

Working Toward "Wow": A Vision for a New Teaching Profession
Remarks of Arne Duncan, National Board of Professional Teaching Standards
Friday, July 29, 2011

Thanks for having me. It's a real honor to be addressing an organization that has done so much to strengthen America's most important profession.

I don't look at newspaper cartoons much, but someone showed me one the other day that got me thinking. It showed a sports fantasy camp with a bunch of athletes standing around waiting to get an autograph from a short, balding guy.

One player points to him and says, "I wish I had that kind of money and respect..." Another athlete points to the man and says, "Wow! (pause) A teacher!"

Now this was just a Sunday cartoon -- and I know that you're not all short and balding -- but the message behind the humor says a lot about America today:

We worship our athletes, our entertainers, our movie stars, -- but it is great teachers who really should trigger a 'wow.'

Standing in front of you today, I am wowed. There are so many teachers in this room who are igniting curiosity, inspiring passions and opening doors for students all across America. You stand at the summit of one of the hardest, most challenging professions.

And your record speaks loudly. Although National Board Certified teachers are only 3% of the teaching force, you account for fully 20% of the 2011 Teachers of the Year.

The educators in this room have changed thousands of lives for the better and I couldn't be prouder to address you.

Teaching must be one of our nation's most honorable professions.

Teachers help mold the future every day, having an impact that far outlasts any lesson plan or career.

When I meet young people who want to make a difference, change a life, and leave behind a living, breathing legacy, I urge them to teach.

Too often, though, bright, committed young Americans—the very people our students need in the classroom—do not answer the call to teach.

Instead, they choose fields like law, medicine, and engineering -- that command higher pay and often more respect.

Today, I want to talk about how we can change this trend, transform the teaching profession, and ensure that the next generation of teachers is the very best we can offer our children.

I want to talk about how that Sunday morning cartoon can become a reality. I want to ask how outstanding educators like you can be the norm.

Back home in Chicago, I worked closely with our union and with a non-profit organization called the Chicago Public Education Fund to dramatically increase the number of National Board Certified teachers.

It was a wonderful public private partnership.

When I started as CEO in 2001, there were about 30,000 teachers in the district -- but only 11 were NBCT's. When I left in 2009, there were nearly 1,200 NBCT's.

I didn't encourage only the best teachers to apply.

I encouraged everyone to apply because I knew that everyone benefits from professional development and feedback, regardless of whether or not you achieve certification.

National Board Certification forces teachers to understand their strengths and weaknesses and to learn how to get better.

It helps teachers get to the truth behind the craft and understand what it really takes to inspire children to learn.

And it completely demonstrates to our students the importance of being lifelong learners – all of you are walking the walk, and leading by example.

I'm also excited to see that the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is helping develop policy around teacher evaluation.

The "Student Learning, Student Achievement" report you released this March was a big step in the right direction.

Teaching is demanding, difficult work. You are called upon to make scores of decisions every day.

Developing an evaluation system that recognizes the complexity of teaching and the full range of challenges will not be easy -- which is why most current evaluation systems are so flawed.

Too many states and districts have taken the easy way out -- and simply shirked their responsibility.

But, we can no longer pretend that all teachers or all principals are from Lake Wobegon where everyone is above average.

It is time to recognize and reward our best teachers, support those in the middle, and also acknowledge that teaching may not be the best career choice for a small minority of teachers who continue to struggle despite support and mentorship.

Teaching is not a job for everyone.

I'm especially pleased to learn that a new report you are about to issue recommends that teacher evaluation include measures of student learning and I thank you for taking that important step.

In the 21st century, we shouldn't be guessing whether or not a teacher is impacting student learning—we should know -- and while we know that the current generation of tests are far from perfect, a new generation is in development that will be better.

You know this profession. You know what fair evaluation could look like. You know that it shouldn't be based only on bubble tests.

You know that it should include multiple measures -- like principal observation, peer review, parent and student feedback, student work, teacher attendance and other factors.

Let me be crystal clear.

Neither the President nor I believe test scores should be the sole component of evaluation. We always have and always will support multiple measures.

Test score growth and gain should be part of the equation in classrooms and subjects where they are available, but they should never be the only part.

Now I also know some people believe that factors outside the classroom -- like poverty and family breakdown -- can minimize or negate the positive impact that teachers have on students.

They say that if a child comes from a broken home, it is unfair to expect that student to compete with classmates from more supportive environments.

They also say it is unfair to hold teachers, principals, schools, or districts accountable for the achievement levels of those low-income students.

I respect their opinion and appreciate their voice.

We know that poverty matters, but a teacher matters too. I have seen the extraordinary impact of great educators and great schools on the lives of children.

I've worked all my life with children from poverty-stricken, violence-plagued communities. And I know that poverty is not destiny.

We have all seen lives change because of opportunity, support, and guidance.

Yes, children all start at different places and bring different strengths, challenges and needs -- and we can't hold teachers accountable for the skills of students when they walk in the door in September.

But it is our collective responsibility to do whatever it takes to graduate that child from high school prepared for college or a career.

Closing achievement gaps, by closing opportunity gaps, is the civil rights challenge of our generation.

I don't pretend that poverty is not a factor. It's just not an excuse for students failing to make progress over the course of the school year.

By measuring student growth instead of proficiency and by training our principals and evaluators to recognize these out-of-school factors and take them into account, we can have a richer, more meaningful and fairer system of accountability.

So today I welcome the efforts of the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

I look forward to reading your new report and taking the next step together. The urgency to get better has never been greater. The world is rapidly moving forward while America is standing still.

Moreover, the field of teaching is poised for change. Roughly half of America's 3.2 million active teachers could retire by the end of this decade.

As baby boomers move towards retirement, we will have real challenges and real opportunity.

We have an amazing chance to modernize the teaching profession and expand the talent pool.

But it will require dramatic changes in the way we recruit, train, support, evaluate and compensate teachers.

And there are important lessons from abroad. In nearly every leading country, a large majority of teachers come from the top third of college graduates. That must be our goal as well.

The countries that are beating us in the classroom today will beat us in the workplace tomorrow -- so this is a matter of economic security and national security.

To win the future, we must mirror these high-performing countries and recruit more teachers from the top third.

Many bright and committed young people are attracted to teaching, but surveys show they are reluctant to enter the field for the long-haul. They see it as low-paying and low-prestige.

They want excellence to be rewarded and meaningful feedback provided. They want a job that requires top-flight credentials and a challenging work schedule.

They want autonomy, the time and space to be creative, and they are willing to be held accountable.

But they don't look at teaching the way they look at law, medicine or engineering. It requires too many sacrifices that other professions don't have to make.

The national call to professionalize teaching is almost as old as the field itself. In 1958, then Senator John F. Kennedy wrote a piece in the NEA Journal calling for revitalizing the field of teaching.

In 1984, legendary leader Albert Shanker said that attracting and retaining good teachers is "the major struggle in education."

In 1986, the Carnegie Report the called for a new teaching profession.

Ten years later, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future issued a report called "What Matters Most" -- which talked about professionalizing the field.

Matt Miller -- a journalist and policy expert wrote a book a few years ago called the "Two Percent Solution" arguing for a new paradigm in teaching. He also called for dramatically higher teacher salaries as a way to attract top students.

Last year, McKinsey did a study comparing the U.S. to other countries and recommending -- among other things -- that we change the economics of the profession, pointing out that entry-level salary in the high 30's and an average ceiling in the high 60's will never attract and retain the top talent.

We must think radically differently.

We should also be asking how the teaching profession might change if salaries started at \$60,000 and rose to \$150,000.

We must ask and answer hard questions on topics that have been off limits in the past like staffing practices and school organization, benefits packages and job security -- because the answers may give us more realistic ways to afford these new professional conditions.

If teachers are to be treated and compensated as the true professionals they are, the profession will need to shift away from an industrial-era blue-collar model of compensation to rewarding effectiveness and performance.

Money is never the reason why people enter teaching, but it is the reason why some people do not enter teaching, or leave as they start to think about beginning a family and buying a home.

Today, too often the heart-breaking reality is that a good teacher with a decade of classroom experience is hard-pressed to raise a family on a teacher's salary.

That must change.

There is a new movie called American Teacher coming out produced by the writer Dave Eggers and a teacher, Ninive Caligari, profiling several outstanding teachers.

One of them drives a forklift at night to support his family -- and eventually the pressure of two jobs costs him his marriage.

Another teacher in the movie -- an African-American male elementary school teacher -- finally quits and goes into real estate where he earns twice as much, working half as hard.

When we are losing talented, passionate educators like this, the profession is in crisis. Fully, half of the people who go into teaching leave within five years.

Lack of support, lack of quality mentoring and meaningful professional development, inadequate respect and compensation – we know the reasons.

That is unsustainable in any field, let alone something as important as teaching.

And in high-poverty schools where the most committed, accomplished teachers are needed, the salaries are often lower.

Data collected by our team in the Office for Civil Rights indicates that in high-poverty schools, turnover is higher and experience levels are lower.

There are great teachers in these schools – just not enough of them; not enough of a critical mass.

So the incentives today are all wrong -- not just the money but the prestige and the career opportunities.

We need to agree that in teaching, as in every skilled profession – medicine, business, the arts – quality matters. There's a huge gulf of greatness and grit separating our best teachers from our worst.

Today, too many schools and districts evaluate, recognize, and compensate teachers without respect to their impact on student learning.

This is an assembly-line model of pay, based on seniority and educational credentials.

This is not how professionals are compensated in this age of innovation.

Top undergraduates want to know that their talent and hard work will be rewarded.

They want to know that their commitment is meaningful and recognized. If it isn't, great potential teachers will find that their skills, passion, and creativity have greater value elsewhere.

Teachers absolutely need and deserve the autonomy that other highly accomplished professionals enjoy.

The hospital administrator doesn't hover over a world-class surgeon. The managing partner of a law firm doesn't hover over the firm's top litigator.

Instead, they get them the tools, resources, and support they need to be successful today and to continue to learn and grow.

As we get great talent in the classroom, we must trust them to make decisions like every other profession...and then hold them accountable.

We also need to raise the bar for entry in the field.

Top undergraduates will flock to a profession that demands high standards and credentials.

Yet, too many of our nation's 1,400 schools of education lack the rigor to attract talented students.

And to see how this change might happen, we can look to the field of medicine for a fascinating example – from 100 years ago.

In 1910, medicine was in disarray. Medical schools didn't even require a high school diploma. Medical preparation consisted of two years of guest lecturers with virtually no hospital experience.

The schools varied wildly in quality. Almost any applicant who could pay the tuition was accepted.

Medical schools were cash cows for universities -- and doesn't that sound familiar.

Along came an educator named Abraham Flexner who visited all 155 medical schools and published his findings.

He called for higher standards for people charged with saving lives -- and helped launch a new era in the field of medicine. He told the truth and the world changed.

In the field of education, we also need to tell the truth. We all need to say out loud what everyone knows: the field of education must change, grow, improve, and rise to a higher standard of professionalism.

You are not just saving lives, like doctors, you are also helping create lives of hope and opportunity.

This conference is called “Reboot! Teaching Transformed.” I know that you're primarily referring to the use of technology in the classroom -- and I know you heard from one of my top advisors Karen Cator.

Technology -- in partnership with great teaching -- can really help teachers get better and boost student outcomes.

But if we're truly going to transform American education, we must go far beyond the smart use of technology.

We must remake the teaching profession itself. We must think big.

Our children, our parents, our teachers, and our country deserve better.

In too many ways the current model no longer works: a broken pipeline, a nine-month school year based on the agrarian economy, a factory approach to staffing, compensation and benefits, a school design from the last century, and a management structure that is simply not up to the challenge.

Too many principals and administrators are falling down on the job when it comes to mentoring, evaluating and supporting teachers.

Too many are simply overwhelmed with bureaucratic burdens and political pressures to be the real instructional leaders we need them to be

And we are absolutely part of the problem too. Education officials at the state and federal level need to narrow their role, and get out of the way as much as possible, while holding ourselves and each other accountable for educational equity and quality.

Instead of being a compliance-driven bureaucracy, we should be an engine of innovation, fostering new approaches and ideas.

We must be more flexible -- focused more on goals than on means.

We must look in the mirror every day, and ask ourselves, are we perpetuating the problem, or creating the solutions?

So I'm here today to challenge us all to work together towards one profound goal: to make teaching one of our nation's most venerated professions.

In Singapore and South Korea teachers are known as "nation-builders."

Think what that would mean to all of us, if America's teachers were recognized as "nation-builders."

Let's get out of the box we've been stuck in for decades -- and picture a day when highly accomplished teachers are considered masters in their fields and compensated accordingly -- and where they don't need to become administrators or leave teaching in order to support their families.

We should keep our best teachers in the classroom -- and they should be earning a lot more money -- as much as \$150,000 per year.

Let's face it: a phenomenal teacher educating underserved kids in science, technology, math, engineering, or the arts should be very well compensated -- just as they are in other professions.

A kindergarten teacher who can turn every child into a reader is priceless.

Picture a day when all teachers have access to strong mentors, good incentive programs, meaningful professional development and real career ladders.

Picture a day when teachers are evaluated like other professionals, using multiple sources of evidence about their success on the job.

Picture a day when all teachers -- not just three percent -- aspire to the high and rigorous standards achieved by all of you here today.

Picture a day when an entry-level teacher's salary is radically higher -- especially in a low-income and low-performing school -- and when a top undergraduate walks off the stage and says to his mother, "Mom—I'm going to be a highly-respected, well-paid professional. I'm going to be a teacher."

Earlier this month, I met with thirteen amazing former state teachers of the year to talk about elevating the teaching profession. Like you -- these teachers are at the top of their field.

We didn't agree on everything -- but we all recognized the urgent need for change in the profession.

They are not afraid of it. In fact, they are begging for it and want to work together to make it happen.

They want us all to come together and deal openly and honestly with the challenges and choices needed to bring about real transformation.

They are hungry for a vigorous national conversation -- led by teachers -- about the profession that our children need and that good teachers want.

They expect some noisy debates -- and they know it won't happen overnight.

It won't happen everywhere at once.

It will require everyone to go outside their comfort zones.

And it will cost money -- and -- given the current political climate with the nation wrestling with debt and deficits -- I am sure some people will immediately say that we can't afford it without even looking at how to redirect the money we are already spending -- and mis-spending.

To them I say that there is more than one way to mortgage your future.

We can't mortgage our future by under-investing in education.

Still others will hear the message about tradeoffs in terms of job security or benefits, and try to suppress the kind of open dialogue we need about the teaching profession.

I respectfully urge everyone to take a deep breath, hold their fire, and see this as an opportunity to transform the entire profession -- not as a threat or as an investment we don't need.

We respectfully need it.

This isn't just coming from me -- or some narrow segment of the reform community.

This is coming from thousands of great teachers all across America who desperately want our respect, our support and our trust.

This professional transformation won't happen unless teachers own this and drive this. Change can only come from the men and women who do the hard work every day in our classrooms.

This group, Nationally Board Certified Teachers, has always stood for excellence and professionalism. You are uniquely prepared to take on this mission and transform your field.

So, I urge you to lead this effort.

Your colleagues in the classroom trust you. They will take your lead and they will follow you.

Appeal to their highest ideals.

Bring their voice into the conversation, and help them see that by taking full responsibility for their profession, they can remake it in their own eyes -- and in the eyes of our nation.

And then we can all look forward to the day when people across society who meet a teacher come away with just one word on their lips:

"Wow."

Thank you.