

Let's Stop Asking Whether Teachers Are Professionals. Let's Ask What Kinds of Professionals We Want Teachers to Be



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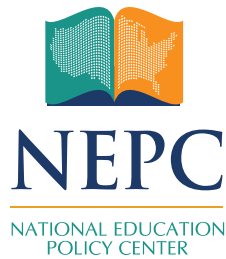
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I. Executive Summary

A professionalized teaching workforce can lead to quality teaching, enhanced student outcomes, and contributions to the public good. Yet despite extensive, ongoing efforts to mandate “high-quality” teaching, there remains little consensus on how to achieve it. Recent policies and reform efforts that were designed, in part, to create structures to address teacher quality have backfired. Specifically, they have led to de-professionalizing teachers, increasing teacher workload, standardizing curriculum and assessment, disempowering teachers, and sowing public distrust of teachers.

Teachers have been unable to maintain consistent control over the primary processes that define any profession: 1) specialized and formalized knowledge that informs established and agreed-upon practices; 2) a learning community governed by standards for entry, preparation, continuous development, and practice; and 3) service and commitment to those served, keeping their welfare and the public good at the center of practice and decision-making. Neither have they consistently measured up against other factors that differentiate professions from occupations, such as compensation, working conditions or prestige. Although teachers have had some involvement in determining accreditation, certification, and teaching standards, many of these structures have been imposed onto teachers through political mandates and the involvement of policymakers, advocacy organizations, and for-profit corporations outside of education. These external pressures have led to tensions and constraints on teachers’ professionalism and the professionalization of teaching.

Three recent developments—standards and assessments, curriculum restrictions, and digi-

talization—have affected how teachers are credentialed, the specialized knowledge that they bring, the curriculum decisions they make, and the nature of their roles in supporting student learning. We analyze these developments in an effort to understand why teachers' professional status continues to be an enduring and evolving question.

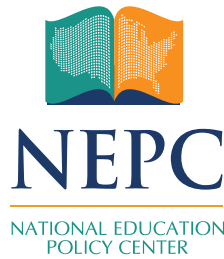
Across these recent developments, the imbalance of power among stakeholder groups in and out of education has excluded teachers and eroded their professional status. However, rather than ask whether or not teachers are professionals, it would be valuable to move away from static definitions or lists of characteristics that define professionals. Instead, it is helpful to ask, "What kinds of professionals do we want teachers to be?" Policy that redistributes power to teachers can encourage shared decision-making and networks of teachers who work with various stakeholder groups as a democratic professional community focused on information exchange, problem-solving, dialogue, and innovation. To advance teacher professionalism in this way, we recommend that policymakers and educational leaders take the following actions:

National and State Education Agencies and Accrediting Organizations

- Supplement standardized credentialing requirements for entry into the profession with teacher assessments that are locally designed, controlled, and responsive to community and local needs, thus building upon the existing knowledge base for teachers while simultaneously valuing local knowledge, culture, and expertise.

School and District Leaders

- Provide tangible support including funding, release time, and resources for teachers to collaborate and network, as well as provide professional development for teachers to work with members of the school, district, and broader community around issues of curriculum, teaching, and learning.
- Oppose efforts by a vocal minority in their communities, including elected school board members, to ban specific books and curricular content that educators and other community stakeholders determine that teachers can teach and that students should be able to access in classrooms and school libraries.
- Resist the temptation to prescribe that teachers use new technologies, such as generative Artificial Intelligence, for instructional purposes. Instead include teachers in decisions to pilot, adopt, and implement specific digital products and platforms and give teachers flexibility to use new technologies in different ways.



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II. Introduction

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- Resist the temptation to prescribe that teachers use new technologies, such as generative Artificial Intelligence, for instructional purposes. Instead include teachers in decisions to pilot, adopt, and implement specific digital products and platforms and give teachers flexibility to use new technologies in different ways.

II. Introduction

Many assume that a professionalized teaching workforce can lead to quality teaching, enhanced student outcomes, and contributions to the public good.^{1,2} Yet, despite extensive, ongoing efforts to mandate “high-quality” teaching, there remains little consensus on how

to achieve it.³ Further, many recent policies and reform efforts that were designed, in part, to create structures to address teacher quality, have led to teacher de-professionalization, increased teacher workload, standardization of curriculum and assessment, teacher disempowerment, and public distrust of teachers.⁴

Professions are commonly defined by particular traits, dimensions, or characteristics including credentialing and entrance into the profession, induction and ongoing professional development, specialization and standards around a defined knowledge base, and authority/autonomy and control over decision-making.⁵ Yet policies that seek to regulate and control teachers' work, identity, and purpose, reflect multiple and divergent views of teacher professionalization and professionalism,^{6,7} resulting in an ongoing struggle over the professional status of teachers. These policies often have undermined teacher decision-making, autonomy, and responsibility, which are key elements of professionalism. Across the competing views, teaching is frequently positioned as a "semi-profession"⁸ with some characteristics or structures in place (e.g., specialized knowledge or licensing and credentialing) but with limited autonomy, internal control, or professional standing compared to members of more established professions, such as medicine and law.⁹

This analysis of the professional status of teachers begins with a review of the literature and offers a brief historical overview of teacher de/professionalization. We go on to examine teaching as a profession, using attributes commonly associated with professions as analytic lenses. Then, we focus on how three recent developments—teacher performance assessments, curriculum restrictions and book bans, and digitalization—have affected how teachers are credentialed, the specialized knowledge that they bring, the curricular decisions they make, and the nature of their roles. Given these contexts, we offer an analysis of why teachers' professional status continues to be an enduring and evolving question. We conclude with recommendations for policymakers and educational leaders. Throughout this brief, we find that the professional status of teachers is contested territory that is vulnerable to reforms and policymaking that are designed to shape, influence, enhance, and/or limit the purposes of education and what teachers can do, or not, in service of broader purposes of teaching and learning.

III. Review of the Literature

A Glance at History

In the U.S., teachers have long struggled for their roles to be recognized as a legitimate profession, reaching back to the early days of the common schools movement of the 19th century. From the early 1800s to the turn of the century, the confluence of several major events directly affected the professional status of teachers. First, the industrial revolution required labor, causing large numbers of people, especially men, to move to city centers to look for work, while a substantial immigration wave brought large numbers of newcomers, primarily from Northern and Western Europe, to America.¹⁰ Then, the field of teaching was affected by two historical movements—dramatically changing demographics and a "blossoming industrial capitalism" that demanded a workforce that exhibited certain habits, such as punc-

tuality and adherence to directions. These changes prompted widespread societal demands for “intentional nation building,” for “new social and economic ambitions for education,”¹¹ and for schools.¹² As men flocked (and were sought) to fill the jobs newly created by rapid industrialization, public officials overseeing the expanded role for schooling needed to train and hire more teachers. This opened the door for women who had few occupational options and were eager to be hired and accept salaries far lower than men demanded. Women were also seen as being more compliant, more easily controlled, and more apt to possess “natural” care-taking dispositions suited for teaching.¹³

Thus began the “feminization” of teaching, which has essentially ensured that teachers’ fight for professional recognition has been continuous and ongoing, because, as “in most societies, a high proportion of women suffices to reduce the status of any given profession.”¹⁴ Also, as education shifted from being a private enterprise between teacher and pupil to a public institution, it became a powerful tool for advancing ideological and political agendas on a national scale¹⁵ and a site for control of school curriculum and teachers’ work.¹⁶

Teachers’ struggle for their work to be recognized and valued continued even in the face of notable efforts to professionalize teaching. In the 20th century, economic and societal demands for “an actual system of education,” required, for example, teachers who possessed “*professional knowledge*,”¹⁷ special or higher education institutions responsible for preparing prospective teachers, and the creation of teacher certification.¹⁸ Thus, debates about teaching as a profession, the professional knowledge base of teaching, and whether teachers are, or can be, professionals, have not yet waned.

Hallmarks of a Profession

“Profession” as a sociological construct is typically defined in terms of characteristics—i.e., what members of a profession exemplify and can or should do versus what a profession is—and as a way of distinguishing a profession from other occupational pursuits.¹⁹ The question of what characteristics constitute teacher professionalism has been extensively discussed²⁰ as has whether teaching is a profession at all.²¹ A consensus view has formed that the hallmarks of any profession typically include: 1) specialized and formalized knowledge that inform established and agreed-upon practices; 2) a learning community governed by standards for entry, preparation, continuous development, and practice; and 3) service and commitment to those served, keeping their welfare and the public good at the center of practice and decision-making.²² Additional factors that differentiate professions from occupations include compensation, working conditions and prestige.²³ However, teaching has not consistently measured up against these criteria, thus its characterization as a “not quite profession.”²⁴ Taking each criterion in turn, the reasons for this characterization are clear.

Specialized Knowledge, Agreed-Upon Practices

While “teaching is in fact, the mother of all professions”²⁵ as no profession could exist without its teachers, arguments about whether teachers possess a unique, codified knowledge base have persisted for nearly a century. Early critics lambasted the study of the education

field in higher education institutions for vacuous and trivial content, its departure from the liberal arts curriculum, and its proliferation of low-quality courses.²⁶ These criticisms have been ongoing, with disagreements about the *what*, *how*, and *why* of teaching and education as a body of knowledge: what must teachers master before they are deemed qualified to practice, how should this body of knowledge be conveyed to teacher candidates' and why does possessing this body of knowledge assure quality results? A 2024 report examining the “2,000 [Institutions of Higher Education] that offer teacher preparation in the United States”²⁷ found teacher education to be “a highly variable enterprise,”²⁸ such that “specific course content varies and may or may not be connected to clinical experiences.”²⁹ While variability is to be expected in the practice of teaching as a complex and context-dependent activity, variability in preparation suggests a lack of consensus in the field about what teachers should know and be able to do—quarrels that remain timely and unresolved. At the root of these criticisms are fundamental disagreements about whether teaching is innate or acquired behavior, technical and predictable, or complex and uncertain,³⁰ all of which fuel arguments about whether, and how, teaching can be taught and therefore learned.

Standards for Entry and Professional Practice

A profession should “be held accountable for meeting high standards of practice”³¹ and, therefore, committed to ensuring that all members meet specific criteria for entry and continued membership,³² based upon clearly articulated and agreed upon understandings and codes of conduct.³³ However, as a consequence of varying policy decisions governing teacher preparation and licensure,³⁴ the field of teaching has yet to gain consensual, consistent, and clearly articulated standards for entry and practice. Any agreement on standards remains elusive even while there is greater coherence and consistency among educators in terms of what constitutes strong teacher preparation—especially in response to racial and linguistic diversity among school populations—and what good teachers should know and do.³⁵ Moreover, state licensure or certification often purportedly serves as a “gatekeeping” function to maintain quality,³⁶ indicating that teacher candidates have achieved “minimal requirements and are safe to place with young people,”³⁷ but that function can be overridden.

In particular, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation³⁸ opened the gates for states to “create alternative routes to full state certification that target talented people who would be turned off by traditional preparation and certification programs.”³⁹ While state certification was still considered a marker of a “highly qualified teacher,” NCLB redefined what that meant by supporting “a variety of ways for teachers to demonstrate content mastery,” including “a state content assessment . . . or by holding an undergraduate major, or by completing coursework equivalent to an undergraduate major, or by holding a graduate degree in the subject(s) taught.”⁴⁰ The proliferation of alternative pathways to “certification” expanded by NCLB has added to the variability in teacher preparation options and curriculum, with requirements ranging from minimal to commensurate with traditional university-based programs.⁴¹ As a result, there is great variation in those allowed entry into the profession. Although all teacher candidates may be designated teachers of record, they may evidence differing levels of preparation and proficiency in their understanding of content, pedagogy, or students’ needs.⁴² Recent teacher shortages, created by teacher retirements and turnover as well as decreasing interest in teaching, have resulted in even more fast-track

alternatives into the classroom, some of which are questionable in quality.⁴³ For example, online-only teacher preparation programs, such as “Teachers for Tomorrow,” that do not require any field placements and offer certification for a price, are increasingly available,⁴⁴ even while data indicate that teachers “certified” via such programs “negatively impact their students’ achievement.”⁴⁵ Although teachers prepared by alternative certification programs such as *Relay Graduate School of Education* or *Teach for America* give these programs strong marks, there is insufficient evidence that these alternative tracks deserve the praise they get. Also, there are other issues, such as poor retention, that affect the quality of these programs.⁴⁶

These efforts to expand pathways into teaching that vary in structure, length, content, criteria, requirements, and rigor, have weakened claims that teaching is a profession. Shifting standards for entering the teaching field and the regulatory inconsistency among state legislatures have made teacher preparation more of a market-driven enterprise than one that is undergirded by professional commitments and goals. These policy moves have also increased perceptions that teachers are “functionaries . . . [who] do not plan or evaluate their own work; they merely perform it.”⁴⁷

Students’ Welfare at the Center

Because teachers are consistently identified as the most critical in-school factor that contributes to student outcomes,⁴⁸ policymakers often see quality teachers as key to national progress. Also, when national progress is framed by capitalist imperatives, as is the case in the U.S., business leaders and the general public tend to urge policymakers and government officials to hold teachers accountable for the development of a workforce that can maintain a competitive edge in a globalized economy.⁴⁹ NCLB legislation, with its emphasis on standardized test-based accountability, positioned teachers at odds with the professional attribute that their work should center on ensuring the welfare of “clients”—students. Tying teacher performance to standardized tests results had a narrowing effect on the curriculum,⁵⁰ as teachers focused on compliance and teaching to the test, sometimes at odds with students’ needs, because of “the increase of rewards and sanctions attached to assessment results.”⁵¹

Accountability structures that emphasize external bureaucratic accountability⁵² take decisions that impact student learning out of the hands of teachers and transfer them to policymakers and legislators who are unconnected to schools and students. Teachers’ professionalism is therefore undermined, and they are relegated to complying versus deciding what is best for their students. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA)⁵³ eliminated some of the punishments and sanctions that NCLB attached to making annual yearly progress. However, ESSA continues annual standardized testing and testing-related sanctions on schools, which maintains pressure on teachers and schools to focus on test scores and ranking rather than their professional judgment.⁵⁴

The current sociopolitical context also continues to put teachers in a moral bind, testing their obligations as professionals to students. For instance, restrictions written into law by “anti-woke” legislation override teachers’ professional judgement on what can be taught in

schools and who has control over the curriculum.⁵⁵ Under threat of sanctions, including losing their jobs, teachers must omit “divisive concepts” as determined by legislators, exclude any of thousands of banned texts that are deemed inappropriate for students,⁵⁶ and teach a redacted version of history.⁵⁷ It has become illegal for teachers to teach some subjects factually, to teach in ways that recognize students’ identities and histories, and to teach what they believe their students should know as members of a pluralistic, multiracial, multilingual democracy. Under these circumstances, teachers are compelled to comply with executive directives and state laws and thus prevented from placing the welfare of their students at the core of practice, as is ethically incumbent upon professionals.

The (De)Professionalization of Teaching

The state, status, and attractiveness of teaching has ebbed and flowed from the 1970s through the present, with many reports and surveys indicating that opinions and perceptions of teachers and teaching, including among teachers themselves, are at an all-time low.⁵⁸ Teachers characterize their jobs as stressful, unsafe, unfulfilling, poorly paid, and overloaded with too many responsibilities for too little time.⁵⁹ The majority of teachers feel a lack of respect for their work,⁶⁰ particularly from the media and elected officials.⁶¹ Teachers express dissatisfaction with working conditions and the lack of support from administration. They identify these dissatisfactions as key factors in their decision to leave the profession.⁶² Other factors that cause teachers to leave the profession include inadequate resources and students presenting with increased mental health and disruptive behavior challenges.⁶³ The majority of teachers report having less autonomy in decision-making and less control over curriculum and instruction, even though they express interest in having greater say and participation in instructional decisions.⁶⁴

The hyper-regulation of teachers’ work in the U.S. has led to an alarming level of demoralization among teachers,⁶⁵ who experience “uncertainty and alienation . . . [and] the de-humanizing effects of an increasingly managerialist and market-oriented approach to school education.”⁶⁶ The financial crisis of 2008 and the exhaustion of *Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Security* (CARES) Act funding following the COVID pandemic have put additional financial strain on schools and education.⁶⁷ These economic calamities led to financial shortfalls for teachers, who lost additional ground in terms of compensation commensurate with professionals,⁶⁸ further undercutting notions of professionalism. Teachers seem to be experiencing what sociologist Julia Evetts calls a “new professionalism,” in which external pressures override their work, “from notions of partnership, collegiality, discretion, and trust to increasing levels of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardization, assessment, and performance review.”⁶⁹

IV. Recent Developments

With these current contexts in mind, we focus on three recent and ongoing developments related to the professionalization of teaching: teacher performance assessments for certification and licensure; legislation surrounding curriculum and book bans; and digital technology that purports to personalize student learning, accelerated by recent advances in gen-

erative Artificial Intelligence. These developments are especially salient to the discussion because they reflect central issues in the teacher professionalism debates: measurements of teacher quality; decisions about curriculum; and best methods to meet students' needs. Consequently, they aggravate the contested territory of teaching, stir up the many groups and players who shape teaching, and worsen tensions that arise from these developments and their impact on teacher professionalism.

Credentialing and Certification: Teacher Performance Assessments

Since the 2000s, states and institutions have adopted nationally available teacher performance assessments for preservice teachers, such as the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) and the Praxis Performance Assessment of Teaching (PPAT), as a policy lever to strengthen the teaching profession.⁷⁰ As of 2021, at least 16 states required teacher performance assessments,⁷¹ and approximately 900 teacher preparation programs across 40 states adopted teacher performance assessments for certification/licensure and/or program completion purposes.⁷²

In contrast to paper-and-pencil teacher certification exams, teacher performance assessments aim to measure subject-specific, real-world tasks through a portfolio that includes lesson plans, teaching artifacts, video segments, student work samples, and reflections on teaching. One goal of these assessments is to “link a national conversation aimed at building consensus around professional standards of teaching practice with the tools of practice-based assessment.”⁷³ These performance assessments are based on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards portfolio assessment and claim to be aligned with the InTASC model core teaching standards, professional organizations' content standards, and national and state teacher education accreditation standards.⁷⁴

Despite their widespread use in teacher education, prospective and current teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and policymakers debate the adoption and implementation of teacher performance assessments in teacher education.⁷⁵ Advocates argue that teacher performance assessments create structures for professionalizing teaching through alignment with standards for quality teaching⁷⁶ and professionally governed systems for internal and external teacher education accountability and programmatic improvement.^{77,78} Some view these rigorous assessments as similar to licensure exams in law and medicine. Some research suggests that teacher performance assessments, such as the edTPA, are psychometrically sound and that scores on teacher performance assessments are positively correlated with other characteristics of effective teacher education programs, including teacher candidates' perceptions of programmatic and clinical support.⁷⁹

Conversely, some teachers, teacher educators, and researchers have critiqued teacher performance assessments. Researchers point to the absence of social justice and equity in the content of the teacher performance assessments,⁸⁰ raising questions about whether the assessments measure consensus views of “quality teaching.”⁸¹ Scholars argue that standardized, nationally available performance assessments devalue local expertise,⁸² with scoring outsourced to for-profit learning companies (Pearson, Inc. for the edTPA) and testing companies (ETS for the PPAT) that ignore local contexts and thus contribute to the corpora-

tization of teaching and the business of assessment. Researchers who have examined the consequential effects of the high stakes associated with teacher performance assessments⁸³ have found that they can lead to a narrowing of the teacher education curriculum⁸⁴ and a culture of compliance in the face of accountability pressures.⁸⁵ Preservice teachers describe the burdensome logistics that accompany completion of the assessments that are unrelated to the tasks of teaching.⁸⁶ Further research highlights the role of these assessments as gate-keeping mechanisms for preservice teachers of color and teachers from other minoritized communities.⁸⁷

In response to these critiques, Georgia,⁸⁸ New York,⁸⁹ and New Jersey⁹⁰ have rescinded the performance assessment requirements for teacher certification and licensure. Additionally, legislators have proposed legislation that would eliminate the teacher performance assessment requirement for teacher certification and licensure in Illinois,⁹¹ California,⁹² and Connecticut.⁹³

Curriculum: Widespread Curriculum Restrictions and Book Bans

As professionals, teachers should hold “a high degree of control over their work,”⁹⁴ but teachers in the U.S. have never consistently maintained decision-making power over instructional decisions and curriculum,⁹⁵ key classroom activities that are central to teachers’ role. When teachers are regarded as “transformative intellectuals,”⁹⁶ they are able to enact a “curricular vision”⁹⁷ as curriculum-makers,⁹⁸ not simply curriculum-deliverers, and as professionals who exercise agency and make informed decisions according to their expert knowledge, professional judgement and diverse students’ needs. However, in the U.S., any notion of teachers as autonomous professionals and curriculum-makers is being currently dismantled by politicians intent on legislating what teachers can and cannot say and do in their classrooms.^{99,100} The range of legislation and executive actions aimed at suppressing or outright banning the instruction or mention of what have been termed “divisive concepts” is increasing and shifting, and lawmakers at local, state, and federal levels continue to introduce and pass new laws intended to impose so-called woke restrictions.¹⁰¹

According to a recent report, 30 states have introduced bills banning or limiting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives.¹⁰² The UCLA School of Law has been tracking anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) activities since 2020 and notes that thus far, “a total of **247** local, state, and federal government entities across the United States have introduced **861** anti-Critical Race Theory bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements, and other measures.”¹⁰³ *Education Week* adds that, “since January 2021, 44 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism.”¹⁰⁴ These legislated restrictions, compounded by pressures from parents, religious institutions, and school boards seeking to align curricular content to their own beliefs, create a chilling effect on teachers’ ability to make instructional decisions.¹⁰⁵ Many states now grant parents and the public the right to review and challenge library/reading and instructional materials, while other states have extended these prohibitions to professional development trainings for teachers.¹⁰⁶ According to the American Library Association, there have been “organized campaigns” to ban books, with an unprecedented 4,240 discrete book titles targeted for censorship in 2023 by individuals

and groups.¹⁰⁷

The impact on teachers has been pronounced. Teachers are concerned about crossing vague content and instructional boundaries, losing their jobs, or risking sanction and censure.¹⁰⁸ These worries are not unfounded as educators have been fired from their positions for violating these laws and executive actions,¹⁰⁹ and schools have been threatened with loss of funding.¹¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, teachers' perception of their own professional status has fallen dramatically in recent years.¹¹¹

Digital Technology: Generative Artificial Intelligence as a Tool to Personalize Learning

As digital technologies continue to shape society, education, teaching, and learning,¹¹² teachers' roles have changed with the emergence of and increased accessibility to one-to-one laptops and tablets,¹¹³ social media,¹¹⁴ apps,¹¹⁵ and other tools such as digital workbooks, texts, internships/simulations, and virtual reality in educational spaces.¹¹⁶ The shift to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption and integration of digital technologies in K-12 education, including Learning Management Systems, such as Google Classroom (part of Google Workspace for Education); videoconferencing applications, such as Zoom, that support virtual instruction and communication between teachers and families; and a plethora of educational software designed to personalize student learning in K-12 schools.¹¹⁷

As one of the fastest growing innovations in technology, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), portends to “transform education as we know it.”¹¹⁸ Broadly speaking, generative AI is defined by its ability to produce original human-like output by detecting patterns, making associations, and automating decisions, through an analysis of large data systems via complex algorithms.¹¹⁹ For example, generative AI large language models that power ChatGPT break down complex sentences and use probability models to predict and generate original human-like responses.¹²⁰ These models and systems often take place in a “black box,” where the data and algorithms are not known to the developers or transparent to the users.¹²¹

Since the launch of ChatGPT in fall 2022, technology companies have rapidly incorporated generative AI into a wide range of educational tools including virtual learning platforms, learning management systems, and chatbots.¹²² OpenAI advanced ChatGPT as a “personal tutor” for students,¹²³ Google introduced Gemini as an AI assistant in its Google Workspace for Education,¹²⁴ and Microsoft incorporated AI through “CoPilot,” as a supplement to its Microsoft Office Suite. Technology companies argue that generative AI has the capacity to support targeted, individualized learning through AI-powered educational learning games, immediate feedback to students through adaptive learning platforms, and automated grading, freeing up teachers' time to focus on their students.¹²⁵ In 2023, surveys of teachers indicated that between 30-50 percent of teachers had used generative AI for teaching and learning purposes.¹²⁶ However, many teachers may not be aware of potential risks of using generative AI in the classroom.¹²⁷

Some educational scholars and practitioners note that digital technologies that integrate

generative AI as a tool to personalize student learning and individualize instruction pose potential challenges to teacher professionalism.¹²⁸ Critics point to the adoption of AI through the intensification of existing concerns regarding the digitalization/platforming of schooling. They argue that generative AI rests on longstanding pressure to “personalize” education by shifting to digitally administered and controlled approaches to teaching and learning.¹²⁹ Additional risks include increasing costs, creating threats to student privacy, narrowing instructional content, creating and disseminating misinformation, and reinforcing and amplifying biases that already exist in current systems and technologies.¹³⁰ For example, AI tutors that restrict broader concepts of learning—pointing students to generate “correct answers” around rote recall or a discrete skill, rather than promoting critical thinking—remove the teacher from the role of curriculum designer, instructor, or assessor.¹³¹ Generative AI is known to “hallucinate” or create false or unsubstantiated responses.¹³² Also, generative AI models are based on existing data systems and simplistic models that are prone to reinforce existing biases in the data themselves.¹³³

Despite concerns expressed by educators, educational researchers, and technology companies,¹³⁴ as of September 2024, no federal or state regulations related to the development, adoption, and integration of generative AI in education exist. The U.S. Department of Education Office of Technology published two major reports on generative AI in education that offer recommendations for developing and using generative AI in education,¹³⁵ and as of January 2025, 25 states offer guidance for K12 schools and districts around generative AI in education.¹³⁶ But technology companies retain primary control over the integration of generative AI in educational spaces as a tool for teaching and learning.

V. Discussion and Analysis

We structure our analysis of these developments around four key questions: (1) how is teaching quality defined; (2) who gets to decide; (3) what is the problem that this development or reform is trying to address; and (4) what is the solution to this problem? These questions often “lurk under the surface and only occasionally come explicitly to the fore.”¹³⁷ In addressing these questions, we analyze how these recent developments position teachers toward—or away from—professionalization (see Table 1 below).

Proponents of nationally available performance assessments view teachers as practice-based professionals and define teaching quality in terms of specialized knowledge and skills that are in line with broader standards for teaching. The key decision-makers for policies related to teacher performance assessments are teacher educators and researchers (who designed these assessments), state departments of education, state and national accrediting bodies, teacher and teacher educator professional organizations, educational testing companies, advocacy organizations, and for-profit companies.¹³⁸ Nationally available performance assessments can serve as a mechanism toward both professionalization and de-professionalization of teaching, depending on who has control of decision-making around these assessments. Advocates for performance assessments argue that these products address problems related to the “quality” of the teaching workforce through authentic and rigorous assessments for program completion, certification, credentialing and licensure purposes, key characteristics of a profession. They contend these evaluative instruments are linked to specialized knowl-

edge and can provide evidence of teacher preparation program effectiveness. However, the consequences of these nationally available assessments lead to: standardization; reduced local autonomy of teachers and teacher educators; privatization of education through partnerships with for-profit companies; a narrowing of the teacher education curriculum and conceptions of teaching; and barriers and gatekeepers for prospective teachers.¹³⁹

Proponents of curriculum bans define teaching quality in terms of teachers' compliance around and fidelity to specific definitions of what constitutes acceptable content and worthwhile knowledge. Although these proponents constitute a vocal minority in most places, they are empowered (or perhaps emboldened) by the political climate and prevailing ideology to shape and limit curriculum, according to their own self-interests and beliefs, and determine what all teachers should teach everyone's children. They use the power of accessible governance channels, such as school boards and government legislation, to forward curriculum changes "that affect not only their own children, but all children in a school, locality, or state."¹⁴⁰ They insist teachers should be confined to the role of curriculum deliverers and disseminators of purportedly "neutral" and "unbiased" content knowledge.

In contemporary times, decision-makers, such as conservative politicians and right-wing national advocacy groups such as *Moms for Liberty*, are reshaping state and district curriculum policy and content and exercising an outsized voice (and supported by outsized funding) in local debates around the role of teachers.¹⁴¹ These advocates view the "left wing' indoctrination"¹⁴² in schools an essential problem of public education. They sponsor and pass legislation in which some parents and religious institutions have more control over what their children—and other people's children—learn in schools.¹⁴³ These laws and policies have the chilling effect of disempowering teachers and contributing to the de-professionalization of teaching by removing teachers' autonomy and expertise as curriculum designers and transformative intellectuals.

Although Generative AI is currently operating in a liminal and uncertain space as a tool to personalize student learning, advocates for these technologies argue that quality teaching is defined through teachers' ability to effectively integrate digital tools to support personalized student learning, instruction, and assessment. Technology companies, with responses and guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education and state departments of education, are leading the conversation around teachers' roles and uses of how generative AI is integrated in the classroom. However, many stakeholders, including educational researchers and educators, are concerned about the potential risks of using AI. These concerns include restricting the complexity of curriculum and assessment and limiting teachers' autonomy and decision-making around what and how curriculum is taught and assessed. Private technology companies have almost complete control over decision-making around how and to what end generative AI is integrated into educational technology. The role teachers have in decision-making around the integration of generative AI in digital educational technologies is often limited or nil. Moreover, teachers have not been central to the discussion around regulations, use, and limitations around these tools in the classroom.

Table 1: Recent Developments and Key Questions Around Professionalization

	Credentialing & Certification: Teacher performance assessments	Curriculum: Curricular restrictions and book bans	Digital Technology: Generative AI in education as a tool to personalize student learning
What are teachers’ roles related to teaching quality?	Teachers as practice-based professionals, in line with state and national standards for teaching and learning	Teachers as disseminators of curriculum implementing traditional, “neutral” curriculum	Teachers as curators of information and digital technologies promoting student-centered, personalized instruction and assessment
Who gets to make decisions around these developments?	Teacher educators, state Departments of Education, for-profit textbook companies, accrediting bodies	Conservative “parents’ rights” advocacy groups, legislators, school board officials, politicians	Technology companies, federal government, state agencies
What is the problem of teaching?	Need to increase teaching quality, licensure and credentialing assessments	“Biased” liberal curriculum and educators	Need for individualized instruction, efficiency, technological knowledge and skills to keep up to date with advances in technology
What is the solution to the problem of teaching?	Rigorous and authentic assessments for credentialing, licensure, and certification purposes	Parental choice, voice and control over the curriculum, anti-public education rhetoric	Generative AI tutors, chatbots, integrated educational platforms, learning management systems that create personalized learning opportunities for students

Looking across these developments, we see that there is no consensus around definitions of teaching quality, the role of the teacher, and the problems and solutions to these problems. The adoption and implementation of performance assessments for teacher certification and licensure purposes, a key hallmark of a profession, simultaneously serve as a mechanism for de-professionalization. Curriculum restrictions and book ban laws highlight growing but increasingly influential anti-public education sentiment and distrust of teachers. Technology companies have outsized control and autonomy to integrate digital technologies into classrooms, and their products may ultimately serve as mechanisms to potentially remove or replace teachers from teaching, learning, and assessment activities.

Rethinking Professionalization

Because the professional status of teachers is fraught with such contradictions, the question, “Are teachers professionals?” may be the wrong question to ask. Instead, policymakers should consider whether to rethink professionalization by asking, “What kinds of professionals do we want teachers to be?” Policymakers and educational leaders can go beyond identifying characteristics and dimensions of professionalization—such as a specialized knowledge base, standards, and structures that would be internally controlled by teachers and teacher educators—to consider broader, pluralistic conceptions of professionalization.¹⁴⁴ Like many occupations, teaching is subject to a world context that is shifting and uncertain and constantly experiencing internal and external negotiation with other professions and broader societal influences.¹⁴⁵ Further, teaching draws on multiple approaches that could advance broader public aims in a pluralistic democratic society.¹⁴⁶ Recognizing this, definitions of professionalism—and the kinds of professionals teachers ought to be—would “acknowledge [that] diversity in teacher approaches underline that there are multiple possible ways of being an excellent teacher.”¹⁴⁷ Such definitions of teachers’ professionalism, and mechanisms for professionalization, are mindful of and responsive to “the special challenges of American pluralism” along with “education’s idiosyncratic features,”¹⁴⁸ which are inherent in a society undergirded by democratic principles of choice, participation, and voice.

Considering the question, “What kinds of professionals do we want teachers to be?” moves away from static definitions or lists of characteristics toward broader notions of professionalism, such as how teachers can be independent decision makers and enact their own professionalism. Such considerations would underscore “the importance of teachers themselves at the forefront of discussions of teacher professionalism.”¹⁴⁹ When a broader consideration of teacher professionalism is adopted in a plural democracy, teachers become,

a group of ‘social agents’ involved in the education enterprise who collaborate with other stakeholders within the school community, [including] parents, students, teacher educators, and academics... [and who engage in] value-laden dialogic negotiations around the aims of education (a) with students over what is educationally desirable to support their growing emancipation; and (b) with stakeholders in the community around the aims of education and the nature of quality teaching.¹⁵⁰

When teachers are viewed as “social agents”¹⁵¹ and “policy actors,”¹⁵² they are granted the expertise, autonomy, and responsibility to engage in the messy process of negotiating with the multiple stakeholders who define quality teaching locally, identify problems, and propose solutions that reposition students at the center of teachers’ work.¹⁵³

Because teachers operate within contested and constantly evolving systems that are shaped by multiple forces, internal and external pressures, and institutional structures, any considerations of their professional status are dependent on who is involved in the decision-making process around the goals of education, the nature of teachers’ roles, what is taught, how it is taught, and how teaching and learning are assessed. Therefore, multiple voices—among them, teachers, family members, and local communities—are integral to this decision-making process.¹⁵⁴

As evidenced in the three recent developments described above, the imbalance of power within and across roles and stakeholder groups increasingly has excluded teachers and eroded their professional status. However, when policymakers, leaders, and practitioners redistribute power to ensure shared decision-making among teachers and their various stakeholder groups, they replace this imbalance of power in the teaching profession with a “connective or democratic” professional community¹⁵⁵ focused on exchange, problem-solving, dialogue, and innovation. Such a process of (re)professionalization requires “organizational conditions . . . [that] . . . ensure teachers are actively involved in schoolwide decision-making.”¹⁵⁶ As a plural, connective, and democratic concept, policymakers can reimagine professionalism not as a trait that an individual has or doesn’t have, but as a collective action that members of a community undertake as they work collaboratively towards uplifting students, teachers, schools, communities, and the public good.

VI. Recommendations

The central question: “What kinds of professionals do we want teachers to be?” undergirds the recommendations outlined, while keeping in view the three key developments discussed in this brief and the de-professionalizing effect they have had on teachers. To assist politicians, policymakers, educational leaders, and teachers in redefining teaching quality and teachers’ roles towards greater professionalism, we recommend that:

National and State Education Agencies and Accrediting Organizations

- Supplement standardized credentialing requirements for entry into the profession with teacher assessments that are locally designed, controlled, and responsive to community and local needs, thus building upon the existing knowledge base for teachers while simultaneously valuing local knowledge, culture, and expertise.

School and District Leaders

- Provide tangible support including funding, release time, and resources for teachers to collaborate and network, as well as provide professional development for teachers to work with members of the school, district, and broader community around issues of curriculum, teaching, and learning.
- Oppose efforts by a vocal minority in their communities, including elected school board members, to ban specific books and curricular content that educators and other community stakeholders determine that teachers can teach and that students should be allowed to access in classrooms and school libraries.
- Resist the temptation to prescribe that teachers use new technologies, such as generative AI, for instructional purposes. Instead include teachers in decisions to pilot, adopt, and implement specific digital products and platforms and give teachers flexibility to use new technologies in different ways.

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