Teacher's ed – Who’s Teaching the Teachers?
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The most critical factor in a child's education outside the home is the quality of the teacher at the front of his or her classroom. A great teacher can lift a struggling student. A mediocre teacher can set a child back months if not years.

So which Illinois education schools are producing great teachers? And which aren't?

On Tuesday, the Washington-based National Council on Teacher Quality unveiled a no-punches-pulled report that evaluated 111 undergraduate and graduate programs in 53 education schools across Illinois.

The most disturbing finding: The state's largest producers of teachers — Illinois State University and Northern Illinois University, — earned poor marks. Illinois State, the report said, merited "exceptionally low grades in its undergraduate elementary and special education programs." Northern Illinois "did only slightly better, with weak grades in its undergraduate elementary and both its undergraduate and graduate special education program."

Programs earning high marks were at Elmhurst College, the Illinois Institute of Technology, Lake Forest College, Loyola University Chicago, Northwestern University, Principia College in downstate Elsah, the University of Illinois campuses at Urbana-Champaign and at Chicago, and the University of Chicago.

Among the overall shortcomings the report found: Too many schools fail to instruct prospective teachers on the most effective ways to teach reading, particularly to poor kids. In those schools, professors load college students with irrelevant and unfocused coursework. They don't pair student teachers with effective mentors, a problem that stunts the development of tomorrow's classroom professionals.

State government, too, is falling short, the report alleges: The state test for college students who want to be teachers is geared to an 8th-grade level — and applicants get five attempts to pass. That funnels a lot of mediocre students into the system. "Research shows that if you have a school with a lot of teachers who had to take the test repeatedly, then student achievement is lower," says Julie Greenberg, NCTQ's senior policy director.

Educators lashed out at the report, trying to poke holes in its methodology.

The study's authors acknowledge that the research is preliminary and should come with a warning label: Good teachers can come from bad schools, and vice versa.

The best way to measure which college education programs are doing a good job is to track new teachers from graduation into their careers and measure how well their students perform. The state is developing a data system that should yield those answers ... by 2018. That's too long to wait. Memo to the Illinois State Board of Education: Move faster.

Credit NCTQ, a nonpartisan group that pushes for higher-quality teacher training, for refocusing attention on a vital issue. This isn't the first time we've heard about the lousy job done by many ed schools. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said last year: "By almost any standard, many if not most of
the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom."

Many principals know that. And so do many teachers. In a 2006 report from The Education Schools Project, roughly six in 10 ed school alums complained that their training did not prepare them to teach.

High school students who aspire to be teachers now have a valuable resource when deciding which education school to attend. No use pretending that all ed schools are doing a good job of preparing teachers. They aren't.