

Concord Review Society Member Column

Raising Expectations for Teachers and Their Students: Better Professional Development Is One Tool

By Josiah Brown

The Concord Review's emphasis on Varsity Academics® addresses a striking need for greater rigor, writing, and student engagement in secondary education. A related need: more rigorous and appealing professional development opportunities for teachers, at the elementary as well as the secondary level.

Though SAT scores are edging forward and more students are taking it, these and other measures—such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—remain troubling. NAEP scores suggest fewer than 40 percent of American fourth and eighth graders are proficient in reading and math. States' data is more favorable, but this partly reflects teaching to their tests along with variable test quality. Disparities persist, by income and ethnicity, in average scores among groups. Most college students' writing skills are inadequate.

Despite the evident need for improvement, millions of high schoolers do little homework and are unenthused about learning. According to a recent study, 65 percent are unexcited about their classes, and 62 percent don't feel their teachers encourage them to learn more. Eighty percent spend fewer than three hours per week outside class on reading for all courses combined, yet most feel they have prepared for class faithfully. Another study, of students ages 8-18, finds the average young person watching more than three hours per day of TV. Add other media and talking on the phone—on which the average seventh to twelfth grader spends more time (53 minutes per day) than on homework (50 minutes)—and the urgency of the problem is clear. In general, students need both more academic time and more challenging projects, including the research and writing that term papers involve.

The Varsity Academics® movement recognizes that higher expectations for students—cultivating in them

a love of learning as well as a capacity for hard work—are essential. These are among the elements of good teaching.



Josiah Brown speaking to the Yale University Advisory Council for the Teachers Institute.

There are numerous causes of students' academic shortcomings on average; among the contributing factors is uneven teacher quality. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires all teachers of core academic subjects to be "highly qualified" by 2006.

This mandate demands not only better teacher education, selection, and retention, but also enhanced professional development. Done well, it can boost teachers' morale, subject mastery, and ability to motivate students. As Kierkegaard wrote, "To be a teacher in the right sense is to be a learner."

Yet effective professional development is rare. In 2000, teachers typically spent just a day in professional development on any one content area. The fraction who felt this activity significantly improved their teaching ranged from 12 percent to 27 percent.

An exception: Teachers Institutes, educational partnerships between universities and school districts designed to strengthen teaching and learning. Evaluations have shown that the Institute approach promotes the dimensions of teacher quality that improve student achievement. These include subject knowledge; skills in writing, math, and speaking; enthusiasm; high expectations for students; and the ability to motivate them.

Within the League of Teachers Institutes, university and public school faculty work together as colleagues. Months-long seminars focus on the sciences

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Josiah Brown (center) with a group of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute' teacher leaders.

and the humanities. Each participating teacher (known as a Fellow) writes a curriculum unit for the K-12 classroom and publication online. Teacher Representatives decide the seminar topics, and Fellows become members of the university community.

This model of partnership between a university's sciences and humanities faculty and its neighboring school district holds promise for additional cities. Senator Joseph Lieberman has introduced a bill to establish 45 such Institutes nationwide. The entire bipartisan Connecticut delegation in both houses of Congress has co-sponsored the legislation.

Having myself attended rural public schools for nine years, and having worked or volunteered in urban public schools over more than a decade, I am committed to strengthening public educational opportunities, notwithstanding my also having attended four years of prep school on a partial scholarship. Public schools—

open to all students and serving the great majority—are in greatest need of a more uniformly high standard of quality. There are excellent public schools in every state and virtually every city, but not nearly enough of them.

Teachers Institutes support districts' efforts to attract, develop, and retain qualified teachers. As one Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute Fellow has said, "The Institute, and the experiences I have had among colleagues, Yale professors and in my own research, has helped me define who I am as a teacher. The Institute experience and the units I have produced have enabled me to realize my potential as a teacher."

When the students of an Institute Fellow win first prize in the science fair as a result of his Institute project; when other Fellows are named the city's teachers of the year and one is even recognized—in 2004-05—as Connecticut's state teacher of the year, the program's value becomes tangible. Such results reflect correlation rather than causation, but they are powerful nonetheless.

No single intervention can transform teaching, let alone affect students' academic engagement and effort. Still, Teachers Institutes can bolster one key part of the equation. Joining school districts with universities in core academic subjects, these Institutes are a proven tool in the quest for more qualified educators.

"Learning is not attained by chance," Abigail Adams wrote. "It must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence." Hundreds of teachers in New Haven and other cities have displayed this spirit as Fellows in Teachers Institutes. More of their colleagues around the country should have this opportunity to develop their teaching and their students' learning.

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Josiah H. Brown, whose essay appeared in Volume One of The Concord Review in 1988, studied history at Yale and, later, public policy at Harvard. He has worked as a Congressional aide and as a university administrator, as well as with K-12 education initiatives. Currently he is Associate Director of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, a member of the League of Teachers Institutes whose members also include Houston and Pittsburgh, which have similar partnerships between university faculty and public school teachers in the sciences and the humanities. He and his wife, a scientist, are the parents of a baby daughter.