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Summary

Oregon's teacher certification process keeps accomplished individuals from teaching their subjects in our public schools. Rather than providing information and methods needed to teach, it acts more like a gauntlet that discourages those with other options from entering the teaching profession.

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“What did eminent scientists such as Albert Einstein, Alan Turing and Richard Feynman have in common...None of these individuals...would be qualified to teach in an Oregon public school.”

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Must this Teacher be Fired?

by Michael Barton, Ph.D.

What did eminent scientists such as Albert Einstein, Alan Turing, and Richard Feynman have in common with Nobel Prize winning authors V. S. Naipaul, J. M. Coetzee and Toni Morrison? And what do accomplished Oregonians such as University of Oregon President Dave Frohnmayer, cancer doctor Brian Druker of OHSU and professional jazz musician Thara Memory have in common? None of these individuals, according to the state licensing board, would be qualified to teach in an Oregon public school.

Albert Einstein revolutionized Physics, Alan Turing helped invent computer science and Richard Feynman won the Nobel Prize in Physics while maintaining a reputation as the best science teacher of his generation. None would have been considered for a position teaching high school science in Oregon because they lacked a degree in education.

Naipaul, Coetzee and Morrison have written at the highest level on religious zealotry, oppression and the modern experience; but none are considered qualified to teach a high school English class. Dave Frohnmayer teaches a leadership class to freshman at the University of Oregon but could not teach social studies to high school seniors. Druker developed the world's first anti-cancer therapy to successfully target only cancer cells while leaving normal cells alone, resulting in a treatment that is extremely effective with little or no side effects for certain cancers. but teach science or math to Oregon's children? No.

Thara Memory differs from these other accomplished individuals only in that he actually wants to teach in the public schools and, according to a March 10, 2005 article in *The Oregonian*, has been enormously successful doing so for the four years he has been teaching with a 'transitional license'. In these four years Memory created a jazz program at the Arts & Communication Magnet Academy in Beaverton and developed a jazz orchestra that will travel to New York in May as the favorite in a national contest at Lincoln Center. But now time has run out for Memory, a trumpet player and long-time star of the Portland jazz scene.

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Because Memory has not completed the required how-to-teach course work his teaching license cannot be renewed according to the Teacher Standards & Practices Commission. Without the license Memory can teach at a private school, at a charter school (where only half of the teachers must be certified) or at any college or university, public or private. But he may not teach at any government run primary or secondary school.

The teacher certification process in Oregon, like that in most states, focuses primarily on the completion of course work on the pedagogy of education, that is the principles and methods of teaching. And while it is true that knowing a subject well does not ensure that one can teach it well it is also true that there is no agreed-upon body of knowledge concerning teaching methods. Many teachers who have survived the certification process describe the requirement as a gauntlet that must be run rather than information and methods to be learned.

Two things are demonstrably true in secondary education: More teachers are needed and the quality of teaching is vitally important. The barriers that exist in Oregon limit the pool of potential teachers and provide an incentive for those with other options to not pursue teaching. Certainly we do not want to encourage the best and the brightest, those with the widest options coming out of college, to go elsewhere.

The point is not that people should be given teaching jobs based solely on the credentials they possess in their chosen field. Perhaps Einstein would have made a dreadful high school physics teacher. Rather the point is that a person should not be excluded from consideration for failure to jump through bureaucratic hoops and a person with demonstrable teaching skill such as Thara Memory should be welcomed and celebrated, not drummed out of the teaching profession.

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