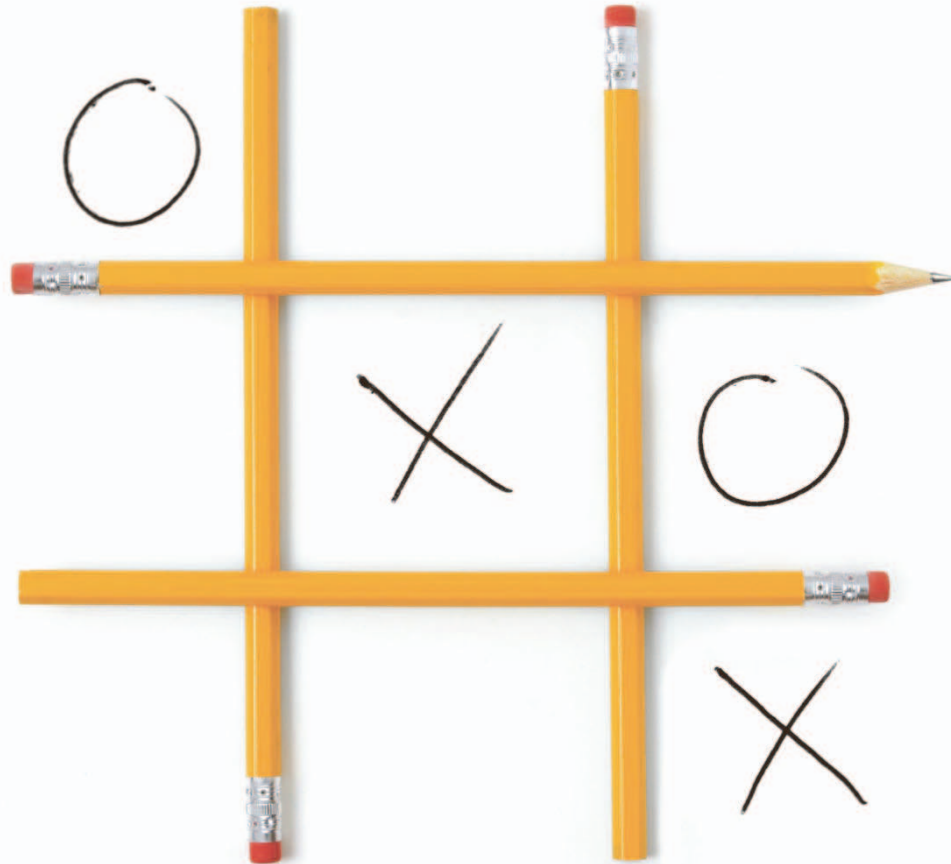


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# Viewpoints

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## Why do we leave our kids' education to a game of chance?

**It's time to free Arizona students and teachers from the false promise of that one unicorn teacher who can do everything for all kids**

**Your Turn**  
 Carole G. Basile  
 Guest columnist

It's the day before school begins. You and your child walk or drive to school — or maybe you log in to the school's website — to answer the big question of the school year: Who did you get this year?

Is it the good teacher you've heard about from neighbors with older kids? Or that one, the one you've heard parents speak about in frustration?

Year after year, especially in the all-important elementary school years, we have accepted this game of chance as normal. But it needn't

be. And it shouldn't be.

In fact, in this very basic scenario we can see the single most important norm that prevents our public schools from reliably providing the best possible educational experience to all children: We expect each individual teacher to be all things to all children at all times.

We ask teachers to be content experts and pedagogues; to assess children's socio-emotional and academic development and manage classrooms of 30 or more kids; to teach reading and math to children of all abilities; to be role models and social workers; to be data analysts,

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# Education

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trauma interventionists and a host of other roles.

It's an unreasonable expectation. It's bad for learners. And it's bad for teachers. It rests on the faulty assumption that all kids require the same thing from teachers and that, therefore, any teacher can adequately serve every learner.

We know better.

In recent decades, the field of education has significantly advanced our understanding of how different instructional approaches, interventions and support can help different learners. We know we need educators who can meet children where they are in their cognitive and socio-emotional development. We have come to understand the necessity of personalizing learning.

If the goal of personalization is to liberate learning from an assembly-line experience and meet children where they are, we'll never succeed if we continue to ask teachers to endure their own assembly-line experience.

And make no mistake: that's what we currently do. In fact, we not only ask all teachers to do the same thing. We ask them to do the same thing for years. Too often, in too many schools, the job of being a teacher looks pretty much the same on day 3,000 as it does on day one.

That's troubling on two fronts. First, the job is too complicated for most novice teachers to perform well. Second, a profession that looks the same on day 3,000 as it does on day one isn't offering pathways for professional growth and advancement. That's a recipe for burn-out and attrition.

If we're serious about improving public education, we need to simultaneously address the learner experience and the educator experience. We have to light this candle from both ends. It's the only way to propel our education system

out of the present-day trap in which we suffer from both unsatisfactory learning outcomes and an education workforce crisis that is commonly referred to as a teacher shortage but is, in reality, much more than just a supply problem.

On the learning experience front, the data is clear. Despite the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, the academic performance of U.S. students has proven frustratingly stagnant, as recorded in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Additionally, disparities by socioeconomic status remain high.

On the educator experience front, the crisis in Arizona's education workforce persists. According to a study by the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association, 24% of Arizona teacher positions remained vacant as of December. Perhaps more tellingly, more than half of all positions that were filled were held by "by individuals not meeting standard teacher requirements."

Nationally, according to data maintained by the U.S. Department of Education, the number of people enrolled in teacher-preparation programs in the United States declined by 35% between academic years 2010-11 and 2016-17.

We need to build the next education workforce. Colleges of education, school districts, policymakers and community leadership need to work together to build learning environments that can do two things:

- provide all students with deeper and personalized learning by building teams of educators with distributed expertise; and

- empower educators by developing new opportunities for role-based specialization and advancement.

By building teams, we can free both learners and educators from the false promise of that one unicorn teacher

who can do everything for all kids.

Sometimes a student needs one-to-one instruction from a content expert; at other times, she would benefit from a small-group project. Sometimes, whole-group learning is appropriate; at other times, individually leveling up in math problems is the way to go. This student rocks the multiplication tables but is challenged by spelling; that one can write a Shakespearean sonnet but still occasionally confuses hypotenuse with hypnosis.

Different locks require different keys. That's why our economy values collaborative work in the professions. Young professionals in many fields are accustomed to agile teams — small groups of people with different but complementary skills who work cross-functionally.

The approach has expanded from the tech industry to many other sectors, especially health care, which has been developing teams of distributed expertise among both physicians and medical support personnel for years.

We should value and develop distributed expertise in education as we do in other professions.

Learning environments should be staffed by a range of professionals, including novices, experienced teachers and specialists. During the course of a normal work day, novice teachers should have the opportunity to work with a range of experienced colleagues with diverse areas of expertise.

These areas should include pedagogical skills and content mastery, the ability to conduct assessments and the ability to analyze them, the ability to provide individualized instruction and the skills to facilitate group-project learning. And much more.

In short, we need to unpack the tasks we ask each and every professional to do and reallocate those tasks, sustainably, across teams.

By doing so, we would create more opportunities for instructional specialization and, crucially, more leadership

roles that could help schools attract and retain talent. We need teacher-leaders whose responsibilities require both instructional expertise and management acumen as they direct the work of teams.

We also need organization leaders who know how to build systems, empower teacher-leaders and work with community stakeholders to identify and meet school and community learning needs.

This isn't just theory.

In the past two years, Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, where I serve as dean, has worked with schools throughout the Valley to field next education workforce models. As of January, nearly 400 of our students are working as teaching residents in teams with experienced teachers in 80 schools across 14 districts.

Many of our partners have seen enough to ask for more. So we're working with them to design even more robust models. That includes working through the challenges of financial and organizational sustainability.

It's hard work. But it's the right work. No parent should have to look at that list in the window or online and think "uh oh."

And, on the first day of school, no teacher should have to look out at a room of 30 or more expectant faces and know, deep down, that there is no possible way to serve all of those children adequately or fairly all of the time, alone.

We can surround our kids with the adults and the expertise they need. And, in doing so, we will make a commitment to the professionalism of educators that matches their commitment to the learning experiences of our children.

*Carole G. Basile is the dean of Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, which is partnering with Arizona schools and other organizations to develop the Next Education Workforce.*