

Teacher Licensing -- A Protection Racket

By [Joel Turtel](#) Contrary to popular notions, teacher licensing in public schools does not insure teacher quality. A license also does not even insure that a public-school teacher knows much about the subject she teaches. In fact, in our upside-down public-school system, licensing often leads to ill-trained and mediocre teachers instructing our children. As we will see, it turns out that teacher licensing is a protection racket. The notion that only state-approved, licensed teachers can guarantee children a good education is proven wrong by history and common sense. In ancient Athens, the birthplace of logic, science, philosophy, and Western civilization, city authorities did not require teachers to be licensed. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle did not have to get a teaching license from Athenian bureaucrats to open up their Academies. A teacher's success came only from his competence, reputation, and popularity. Students and their parents paid a teacher only if they thought he was worth the money. Competition and an education free market produced great teachers in ancient Greece. Parents in America gave their children a superior education at home or in small grammar or religious schools for over two hundred years before we had public schools or licensed teachers in this country. School authorities' claim that teachers have to be licensed for our children to get a quality education, is therefore false. Today, in millions of companies across America, bosses or their managers teach new employees job skills, from the simplest to the most complex. Private schools and trade schools teach millions of students valuable, practical skills. Thousands of college professors with masters or doctorate degrees in the subject they teach, instruct hundreds of thousands of college students in subjects ranging from philosophy to electrical engineering. Over a million home-schooling parents teach their children reading, writing, and math with learn-to-read or learn-math books, computer-learning software, and other teaching materials. All these teachers are not licensed yet they often give children a far better education than licensed public-school teachers. Licensing laws imply that only public-school education "experts" can judge a teacher's competence. These alleged "experts" are usually graduates of teacher colleges and university education departments. Unfortunately, so-called teacher education is often an academic joke or waste of time, especially to student-teachers who have to endure years of this "teacher-training" torture. Steve Wulf, writing in Time magazine, revealed the opinion that many student-teachers had about their so-called teacher training: "Six hundred experienced teachers surveyed in 1995 were brutal about the education they had received, describing it as "mind-numbing," the "shabbiest psycho-babble," and "an abject waste of time." They complained that fragmented, superficial course work had little relevance to classroom realities. And judging by the weak skills of student teachers entering their schools, they observed, the preparation was still woefully inadequate." Many teacher colleges don't teach crucial reading phonics or math instruction skills, nor do they teach science or history. Many "licensed" reading, math, history, or science teachers have not taken courses in or majored in these subjects in college. One survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that more than three-quarters of teacher-college graduates preparing to be elementary-school teachers had no academic major except education. In many teacher colleges, student-teachers don't learn specific knowledge in their subject field or competent teaching techniques to teach our kids reading, math, and science. Instead they learn the history and philosophy of education and other mostly useless nonsense. Also, many university education departments waste student-teachers' time on socialist, politically-correct courses about gender and minority oppression, multiculturalism studies, and other courses that would fit right in to a Marxist curriculum in Cuba. Licensing also implies that parents can't and shouldn't judge a teacher's competence. Yet millions of parents in all fifty states send their children to private kindergartens, grammar schools, and colleges. These allegedly ignorant parents have no problem judging the competence of teachers in private schools, and withdrawing their children if the schools don't live up to the parents' expectations. We judge the competence of our car mechanic, accountant, and our child's private kindergarten teacher all the time, and we do so reasonably well. Is there some mysterious reason we can't judge whether our children are learning to read, write, or do math? Public-school officials who claim that parents are too ignorant to judge their children's education are self-serving. If we allegedly can't trust parents with this job, obviously we have to trust the so-called education "experts," thereby guaranteeing these so-called education experts' cushy jobs. School authorities also claim that we need licensing to guarantee competence, so no charlatans become teachers. Yet some licensed public-schools teachers are barely literate themselves or are ill-trained or have little knowledge of the subject they teach. Fred Bayles, in a "USA Today" column titled, "Those Who Can't Spell or Write, Teach," gave an example: "On April 1, 1998, the Massachusetts Board of Education gave applicants who wanted to teach, a basic reading and writing test. The results of the test were that 59 percent of the applicants failed. If you think these test results made the Board of Education do something constructive, think again. It promptly lowered the test's passing grade from 77 to 66 percent. Under the "new" standard, only 44 percent failed. Note that all the applicants were college graduates." Also, these same education students often score lowest in academic achievement among other high-school graduates. Thomas Sowell, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote about this issue in his book, "Inside American Education." "Despite some attempts to depict such attitudes as mere snobbery, hard data on education student qualifications have consistently shown their mental test scores to be at or near the bottom among all categories of students. This was as true of studies done in the 1920s and 1930s as of studies in the 1980s. Whether measured by Scholastic Aptitude Tests, ACT tests, vocabulary tests, reading comprehension tests or Graduate Record Examinations, students majoring in education have consistently scored below the national average." "At the graduate level, it is very much the same story, with students in numerous other fields outscoring education students on the Graduate Record Examination—by from 91 points composite to 259 points, depending on the field. The pool of graduate students in education supplies not only teachers, counselors, and other administrators, but also professors of education and other leaders and spokesmen for the education establishment." Because of poor teacher training, public schools often hire ill-trained or mediocre teachers, which can cause untold damage to millions of children. Parents

have no recourse to oust these teachers because most teachers get tenure after a few years on the job. In contrast, in a private school, a truly incompetent teacher will not last long. Parents will complain, and the school owner will have to fire this teacher to keep parents happy. Also, for the same reasons, a private-school owner will make every effort to find out if a teacher is competent before he hires that teacher. The school owner's livelihood and the success of his school depend on having competent teachers and happy customers. Compulsory public schools can ignore parents, so they have no such constraints. Most parents naively assume that if a teacher is licensed, he or she is now a trained professional they should trust their children with. Parents therefore lower their guard with "licensed" teachers because they assume that a licensed teacher must be competent. As we have seen, this is often not the case. One solution offered for this problem is "merit" pay for teachers. Merit-pay programs would judge all school employees on competence. Better teachers would get paid more, and bad teachers, principals, or administrators could be fired or demoted. How one judges merit, of course, is a whole separate issue, but just as private-school owners devise methods to judge the merit of their teachers, so too could public schools. Yet, if teacher licensing produced competent teachers, why do school authorities and teachers unions fight so hard against merit pay? The answer seems obvious—the system produces many teachers, principals, and administrators who may not "merit" their pay, and might lose their jobs under merit-pay rules. In effect, public-school employees say to parents: "You have to pay our salary and benefits, but how dare you demand proof that we know how to teach your children? How dare you judge our merit? How dare you demand that you get your money's worth?" Only employees who think the world owes them a living are afraid to be judged by the people who pay them. So licensing does not keep charlatans out of our public schools. Instead, it practically guarantees that we employ charlatans or ill-trained teachers. If licensing doesn't work, what is the alternative? The answer is, no licensing. If anyone could teach without a license, like home-schooling parents or private-school teachers, then millions of new, competent, creative teachers would flood the market. These new, unlicensed teachers would compete with one another and drive the price of education down, much as competition drives down the price of computers. They would, hopefully, also put public schools out of business, since millions of parents and free-market schools would now hire these new competent, low-cost teachers. Without licensing laws, anyone with a special skill or knowledge could simply put an ad in the Yellow Pages or their local newspaper and advertise themselves as a tutor in English, math, biology, history, or computer skills. Retired cooks, engineers, authors, plumbers, musicians, biologists, or businessmen who love teaching could easily open a small school in their homes. If there were no license laws, these talented new teachers would not have to worry about school authorities shutting down their schools because they didn't have a license. How would parents be sure they were not hiring a charlatan if there were no licensing laws? The same way they judge their car mechanic, accountant, and child's kindergarten teacher — by results, reputation, and by being careful consumers. Naturally, parents would make occasional mistakes in judgment because they are human. However, they would quickly become careful consumers because they would now be spending their hard-earned money for teachers. It is amazing how fast we learn to judge the work of others when we have to pay for their services out of our own pockets. Also, if a parent does make mistakes in judging an unlicensed teacher, by watching her child's progress she will soon catch her error. At that point, she can quickly fire the teacher and find a better one. Can a parent do that with her children's public-school teachers? The worst nightmare for public-school authorities is a true free market of teachers who don't need a license to teach. Fierce competition by millions of new, unlicensed, competent, highly-skilled people might destroy public schools, the teacher unions, and teachers' lifetime security in tenured jobs. It might destroy the licensing racket that protects their jobs. That is one unspoken reason why school authorities fiercely defend licensing laws—real competition terrifies them. That is also one of the best reasons to eliminate licensing. The only way to insure good teachers is to let parents decide who will teach their children, not bureaucrats. Millions of parents making individual decisions about who should teach their children will bring forth the best teachers. Fierce competition and an education free market would raise all boats in the teaching profession. Teachers who want to succeed in their profession would have to prove to parent-customers or private-school owners that they have what it takes. They would have to prove by results that they know how to teach and motivate children to read, write, and learn. Once this licensing protection racket was broken, parents would have complete control over who teaches their children. Our kids could then learn from the best teachers out there and get the great education they deserve.

About the Author

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