

How America's Teachers Colleges Make Teachers And Their Students Dumber

By: [Daniel Coupland](#) November 14, 2023

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More than three years after [Covid-19](#) began, explanations abound for ongoing “learning loss” in schools. But these discussions often miss one of the most obvious explanations: outdated and ineffective instruction.

It's been repeatedly [shown](#) that teacher quality is the primary thing affecting student achievement. Shouldn't teacher quality be our primary concern? Given how far behind we've fallen in teacher quality, you would think so.

If you aren't convinced that teacher quality has gone down, I would ask you to “briefly state the result and effect of the battle of Waterloo.” If you're anything like me, you could say *something*, right? It just wouldn't be amazing. What is amazing, though, is that the question above was taken from Michigan's public grammar schoolteacher-licensing [exam](#) in history from 1900. In other words, a competent high school graduate in 1900 was expected to know the answer and to teach the answer to eighth graders. In other words, teachers back in the day knew their stuff.

Teaching Without Studying

By 1997, the Department of Education was forced to admit that a staggering 59 percent of social studies teachers were teaching subjects they hadn't even studied. Not surprisingly, that year 57 percent of high school seniors scored “below basic” in U.S. history, according to [Diane Ravitch's NAEP report](#). It's like the blind leading the blind.

Fast forward to 2006: 62 percent of teachers [agreed](#) that their training didn't prepare them well for their jobs. Teacher training programs have not only been a [waste](#), but they may actually make teachers [less competent](#) at their jobs. That's why no matter how much money you throw at them, modern teacher certification programs still do not improve teacher quality and student achievement.

So if teacher quality is so important, then why isn't it at the forefront of every conversation about learning loss? Because, unlike calls to abolish the Department of Education, improving teacher quality is remarkably practical — but not easy.

Education Reform Begins with Teachers

No law, executive edict, funding package, or curriculum restriction will fix the teacher quality problem. In any case, you would still have teachers in the classroom who can't do what you want them to do: competently teach their students. Telling a history teacher educated on Howard Zinn or Paulo Freire to teach a competent class on the U.S. Constitution from the framers' point of view would be

like telling a chef he can cook anything on the menu but only giving him the ingredients for pasta. You'll get *something*, sure. It'll probably be pasta.

Improving teacher quality in America's schools will take much time and hard work. You would have to start from the ground up, training new teachers from scratch based on partially lost knowledge. You would have to raise college admission standards and require four years of academic work in the teacher's core subject. Studies [show](#) that subject-matter knowledge is the best predictor of a student's achievement. Educationally high-achieving countries like Finland have already taken such steps in that direction.

Education degrees and teacher licensing, by the way, should be done away with. They are [expensive and ineffective](#). Undergraduate education licensing can be used to keep some people in the profession and other people out. It may also discourage the right people from going into teaching in the first place. In the end, teacher certification requirements may ultimately contribute to intellectual mediocrity in America.

Teachers Must Keep Learning

In the meantime, school administrators should focus on providing teachers with meaningful feedback, gathered from fellow administrators, peers, and students, to help them improve professionally. Schools should encourage professional development in light of the feedback received and shore up weaknesses in their teachers' knowledge. Schools should reward exceptional teachers with mentorship roles that allow them to continue teaching. All easier said than done, of course.

Strengthen the curriculum and strengthen the quality of the academic teaching force. The formula is simple, but the work is challenging. I'm proud to be the head of an [institution](#) leading the charge in that direction. We happily do our work because we know that if we fail, America's students soon may not have any learning at all to lose.

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