

Non-partisan education evaluations are anything but, education professor says

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(PhysOrg.com) -- An increasingly influential national organization evaluating and grading teacher education programs misleads its audience by claiming to be "non-partisan" when, in reality, the group is part of a growing movement of "corporate education" reformers pushing an agenda of standardization and privatization at the expense of meaningful teaching and learning, according to a professor in the University at Buffalo's Graduate School of Education, author and longtime teacher advocate.

"And the same kind of stifling of public schools, teachers and students that we have seen for several years is now being directed against college and university-based [teacher education](#) as well," says Catherine Cornbleth, professor of learning and instruction who has been a vocal supporter of exemplary teaching throughout her career at UB.

The organization rating teacher education programs is the self-styled National Council on [Teacher Quality](#), according to Cornbleth, and the problem with NCTQ's evaluation model, she says, is its superficial and arbitrary nature.

"I'd describe it as akin to evaluating restaurants on the basis of their menus and your own preferences," says Cornbleth. "If a restaurant doesn't provide their menu for your evaluation, you either give them an F or estimate their menu and grade. Then you publish your 'findings' so consumers can make informed choices. Colleges are being threatened and bullied by NCTQ to participate."

Cornbleth has earned a reputation as a researcher and champion of the perennial value of good teaching -- which defies cookie cutter production. Her latest book on effective teaching is about teachers who have found ways to reach individual students within strict, standardized test-driven environments. Before that, Cornbleth's work with life-changing but unconventional "maverick" teachers attracted national attention and praise, connecting with Americans' familiarity with teachers who have been portrayed in movies and well-known literature.

Now she is taking aim at the NCTQ and other corporate education reformers, especially those who insist on accountability for schools and teachers but evade accountability for their own actions.

"Longer term, if NCTQ and other corporate reformers get their way, public school teachers would pass corporate-provided subject matter tests for certification and follow so-called scripted instructional programs provided by corporate publishers," says Cornbleth. There would be little or no room for individualization to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, she adds. "It's the old factory model for manufacturing automobiles that even Ford doesn't follow anymore.

"In too many cases," Cornbleth continues, "the phrase 'teacher quality' has become code for corporatizing teacher education and teaching." Teachers would have no union protections and limited, if any, health insurance or retirement pension. Students would be subject to even more standardization and testing in the "basics" -- unless their parents could afford private schooling.

Cornbleth's admonitions fly in the face of current trends. She reveals the actual workings of the NCTQ, a nonprofit that claims to be non-partisan. "It may be non-partisan in a Democratic-Republican sense," Cornbleth says, "but it is not independent. Just look at its foundation funders and

the members of its Advisory Board, as well as its activities." That is just what Cornbleth is doing in her ongoing research project.

"NCTQ's charade (like the wolf posing as Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother) is significant because, in the guise of providing information and evaluation, it spends large sums of money undermining public education, teachers and teacher education, while doing nothing to foster their improvement," says Cornbleth. "Getting a C- on a paper (without teacher comments) doesn't tell you what's wrong with it or how to improve. In the case of teacher education, participation also wastes the limited resources of the programs being scrutinized."

NCTQ has a track record of evaluating teacher education programs in about a dozen states and is now attempting a nationwide evaluation to be published in US News & World Report next year, she says, although independent and for-profit teacher education programs are not facing such challenges. Fortunately for New Yorkers, State University of New York Chancellor Nancy Zimpher and numerous deans within the system have objected to NCTQ's methods, according to Cornbleth. Most SUNY campuses, she says, probably will not participate and risk getting an "F."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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