

Why Clinical Experience and Mentoring Are Replacing Student Teaching on the Best Campuses



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A White Paper

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While the courses vary widely, U.S. teacher preparation programs, even the alternative ones, almost universally require some version of student teaching—a period of a few weeks to several months spent observing and then taking responsibility for leading a classroom under supervision. But traditional student teaching is out of date and insufficient, especially in programs that seek to prepare teachers to serve the nation’s growing numbers of students in high-need school settings.

A number of education schools and alternative providers have begun to replace student teaching with full year internships. Through our work with the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowships, we have charged our partner campuses with overhauling clinical fieldwork, and we’ve seen a range of approaches. We are not alone. Many programs are in the midst of the most fundamental rethinking of clinical fieldwork for teachers in decades.

Especially in teacher education programs that prepare teachers for high-need schools, the sense of urgency to do better is palpable. Many who teach in these programs know that change is sorely needed, particularly in light of rapidly changing student demographics. The pressure from outside—from governments and foundations—is also very real. Moreover, both the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning (2010) and the standards newly adopted by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) also call for improving the duration and the quality of the clinical placement. We need a new vision of clinical practice that helps teacher candidates prepare for an increasingly diverse student population and that leads to better outcomes for *all* students.



Improving is not merely a matter of doing more. It involves rethinking every aspect of our work, particularly the most cherished.

The Evolution of Student Teaching

In 1825, James G. Carter proposed that Massachusetts create a new institution to prepare teachers, a proposal that would lead to the creation of the first state schools specifically dedicated to teacher preparation in the 1830s. Describing the curriculum he sought, Carter wrote, “After the young candidate for an instructor... has acquired sufficient knowledge for directing those exercises and teaching those branches which he wishes to profess, he must then begin his labors under the scrutinizing eyes of one who will note his mistakes of government and faults of instruction and correct them.” By the 1830s Carter’s vision for teacher preparation had spread from Massachusetts to many other states. The normal schools, seminaries, teachers colleges, and university-based teacher preparation programs that followed invariably included the same basic pattern: foundation courses in content knowledge and educational theory and methods, and then, as the capstone, student teaching with a real class under the watchful eye of supervisors and experienced teachers.

Student teaching has been at the heart of teacher preparation for almost 200 years. But in its current form, that may be long enough.

The Problems with Student Teaching Today

Today, the problem is not too much or too little student teaching. Rather, the very idea of student teaching gets in the way of effective 21st-century clinical practice. For example:

- Carter’s 1825 proposal begins, “After the candidate...,” and nearly all student teaching since follows that model: First take courses in methods and pedagogy; then, and only then, enter the classroom and test the ideas. First study theory; then test the theory in practice; then, in too many cases (though no program says so), toss out the theory and focus on the practice. By learning theory before trying teaching, the aspiring teacher misses the opportunity to challenge theory and create an internal dialogue between what’s studied and what’s experienced. The integration of theory and practice that some call *practice-oriented education* is lost.

Students ask far better questions in classes and learn more when they are simultaneously engaged in actual classroom practice. With reference to practice-based education, University of Washington professor, Walker Parker says, “We need to avoid the temptation of background information.” It does not work to pour ideas into teachers—give them lots of background information—and then put them into

schools. Instead, an immersive experience in classrooms and academic work in education schools and arts and sciences seminars should happen concurrently.

- If teacher preparation delays clinical practice until the teacher candidate is “ready,” the very structure takes on a “parachute in” quality. When fieldwork is anything less than the whole academic year, future teachers don’t experience the rhythm of the school year. Teacher candidates who miss the first week of class never see a veteran teacher launch the year, setting critical classroom norms and expectations, and may miss key classroom management lessons. Many a student teacher feels unprepared to “manage” a class, yet too many never see the crucial norm-setting and community-building that a teacher does in the first weeks of the school year because they have not yet been assigned to a classroom.

Practicing teachers who aren’t present when a class is preparing for high-stakes tests don’t see what effective test preparation is like, or how to engage bored or reluctant students. Further, the evidence suggests that student teachers are particularly anxious about working with parents in high-need schools. Many student teaching experiences are too short to allow teacher candidates to witness the strategies that master teachers use to establish and cultivate these important relationships. Finally, novice teachers who graduate from university before the public school year ends—and many university calendars end at least two months before most schools’ do—don’t experience the challenge of keeping a class focused on learning as summer’s arrival distracts students and teachers alike. To forgo any of these experiences is to lose the richness of clinical education.

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- In too many cases, the selection and development of cooperating teachers takes place haphazardly and without adequate delineation of the discrete skills employed in mentoring aspiring teachers well. In some instances, cooperating teachers maintain an outdated sink-or-swim approach, believing that student teachers should be “left on their own” while the cooperating teacher enjoys the benefit of badly needed planning time. At the other extreme, the cooperating teacher provides too little opportunity for student teachers to practice planning and executing lessons, managing classrooms, or juggling the complex decision-making that takes place daily. Instead, they micromanage every aspect of the student teaching experience. The professional development needed to support the work of cooperating teachers is sparse and inadequate, leaving them without the necessary skills to negotiate between the two extremes.

- These issues matter acutely for candidates preparing to teach in high-need schools. Those preparing to teach today are primarily white and middle- or working-class individuals who grew up in largely suburban backgrounds. By 2035 students of color will be the majority of the U.S. student population; by 2050 they will make up 57% of the student population. In fact, in a dozen states, students of color are already the new



majority; Illinois is on the verge of becoming the thirteenth such state, and the first in the Midwest with a majority minority student population.

In spite of myriad teacher education reforms intended to acknowledge these demographic shifts, outcomes for many poor students and students of color remain stagnant. Teacher education programs have attempted to prepare teachers for classrooms with a range of students of different socioeconomic

statuses, races, and ethnicities by adding coursework in diversity—but far more must be done, particularly within clinical settings, from more thoughtful selection of cooperating teachers to improved development opportunities for these teachers to specific assignments undertaken.

We must wonder in what ways these short stays in classrooms intensify the unacknowledged stereotypes and biases that many student teachers bring to their work with students of color and/or those who live in poverty. Short stays in classrooms provide superficial, rather than deep, understandings of students' lives, communities, and cultures. To help ensure that new teachers overcome what might be called the "missionary teaching syndrome," these candidates urgently need time to immerse themselves in school communities and learn students' academic strengths and weaknesses.

Specifically, teacher preparation programs need sufficient clinical time to foster within aspiring teachers the necessary skills, cultural competence, and critical consciousness to facilitate high academic achievement among high-need students. Dropping into high-need classrooms for a few weeks won't provide a sense of the challenges that effective teachers face and overcome daily. Short classroom experiences may, in fact, reinforce or exacerbate preconceived notions about the academic abilities of high-need students. Failure to understand the communities from which students come may keep novice teachers from learning some of the sources of support with which students

come to school, sources on which a talented teacher can effectively build. Anything short of a yearlong residency with deep engagement in students' communities shortchanges aspiring teachers.

- When aspiring teachers spend real time in high-need schools and classrooms with culturally competent mentor teachers, they can learn to acknowledge and build on the knowledge that poor students and students of color bring with them; this experience helps new teachers persevere despite the significant economic, social, and structural barriers that the students face. At minimum what best prepares aspiring teachers is a high-quality, carefully supervised and extended experience with an expert teacher who can assess students' strengths and weaknesses, craft and enact lessons tailored to student needs, and expertly manage student behavior in the service of learning outcomes. What helps most are expert teachers with these skills and abilities who can purposefully model high expectations for student teachers and can demonstrate when to press struggling learners to succeed, and when to support them—both important strategies for new teacher candidates' success, in different circumstances.
- All of these concerns about the clinical experience raise another concern about the shape of the teaching profession itself. Teachers often complain that the job description of a first-year novice teacher and a twenty-year veteran is the same. In current standard practice, the complaint is an accurate assessment. In fact, it makes no sense for a first-year teacher to be a “teacher of record” with perhaps a bit of support but not much difference in responsibilities than a veteran. Study after study has shown that students who have a first-year teacher do not do as well as students with a teacher who has at least three years of experience, and that even for the best-prepared teacher, at least three years of classroom practice are needed to reach proficiency.

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Our students and our teachers deserve something better. In the short run much more robust mentoring—conducted by both school-based and university-based mentors—is essential if new teachers are to have the support they need in the early years of professional practice. In the longer run, and we hope not too much longer, the teaching profession itself needs to be restructured so that all first-year teachers serve as a kind of teaching assistant, and only after a year of such post-preparation in-school residency do they assume responsibility for an entire class.

So—what should be done?

New Approaches to Clinical Preparation for Teachers

Universities and school districts around the country are currently testing a number of different approaches that turn old-style student teaching into a clinically-rich experience. None are definitive answers to the problems posed above, but all of those listed here are significant steps in the direction of a more effective approach to teacher preparation.

- 1) **Year-Long Residencies**— Many universities are now experimenting with graduate programs modeled on 12- to 15-month residencies. In some cities, including Boston, Philadelphia, Denver, and Seattle, school districts and universities are partnering to launch stand-alone residency programs. Some of the nation’s top universities are also developing their own residency programs—adopting the best of what residency programs have to offer, and blending these approaches with university courses that help a novice move from “the tricks of the trade” to a solid research-based foundation for future teaching. In these university programs aspiring teachers arrive for summer courses and clinical experiences, often in a non-school setting; a full-year residency follows, with teacher candidates arriving when classroom teachers arrive and staying connected with one teacher and one classroom for the full school year. University courses are taught throughout the year in the late afternoon or evening, after a candidate’s full day in school.

Stanford University’s STEP (Stanford Teacher Education Program) is the model of such an approach; other universities have also adopted it. Some universities include four days a week in classrooms and confine courses to a fifth day. The University of

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Indianapolis, which reconfigured its teacher preparation as part of the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship, has requirements almost as comprehensive as Stanford’s in terms of the depth of the residency; in addition, UIndy arts and sciences faculty serve as content coaches to the aspiring teachers while education faculty bring much of their coursework into the schools, rather than bringing students to campus. As an

added bonus of the geographic shift in coursework, other teachers in the school also benefit from the exchange of ideas and research.

Residencies may be the single most important kind of preparation for teachers, in particular, who are going into high-need classrooms. By spending a year of practice in a high-need classroom, a teacher candidate comes to understand viscerally that a student who has no one place to live, for example, has a harder time prioritizing homework. What approaches might that candidate use to help bring that student

along? This is not the kind of question that gets answered in a few weeks. Instead, seeing such situations unfold over the course of a year prepares a candidate to understand what works and what doesn't.

An aspiring teacher who spends a year in a high-need classroom also has the chance to learn about students' interests, lives, and development outside of the classroom. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, has linked its residency not only to specific schools but to specific neighborhoods in West Philadelphia. How does one understand and teach the student who acts out in math class but is also a star in a church choir or on a neighborhood basketball team? How does one reach a shy student who is part of a lively circle of friends or a gang outside of school? One does not learn the answers by confining time to the school.

The National Education Association has stepped up to call for residency-style teacher preparation programs. NEA president Dennis Van Roekel's 2011 three-point plan for educational reform says: "Every teacher candidate should have one full year of residency under the supervision of a Master Teacher before earning a full license." The NEA sees multiple benefits. Future teachers have extensive practice with actual students, preparing them for the realities of today's classrooms; veteran teachers have the opportunity to serve as mentors, broadening their career and leadership opportunities within the classroom rather than moving into administration. The NEA continues to study residency programs around the country, and has committed to work with institutions of higher education, school districts, and foundations to establish rigorous standards for meaningful residency programs.



- 2) **Co-teaching** is sometimes a key element in residency programs. Traditionally, student teachers observed from the back of the classroom, then moved to stand-alone performance in front of the room, with a master teacher and sometimes a university supervisor observing from the back. In the co-teaching model, the teacher candidate and the mentor teacher plan and execute as a team. The actual teaching may take many forms: Co-teachers sometimes lead the class together; they sometimes take turns teaching the whole class; they may divide the class into two smaller groups undertaking

different activities; one may work with a small group of students while the other leads the majority; and sometimes both serve as coaches to groups of students.

Two of our Woodrow Wilson partners—Purdue University and Ball State University, both in Indiana—have adopted a co-teaching model. Faculty at Purdue and Ball State define co-teaching as two people who fully share the “planning, organization, delivery, and assessment of instruction.” Of course, not all instruction is conducted in this way. There are times when one teacher will stand alone, and it is essential for the student learning to teach to have appropriate supervision and mentoring.



Nevertheless, the shift from classroom observation or sink-or-swim student teaching performance to a true partnership model is significant. This benefits both the aspiring teacher and the students, who receive the benefit of increased access to interactions with the teacher, individualized instruction and content knowledge, resulting in improved P–12 student learning. For example, the co-teaching model developed at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota has demonstrated that P–12 students in co-taught classrooms achieve at higher rates in both reading and mathematics than students in classrooms with either traditional student teachers or no student teachers. One of the major advantages of this

approach: Parent complaints that their children are “guinea pigs,” or teacher concerns that test scores will fall if a novice “takes over,” are replaced by the advantages of having two individuals in the classroom focused on moving student learning forward, with different but often complementary skills. While the cooperating teacher helps the novice attain skill in pedagogy, the novice—as a current graduate or undergraduate student—often has the benefit of knowing the most up-to-date research, which can be a significant benefit to the students in the classroom where the team works.

The intensive clinical experiences in the Woodrow Wilson program at Purdue University inspired faculty to pilot the co-teaching model in Purdue’s elementary teacher education program. The pilot co-teaching program was so successful it was rapidly scaled up to include the entire elementary education program. Now the WW Coaching Coordinator at Purdue is leading an effort to incorporate co-teaching into all of the secondary teacher education programs at Purdue. The secondary model was

piloted in STEM Goes Rural, the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship program at Purdue. Principals have reported that they like the co-teaching model because it enhances student learning and improves the skills of novice teachers to a greater extent than the more traditional student teaching model.

In the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship program at Ball State University, we had occasion to observe effective co-teaching as a veteran teacher and a graduate student in the master's program jointly led a high school physics class. It was an impressive and fully engaged science classroom, with students and teachers working together in two groups to complete their experiment. Whatever forms the co-teaching may take, the advantages of having the senior teacher and the aspiring teacher operate as a team are considerable.

- 3) **Robust Community Engagement**—As we have noted, an often underappreciated element in the best teacher preparation programs is an opportunity, and a requirement, that students who are preparing to teach spend time not only in schools but also in communities and informal neighborhood settings. The University of Pennsylvania provides one model of such a requirement, focusing its clinical placements in high-poverty high schools that are generally walking distance from the Penn campus. These schools also partner with the university in many other service-learning efforts, so that many of the Penn students who end up as student teachers have already spent time in local agencies and neighborhood gatherings, knowing the community from which students come to school.

An often underappreciated element: a requirement that aspiring teachers spend time in schools' communities.

Many years ago, the National Teacher Corps, a 1960s War on Poverty initiative to get top-flight college students into teaching, required those in the program to live in neighborhoods near the schools. More recently a few universities have experimented with observation placements in community agencies prior to student teaching. Michigan State University provides a powerful example of a program which focuses on community-based immersion experiences. To become more familiar with the steadily growing refugee population in a partnering district, aspiring teachers spend time in Lansing learning about the specific needs and challenges facing the districts' refugee population and about resources to support their teaching. All of these experiments are worth further attention and consideration if the teachers who graduate from our programs are going to appreciate fully, as they must, their students, their students' families, and the communities that support them.

- 4) **Clear and Consistent Measures of Success**— There has been a growing debate about the reliability of value-added measures of teachers and teacher preparation programs. Critics rightly point out that the current test data is unstable and limited; it neglects entire subject areas and grade levels, and it is always inattentive to the kinds of issues—student motivation and interest, for example—that are hard to measure. On the other hand, defenders of a value-added approach ask, “If we are not improving our students’ learning, what are we as teachers and teacher educators doing?”

It is true that the achievement gap would disappear from educational discourse if there were no measures of whether students were learning in school, but such a shift would do nothing to improve learning, especially for students most in danger of being marginalized. The solution, we would argue, is a much more wide-ranging set of measures of student achievement. Effective teacher education programs need to create a strong feedback loop so that they know how well their graduates are

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teaching, what the gaps are, and how they may be corrected.

Certainly, we believe that when program-specific student test score data are available, they provide valuable information. While value-added data is not sufficiently sophisticated today to accurately evaluate individual teachers—and we believe

that to be the case—value-added program-level data on the teaching of one or two hundred graduates of a university (or alternative provider), gathered over a period of several years, can pinpoint strengths, weaknesses, and areas that require further attention.

Nevertheless, there are also other significant ways in which a university can measure K–12 student learning. The University of Washington, for example, has created a protocol for faculty to review and evaluate student work by students of their graduates. One senior professor said of the first time he saw such student work, “It was a syllabus-shredding moment.” As a result, that professor and others on the UW faculty were able to rethink and redesign courses and clinical experiences that would more effectively help their students prepare to be strong teachers, able to foster the highest levels of student achievement.

- 5) **Mentoring**— While more time in schools is critical in rethinking clinical fieldwork, it is insufficient for preparing future teachers to improve student achievement, particularly in urban schools. Candidates must spend this additional time with excellent veteran teachers who are themselves improving student achievement. Currently, there are few examples of excellence in mentoring; too few mentors have

demonstrated ability to assess and meet the needs of an adult who is learning to teach, and too few can explicitly explain the reasons for their decisions.

Too often mentor teachers and their supervisors have become comfortable with the familiar routines of traditional student teaching. Envisioning a completely different way of working with novice teachers is hard work and takes time and imagination. The specifics of mentors'/cooperating teachers' roles are too often unclear, with few opportunities for their development. While it is important for cooperating teachers to focus with teacher candidates on very specific issues, and to debrief with each other about what they observe, school priorities often make it difficult to find time for such discussion. Mentors also have too few occasions to explore and hone their own mentoring skills. Clinical supervisors who oversee and participate in this process are frequently stretched thin, allowing little time to collaborate with and coach teachers and mentors on effective instructional techniques and areas that need development.

Mentors should also be compensated appropriately for their important work and given sufficient time to do it. We neglect to fully acknowledge the arduousness of the two critical tasks that effective mentors must accomplish simultaneously: Preparing instruction for their K–12 students and preparing instruction for the aspiring teacher.

In the current climate of teacher evaluation, mentor teachers (even those who have not fully understood the complexity of their roles) have already begun to balk at how this responsibility may affect their own evaluations. Currently mentoring is more haphazard and reactive than planned and purposeful. If the work of teaching is difficult, it follows that the work of teaching teachers would be even more difficult. That we don't allow mentors ample time to rethink their work, plan carefully, and develop skills for this work makes no sense.

The University of Virginia has developed an intensive mentoring program for its own graduates and for other teachers around the country. Using videos of their classrooms, U.Va.'s acclaimed My Teaching Partner Program engages novice teachers with carefully prepared mentors in discussions of key questions, posed by the teachers, about how to improve classroom practice. In each session the novice teacher—a student teacher or a new teacher in the early years of professional practice—reviews the video of her/his classroom and selects an issue that will be the focus of the conversation with the trained mentor. By allowing student teachers and teachers to select the area in which to focus the program, My Teaching Partner ensures that the novice “owns” the conversation and does not feel imposed upon or judged by the

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mentor. Using videos followed by telephone meetings, the U.Va. program is able to serve teachers in any part of the nation.

The University of Washington has developed a mentoring program in which students who are earning their master's degree at the university and university graduates during their first three years of teaching all return to the campus at pre-determined times during the course of the year.. These current master's students and recent graduates present samples of student work, from in-class essays to reports on science experiments, along with videos of the classes in which the work was developed, to each other and to a respected faculty leader who then leads the group through a critical analysis of the samples of student work. In this professional learning forum, participants learn to trust each other, accept critical feedback, and use the sessions to improve their practice.

Four Essentials for Today's Clinical Preparation

There certainly are approaches other than these to improving clinical practice. However, we believe that no aspect is more important than situating clinical practice at the heart of the preparation of teachers who will be effective in high need schools. High-quality interaction between mentors and aspiring teachers is critical. All such efforts, if truly thoughtful, have four characteristics.

- **They integrate coursework with clinical time.** When students take courses before rather than during clinical practice, those courses all too often seem irrelevant once the student is in a school for the practicum experience. If it is not immediately obvious how theory connects to practice—and it is often hard for the novice to see the connections—the easy solution is to forget the course-based learning and refine the “tricks of the trade” that seem to be needed in the immediate situation. On the other hand, clinical practice unattached to coursework, or to anything except a reflection seminar, misses the opportunity to link theory and practice. A requirement that students have at least five weeks of student teaching with no coursework—the standard sometimes put forward by the National Council on Teacher Quality — moves in exactly the wrong direction: Five weeks of student teaching is almost nine months too little, and requiring that there be no coursework during that time disconnects what most needs most to be connected. Happily, NCTQ seems to be moving away from that standard. *The clinical experience of the 21st century must fully integrate content courses, methods courses, and “student teaching” in time and in intellectual content. Learning doesn't merely occur in practice. Learning is the by-product of the ability to both practice and make connections between practice and theory.*
- **They last one full school year.** We have previously noted the value to teacher candidates of observing the first week of school in August or September as well as the

last week in June. *The clinical experience of the 21st century must begin with the cooperating teacher and the aspiring teacher working as a team from the day the teachers arrive at school in the fall and continue until the day the teachers leave the school in June. Anything less undermines the aspiring teacher's preparation.*

- **They make outcome measures that focus on student achievement the heart of the program.** Whatever the measures used—and the most effective measures should be designed by the faculty and school partners of a specific program—real demonstrable gains in student learning must be the measure by which a faculty and outside groups, including state agencies and accrediting bodies, measure the effectiveness of any teacher education program. Faculty and administrators must continually be on guard against “feel-good” measures in which every program is above average. *The critical criteria for measuring teacher residency and mentoring programs, as for all teacher education programs, is the actual learning demonstrated by the students of teachers who have graduated from a program.*
- **They blur the traditional line between a teacher candidate and a teacher of record.** The assumption that a brand-new teacher, no matter how good the preparation, is ready to function as the “teacher of record,” perhaps without any further help, is an inappropriate way to organize a 21st-century profession. No other profession is organized in that way today. No newly minted M.D. begins surgery on his or her own the next day. No newly minted J.D. tries cases on her or his own. There are medical residencies and associate positions in law firms first. *A rich clinical program moves novice teachers more deliberately into the profession—with time to learn from an experienced mentor, to test one's wings under careful supervision, and to transition easily into one's own classroom.*

If the United States is to have the teachers we need for increasingly diverse schools with more and more students from high-need backgrounds, and if we are to prepare 21st-century citizens and workers with the knowledge and skills they need, it is time to replace 19th-century student teaching with a 21st-century in-depth clinical experience.

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