Including the Practitioner's Voice

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The Clamor of Voices

Deans of colleges of education often feel that they are sitting in the eye of a storm. No sooner does one half of the hurricane pass than the other half appears on the horizon. It seems as though almost every day a new voice is heard about something that is amiss in educator preparation. (Most deans of education do not eagerly pick up the telephone after an administrative assistant says, "A reporter from the newspaper would like to talk with you.") As painful as these voices may be, teacher educators must listen to them carefully because we have much to learn from them. Permit me to share some examples and to describe a statewide method for incorporating critical voices into teacher education programs.

Are We Listening?

Last spring, I was taking a bus from the University of Washington campus to attend a meeting downtown. Behind me, two parents were talking about school. They were not happy. In fact, they were extremely critical of the school, of the teachers, and of education in general. Needless to say, I was discouraged to have to sit and listen to more complaints about teachers and schools. As we approached my stop, one parent said to the other, "You know, I just wish they would help Elizabeth learn." Those words continue to echo in my
head—"I just wish they would help Elizabeth learn." Is that not what we all want? This parent's plea reminded me that we often interpret parents' voices as criticism of our schools when in actuality they are cries asking us to educate their children. It also reminded me that teacher educators often do not hear the voices of parents—especially parents of color, parents who come from poverty, and parents who have recently come to this country. Our teacher education programs are the poorer for it, and our students far too often are not prepared to teach their students. We cannot ignore parents' voices as we approach the new century.

As president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, I had the opportunity to write a foreword to a wonderful publication entitled "Culturally Responsive Teachers Inform the Reform Agenda." This booklet was produced by a group of experienced classroom professionals who came together to advise policymakers about education reform. The voices of these teachers—teachers of color—are often not heard. They need to be heard, however, because the ideas these voices express are insightful, sometimes provocative, and always pedagogically sound. More importantly, these voices are being lost as more and more teachers of color retire from the profession and are not replaced by novice teachers from diverse backgrounds. As I completed the foreword, I was once again reminded how powerful the practitioner's voice can be for teacher educators and how critical it is, in the increasingly diverse world of schooling, that teachers of color have a voice in teacher preparation programs.

The Professional Education Advisory Board

The Washington State legislature requires each educator preparation program to have a Professional Education Advisory Board (PEAB), which is composed of classroom teachers, administrators, and college faculty. Sixty PEABs
across the state involve 700 to 800 educators. At least 50 percent of PEAB members represent their professional association. The PEABs range in size from 7 to 50 members; the largest PEAB is at the University of Washington.

The PEABs' fundamental task is to determine whether each professional educator certification program is in compliance with the program approval standards set by the state. College administrators seldom praise state legislators for passing new laws pertaining to administration, but we must do so in this instance: The PEAB has become one of the most effective channels through which teacher preparation programs in the state of Washington can hear the voices of practitioners who are also citizens, parents, and persons of color.

The PEABs engage in a variety of mandated activities related to determining whether a college of education—such as the College of Education at the University of Washington—is meeting state codes. By law, over the next several years, the PEABs must determine whether the colleges are in compliance with state accountability regulations, are using resources properly, and are in compliance with respect to overall program design and curriculum. Although these are important functions, they are, in my opinion, secondary to other critical roles.

At the University of Washington, PEAB members are involved in a number of activities related to our educator certification programs. For example, the teacher education PEAB members serve on our admissions committees. With our faculty and staff, these teachers review transcripts, analyze writing samples, and assess candidates' work in school prior to admission. Their insights are powerful because they bring the professional "eye" to the admissions process. They willingly participate not only to make a professional contribution to the field but also because they know that the students admitted to our program will later appear in their classrooms. The PEAB members are also
active members of core College of Education committees. During the renewal of our current teacher education program, teachers and administrators were actively involved in designing the new curriculum. Members also serve periodically on search committees for new faculty members. They have also undertaken a number of projects designed to provide us with feedback.

Currently, PEAB members are working closely with us on two important projects. Like most states, Washington is in the midst of education reform involving new standards and assessments. The PEAB members are working with us to incorporate these new standards into our program and to help us prepare our teacher education graduates to meet the state requirements. They are also working with us on policies and procedures related to effective partnerships with public schools. Partnerships are spoken of eloquently in the literature, but we find that we need all of the assistance we can get to make them effective settings for educator preparation, continuing professional education, research, and renewal.

We have learned a great deal over the years by working with the PEAB structure. Five major benefits come to mind. First, although we always intend to involve our public school colleagues in our programs, the reality is that without a formal structure, this involvement often does not happen. The difficulties of finding the time for meetings, finding funds with which to pay for substitute teachers, and getting together more than once seem to hinder our intentions. As a result, the voices from the classroom are not heard. However, the PEAB—mandated and financially supported by the state—requires meetings and designates the tasks to be accomplished. It is the law. As a consequence, excuses are eliminated. What began as just another state-imposed requirement now has a regular meeting schedule and has
funding to allow professionals from the field to attend these meetings. Habits of collaboration have been established.

Second, having to meet, and doing so systematically, permits serious discussion and program development. The PEAB members become knowledgeable about and invested in the programs. Because members know they will be meeting again, they do not rush to address and wrap up everything in a one-day meeting. Tasks can be undertaken in a methodical and thorough way so that they actually enhance the programs. For example, PEAB members planned a study related to student teaching. They developed questionnaires for teacher education students and their cooperating teachers, sent them out, analyzed the data, and reported back to the PEAB. The data helped the PEAB fulfill its obligations to the state and were also informative for the teacher education program. Such an effort would not have been possible without the opportunity for collaboration over an extended period.

Third, the meetings permit college of education faculty and staff and teachers from the public schools to engage in serious intellectual discussion about pedagogy, ethics, and the future of the profession. How often do educators have an opportunity to spend periods of time reading, discussing, and thinking about issues? Not often enough. In these meetings, we learn together. Researchers from the colleges talk about the work in which they are engaged. Educators from the schools reflect on what the findings may mean for teachers and students. All participants benefit from such a stimulating experience.

Fourth, PEAB members are educators who represent our partner schools. Our certification students (future teachers, principals, counselors, and school psychologists) are interns in the schools of PEAB members. As a consequence, our programs are more closely linked to the public schools than before. Theory and practice are brought closer together, and
everyone wins. The PEAB members are also a diverse group from very diverse school settings, enabling us to understand whether our students can teach effectively in diverse settings.

Finally, those of us working in teacher preparation programs and teachers working in the field have changed our understanding of each other. Many public school educators have a view of teacher preparation programs that is based on their own experience in a certification program—however long ago. As a result of collaboration on the PEAB, we now have a cadre of practitioners who can inform their colleagues about our teacher preparation programs. They are often our best advocates about the quality of our programs. Needless to say, in the current environment, teacher preparation programs need all of the support they can get.

The state of Washington did a good thing when it created the Professional Education Advisory Board, and it has been wise enough not to tamper with the structure. The PEAB ensures that our teacher preparation programs hear the practitioner's voice. It is a voice we need.

**Concluding Comments**

Many voices are calling for changes in educator preparation. Advocates stand shoulder to shoulder with critics. Foundations support the renewal of current programs and alternative models. State legislatures struggle to decide whether to create new requirements, tests, reporting systems, and other means to meet rigorous student learning standards. In addition, higher education institutions grapple with how they should respond to public school issues. As we listen to or ignore these many voices, we cannot forget that our fundamental goal is to "help Elizabeth learn." To reach this goal, we must create structures and opportunities that enable the practitioner's voice to be heard.