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## **Massage Education Failing**

By Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB

The February issue of this fine publication featured a most disturbing poll. Over 55% of the respondents felt they received fair or poor training from the massage school they attended.

Less than 30% felt their training was excellent. (*Editor's note:* See "How would you rate the training you received at your massage school?" in the MassagePoll archives, available at

[www.massagetoday.com/messagepoll/01archive/12\\_01.php](http://www.massagetoday.com/messagepoll/01archive/12_01.php).) This is a disgrace. It should be an embarrassment to everyone in this profession. I knew it was bad, but not this bad. The edu-crats will whine that this was not a "valid instrument." The mis-leaders of this profession have consistently disregarded and denied the clear will of the majority, and they will ignore this. I see this poll validated every weekend when I conduct continuing education seminars. The overall skill level of entry-level therapists is declining.

Yes, there are great schools out there turning out therapists who are better trained than ever. This is not about them. I do not mean to tar them or their graduates. However, someone has to point out the truth about education in this profession. My next few columns will attempt to do just that. Hopefully they will spark dialogue that results in action to clean up the educational system of our profession. We must police our own.

There was a time when experienced, successful therapists with good communication skills felt the need to open massage schools, to pass along what they had learned and to grow the profession. At that time, the typical students were in their mid-20s or older, usually with some postsecondary education, and were switching careers. They had somehow discovered massage and had a burning passion to learn the profession. Seventeen years ago, there were about 50 massage schools in the entire country. Virtually all of them were good programs with experienced instructors.

Times have changed. Now massage schools are being opened by opportunists trying to "catch the wave." Sadly, the instructors in many programs are therapists that are so unsuccessful in their private practice that

they are willing to work for \$12-\$15 per hour teaching, not because they want to or because they are good communicators/teachers/examples, but because they have to in order to pay their rent. Thus, the failures are training the future therapists in many cases. Yes, good schools are being opened, unfortunately at a ratio of about one good school to five poor ones. If this continues for too long, we will drown in mediocrity.

Students are younger, often just out of high school. Several have told me they chose massage because their counselor told them it was easier than cosmetology school. Others were promised unrealistic incomes by massage school recruiters. Usually "big bucks from insurance" was implied. It is sad, I daresay disgusting, when a profession with so much potential uses a promise of participating in an extortion scam as its recruitment tool.

When I was chair of a state regulatory board for massage, I was often asked, "What do I have to do to open a massage school?" After explaining the paperwork process, I would ask how long the individual had been a therapist, and if they had any background in education. The answers I heard were sickening. One woman stated that she was still a student in a massage school, but could see that schools were where the money was, so she was opening a school as soon as she graduated. She had no teaching experience. She does now, at the expense of her students. Applications were submitted with schedules that did not add up to the number of hours advertised. How can schools provide quality education when they are run by people too stupid to fill in the application for school approval? Of course the board would reject such incorrect applications, but unfortunately, the way the bureaucracy works, the board has to clearly explain what the proposed schools did incorrectly and allow them to re-submit. Usually within two to five additional tries, they would finally get the application right. The board would then be forced to approve them, knowing more lousy schools were coming on line.

Complaints have been filed against incompetent schools by students and graduates. Unfortunately, after filing their complaint, massage therapists seldom testified against a school. They seldom kept records of the hours and subjects received until after the fact, which is not valid evidence. Students and graduates were often threatened by the school owners. One school owner had a biker type for an intimidator; another threatened witchcraft and voodoo spells. Without evidence and witnesses, boards can take no action and the lousy schools continue to rip off their students. The public is ripped off because it keeps getting inferior massage and bodywork from the schools' graduates. Our profession is eroding rapidly. These poorly trained therapists are opening their own schools or becoming instructors at schools. The downward spiral accelerates.

Lousy therapists can come out of the best schools, and great therapists can come out of the worst schools. However, when over half of the respondents feel they received a fair to poor education, it means that about half of the therapists out there are inadequately trained and are not capable of doing good work unless they are self-motivated to make significant investments in additional training. This means that the majority of people receiving massage are receiving substandard work. This is going to backlash on our profession.

The poll from last month should be a call to action. It will be interesting to see if it will be. Tune in next month to read why research and the National Certification Exam will compound the problem.

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Click [here](#) for more information about Ralph Stephens, BS, LMT, NCTMB.



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