The closer you are to ground level in U.S. schools, the more you become aware of the deprofessionalizing power of complex educational systems.
much like the sense of well-being we all get when we decide to really tackle a problem.

In the current rush to make educational decisions based on science, this evidence is significant. I realize that to speak of the psychological health of teachers—their happiness, their sense of being creative and in control of their work—might seem self-indulgent (or irrelevant) to many top-down reformers. The focus should be on student learning, they would say. But realistically, don’t we all hope to be taught and cared for by professionals who are happy in their work? Do any of us want the frustrated, hurried doctor who is on the HMO stopwatch, or worse, the angry dentist?

The closer you are to ground level in U.S. schools, the more you become aware of the deprofessionalizing power of complex educational systems and programs. Often, especially in more-affluent districts, these systems pile up on one another, creating an indigestible, incompatible mess: Christmas-tree schools, with lots of ornaments. Programs for the responsive classroom, comprehension strategies, guided reading, direct instruction, leveled book, differentiated instruction, focused correction, and writing workshop jostle for teachers’ attention, all claiming to be aligned with state systems of evaluation (and all, of course, “research-based”).

A key word in the advertising copy for these systems is “easy.” Check it out. There is the regular promise that by minutely directing instruction, these systems will relieve the teacher of the stress of planning and decisionmaking and create great results. Worried about how to introduce a particular lesson? Here’s a script for you. As one area teacher complained: “Sometimes I think a monkey could do my work.” But, as we have seen, even monkeys become depressed when they lose the belief that they can affect their environment.

It is a Faustian bargain. When teachers lose control of decisionmaking—when they prepare students for tests they have no role in designing (and often no belief in), when they must abandon units they love because there is no longer time, when they must follow the plans designed by others, when they are locked in systems of instruction and evaluation they don’t create or even choose—they will not be relieved of stress. Their jobs are not made easier, they are made harder and more stressful. While some find a way to resist, others acquiesce, though they feel, as one teacher put it, that “the joy is being drained out of teaching.”

It will surely be argued that I am too optimistic here, that only a small percentage of teachers can or will take on this more creative work. That there is not time in a school day. Not enough support. It is too haphazard and unsystematic. Too slow. That it is only realistic to rely on ready-made materials, rubrics, lesson plans, and scripts that will bring focus and consistency to instruction. That teachers appreciate the way various programs lift the burden of decisionmaking. That instruction in subjects like reading and math is just too complex, the frameworks of assessment too elaborate, for teachers to master.

I will only point out the incredible irony of this position—that some reformers insist on high standards for students, while they have such a low estimation of teachers.

Thomas Newkirk is a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, N.H. His
most recent book is Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones: Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For (Heinemann, 2009).

Vol. 29, Issue 08, Pages 24-25
When teachers lose control of decisionmaking—when they prepare students for tests they have no role in designing (and often no belief in), when they must abandon units they love because there is no longer time, when they must follow the plans designed by others, when they are locked in systems of instruction and evaluation they don’t create or even choose—they will not be relieved of stress. Their jobs are not made easier, they are made harder and more stressful. Driven by state testing, teachers are being pulled toward prompt-and-rubric teaching that bypasses the human act of composing and the human gesture of response. Proponents of rubrics will claim that they are simply trying to be clear about criteria that are too often tacit and unexplained. As student teachers exercise personal control of their thoughts (about their capability as teachers, and their teaching), their self-efficacy impacts on teaching competence, motivation, and inevitably their self-esteem as teachers. How can personal control of thought be illustrated? Mastering competence on student teaching is a case in point. Research suggests that the stronger the self-efficacy individuals have, the higher the goals they set and the firmer their commitment to them (Bandura & Wood, 1989; Locke et al. 1984). Challenging goals raise the level of motivation and performance successes (Loche & Latham, 1990). We often get stressed about the things which are outside our control. Take a moment and make a list of those things which are causing your stress. Now divide these things into two lists, things which are within your control at the moment and things which are not in your control at the moment. Decide to focus on the things which are in your control and do something about them. Put the others aside. We tend to obsess about those things which are outside our control. By Marie Delaney Marie is an educational psychotherapist and Teacher trainer. She is the author of Teaching the Unteachable (Worth Publishing 2008) and What can I do with the Kid Whoâ€¦ (Worth Publishing 2010). Tags.