

Minnesota Association of Colleges for Teacher Education

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April MACTE Minute

On March 23, 2011 a post written by Linda Darling-Hammond was added to a blog, “The Answer Sheet,” provided by Valerie Strauss and published by the Washington Post. MACTE shares some of Dr. Hammond’s statements by reading the opening paragraphs of her blog post which was titled *Darling-Hammond: U.S. vs highest-achieving nations in education*. She writes:

“The first ever International Summit on Teaching, convened last week in New York City, showed perhaps more clearly than ever that the United States has been pursuing an approach to teaching almost diametrically opposed to that pursued by the highest-achieving nations.

In a statement rarely heard these days in the United States, the Finnish Minister of Education launched the first session of last week’s with the words: “We are very proud of our teachers.” Her statement was so appreciative of teachers’ knowledge, skills, and commitment that one of the U.S. participants later confessed that he thought she was the teacher union president, who, it turned out, was sitting beside her agreeing with her account of their jointly-constructed profession.

There were many “firsts” in this remarkable Summit. It was the first time the United States invited other nations to our shores to learn from them about how to improve schools, taking a first step beyond the parochialism that has held us back while others have surged ahead educationally.

It was the first time that government officials and union leaders from 16 nations met together in candid conversations that found substantial consensus about how to create a well-prepared and accountable teaching profession.

And it was, perhaps, the first time that the growing de-professionalization of teaching in America was recognized as out of step with the strategies pursued by the world’s educational leaders.

Evidence presented at the summit showed that, with dwindling supports, most teachers in the United States must go into debt in order to prepare for an occupation that pays them, on average, 60% of the salaries earned by other college graduates. Those who work in poor districts will not only earn less than their colleagues in wealthy schools, but they will pay for many of their students’ books and supplies themselves.

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And with states' willingness to lower standards rather than raise salaries for the teachers of the poor, a growing number of recruits enter with little prior training, trying to learn on-the-job with the uneven mentoring provided by cash-strapped districts. It is no wonder that a third of U.S. beginners leave within the first five years, and those with the least training leave at more than twice the rate of those who are well-prepared.

Those who stay are likely to work in egg-crate classrooms with few opportunities to collaborate with one another. In many districts, they will have little more than "drive-by" workshops for professional development, and – if they can find good learning opportunities, they will pay for most of it out of their own pockets.

Meanwhile, some policymakers argue that we should eliminate requirements for teacher training, stop paying teachers for gaining more education, let anyone enter teaching, and fire those later who fail to raise student test scores. And efforts like those in Wisconsin to eliminate collective bargaining create the prospect that salaries and working conditions will sink even lower, making teaching an unattractive career for anyone with other professional options.

The contrasts to the American attitude toward teachers and teaching could not have been more stark. Officials from countries like Finland and Singapore described how they have built a high-performing teaching profession by enabling all of their teachers to enter high-quality preparation programs, generally at the masters' degree level, where they receive a salary while they prepare. There they learn research-based teaching strategies and train with experts in model schools attached to their universities. They enter a well-paid profession – in Singapore earning as much as beginning doctors -- where they are supported by mentor teachers and have 15 or more hours a week to work and learn together – engaging in shared planning, action research, lesson study, and observations in each other's classrooms. And they work in schools that are equitably funded and well-resourced with the latest technology and materials.

Because our public comment time is limited, the presentation of Dr. Darling-Hammond's comments will end at this point. We encourage you all to read the rest of her comments at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/darling-hammond-us-vs-highest-achieving-nations-in-education/2011/03/22/ABkNeaCB_blog.html.

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