence, enthusiasm for ideas and an ability to communicate. In this regard, they are like those who go into other knowledge-based professions like law, medicine, engineering and architecture. With faculties of the “best and the brightest” from the pool of undergraduates, colleges can be confident of good quality teaching. Moreover, as in other knowledge-based professions, college faculties can be trusted to do their jobs well with minimal external supervision, assessment and in-service training. The professional community itself is, on the whole, able to ensure a high level of competence among its members.

These reflections lead me to a simple proposal. Adopt the same model for grade school and high school teaching that works for colleges. Currently, few of the best students from the best colleges are grade school or high school teachers. (The most encouraging data merely suggest that high school teachers may be a bit above average, while grade school teachers are considerably below average). This is not because the best students have no interest in teaching.

Top doctoral programs have far more applicants than they can accept, and many excellent students don’t apply, either because they do not have a high enough level of specialized skills or because they do not want to risk the terrible job market for college teachers. Such students would form a natural pool for non-college teaching if the pay and working conditions were anywhere near the level of the college average. There are also many excellent students with no interest in the advanced research that is the focus of doctoral programs who would prefer non-college teaching to less intellectually engaging and less socially useful work in, say, management or sales.
So why not make use of all this talent to develop an elite class of professionals — like those who teach in our colleges — and give them primary responsibility for K-12 education? One objection is that teaching children and teenagers requires a set of social/emotional abilities — to empathize, to nurture, to discipline — that have little connection with the intellectual qualities of the “best” college students. But there is no reason to think that people who are smart, articulate and enthusiastic about ideas are in general less likely to have these non-intellectual abilities. The idea is to choose those who have both high intellectual ability and the qualities needed to work successfully with children at a given grade level. Moreover, it’s important that teachers be — as they now often are not — credible authority figures, a status readily supported by the justified self-confidence and prestige of an elite professional.

It’s sometimes urged that a high level of intellectual ability is not needed to understand high-school, not to say grade-school, subjects. This is true, but with our current low standards it is not unheard of to find teachers who lack even this basic understanding. Moreover, it requires considerable intelligence to respond adequately to the questions of bright students. Most important, the greatest intellectual challenge of teaching at any level is to find ways of presenting the content effectively. Our current system seems often to assume that K-12 teachers will need the guidance of “experts” to tell them how to do this. There’s considerable doubt as to the existence of the alleged expertise. For decades educational theory has produced a series of failed panaceas (new math, whole-language reading, writing across the curriculum, discovery-based learning, group projects, etc.). But, in any case, more intelligent teachers will be both more likely to develop on their own better methods of teaching and better able to understand and apply any wisdom that may come to them from above.

Attracting an elite professional class of K-12 teachers requires more than just higher salaries. We also have to eliminate the oversize classes, lack of discipline and inane bureaucracy that can take the joy out of teaching and will drive away the best college graduates. Can we afford all this? The first response is that we need to overcome our self-destructive aversion to raising taxes to pay for what we desperately need. But in the long run, the model of a faculty of elite professionals to whom we can trust the education of our youth may well go a good way toward paying for itself. We will no longer need the current elaborate — and demoralizing — processes of external evaluation and the continual retraining of teachers in accord with outside experts’ latest ideas. Nor will we need the extensive and expensive network of non-teaching bureaucrats that oversee this approach.

In every other area of intellectual endeavor, we have succeeded by creating a professional class drawn from those who have excelled as college undergraduates. We need to do the same for primary and secondary education.

**Possible Reflection Topics:**

1. What is the author’s main argument in this article? What is his support and details? Evaluate the effectiveness of the argument. Does Gutting make a good case?
2. Do you agree with Gutting’s argument? Should we make teaching an attractive profession for the best and brightest in our nation? Why or why not?

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