

**An Empty Curriculum: The Need to Reform Teacher Licensing Regulations and Tests**, by Sandra Stotsky. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, 146 pp., \$24.00 paperback.

**Licensed Mediocrity**

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To paraphrase former U.S. senator Slade Gorton, there are two kinds of Washington memoirs, those about how I saved the world, and those about how I would have saved the world if those bastards had let me.<sup>1</sup> *An Empty Curriculum: The Need to Reform Teacher Licensing Regulations and Tests*, by my former colleague Sandra Stotsky, is the best work extant on the farcical teacher

<sup>1</sup>Slade Gorton, “Conflict and Cooperation with Congress,” panel remarks made at the Eleventh Hofstra University Presidential Conference on William Jefferson Clinton, Hempstead, NY, November 11, 2005, 20, [http://www.hofstra.edu/community/culctr/clinton/clinton\\_guests.html](http://www.hofstra.edu/community/culctr/clinton/clinton_guests.html).

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licensing systems’ multiple failures to assure teacher quality, but it is also the first sort of memoir, explaining how Stotsky fixed teacher licensing in Massachusetts. This slim, blunt volume has nearly everything you need to know about teacher certification and teacher quality, making it essential reading for anyone who wants to save rather than replace public schools.

Now professor emerita at the University of Arkansas, Stotsky has won a few victories for humanity in her long career. As Richard Bernstein chronicles, Stotsky fought in the “battle of Brookline” over whether offering a Western civilization elective in public schools is inherently racist, with local parent Michael Dukakis among her allies.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Stotsky has campaigned against the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) with a wit and ferocity matched only by her grasp of detail. As a lukewarm CCSS supporter, it pains me to admit that at least in the short term, Stotsky’s predictions have proven more accurate than my own.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Richard Bernstein, *Dictatorship of Virtue: How the Battle over Multiculturalism Is Reshaping Our Schools, Our Country, and Our Lives* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Maranto and Michael Q. McShane, *President Obama and Education Reform: The Personal and the Political* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2012), chap. 6.

Stotsky's greatest contribution came during 1999–2003 in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, where her team completely revised the state's forty-one low-quality teacher licensure exams to attract more talent to the profession and replace questionable pedagogical practice with subject matter knowledge. The results speak for themselves.

Many credit Massachusetts' excellent pre-Common Core standards for the Bay State's remarkable turnaround in school performance, making it for a time the national leader in student achievement. Stotsky contends that no standards work without knowledgeable teachers. Since Massachusetts developed real standards for entry into teaching while at the same time reforming academic standards for students, one cannot divine which reform was more effective. Most likely each reinforced the other, and sensible school reformers should do both. (Stotsky played key roles in each, which may suggest another book.)

As Stotsky details in *An Empty Curriculum*, teacher licensing examinations are nothing new. They appeared in colonial New England, and through the nineteenth century were widespread and challenging. Even the original National Teachers Examinations (NTE) of the 1940s and 1950s had rigor and focused on solid subject matter more than jargon-laden and largely unscientific pedagogy. Over time, these exams lost

strength. In the 1930s, teacher supply outstripped demand, but by the 1950s the nation faced teacher shortages and “[s]uperintendents had no interest in test scores when the law required a teacher in every classroom.” Schools of education, then and now, lobbied their allies in state education authorities to end requirements that teachers know the subjects they teach. Over the long term licensure tests lost rigor and adopted embarrassingly low pass scores that “are not set to protect children in our public schools from academically incompetent teachers [but] to protect teacher preparation institutions” from losing funding if prospective teachers fail. This happened as college-educated women gained greater access to careers outside teaching, weakening the teacher talent pool. (See my “Why Don't Schools Teach Poetry?” in the Summer 2015 *Academic Questions*.)

Academic erosion continued in the 1970s, when courts ruled NTE suspect due to racially disparate effects on employment in public schools. Essentially, many judges found it more important to have racially diverse teachers than knowledgeable teachers, at least for other people's children. Such rulings empowered education professors to revise NTE. Stotsky wryly observes that new tests “were validated on the basis of their similarity to the curricula of teacher training institutions even though teacher testing was... promoted on the grounds that teacher

training institutions were graduating academically inadequate teachers.” The new NTE was never taken seriously as a measure of teacher quality, with critics like American Federation of Teachers leader Al Shanker urging the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to develop new tests.

This led to the Praxis Series of examinations, which unfortunately again reflected the child-centered pedagogy supported by Ed.D.s rather than subject matter foci preferred by Ph.D.s and most policy makers. Partly in response, ETS lost its monopoly. National Evaluation Systems began designing and selling teacher licensure tests, which provided Massachusetts potentially more rigorous alternatives. In the 2000s, a third player entered the market, the nonprofit American Board for Certification of Teaching Excellence, which was launched from a grant issued by then-U.S. Education secretary Rod Paige, one of the most important (and underrated) figures in the past two decades of education reform.

We know little about whether most teacher licensing exams measure the knowledge and skills that make for good teaching, since, as Stotsky tartly proffers, “Why would researchers want to provide documentation for consistently negative anecdotes when colleagues at their education schools may have served as advisors to the test companies providing these licensure

tests?” What we do know, or think we know, isn’t pretty. As noted above, licensure tests usually measure support for questionable pedagogy rather than content knowledge or science-based teaching methods. For example, some of the Praxis tests for elementary certification only have between 1 and 7 percent of items related to reading! Equally important, the level of knowledge required to pass most teacher licensing exams is quite low, typically junior high level. Students can pass while missing well over half the questions and can retake exams again and again until they somehow squeak by; and since test items and most data from testing remain secret, there is no way for policy makers and the public to see that these emperors have no clothes.

If all this seems too outrageous to remain behind closed doors, over the long term it was. One theme of *An Empty Curriculum* is how legislation can have long-standing influence. The 1993 Massachusetts Education Reform Act included teacher testing provisions strongly opposed by schools of education, and for good (or at least self-serving) reasons: the near-60 percent failure rates attracted national attention, leading Congress to require that states test prospective teachers and make results at least somewhat transparent.

Massachusetts governor Paul Cellucci brought Stotsky on board to reform teacher licensure. Over her four years in

state government, Stotsky and her staff made numerous changes that in combination with one another helped assure that teachers understood the subjects they taught. Chapter 6 of *An Empty Curriculum* details work in concert with (non-education) university professors to revise teacher licensure tests for foreign languages, Latin and classics, early elementary education, reading specialists, preschool teachers, and middle and high school teachers of math, science, communication, performing arts, English, history, and U.S. government. Generally, this raised the knowledge expectations for Massachusetts teachers to an early college level, rather than an early high school level.

One theme of *An Empty Curriculum* is how minutiae prove vital. Massachusetts had already required teachers to have a major outside of education, but unfortunately future teachers flocked to equally easy majors such as sociology, “grievance majors like women’s studies,” or composite self-made majors—none very useful for teaching. Stotsky and other policy makers reacted by prescribing courses future teachers could take, though this requirement quietly disappeared under Governor Deval Patrick, who was backed by the National Education Association.<sup>4</sup>

Stotsky determined that early childhood teaching licenses would include knowledge of reading instruction. Middle school licenses now required subject specialization and knowledge. The permissible grade ranges for elementary licenses were restricted, while those for high school teachers moved downward—broad efforts to drive subject knowledge into lower grades. Stotsky also required that master’s degrees, tickets many teachers punch for pay raises, include coursework in subject areas rather than just education.

A second theme of *An Empty Curriculum* is the frequent intrusion of political correctness in teacher education and preparation. Prior tests required future music teachers to know American, Asian, African, and Hispanic vocal and instrumental music; thus, “an affirmative action framework was implicitly being imposed on the training of music educators, and an ignorant one at that—as if there is only one musical tradition in Asia, Africa, and South America, and as if Europe doesn’t have any at all.” Similarly, Stotsky speculates that Massachusetts teachers who passed licensure tests for political science and political philosophy “may be capable of countering the ideological thrust of the newly revised Advanced Placement U.S. History course or the Big History Project promoted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation because the licensure test stresses the

<sup>4</sup>For more on Patrick’s efforts, see Charles D. Chieppo and James T. Gass, “Accountability Overboard,” *Education Next* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2009), <http://educationnext.org/accountability-overboard/>.

philosophical antecedents of the U.S. Constitution.”

Stotsky ends with recommendations for policy makers. States should require that prospective teachers have or earn arts and sciences degrees rather than education degrees, limit admission to teacher preparation programs, and base those programs at colleges with selective admissions. States should mandate serious teacher licensure tests, track program success in producing graduates who pass those tests, and hold poor programs accountable as states do for important professions such as cosmetology. States should assure that the bureaucrats who license teachers themselves know and care about academic subjects. Generally, we should do everything possible to draw teachers from the top rather than the bottom of the college-educated talent pool, copying educationally successful nations.

Stotsky also takes on professional development, which currently makes no proven difference in improving teacher effectiveness. Smart teachers will surely create better options: “Most teachers would be far more eager to attend a talk on American history by David McCullough or Gordon Brown or a poetry reading by Helen Vendler or Robert Pinsky in their school district than a workshop on school violence given by an up-to-date educational entrepreneur—the more likely kind of (expensive) in-service presentation arranged for teachers.”

As Stotsky points out, survey research suggests that talented American college students are reluctant to teach less because of low pay than low prestige and weak peers. Reforms like those detailed in *An Empty Curriculum* would help undo the damage, at almost no cost. So where are those reforms and reformers? Where do we get more Stotskys?