

Too Easy a Target: The Trouble with Ed Schools and the Implications for the University

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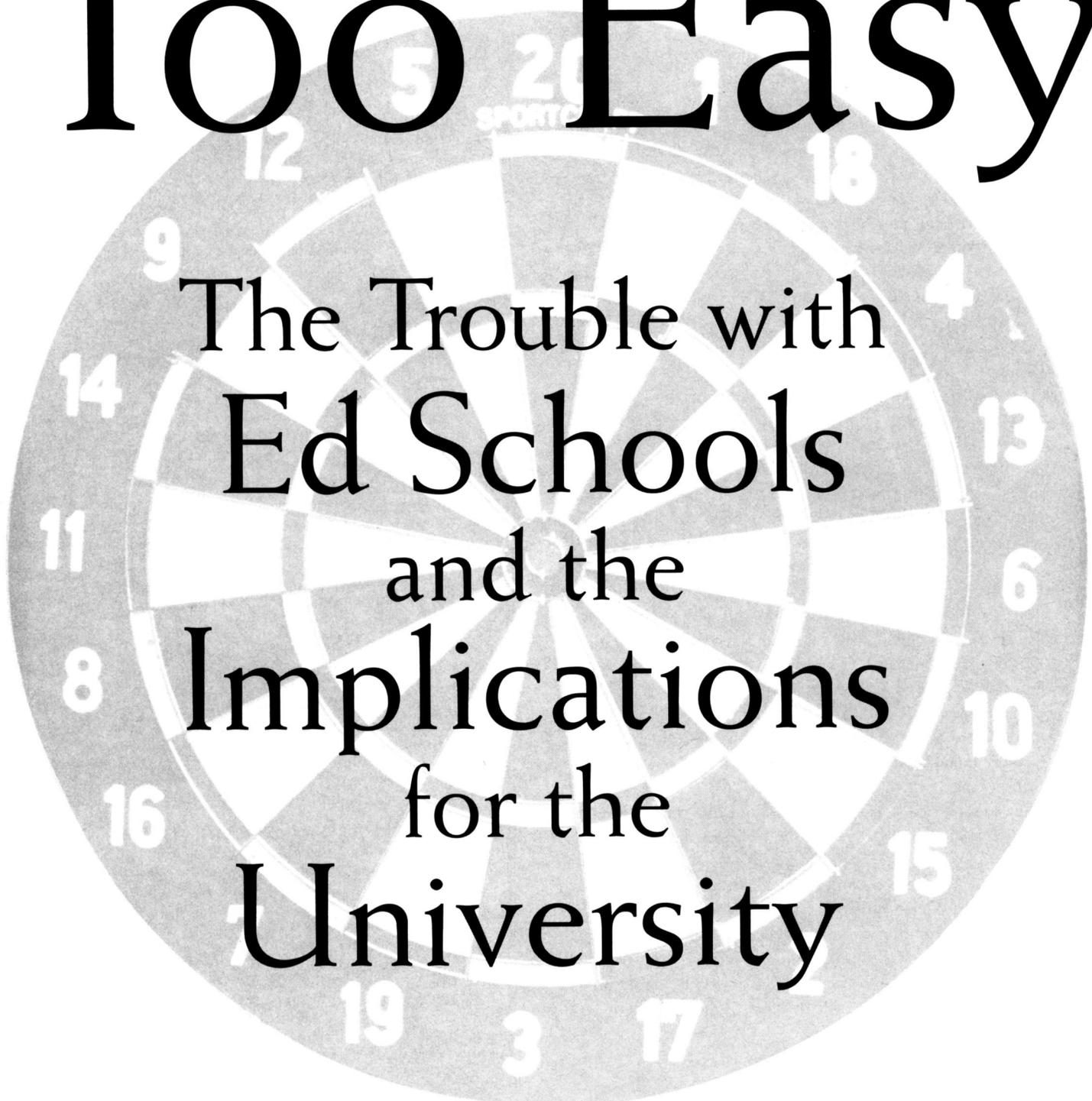
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# Too Easy



The Trouble with  
Ed Schools  
and the  
Implications  
for the  
University

By David F. Labaree

# a Target

**T**HIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE THE ERA OF POLITICAL correctness on American university campuses, a time when speaking ill of oppressed minorities is taboo. But while academics have to tiptoe around most topics, there is still one subordinate group that can be shelled with impunity—the sad sacks who inhabit the university's education school. There is no need to take aim at this target because it is too big to miss, and there is no need to worry about hitting innocent bystanders because everyone associated with the ed school is understood to be guilty as charged.

Of course, education in general is a source of chronic concern and an object of continuous criticism for most Americans. Yet, as the annual Gallup Poll of attitudes toward education shows, citizens give good grades to their local schools at the same time that they express strong fears about the quality of public education elsewhere in the country. The vision is one of general threats to education that have not yet reached the neighborhood school but may do so in the near future. These threats include everything from the multicultural curriculum to the decline in the family, the influence of television, and the consequences of chronic poverty.

One such threat is the hapless education school, whose alleged incompetence and supposedly misguided ideas are seen as producing poorly prepared teachers and inadequate curricula. For the public, this institution is remote enough to be suspect (unlike the local school) and accessible enough to be scorned (unlike the more arcane university). For the university faculty, it is the ideal scapegoat, allowing blame for problems with schools to fall upon teacher education in particular rather than higher education in general.

For years, writers from right to left have been making the same basic complaints about the inferior quality of education faculties, the inadequacy of education students, and, to quote James Kerner's 1963 classic, *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, their "puerile, repetitious, dull, and ambiguous" curriculum. This kind



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of complaining about ed schools is as commonplace as griping about the cold in the middle of winter. But something new has arisen in the defamatory discourse about these beleaguered institutions: the attacks are now coming from their own leaders. The victims are joining the victimizers.

So how did things get this bad? No occupational group or subculture acquires a label as negative as this one without a long history of status deprivation. Critics complain about the weakness and irrelevance of teacher ed, but they rarely look at the reasons for its chronic status problems. If they did, they might find an interesting story, one that presents a more sympathetic, if not more flattering, portrait of the education school. They would also find, however, a story that portrays the rest of academe in a manner that is less self-serving than in the standard account. The historical part of this story focuses on the way that American policy makers, taxpayers, students, and universities collectively produced exactly the kind of education school they wanted. The structural part focuses on the nature of teaching as a form of social practice and the problems involved in trying to prepare people to pursue this practice.

## Decline of Normal Schools

MOST EDUCATION SCHOOLS GREW OUT OF THE NORMAL schools that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Their founders initially had heady dreams that these schools could become model institutions that would establish high-quality professional preparation for teachers along with a strong professional identity. For a time, some of the normal schools came close to realizing these dreams.

Soon, however, burgeoning enrollments in the expanding common schools produced an intense demand for new teachers to fill a growing number of classrooms, and the normal schools turned into teacher factories. They had to produce many teachers quickly and cheaply, or else school districts around the country would hire teachers without this training—or perhaps any form of professional preparation. So normal schools adapted by stressing quantity over quality, establishing a disturbing but durable pattern of weak professional preparation and low academic standards.

At the same time, normal schools had to confront a strong consumer demand from their own students, many of whom saw the schools as an accessible form of higher education rather than as a

site for teacher preparation. Located close to home, unlike the more centrally located state universities and land grant colleges, the normal schools were also easier to get into and less costly. As a result, many students enrolled who had little or no interest in teaching; instead, they wanted an advanced educational credential that would gain them admission to attractive white-collar positions. They resisted being trapped within a single vocational track—the teacher preparation program—and demanded a wide array of college-level liberal arts classes and programs. Since normal schools depended heavily on tuition for their survival, they had little choice but to comply with the demands of their “customers.”

This compliance reinforced the already-established tendency toward minimizing the extent and rigor of teacher education. It also led the normal schools to transform themselves into the model of higher education that their customers wanted, first by changing into teachers’ colleges (with baccalaureate programs for nonteachers), then into state liberal-arts colleges, and finally into the general-purpose regional state universities they are today.

As the evolving colleges moved away from being normal schools, teacher education programs became increasingly marginal within their own institutions, which were coming to imitate the multipurpose university by giving pride of place to academic departments, graduate study, and preparation for the more prestigious professions. Teacher education came to be perceived as every student’s second choice, and the ed school professors came to be seen as second-class citizens in the academy.

## Market Pressures in the Present

MARKET PRESSURES ON EDUCATION SCHOOLS HAVE changed over the years, but they have not declined. Teaching is a very large occupation in the United States, with about 3 million practitioners in total. To fill all the available vacancies, approximately one in every five college graduates must enter teaching each year. If education schools do not prepare enough candidates, state legislators will authorize alternative routes into the profession (requiring little or no professional education), and school boards will hire such prospects to place warm bodies in empty classrooms.

Education schools that try to increase the duration and rigor of teacher preparation by focusing more intensively on smaller cohorts of students risk leaving the bulk of teaching in the hands of practitioners who are prepared at less demanding institutions or who have not been prepared at all. In addition, such efforts run into strong opposition from within the university, which needs ed students to provide the numbers that bring legislative appropriations and tuition payments. Subsidies from the traditionally cost-effective teacher-education factories support the university’s more prestigious, but less lucrative, endeavors. As a result, universities do not want their ed schools to

turn into boutique programs for the preparation of a few highly professionalized teachers.

Another related source of institutional resistance arises whenever education schools try to promote quality over quantity. This resistance comes from academic departments, which have traditionally relied on the ability of their universities to provide teaching credentials as a way to induce students to major in “impractical” subjects. Departments such as English, history, and music have sold themselves to undergraduates for years with the argument that “you can always teach” these subjects. As a result, these same departments become upset when the education school starts to talk about upgrading, downsizing, or limiting access.

## Stigmatized Populations and Soft Knowledge

THE FACT THAT EDUCATION SCHOOLS SERVE STIGMATIZED populations aggravates the market pressures that have seriously undercut the status and the role of these schools. One such population is women, who currently account for about 70 percent of American teachers. Another is the working class, whose members have sought out the respectable knowledge-based white-collar work of teaching as a way to attain middle-class standing. Children make up a third stigmatized population. In a society that rewards contact with adults more than contact with children, and in a university setting that is more concerned with serious adult matters than with kid stuff, education schools lose out, because they are indelibly associated with children.

Teachers also suffer from an American bias in favor of doing over thinking. Teachers are the largest and most visible single group of intellectual workers in the United States—that is, people who make their living through the production and transmission of ideas.

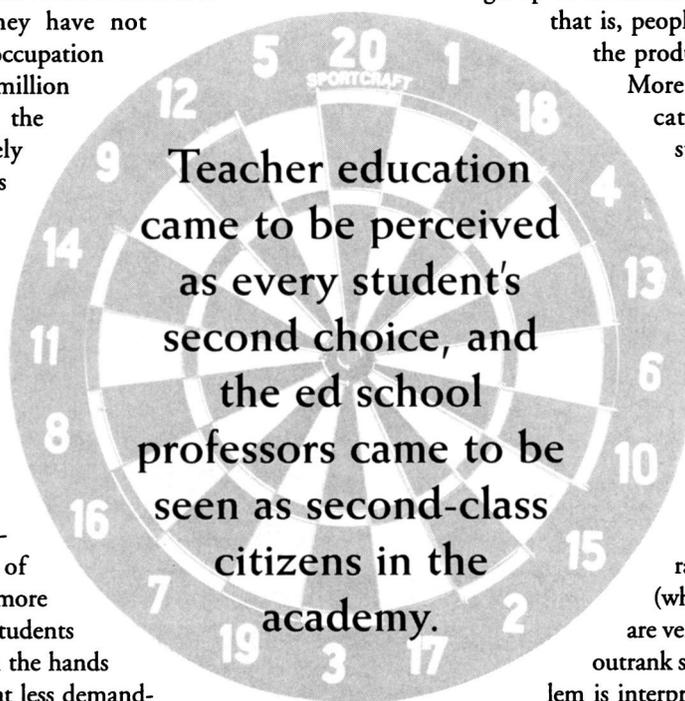
More accessible than the others in this category, teachers constitute the street-level intellectuals of our society. As the only intellectuals with whom most people will ever have close contact, teachers take the brunt of the national prejudice against book learning and those pursuits that are scornfully labeled as “academic.”

Another problem facing education schools is the low status of the knowledge they deal with: it is soft rather than hard, applied rather than pure. Hard disciplines (which claim to produce findings that are verifiable, definitive, and cumulative)

outrank soft disciplines (whose central problem is interpretation and whose findings are always subject to debate and reinterpretation by others).

Likewise, pure intellectual pursuits (which are oriented toward theory and abstracted from particular contexts) outrank those that are applied (which concentrate on practical work and concrete needs).

Knowledge about education is necessarily soft. Education is an extraordinarily complex social activity carried out by quirky and



willful actors, and it steadfastly resists any efforts to reduce it to causal laws or predictive theories. Researchers cannot even count on being able to build on the foundation of other people's work, since the validity of this work is always only partially established. Instead, they must make the best of a difficult situation.

They try to interpret what is going on in education, but the claims they make based on these interpretations are highly contingent. Education professors can rarely speak with unclouded authority about their area of expertise or respond definitively when others challenge their authority. Outsiders find it child's play to demonstrate the weaknesses of educational research and hold it up for ridicule for being inexact, contradictory, and impotent.

Knowledge about education is also necessarily applied. Education is not a discipline, defined by a theoretical apparatus and a research methodology, but an institutional area. As a result, education schools must focus their energies on the issues that arise from this area and respond to the practical concerns confronting educational practitioners in the field—even if doing so leads them into areas in which their constructs are less effective and their chances for success less promising. This situation unavoidably undermines the effectiveness and the intellectual coherence of educational research and thus also calls into question the academic stature of the faculty members who produce that research.

## No Prestige for Practical Knowledge

ANOTHER RELATED KNOWLEDGE-BASED PROBLEM FACES the education school. A good case can be made for the proposition that American education—particularly higher education—has long placed a greater emphasis on the exchange value of the educational experience (providing usable credentials that can be cashed in for a good job) than on its use value (providing usable knowledge). That is, what consumers have sought and universities have sold in the educational marketplace is not the content of the education received at the university (what the student actually learns there) but the form of this education (what the student can buy with a university degree).

One result of this commodification process is that universities have a strong incentive to promote research over teaching, for publications raise the visibility and prestige of the institution much more effectively than does instruction (which is less visible and more difficult to measure). And a prestigious faculty raises the exchange value of the university's diploma, independently of whatever is learned in the process of acquiring this diploma. By relying heavily on its faculty's high-status work in fields of hard knowledge, the university's marketing effort does not leave an honored role for an education school that produces soft knowledge about practical problems.

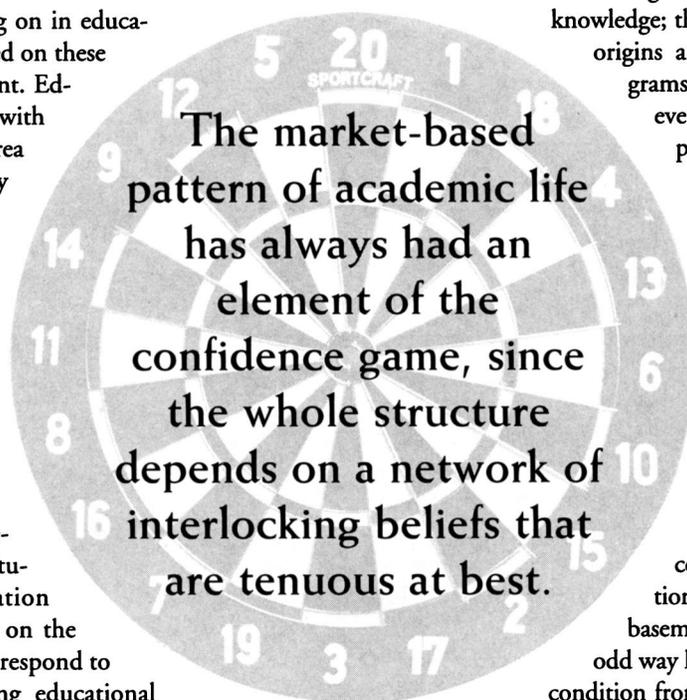
## A Losing Status, but a Winning Role?

WHAT ALL OF THIS SUGGESTS IS THAT EDUCATION SCHOOLS are poorly positioned to play the university status game. They serve the wrong clientele and produce the wrong knowledge; they bear the mark of their modest origins and their traditionally weak programs. And yet they are pressured by everyone from their graduates' employers to their university colleagues to stay the way they are, since they fulfill so many needs for so many constituencies.

But consider for a moment what would happen if we abandoned the status perspective in establishing the value of higher education. What if we focus instead on the social role of the education school rather than its social position in the academic firmament? What if we consider the possibility that education schools—toiling away in the dark basement of academic ignominy—in an odd way have actually been liberated by this condition from the constraints of academic status attainment? Is it possible that ed schools may have stumbled on a form of academic practice that could serve as a useful model for the rest of the university? What if the university followed this model and stopped selling its degrees on the basis of institutional prestige grounded in the production of abstract research and turned its focus on instruction in usable knowledge?

Though the university status game, with its reliance on raw credentialism—the pursuit of university degrees as a form of cultural currency that can be exchanged for social position—is not likely to go away soon, it is now under attack. Legislators, governors, business executives, and educational reformers are beginning to declare that indeed the emperor is wearing no clothes: that there is no necessary connection between university degrees and student knowledge or between professorial production and public benefit; that students need to learn something when they are in the university; that the content of what they learn should have some intrinsic value; that professors need to develop ideas that have a degree of practical significance; and that the whole university enterprise will have to justify the huge public and private investment it currently requires.

The market-based pattern of academic life has always had an element of the confidence game, since the whole structure depends on a network of interlocking beliefs that are tenuous at best: the belief that graduates of prestigious universities know more and can do more than other graduates; the belief that prestigious faculty make for a good university; and the belief that prestigious research makes for a good faculty. The problem is, of course, that when confidence in any of these beliefs is shaken, the whole structure can come tumbling down. And when it does, the only recourse is to rebuild on the basis of substance rather than reputation, demonstrations of competence rather than symbols of merit.



This dreaded moment is at hand. The fiscal crisis of the state, the growing political demand for accountability and utility, and the intensification of competition in higher education are all undermining the credibility of the current pattern of university life. Today's relentless demand for lower taxes and reduced public services makes it hard for the university to justify a high level of public funding on the grounds of prestige alone. State governments are demanding that universities produce measurable beneficial outcomes for students, businesses, and other taxpaying sectors of the community. And, by withholding higher subsidies, states are throwing universities into a highly competitive situation in which they vie with one another to see who can attract the most tuition dollars and the most outside research grants, and who can keep the tightest control over internal costs.

In this kind of environment, education schools have a certain advantage over many other colleges and departments in the university. Unlike their competitors across campus, they offer traditionally low-cost programs designed explicitly to be useful, both to students and to the community. They give students practical preparation for and access to a large sector of employment opportunities. Their research focuses on an area about which Americans worry a great deal, and they offer consulting services and policy advice. In short, their teaching, research, and service activities are all potentially useful to students and community alike. How many colleges of arts and letters can say the same?

But before we get carried away with the counterintuitive notion that ed schools might serve as a model for a university under fire, we need to understand that these brow-beaten institutions will continue to gain little credit for their efforts to serve useful social purposes, in spite of the current political saliency of such efforts. One reason for that is the peculiar nature of the occupation—teaching—for which ed schools are obliged to prepare candidates. Another is the difficulty that faces any academic unit that tries to walk the border between theory and practice.

## A Peculiar Kind of Professional

TEACHING IS AN EXTRAORDINARILY complex job. Researchers have estimated that the average teacher makes upward of 150 conscious instructional decisions during the course of the day, each of which has potentially significant consequences for the students involved. From the standpoint of public relations, however, the key difficulty is that, for the outsider, teaching looks all too easy. Its work is so visible, the skills required to do it seem so ordinary, and the knowledge it seeks to transmit is so generic.

Students spend a long time observing teachers at work. If you figure that the average student spends 6 hours a day in school for 180 days a year over the course of 12 years, that means that a high school graduate will have logged about 13,000 hours watching

teachers do their thing. No other social role (with the possible exception of parent) is so well known to the general public. And certainly no other form of paid employment is so well understood by prospective practitioners before they take their first day of formal professional education.

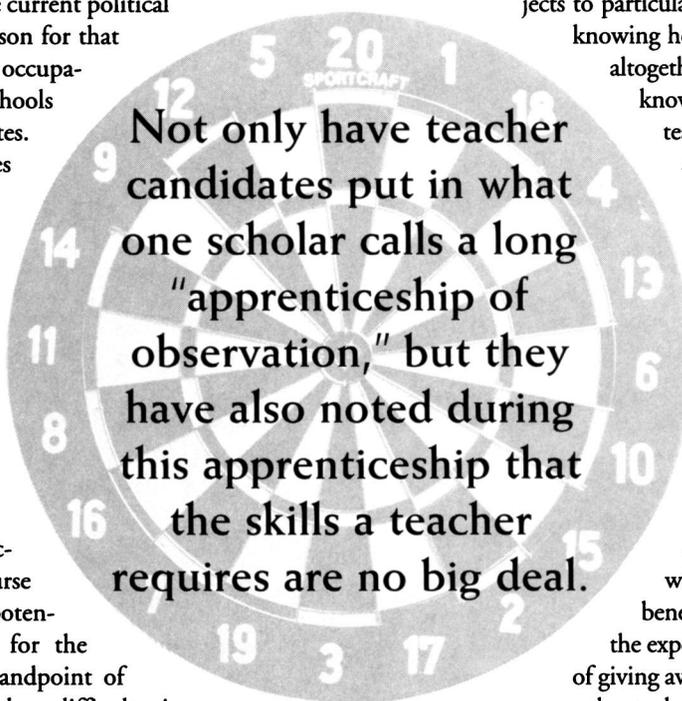
By comparison, consider other occupations that require professional preparation in the university. Before entering medical, law, or business school, students are lucky if they have spent a dozen hours in close observation of a doctor, lawyer, or businessperson at work. For these students, professional school provides an introduction to the mysteries of an arcane and remote field. But for prospective teachers, the education school seems to offer at best a gloss on a familiar topic and at worst an unnecessary hurdle for twelve-year apprentices who already know their stuff.

Not only have teacher candidates put in what one scholar calls a long "apprenticeship of observation," but they have also noted during this apprenticeship that the skills a teacher requires are no big deal. For one thing, ordinary adult citizens already know the subject matter that elementary and secondary school teachers seek to pass along to their students—reading, writing, and math; basic information about history, science, and literature; and so on. Because there is nothing obscure about these materials, teaching seems to have nothing about it that can match the mystery and opaqueness of legal contracts, medical diagnoses, or business accounting.

Of course, this perception by the prospective teacher and the public about the skills involved in teaching leaves out the crucial problem of how a teacher goes about teaching ordinary subjects to particular students. Reading is one thing, but knowing how to teach reading is another matter altogether. Ed schools seek to fill this gap in knowledge by focusing on the pedagogy of teaching particular subjects to particular students, but they do so over the resistance of teacher candidates who believe they already know how to teach and a public that fails to see pedagogy as a meaningful skill.

Compounding this resistance to the notion that teachers have special pedagogical skills is the student's general experience (at least in retrospect) that learning is not that hard—and, therefore, by extension, that teaching is not hard either. Unlike doctors and lawyers, who use their arcane expertise for the benefit of the client without passing along the expertise itself, teachers are in the business of giving away their expertise. Their goal is to empower the student to the point at which the teacher is no longer needed and the student can function effectively without outside help. The best teachers make learning seem easy and make their own role in the learning process seem marginal. As a result, it is easy to underestimate the difficulty of being a good teacher—and of preparing people to become good teachers.

Finally, the education school does not have exclusive rights to the subject matter that teachers teach. The only part of the



teacher's knowledge over which the ed school has some control is the knowledge about how to teach. Teachers learn about English, history, math, biology, music, art, and other subjects from the academic departments at the university in charge of these areas of knowledge. Yet, despite the university's shared responsibility for preparing teachers, ed schools are held accountable for the quality of the teachers and other educators they produce, often taking the blame for the deficiencies of an inadequate university education.

## The Border Between Theory and Practice

THE INTELLECTUAL PROBLEM facing American education schools is as daunting as the instructional problem, for the territory in which ed schools do research is the mine-strewn border between theory and practice. Traditionally, the university's peculiar area of expertise has been theory, while the public school is a realm of practice. In reality, the situation is more complicated, since neither institution can function without relying on both forms of knowledge. Education schools exist, in part, to provide a border crossing between these two countries, each with its own distinctive language and culture and its own peculiar social structure. When an ed school is working well, it presents a model of fluid interaction between university and school and encourages others on both sides of the divide to follow suit. The ideal is to encourage the development of teachers and other educators who can draw on theory to inform their instructional practice, while encouraging university professors to become practice-oriented theoreticians, able to draw on issues from practice in their theory building and to produce theories with potential use value.

In reality, no education school (or any other institution, for that matter) can come close to meeting this ideal. The tendency is to fall on one side of the border or the other—where life is more comfortable and the responsibilities more clear cut—rather than to hold the middle ground and retain the ability to work well in both domains.

But because of their location in the university and their identification with elementary and secondary schools, ed schools have had to keep working along the border. In the process, they draw unrelenting fire from both sides. The university views colleges of education as nothing but trade schools, which supply vocational training but no academic curriculum. Students, complaining that ed-school courses are too abstract and academic, demand more field experience and fewer course requirements. From one perspective, ed-school research is too soft, too applied, and totally lacking in academic rigor, while from another, it is impractical and irrelevant, serving a university agenda while being largely useless to the schools.

Of course, both sides may be right. After years of making and attending presentations at the annual meeting of the American

Educational Research Association, I am willing to concede that much of the work produced by educational researchers is lacking in both intellectual merit and practical application. But I would also argue that there is something noble and necessary about the way that the denizens of ed schools continue their quest for a workable balance between theory and practice. If only others in the academy would try to accomplish a marriage of academic elegance and social impact.

## A Model for Academe

SO WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE us in thinking about the poor beleaguered ed school? And what lessons, if any, can be learned from its checkered history?

The genuine instructional and intellectual weakness of ed schools results from the way the schools did what was demanded of them, which, though understandable, was not exactly honorable. Even so, much of the scorn that has come down on the ed school stems from its lowly status rather than from any demonstrable deficiencies in the educational role it has played. But then institutional status has a circular quality about it, which means that predictions of high or low institutional quality become self-fulfilling.

In some ways, ed schools have been doing things right. They have wrestled vigorously (if not always to good effect) with the problems of public education, an area that is of deep concern to most citizens. This has meant tackling social problems of great complexity and practical importance, even though the university does not place much value on the production of this kind of messy, indeterminate, and applied knowledge.

Oddly enough, the rest of the university could learn a lot from the example of the ed school. The question, however, is whether others in the university will see the example of the ed school as positive or negative. If academics consider this story in light of the current political and fiscal climate, then the ed school could serve as a model for a way to meet growing public expectations for universities to teach things that students need to know and to generate knowledge that benefits the community.

But it seems more likely that academics will consider this story a cautionary tale about how risky and unrewarding such a strategy can be. After all, education schools have demonstrated that they are neither very successful at accomplishing the marriage of theory and practice nor well rewarded for trying. In fact, the odor of failure and disrespect continues to linger in the air around these institutions. In light of such considerations, academics are likely to feel more comfortable placing their chips in the university's traditional confidence game, continuing to pursue academic status and to market educational credentials. And from this perspective, the example of the ed school is one they should avoid like the plague. 

