

Release of the Commission Report on Effective Teachers and Teaching
December 8, 2011
Comments by Maddie Fennell

Thank you Becky!

First I want to thank Dennis and the leadership of the NEA for having the courage to create the Commission and giving us the complete autonomy and resources to meet our charges. This work would not have been possible without their support and tremendous confidence in us as professionals.

I would also like to thank the NEA staff who provided support, especially the Teacher Quality Department members who are here with their director Dr. Segun Eubanks.

And on a brief personal note, I must thank my Superintendent, Dr. John Mackiel, and my wonderful Principal, Lisa Utterback, for their incredible support

Let me now recognize my fellow Commissioners who are in attendance today; as I say your name, will you please stand?

- **Ronarae Adams**
- **Adele Bravo**
- **James Brooks**
- **Sharon Gallagher-Fishbaugh**
- **Michael Geisen**
- **Anne Keith**
- **Shelly Moore**
- **Heidi Rodriguez**
- **Kathleen Skinner**
- **Peggy Stewart**
- **Mary Tedrow**
- **William Thomas**
- **Lynette Wayne**
- **Kathleen Wiebke**

Working with this amazing group of colleagues has been both incredibly rewarding and challenging! We have spent the past year arduously studying, discussing and debating as we endeavored to create a new vision for the teaching profession and for NEA.

As we began our work, we were continuously told to BE BOLD!! As with all major projects, what that really means has changed for me over time.

Being bold didn't mean developing some great new "AHA!" product that can be packaged and sold. It meant listening to our colleagues, researching best practices around the world, trusting our own knowledge and experiences and prioritizing the crucial steps needed to strengthen the teaching profession and ensure that America's students are prepared for tomorrow's global challenges.

BOLDNESS is defined not only by WHAT is said, but by WHO is saying it – and even more importantly, the boldness will come from those who choose to DO the work to make this vision a reality.

What we've created is a mosaic; a vision of change that can be realized from the smallest school district to our largest urban areas. We learned from our successful colleagues in Singapore that change must be made comprehensively and systemically. We understand that many of our suggestions may need to be implemented incrementally, but they also must be seamlessly interwoven in their execution.

So, let me begin to construct that mosaic for you by highlighting some of the key pieces in our report.

Sometimes it's the most obvious things that we forget to talk about.

You don't wake up every morning and announce that the sun actually came up. It's just obvious.

In the hearts of teachers, students are the sun. They are the reason for what we do.

But what's so obvious in our hearts isn't always readily apparent to others.

We must make clear to the public, in both our words and our actions, that student learning is at the center of everything we do.

Our vision is of a profession that clearly and visibly puts student learning at its core and guarantees that students acquire the critical thinking ability, ingenuity, and citizenship skills they will need to thrive as 21st century citizens.

The schools we envision develop students' academic knowledge, critical thinking, and innovation skills, while also attending to their overall well-being.

Our vision for the teaching profession rests on three guiding principles:

1. Student learning is at the center of everything a teacher does.
2. Teachers take primary responsibility for student learning.
3. Effective teachers share in the responsibility for teacher selection, evaluation, and dismissal.

We envision a teaching profession that embraces *collective accountability* for student learning balanced with *collaborative autonomy* that allows educators to do what is best for students.

For us, "accountability" doesn't simply mean counting test scores – and "autonomy" definitely does not mean that teachers get to close their doors and do what they want.

Instead, we work collectively with our fellow educators in the development of our skills, knowledge and best practices and independently apply that knowledge in our daily work. We share responsibility for student outcomes and collectively, our professional choices and judgment are honored. As education professionals, this improves both our professional status and the quality of public education.

We believe that the most difficult part of this work may actually be changing the CULTURE of teaching. We all know that you can change policy without changing people's beliefs and actions.

Real change will come teacher by teacher.

The transformation will begin when teachers claim their authority to set and maintain high quality standards of effectiveness and develop systems that ensure the integrity and continued growth of the profession instead of accepting a position at the end of the decision making line.

We must redefine accountability as relational rather than numerical. Accountability isn't about the numbers we achieve on a test. Real accountability is accepting the trust the public has in America's teachers and embracing our professional and individual responsibility for student learning and well-being.

We need to make our practice public - open our doors, step into the corridors, and share responsibility for all our students, including the most challenging. We envision a professional culture in which effective teachers are attracted to the most challenging schools where students' needs are highest.

I've heard Dennis say – go forward until apprehended! We need to empower ourselves to be the change agents we know are needed! We have to stop making movies about teachers who are only effective when they go outside a broken system and instead move forward and change the system itself!

One aspect of changing our culture is - to borrow a term from the business world - blast open the glass ceiling - or glass door!- of advancement in our profession.

When I was named NE Teacher of the Year in 2007, one of the first questions I was asked was "When are you leaving the classroom?" – an acknowledgement I fear of a general attitude that is also evidenced in the often heard comment "I'm JUST a teacher".

We want effective teachers to be challenged and have the opportunity to take on additional roles and responsibilities while keeping their roots in teaching.

We need a new system that sees school leadership as a joint endeavor with highly effective classroom teachers and innovative administrators. Shared decision-making models utilize classroom expertise in advancing the effectiveness of schools.

Teachers assume hybrid roles that involve both teaching and leading; effective principals spend some time teaching and welcome opportunities to work with teacher leaders.

We need to move from a top-down hierarchical model to a circular structure of shared responsibility that will engage students as active participants in their own learning.

This report clearly states that you don't move to ANY instructional leadership position without proving your effectiveness as a teacher.

So what is effectiveness? The easy out is to say that we can determine effectiveness via a test score. Test scores are merely a snapshot of student learning, not the be all and end all of intellectual achievement.

Effective teachers have a positive impact on student learning. They know their content and how to teach it to a broad range of students. They have the dispositions and aptitudes to work effectively with colleagues and students. They have mastered a repertoire of instructional strategies and know when to use each appropriately. They plan instruction purposefully, analyze student learning outcomes, reflect on their own practice, and adjust future planning as needed.

Effective teachers consider collaboration an essential element of their practice. They take responsibility for both classroom and school-wide learning; many also engage their students in virtual learning.

Teacher effectiveness must be determined through evidence-based processes that are fair, accurate, and transparent.

Determinations of effectiveness should inform decisions about teaching assignments, continued employment, advancement to teacher-leader and administrative positions, and compensation.

If we truly and objectively want to know if a teacher is using best practices in their classroom, we have to do the work of actually going in the classroom and WATCHING them teach. We can then work in a collaborative manner with every teacher to stimulate growth in their teaching effectiveness.

The Commission acknowledges that we have ceded quality control of our profession to administrators and other non-educators; to assert teaching as a respected profession, we must reclaim our authority to set the standards for quality teaching.

That is why the Commission believes that Peer Assistance and Review is so critically important. We have to change the culture of evaluation from a “gotcha” mentality to a “grow ya” mentality.

In the system we envision, teachers collaborate with administrators to create a peer review program—a high-quality evaluation system in which teachers are deeply engaged in assessing and evaluating practice, developing professional learning plans, and contributing to personnel decisions.

In this system, the need for tenure is replaced by a peer review program that provides opportunities for improvement or, when improvement is lacking, ensures due process rights throughout dismissal procedures.

By guaranteeing teachers’ due process rights through a fair and transparent peer review system, continued employment and advancement are based on performance. Seniority would only be used for decision-making when all other factors are equal.

As we take a new look at teacher practice in the classroom, we also have to redefine how one becomes a teacher.

Three characteristics of a profession are that:

- 1) It has a defined body of knowledge
- 2) It trains every member of the profession in that knowledge
- 3) It governs who enters and who exits the profession

In reality, we – as a profession - don't do those things. When I served on NCATE, I remember reading an application where a College said their philosophy of education was to allow the winds of change to blow – it read like they had a lot of hot air blowing at me!

Our report calls for the National Council for the Teaching Profession. The NCTP is designed to bring all stakeholders to the table - this is NOT a new organization, but a substantive coalition that moves us towards those three characteristics – defining a body of knowledge, training every member of our profession on that knowledge, and aligning the entry and advancement in our profession.

In order to ensure that every child—regardless of family income, location, or other factors—is taught by effective teachers, it is crucial to set national standards for the preparation, licensing, and certification of educators.

The NCTP will be responsible for defining and setting the standards for that national system.

NCTP will work to ensure that each state's teaching standards are no less rigorous than the national standards. Alignment among state standards will facilitate teacher quality and mobility from state to state.

Bringing this work under one national umbrella group will lead to processes that are consistent, efficient, and cost effective.

We know that teaching is complex work and that to be successful all pre-service teachers must learn the body of knowledge that I just mentioned.

College teaching programs must be judged by the placement rates of graduates and the graduates' impact on student learning and well-being.

Programs that fail to meet these standards may be provided a reasonable amount of time to improve, but those that do not improve need to be closed.

We need to focus on the development of a solid assessment that can show that a candidate for the teaching profession has the appropriate skills, knowledge and dispositions to be an effective teacher, regardless of HOW they attained those skills. As with our own students, we must recognize that there can be multiple paths to mastery.

Over the course of their career, effective teachers must also reassess their practice and learn new approaches.

Too often, professional development is disconnected from the realities of classroom practice. We know that teachers want high-quality continuing professional learning that is meaningfully connected to their daily work and to the students they serve.

Professional development must be based on the individual needs of the educator and facilitate raising their competencies in the skills and knowledge needed for their students learning and well-being.

By defining the content and design of a professional development program, teachers can ensure that their professional learning and classroom practice are connected, which in turn strengthens student learning.

Teachers with advanced degrees who expand their knowledge and skills in the science of teaching and learning have a significant impact on student learning. However, inadequate compensation and limited career opportunities often lead teachers to pursue advanced degrees that contribute little to improving their practice.

This new vision of teacher learning would require dramatic change in the curricular offerings of universities and in agreements between teachers and schools regarding what specific educational credentials should be valued and rewarded in teacher advancement and compensation systems.

Teacher compensation in the system we envision is competitive with professions that are comparable in terms of educational preparation, knowledge, and skills and is high enough to attract and retain a highly skilled teacher workforce.

Each teacher's compensation would be locally determined by a combination of factors such as Quality of Practice, Challenging Teaching Assignments, Work in Expanded Learning Programs and Additional Roles and Responsibilities.

Advancement in this compensation system is determined neither by time in service nor by graduate degrees. Advancement to the next tier requires evidence of effectiveness using multiple data sources and input through the peer assistance program.

The last component of our report is our Call to Action which focuses on the commitment that will be needed to actualize the vision of this report.

We call on our fellow teachers to join us in changing the culture of teaching;

We call on our institutions of higher education to work in genuine partnership with practicing teachers to reform every aspect of teacher preparation;

We call on school districts to embrace teacher leadership and implement both proven and innovative programs of evaluation, peer review, and compensation;

We call on state education agencies to think beyond state borders and help to create systems for the teaching profession based on a shared, nationwide vision of great teaching;

We call upon state legislators to support programs that work and to put students and teachers ahead of bureaucracy and politics;

We call on the US Department of Education to support a national, teacher-led (not federal government-led) transformation of the profession.

And mostly, we call on our union, the National Education Association, to lead.

We understand that the bulk of this work will be conducted at the state and local level. However, we were charged to prepare a report for the NEA, so I want to address my final comments to my union.

I am a proud member of the NEA. I, like many of my Teacher of the Year colleagues, have been publicly applauded for my contributions to student success, but many of those contributions came through fighting the system. I

if it weren't for NEA – for my colleagues who taught me the ropes and then watched my back as I challenged the system - I would not be teaching today and would have been denied the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of my students.

However, this report challenges the NEA.

We have replicated in our organization some of the same inefficiencies we fight against in our school districts. The challenges of the past can inform our future, but we can't continue to use the same strategies to solve our new challenges.

We tie the hands of our leaders through complicated resolutions and policies. We lack the flexibility to rapidly adapt in a texting, Facebook, technologically “do it now” society.

We must promote and enable greater flexibility within NEA governance structures for a rapid response to the changing political and educational environments.

We must take the primary responsibility for the quality of teaching and for student learning.

It is time for our union to evolve.

With my fellow Commissioners, we humbly submit this report as the first step in that process.

Thank you.