

6-21-1985

## Teaching--From Occupation to Profession: A Response

Robert S. Peterkin

*Cambridge Public Schools*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Education Policy Commons](#), [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Peterkin, Robert S. (1985) "Teaching--From Occupation to Profession: A Response," *New England Journal of Public Policy*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol1/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@umb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@umb.edu).

# Teaching—From Occupation to Profession:

## A Response

Robert S. Peterkin

---

76

*Educational reform must go beyond a restructuring of the teaching occupation. A realistic approach would include strengthening the principalship, reestablishing the primacy of education as the focus of public schools, improving the physical plant, increasing parental participation in the decision-making process, and aligning schools with the external communities—especially the business and university communities.*

---

**T**HE QUALITY OF THE TEACHING FORCE is a crucial element in the successful reform of public education: well-trained, competent teachers are critical to the success of America's schoolchildren. Yet the enhancement of professional standards for teachers is only one piece of the puzzle of educational reform.

To examine the issues of teacher preparation and working conditions is to recognize that the *classroom* is the essential unit for effective education. While much of the literature on the effectiveness of schools concentrates on the school—which includes but is not limited to the school environment, the curriculum, the entirety of social programs, the administration, and the physical plant—as the unit of greatest potential for educational change, practitioners and knowledgeable researchers are increasingly examining the quality of the educational interaction in the classroom as the primary force in school improvement.

To illustrate the complexity of the issues confronting American educators in their attempts at reform, it would be helpful to describe a typical urban school day. Students arrive one-half hour to forty-five minutes before the school day begins. Some come early to partake of the breakfast provided by the school system; others come just to hang around because their parents, or increasingly the one parent they live with, has already gone off to work.

No sooner has the school day started than it is interrupted by announcements, and, probably, by the need to collect information for a federal or state agency. On the elementary level, students come and go—to Title I, Bilingual, or Special Needs services, or to participate in sessions with specialists (most school districts cannot afford to hire specialists in art, music, and physical education for each elementary school, so the specialists travel from school to school).

*Robert Peterkin is superintendent of public schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

At the secondary level, students and teachers move every forty-five or fifty minutes all morning. Sometime near the middle of the day, students at both elementary and secondary levels have lunch. Programs that deal with child abuse, adolescent pregnancy, joblessness and other problems are standard fare for the remainder of the afternoon, in addition to continued academic classes. After-school programs prosper for child development activities and child care. Late in the afternoon, buses pick up schoolchildren, thereby bringing to a close another busy school day. I am sure that classroom teachers could add to this overwhelming array.

Schools, particularly those in urban areas, have become the largest multipurpose agencies in the community. Until we confront that reality, school reform has little or no chance of taking hold. I agree with Dr. Gifford that we must have better teachers for our children, but we must also beware of trying to legislate competence at the expense of creativity and individual initiative. Currently, the bulk of educational reform movements are sponsored by the legislative bodies of the states. Mistrusting school professionals and local school boards, state legislators have taken it upon themselves to determine the quality and quantity of education in the United States. While their intentions may be laudable, they seldom consider the totality of the school environment in their efforts to redress the problems of the schools.

If we are to make substantial progress on the issue of school reform, we must go beyond a restructuring of the teaching occupation. A realistic approach would include the following:

*Strengthening the principalship.* The preparation of school administrators, especially principals and assistant principals, is as deficient as that of the teachers. Principals must be prepared explicitly to work in collegial fashion with teachers who have "new" teaching styles. The literature on school effectiveness stresses the importance of the principal as the educational leader of his or her building, yet few building administrators have had the advantage of a preparatory program which is very relevant to the needs of today's schools.

*Reestablishing the primacy of education as the focus of the public schools.* School district administrators and local school boards must insist on the academic process as the primary focus of schools. School boards should initiate discussion within the community to develop a common definition of the purpose and scope of education in that particular community. Of course, schools will continue to serve other functions, but we must ensure that educators be allowed to pursue their craft. Social and economic services will continue to be offered by the schools, but the emphasis on education must come first.

*Changing the environment of the schools.* Both the physical and educational climate of the schools must be examined and modified. The conditions which most students and teachers endure in the schools are simply not conducive to the educational process. The physical plant in most urban areas is in poor condition and certainly would not indicate the value which society supposedly places on public education. With respect to the educational process within the physical plant, I believe that TheodoreSizer's accurate portrayal in his recent study on high schools, *Horace's Compromise*, should awaken us to the crisis that con-



fronts us. The structure of the school day, despite its bureaucratic trappings, is seemingly haphazard and chaotic. Education is delivered piecemeal, subject more to time constraints than reason; all continuity of instruction is sacrificed to the needs of the bureaucracy and the delivery system.

*Increasing parental participation.* The parents of our schoolchildren must become more involved in the schools; they must participate in evolving a definition of the purposes of schools, in selecting school staff, and in delivering educational services. Without this level of support and participation, schools will be forced to define themselves solely on their own terms and will come increasingly into conflict with expressed (or unexpressed) parental desires.

78

*Aligning the schools with the external communities.* University-business partnerships are the reality of the present and the wave of the future. The business and university communities have been helpful, in numbers of cities and suburbs, in strengthening the individual skills of administrators and in assisting schools in the creation of programs to address the specific needs of students. In addition, positive relationships and rapport with these communities could aid in creating an advocacy for public schools which is sorely lacking at this time.

In suggesting a course of action for the restructuring of the teaching profession, Dr. Gifford has pointed to a crucial path in educational reform. By thoughtfully considering reform of the teaching profession within the context of broader educational reform and all the complex issues of the schools, we may be able to restore confidence in urban public schools and, more important, may restore the value of public education to the schoolchildren of America.