

Education School Grades and Selection into Teaching

by Cory Koedel — August 24, 2011

In a recent article, the author documents a startling difference between the grades that are awarded to undergraduate students in education and non-education classes at universities. Students pursuing undergraduate degrees in education, the vast majority of whom go on to work as K-12 teachers, receive significantly higher grades than students in every other academic discipline. The most probable explanation is that the high grades in education classes are the result of low grading standards. This commentary discusses how the overwhelmingly favorable grades that are awarded to education students are likely to affect the composition of the teaching workforce in K-12 schools.

In a recent article I show that college students in education classes receive higher grades than students in non-education classes (Koedel, 2011). What surprises me is not that a discrepancy exists, but rather its magnitude – it's not just that education students receive higher grades, they receive much higher grades. Plenty of supporting documentation is available in my paper, but a quick example makes my point: at the University of Indiana, Bloomington, three fourths of all grades awarded to undergraduate students in education classes are A's, and over 95 percent are A's and B's (based on my calculations using publicly available data). In my paper I show that high grades in education classes are the norm at universities across the country. I also rule out two possible explanations: (1) they are not the result of education students being more able, at least observationally (in fact, college entrance exam scores suggest the opposite), and (2) they are not explained by structural differences between education and other academic departments, like differences in class size. Low grading standards are the remaining (reasonable) explanation.

The low grading standards in education programs raise a number of important questions. In my paper I briefly address three. First, do they adversely impact the accumulation of knowledge for soon-to-be teachers during university training? Based on prior research on grade inflation (Babcock, 2010), the answer is likely yes. Second, do grades play any filtering role in education programs, or provide any meaningful information to students as to whether they are a good or bad fit for the discipline? The answer is almost surely no. And third, do the low evaluation standards in education programs carry over for teachers into the workforce? This question is the most difficult to answer, but a 2009 report from The New Teacher Project (TNTP, 2009) shows that teacher performance evaluations in K-12 schools are also overwhelmingly positive. The possibility of a connection cannot be ruled out.

One indisputable point is that grades in education programs do not distinguish students by performance. In this brief note I discuss how this feature of the grading policies in education

programs is likely to influence the composition of the K-12 teaching workforce. In economic terms, I suspect that the low grading standards affect selection into the teaching profession. I am particularly worried that they encourage some low-skilled individuals to become teachers who would otherwise choose a different career, and encourage some high-skilled individuals to abandon their plans to become teachers. To be clear, there are surely many teachers whose career decisions are unaffected by the low grading standards in education programs. However, the ones who I worry about are those on the margin – the bad ones who are enticed to choose an education major because of the favorable grades, and the good ones who switch away from education because they are unable to distinguish themselves from their less-skilled peers, or are otherwise frustrated by the low grading standards in their classes.

In a 2004 study, Peter Arcidiacono provides empirical evidence consistent with both scenarios playing out on college campuses across the country. Using a nationally representative dataset, he shows that over the course of their college careers, the least-skilled college students who initially choose a non-education major move into education programs, and most-skilled students who initially choose education majors move out of education programs. This is exactly the opposite of what those of us who are concerned about educator quality would like to see.

That less-skilled individuals move into education programs over time is hardly surprising given the high grades that are awarded in education classes. With a grading scale where only 5 percent of students get worse than a B, it is easy to see why some low-skilled students shift into education programs as they receive negative grade signals in their non-education classes during college. Unfortunately, this greatly increases the likelihood that these individuals will choose a career in teaching. And even worse, they will graduate from college with seemingly high GPAs (particularly when compared to the general population of college graduates), giving potential employers little information about their true placement in the skill distribution. For a student who is struggling with college, an education major seems like a fail-safe option.

What may be going on in the other tail of the distribution is equally concerning. Why do more-skilled individuals who initially choose to major in education switch majors later? The easy answer, and a common one among economists, is that they can earn more in a non-education career. But for this to fully explain the major-switching patterns revealed by Arcidiacono (2004), it would have to be the case that these better-than-average education majors don't fully realize that they can earn more with a non-education major prior to college entry (or else they are confused about their placement in the skill distribution upon initial entry into college). I'll concede that the non-education wage premium likely explains some exits by high-skilled individuals who initially choose education majors, but other factors are also likely to be in play. For example, the smartest and most successful people who I know have the lowest tolerance for mediocrity. Could it be that education schools, in facilitating mediocre students, are turning

away some of the brightest would-be teachers in the process? I don't know the answer to this question, but given the stakes I think the possibility should not be dismissed.

With all of the potential problems created by the low grading standards in education programs across the country, let me turn the issue on its head: what benefits do the low grading standards provide? And I don't mean for adults, I mean for kids. Let me put it this way: how could it possibly harm students in K-12 schools if we imposed meaningful grade distributions in education classes, and directed the would-be teachers who perform the worst during college to different majors (or even out of college)? The only possible response I can imagine is from those who continue to believe that we have a teacher shortage, who would argue that such a policy would turn away needed teachers. But noting that we may have teacher shortages in some areas, like in STEM fields, I just don't see the evidence of a teacher shortage more generally. If we really had a teacher shortage, all of the pink slips that teachers have received as a result of the recent financial crisis wouldn't be nearly as big of a problem – the market would quickly scoop up these newly-available teachers. And teacher groups like the NEA wouldn't need to constantly guard their territory from other teacher-producing groups, like Teach for America (see NEA (2011)) Finally, even if we do have a shortage, I think it's worth considering the possibility that we would still want to keep the least-skilled teachers out of the classroom and deal with the consequences some other way (like with larger classes).

I do not understand the rationale for supporting the current system of assigning overwhelmingly favorable grades to essentially everyone in college who decides to pursue a degree in education. I can't see how this system is good for students in K-12 schools, and there are many ways that it can be harmful.

References

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