Sustaining the Profession
Ronald Thorpe

Although teaching deserves to be a profession, it has not yet achieved that status. Dan Lortie put forward that proposition as clearly as anyone in his 1975 book Schoolteacher, and I’m sorry to say that not much has changed in the years since.

As Lortie and others have described, in “real” professions, practitioners define the key terms. Those terms include

- what you have to know and be able to do to begin formal preparation;
- how you are prepared, and who prepares you;
- how you are mediated into the workforce through the induction and novice years;
- what the trajectory of development is as you continue in your practice;
- what you must know and be able to do at the accomplished level, and how you demonstrate when you have reached that level;
- what the industry standards for success are;
- what the expected code of behavior is for people in the profession;
- how people are removed from the profession if they don’t measure up;
- how changes are made to the entire enterprise with the advent of new learning and new tools.

This list may not be complete, but it contains matters that only people in a profession are qualified to address. If we were to test teaching against each of these items, it’s clear that it wouldn’t score very well. Thus, the question becomes, Can we as educators make the necessary changes and stick with them until teaching emerges as a true profession?

I think we can. And the reason I think it is possible—and essential—is because I believe teaching deserves to be a profession equal to and maybe even more compelling than medicine, engineering, architecture, and so on.

Many think that it isn’t possible. After all, we’re talking about a mostly female, middle-class workforce that takes care of children. These are not exactly the typical ingredients that go into other professions. Furthermore, teachers do work that almost everyone believes they can do themselves, mostly because everyone has spent fifteen thousand hours watching teachers. No other occupation is observed so extensively, and it undoubtedly fosters the belief that teaching just isn’t that hard.

Let me start with some good news. Professions don’t emerge fully formed from the head of Zeus. They are more like Michelangelo’s sculptures, waiting to be released from a great hulk of stone. Each enterprise that we now consider a profession is the result of a mighty and sustained
struggle, the work of many who chiseled away until the profession emerged. In other words, having the primal stuff of a “profession” does not ensure that the profession itself will ever see the light of day. People in it make conscious decisions and fight over important points. They build and rebuild coalitions of like-minded colleagues, and they have the longer view in mind.

They also recognize the need for professions to continue to evolve, as new knowledge and skills are constantly being developed. There is no final state of perfection, but the culture of professions does expect all practitioners to be accomplished.

A quick look at medicine helps make the point. In his Pulitzer Prize–winning book *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, Professor Paul Starr writes, “In the nineteenth century, the medical profession was generally weak, divided, insecure in its status and its income, unable to control entry into practice or to raise the standards of medical education. In the twentieth century, not only did physicians become a powerful, prestigious, and wealthy profession, but they succeeded in shaping the basic organization and financial structure of American medicine.”¹

That is a summary of an amazing story. Most people in our country don’t realize that not long ago, the practice of medicine was a mess, if not a disgrace, and that those who practiced it were consequently held in low esteem. I suspect that most doctors today don’t even know the full history, but a hundred years ago, doctors weren’t what they are today, and neither was the practice of medicine.

A 1910 report written by Abraham Flexner is considered the turning point in the creation of the medical profession.² Flexner’s report focused on medical education and what it needed to become for medicine to emerge as a true profession. Not only was the content scrutinized and redefined, but so too were the places eligible to deliver that content. In 1900, there were nearly 400 medical schools in the United States; today, there are 141. Remember, also, that in 1900, the U.S. population was 76 million; today, it’s over 330 million. As you can imagine, none of the people in the medical schools that were shut down wanted that to happen. It was an intense battle, to say the least.

And in 1916, ten years after the *Flexner Report*, the first physicians took their “boards”—the precursor to today’s board certification of doctors. Ten physicians showed up, and only five passed.

Since I believe that teaching is equally as complex as medicine and therefore just as worthy of being a profession, and because we have irrefutable proof that a ragtag of people who called themselves doctors were able to organize over time into the profession we know today, I am certain we can do the same thing. We can look to the medical profession not only for hope but also for guidance on what we need to do.

I should note that I am unapologetic about my interest in comparing medicine and teaching. I know all the arguments for why the medical model doesn’t apply to teaching, but I am
convinced we have more similarities than differences. One of these similarities is the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the so-called reserve clause. As it relates to teaching, states have claimed responsibility for schools because the word education does not appear in the Constitution, and therefore “it is reserved to the states or the people.” Well, the word medicine doesn’t appear in the Constitution either, which is what gives states the exclusive right to issue licenses to physicians. Interestingly, states seldom venture beyond that act when it comes to regulation and oversight of medicine.

**How the Medical Profession Can Inform Our Work**

Possibly the most critical element in the rise of the medical profession was its ability over the years to define and implement a trajectory from pre-service to accomplished practice and then to insist that everyone in the profession follow that path. It was essential that the trajectory be coherent, each step building directly on the previous one. It was also essential that there be no back or side doors. Either everyone followed the same path or the whole thing would collapse.

In establishing such a trajectory, one must begin with the end point—that is, identifying what the target is before asking someone to hit it, which means articulating what an accomplished practitioner should know and be able to do, and the standards that define that knowledge and those skills. Along with that, there must be a process to certify when those standards have been met.

The next step is to map backward from those standards—through novice and induction, entry and preparation—to ensure coherence and maximize the chances that those who remain in the profession will reach the goal of accomplished status.

In 1987, teaching took a bold step toward building such a trajectory when the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was created. The model itself was taken from medicine, where today 90 percent of all physicians not only have an MD and a state-issued license to practice but are also board certified—and that certificate is issued by the profession, not by the state. The educators who have worked on the National Board have done an amazing job establishing standards of accomplished practice in twenty-five certificate areas and overseeing the assessment process that asserts whether or not a teacher has met those standards.

For the most part, however, that’s where the effort still is today. Those of us who work in education have not yet come together to map backward from those standards so that the trajectory of preparation, licensure, mediation, and development cohere in ways that move the majority of teachers toward board certification. Instead of 90 percent or 60 percent or even 30 percent, today fewer than 3 percent of teachers are board certified.

The National Board is as much at fault as anyone, because over time, we became satisfied just living on this island where we safeguarded the standards and assessments, and we really didn’t seem to care too much that we were increasingly disconnected from the rest of the profession.
Although it may seem as if I am assigning a level of privilege to the National Board Standards and our assessment, I am in no way suggesting that the standards and assessment process are perfect. What I am saying is that they are the best we have and that our goal must be the alignment and the trajectory that derive from them. I’m also saying that we must ultimately agree that this is the path all teachers need to follow.

In education, we have a strong and mostly unhelpful tendency to reject the good and promising because it isn’t perfect. How much better, how much smarter, how much less expensive, is it to improve something that is promising rather than to throw it out and start over again, or—even worse—to continually perpetuate multiple and competing models that ensure we have little consensus around what we stand for as a profession?

And how often do those actions play into the hands of our detractors—those who don’t believe teaching can or should be a profession—or, worse yet, those who stand to benefit from us not being a profession?

And what we stand for as a profession cannot mean one thing in Florida and something else in Massachusetts. A profession must transcend states, or it’s not a profession. States have their individual differences, but a profession at its base must stand for the same thing wherever its practitioners are trained or doing their work.

Over the years, the National Board’s standards and process have gone through a lot of scrutiny—as they rightly should. Some of it has been scholarly and as objective as such things can be; some of it has been more subjective. The results have been spotty.

Sometimes there’s an effect on student learning, as was recently discovered by the Harvard Strategic Data Project in two separate studies—performed in the Los Angeles Unified School District and in Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA)—where students in classes with board-certified teachers achieved at a rate equivalent to two additional months of instruction in math and one additional month in ELA. And of all the different groups of teachers studied, only board-certified teachers made any measurable difference. In other studies, researchers have found no statistical difference in increased learning by students in classes with board-certified teachers.

On the whole, I would say that the research is promising—certainly promising enough to anchor the trajectory. Given that every teacher knows that his or her work is never independent from the work of every other teacher in a school, and given how few National Board–certified teachers there are, why would we expect to see any impact in a school where there might be only one or two board-certified teachers, especially if we are looking at a middle or high school?

As I said, the research is promising enough—and so is our common sense—to believe that we will get to where we need to be faster and in a more sustainable way by building the continuum
based on National Board certification and improving it over time rather than either waiting for it to become perfect or trying to create an alternative process.

Authority and Shared Experience

The board’s standards and assessment have been created by the profession, tested and revised over time, and the process is both performance based and peer reviewed. This is a good thing. If we carefully, consciously, and with fidelity mapped backward from board certification, embedding the standards and the process—even as they are now—into the steps every teacher takes from pre-service on, I believe teaching in general would be stronger, and we would be well on our way to establishing teaching as a true profession.

What matters is the continuum and our agreement within the profession that there can be only one. That’s been the key to the success of every other profession. It is the underpinning of a profession’s authority, and there is no reason for us to think we’ll ever achieve the same status without it.

Again, let me turn to the Paul Starr book and his take on what authority means and where it comes from in professions. He writes, “Doctors and other professionals have a distinctive basis of legitimacy that lends strength to their authority. They claim authority, not as individuals, but as members of a community that has objectively validated their competence. The professional offers judgments and advice, not as a personal act based on privately revealed or idiosyncratic criteria, but as a representative of a community of shared standards.”

In other words, in every profession there is a culture that is shaped by a shared experience that is in turn defined by the profession’s standards and expectations. The experience must be universal, and it requires everyone to travel the same path into and through the profession.

Let me make five recommendations on how I think we need to get started on this path to build the shared experience that will ultimately give teaching the authority it needs and deserves.

First, teacher preparation must be aligned to accomplish practice. The National Board is sitting on thousands of videos and reflective papers submitted by teachers who have achieved certification. We are placing these videos and papers into a searchable electronic database, which we will license to teacher preparation programs across the country. We call the resource ATLAS: Accomplished Teaching, Learning, and Schools. I want to emphasize how important it is to have not only images of accomplished teaching but also a window into how accomplished teachers think. The video alone is not sufficient.

Thanks to our i3 grant from the Department of Education and our partnership with edTPA, six institutions of higher education in three states are currently using a prototype of ATLAS. These institutions are helping us learn what the resource needs in order to be the most useful to faculty and their students, and they are also helping us develop strategies for how to use the resource effectively in teacher preparation programs. If we succeed in capitalizing the full
collection, it could be ready to ship in the spring of 2014. I hope programs across the country will adopt ATLAS as part of our profession’s efforts to improve teacher preparation.

Second, in programs designed to prepare people to enter other professions, it is the norm to have faculty members who are themselves board certified. In medicine, for example, you’d be hard-pressed to find a medical school faculty member teaching surgery who isn’t board certified in surgery. But in education, we do not have a similar expectation for university faculty, and I think the time has come for us to make such a move, especially for clinical faculty. How will undergraduates know about board standards and what it means to become board certified if faculty members don’t have firsthand knowledge themselves? Medical students understand from day one that they are aiming not just for their MD and their state-issued license to practice but for board certification, and they get that understanding from the medical school faculty.

Third, I hope the state licensing boards will look closely at board certification and articulate how licensing requirements move young teachers toward accomplished practice and board certification. And the same holds for what states require for license renewal, which in most places is little more than bean counting or seat time and does little to ensure that a teacher is maintaining the skills and knowledge of an accomplished practitioner.

Again, we can learn from medicine, in which the state medical licensing boards are closely aligned to the profession’s specialty boards, which control board certification. Aspiring doctors don’t pursue one set of activities to become licensed and another, completely unrelated set of activities to become board certified. The licensing requirements are carefully engineered so that they are connected to board certification, even though the state is responsible for the license and the profession is responsible for the certificate. The profession has consciously made that happen through long negotiations with the states.

It’s also worth noting that medical licensing boards tend to be made up of physicians who themselves are board certified.

Fourth, although I know that teacher preparation programs can be much better than they are now, I also know that there are very few twenty-two-year-olds who can be good at their job, let alone accomplished, no matter how strong their preparation program was. We need to recognize that how we bring people into the profession and support them during that period must be reimagined.

There is a reason why almost every doctor in this country spends between three and seven years in a residency program on top of his or her undergraduate work and four years of medical school before becoming an autonomous practitioner. And our country so agrees with that residency model for doctors that we support every resident with $500,000 of taxpayer money—mostly from Medicare and Medicaid. And just to give you a sense of scale, there are 115,000 medical residents out there at any given moment. You do the math: it’s a public commitment of over $57 billion for each wave of residents, and no one questions that
expenditure. Residency for doctors is seen as absolutely essential to providing Americans with the best possible health care.

It is clear to me that our profession should also be demanding universal residency programs for first-year teachers, and residency schools should be modeled after teaching hospitals, with every newly licensed teacher working under the close supervision of a board-certified teacher. I’ve done some figuring on what it would take to create such a thing. I believe we would need approximately five thousand of these residency schools, and I believe the additional cost associated with being a residency school—including salaries for the residents—could be almost fully funded with the $2.5 billion currently in Title II of ESEA. This would have a systemic and sustainable impact on the teaching workforce that would, over time, lift the quality of teaching and learning in schools across the country.

And fifth, I think the time has come for teaching to have the same expectation for its workforce that every other profession has. Simply put, we need to create a culture in which all teachers aspire to be board certified, and the profession itself must be designed to support that aspiration. If we are going to be a true profession and claim the authority that professionals enjoy, we simply cannot accept the assertion “I’m not board certified, but I’m just as good.”

Putting these five elements together, imagine the new teachers in the graduating class of 2014 and where they would be if they had spent the bulk of their pre-service work immersed in these videos and papers, working with faculty who themselves are board certified, creating their own videos and papers connected to board standards, and receiving their state-issued license to practice by hitting certain milestones that are junior versions of board certification.

Imagine that same class of 2014 this winter and spring competing for spaces in residency programs and then spending the 2014–15 school year working with real students in real schools while under the close supervision of board-certified teachers.

Now imagine those young teachers leaving those residencies in 2015 and joining school faculties where induction programs are designed to keep people on that trajectory, where unions and the central office work together to provide the continuing development that will lead to those teachers sitting for their boards at the earliest possible moment.

Now flip ahead to the year 2019, as the fifth consecutive class of undergraduates concludes such preparation, receives their teaching licenses, and heads into their residencies. Think about what it would mean to have one-quarter to one-third of the entire workforce having these shared experiences and common understandings of what it means to be a teacher and what the profession expects.

By 2024, just ten years from now, not only would half of all teachers have had such an experience but the culture of our profession would be redefined by it. Ten years may seem like a long time, but it’s not when you are building a profession. For politicians, ten years is an eternity, but politicians don’t create professions—only the practitioners can do that. And I
guarantee you that if we can come to this consensus now, ten years will be here before you know it.

There is also one more component to the continuum: the career possibilities within education that do more than simply take a teacher outside the classroom in order to advance one’s situation and allow for special talents to be exercised. Many of these possibilities will involve working with other colleagues as well as with students, but all of them give teachers the chance to grow in ways that are personally fulfilling and contribute much to the success of a school, a district, an academic discipline, or the several other facets of work that have a direct impact on teaching and learning.

Let me give one specific and somewhat tragic example. Recently I had the chance to meet with five Einstein Fellows, who are also National Board–certified teachers. From the program’s inception, these STEM teachers are invited to Washington for their fellowship year, where they serve in a variety of government agencies, such as the National Science Foundation. On this occasion, as I listened to those teachers speak about science and math content and how to help students learn it well, I literally felt I was in the presence of teaching royalty. But as the conversation came to an end, they all admitted that they were not looking forward to returning to their schools. The reason: because they had been treated as adults in their Washington assignments, their opinions were valued as equals among the staff, and they were able to lead with their strengths while learning from others. To a person, they knew that would not be the case when they returned to their schools, where the principal and central office would show no interest in their opinion and where at least some of their colleagues would resent them for the opportunity they had had and because it was now implied that these teachers were “better” than the rest—a mortal sin in a world that lives by wrongheaded notions of equality or stature based on years of service rather than demonstrated accomplishments.

How can we build a profession, how can we hope to build a workforce that is strong and vibrant and attracts the best new talent, if colleagues who have been Einstein Fellows feel shut out when they return to their schools? One would think that achieving such a distinction would come not only with opportunities but also with the expectation of contributing even more to their schools. It’s easy to imagine the principal and others sitting down with one of these teachers at the end of the fellowship and saying, “OK, any ideas about changes we could be making?” and then adjusting that teacher’s workload for a semester, a year, or longer to allow time to lead the effort. That’s the way a high-functioning school system would operate, and if we played out that scenario in its many variations, schools would become real learning environments, and a career in teaching—especially for the most talented—would be exhilarating.

To close, I want to go back to the first paragraph I quoted from Paul Starr’s book, but with a few changes: “In the [twentieth] century, the [teaching] profession was generally weak, divided, insecure in its status and its income, unable to control entry into practice or to raise the standards of [teacher] education. In the [twenty-first] century, not only did [teachers] become a
powerful, prestigious, and wealthy profession, but they succeeded in shaping the basic organization and financial structure of American [education].”

I am convinced that someday we or our successors will read those words in a book, possibly titled *The Social Transformation of American Education*. But we are the only ones who can create that future—not the politicians or businesspeople. Only the profession can make it happen, and we need to seize the opportunity we have now to do just that.