

Massachusetts Changes Its Approach to Educator Preparation Programs

One of the core priorities of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), articulated in its most recent strategic plan, focuses on educator capacity: “Massachusetts will develop all of its educators by improving educator preparation programs, setting high standards for entry and persistence in a diverse workforce, and promoting a system of continuous improvement and development.”¹

In 2012, BESE passed new program approval standards for educator preparation programs across the state. The standards ushered in new expectations for the 80 sponsoring organizations (SOs)—institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, and districts—that prepare educators in the state, including a new emphasis on program outcomes. The new standards also pushed harder for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to hold the preparation programs accountable for deep, robust partnerships with K-12 schools and districts.

The new standards presented no small challenge. ESE’s job is to review the quality of programs and to support programs to meet districts’ needs. In 2013, there were 1,719 initial licensure teacher programs approved to operate in Massachusetts, and just 46 percent of those programs were active.² On average, Massachusetts SOs prepare about 6,500 educators annually, of whom 65 percent (4,200) are employed in the state’s public schools, through everything from baccalaureate, teacher residency to postbaccalaureate programs. These 4,200 educators affect an estimated 63,000 students each year.³

ESE’s task is critical. The inclusion of educator effectiveness as one of the board and ESE’s core priorities reflects two imperatives: a moral imperative to ensure that all children in

Massachusetts—especially students who need good teachers the most—have access to effective teachers and leaders and the driving belief that teacher preparation programs can and should prepare teachers to be effective on day one.

Needs Assessment

Statutory and regulatory authority gives ESE authority to review and approve programs. During program review, ESE required SOs to reassess the breadth of their program offerings and demonstrate need for programs they wished to continue.⁴ To better align districts’ needs for a supply of educators with preparation program production and to ensure quality, ESE issued policy guidance that requires SOs to submit a needs assessment in two instances:

1. Low Completion or Zero Completer Programs.

ESE requires that SOs assess the breadth and depth of their program offerings. ESE identifies programs that have had zero completers or low completion rates over the previous three years. ESE determines the threshold for low enrollment annually and takes into account state-level completer data.

2. New Programs.

SOs may propose new programs during the formal or informal program review cycle.

In both instances, an SO must demonstrate state-specific need for its program as well as the ability to meet the demand. Operating a high-quality program, as well as reviewing it effectively, requires considerable resources from both SOs and ESE, and investments ought to go where they are most needed.⁵ Similarly, programs that have been largely dormant for years may lack the vitality necessary to produce effective educators.

A new state policy pushes schools and others that prepare educators to demonstrate need for their programs and to provide evidence that they have the capacity to run them.

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Demonstrating Need

SOs are responsible for demonstrating need and providing evidence that they will be able to meet demand. Because these organizations are best positioned to identify areas of need, ESE places no restrictions on which programs can be put forth for review. But there are also no automatic confirmations just because a program is nationally or locally recognized as satisfying an area of need. For example, most would agree that STEM teachers are needed, but only 20 of 106 approved chemistry programs were “active” in 2013: that is, they produced fewer than 30 combined chemistry teachers in 2013–14. This example illustrates the point that the simple existence of a program does not guarantee a need will be addressed. ESE wants to approve programs that are going to actively recruit, enroll, and produce educators for high-need areas.

Outcomes

In the 2014–15 review year, nine SOs, representing a total of 393 programs, underwent review. Collectively, this cohort opted to let 107 of these programs expire without attempting to demonstrate need; 27 additional programs were phased out because they could not demonstrate sufficient need to continue operation. Thus, at the point of the formal review process when needs assessment was required, 34 percent of the programs up for review expired. In addition, 12 out of 30 proposed new programs were confirmed in ESE’s informal review cycle.

Another important outcome was the marker that was laid down for future program reviews: They would be evidence based.

Closing programs is a politically dicey proposition for all states, and Massachusetts is no different in this regard. However, the new policy pushed SOs to demonstrate need for their programs and to provide evidence that they had the capacity to run them. ESE set expectations, but the SOs themselves determined whether or not they met them.

We believe the new standards were successful for a number of reasons. First, in passing the standards, the board signaled a shift in emphasis from inputs to evidence. Second, the needs assessment policy set clear expectations for SOs. Third, ESE was willing to say no to SOs that could not demonstrate need or capacity. Finally,

the standards helped SOs by providing them a solid external rationale for closing down unsuccessful programs and for not starting new ones without evidence of need and capacity.

Challenges remain. Other state boards of education and state education agencies will have to consider the following as they revamp their education preparation program review, as will ESE:

- Does Massachusetts risk not approving programs that might fill high-need subjects, even if for only a few program completers (i.e., if a sponsoring organization demonstrates supply need, but no capacity)? Massachusetts added the category of evidence of impact in an effort to allow programs that are impactful to exist even if they serve only a small number of candidates.
- Will this policy stifle innovation, especially for small programs or those that produce candidates in subjects other than high-need areas?
- The needs assessment asks for evidence in four categories: high-need subject area, district need, candidate interest, impact/effectiveness of completers. Should ESE weight the evidence categories (e.g., strong impact evidence SOs get preference in opening new programs)? ■

¹Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Strategic Plan (Malden, MA, May 2015), <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/delivery-plan.html>.

²For purposes of this analysis, we considered “active programs” to be those for which there was at least one completer in 2013–14.

³Calculated as 4,200 educators times the average ratio of 15:1.

⁴See Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Needs Assessment: 2015 Policy Advisory,” <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edprep/toolkit/1415/formal/NeedsAssessmentAdvisory.pdf>.

⁵For example, when ESE conducts program reviews, the process includes an offsite and onsite component and involves approximately three staff members from ESE and two to three external reviewers. For more information about Massachusetts’s program review criteria and process, please see <http://www.doe.mass.edu/edprep/pr.html>.

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