Building a Global Profession

Talk by Ron Thorpe at UNESCO, October 5, 2012

I am pleased to participate in this international conversation about the status of teaching, and I thank you for the opportunity to learn from you and my fellow panelists. I also am eager to share with you my thinking about what I believe is at the center of this conversation and how the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is moving forward on this agenda in the United States.

Before I do that, I'd like to share an idea that came from a conversation David Edwards and I had more than a year ago. We were in a restaurant in Washington DC, and he was trying to convince me to take on the job as President of the National Board by helping me understand that teacher groups around the world were beginning to focus on the status of teaching and that the National Board had something valuable to contribute. He won me over when he said: "Ron, I think teaching could become the first truly global profession." It was not only a grand idea, but I could hear in that simple statement something that could become a rallying point for teachers everywhere. If we are going to prepare our students to become global citizens, we too must have a global perspective. Whether or not teachers can really claim to be the first "global profession" makes no difference. Since no other profession has made such a claim, it is ours for the taking!

And so that is the question I would like to place before this assembly: Are we prepared to imagine teaching as a global profession, and if so, what are the first things we should do to put structure and reality to such a vision?

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards was created in the U.S. in 1987 with the long-term goal of doing for teaching what had already been done in medicine, law, engineering and the other great professions. In the U.S. professions have developed “Boards” that determine what accomplished practice looks like and identifies which practitioners have achieved such stature. Once the standards for “accomplished practice” are created, then the profession builds the steps that begin with what a person must study and continue on a rational trajectory through the induction and novice phases of practice.

The existence of such Boards assumes that there is (1) a body of knowledge that all accomplished practitioners should know, (2) a set of skills associated with applying that knowledge effectively, and (3) a developmental path that all practitioners must follow beyond their study and initial licensure as they move from novice to accomplished. Furthermore, there is within professions the assumption that only other accomplished people in that profession are able to define what those skills and knowledge are, and that only professionals can judge whether others have acquired such skills and knowledge. Finally, and perhaps most important, there is the expectation within professions that the goal of every member of the profession is to attain a level of accomplishment. In other words, becoming Board certified is what everyone in a profession aspires to and most achieve.

This is the theory on which the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has been built. Working with teachers – highly accomplished teachers – we have established what those standards are in 16 different content areas and across four developmental levels. The standards are reviewed and revised on a regular schedule to ensure that the most up-to-date information is incorporated in them. In recent years, for example, this has meant aligning our standards to what in the U.S. is now called the Common Core, adopted by 46 of our 50 states to ensure that students are achieving at reliably high levels in math, English language, and now science. In some certification areas – history, for example – the standards change little from cycle to cycle, while in others – most notably Career and Technical Education – the changes are quite extensive.

Of course, the standards are only half of the equation. The other half includes the assessments, and this is an area that is in constant change as the field grows and as technology allows not only for new efficiencies but – we hope – greater depth of inquiry and more reliable results. We depend heavily on partners who are experts in psycho-metrics, but accomplished teachers are centrally involved in the scoring process, especially with portfolio entries involving videos of classroom practice and reflective papers that provide the teachers' analysis of all that went into what is seen in the videos.

We are also in a constant state of research as we try to see what Board certification actually means in terms of student achievement. In this area, the results are promising, especially when we look at schools where the number of Board certified teachers approaches critical mass rather than just one or two isolated Board certified teachers. This should not be surprising because the effectiveness of any teacher is ultimately tied to the effectiveness of other teachers and the overall learning environment within a school and across schools.

On this point, I am often asked whether Board certification actually contributes to a teacher's ability to reach an accomplished level – in other words, is there an element of strong professional development that results from becoming Board certified – or if certification merely validates that a teacher is accomplished. My answer is: it doesn't matter. What does matter is that we can reliably identify which teachers are accomplished because that is what we owe to our students and their parents, our schools, our governments, and our profession.

Our challenge in the U.S. is that today we have only 100,000 teachers who are National Board certified – which translates to only about 2.5% of our teachers. Board certification in teaching is voluntary, and unlike the other professions, we have not yet established the policies and value proposition that would encourage more teachers to achieve such stature.

Let's look at the most obvious incentive: money. In the United States, most teacher contracts use the Master's degree as the accomplishment that moves a teacher up on the salary scale. A recent study of these degrees shows that school districts in the U.S. are paying $14 billion per year just on the differential when teachers earn their Master's degree, and yet there is almost no evidence that these degrees have any impact on a teacher's ability to be more effective. But this should not be all that surprising because many contracts don't even require that a teacher gets the degree in his or her field. It could be a generic degree in education or even in education administration – which is very popular because it is so easy to earn. This is in stark contrast to a country like Finland, where the Masters degrees must be earned before a person starts teaching, are highly clinical, and also are connected to serious research either in child development for elementary school teachers or to subject areas for secondary school teachers.

I do not blame teachers in the U.S. for this imponderable situation, but I have asked them to ask themselves the obvious question: Does this sound like the way a profession acts? Should you get a large raise in your salary simply because you earned a Master's degree, or should that raise come when you've proven to be accomplished through a peer-reviewed, performance-based process such as National Board certification?

What makes a profession a profession? The American education scholar Dan Lortie wrote a seminal book on this topic back in 1975 called "Schoolteacher." In it he lays out all the reasons why teaching deserves to be a profession and then cites all the places where we simply have not required such behavior of ourselves and our colleagues. The book might have been written nearly 40 years ago, but if you take a look at it you will be amazed at how little has changed in teaching – at least in the U.S. – during that period.

To me, this is at the root of why teachers continue to suffer from low status in the United States. It is not the only reason but it is a big one. The good news is that the points Dr. Lortie makes in that book are all under our control within the profession. By definition, governments cannot create a profession: only people in the profession have the skills and knowledge to do that, and they must define the key terms of the profession. Such work is hard. Very hard. But we know it can be done because it's been done – at least in the U.S. – in every other profession. And I hope it will be the primary focus of our teacher unions to lead us in that direction. In fact, I believe that if teacher unions succeed in the 21st century, it will be because they have redefined themselves around such a goal, creating the conditions under which teachers are the agents of reform, not the targets of it.

In the end, we must remember that the quality of any enterprise simply cannot exceed the quality of the people in it. That applies to a school. It also applies to a profession. With that in mind, we must do everything we can to ensure for ourselves and the public that once teachers are beyond the novice phase of their career, their quality is dependably consistent at the accomplished level. If we don't set and maintain those standards, the public will have no reason to respect us. More important, if we don't this, someone else will, ensuring that we never will achieve full professional status.

In my opinion, determining the status of our profession is entirely in our hands. At the National Board, we stand ready to work with our colleague educators around the world to accomplish this goal. I hope that each of you will embrace the idea that teaching should be and can be the first truly global profession.