

A focus on assessing new teacher candidates on classroom performance tasks goes statewide.

by Anne Marie Fenton and
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Georgia's Teacher Performance Assessment

Like most states, Georgia until recently depended on an assessment of content knowledge to award teaching licenses, along with a licensure recommendation from candidates' educator preparation programs. While the content assessment reflected candidates' grasp of subject matter, licensure decisions did not hinge on direct, statewide assessment of teaching effectiveness. This method of assessment began to change in Georgia in 2012, when the state began to explore using a content-specific performance assessment for teacher candidates.

Today Georgia is implementing edTPA in all 59 initial teaching preparation programs across the state. This shift affected the entire continuum of educators, from recruitment to preservice preparation, certification, induction, and retention. Not only has edTPA changed how Georgia's educators think about teaching and learning, it has built bridges and stronger partnerships across the state's education community.

edTPA, a subject-specific performance assessment developed by Stanford University and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, has been operational since 2014.¹ Forty-one states and 626 educator preparation providers participate in edTPA nationwide. In six states, edTPA is required for teacher licensure, certification, or program completion.² As with the National Board Certification process for veteran teachers, edTPA focuses on analysis of classroom practice, supported by video documentation, to assess and foster growth in the core areas of teaching that have long been priorities in most preparation programs.

edTPA is one of several performance-based assessments designed for beginning teachers. When Georgia began exploring performance assessments, edTPA was far along in its development, and Georgia sought a content-specific pedagogy assessment aligned to multiple preparation fields.

As a performance-based measure, edTPA does not rely on candidates' answers to multiple-choice tests or a faculty member's point-in-time observation of a candidate's student teaching. Rather, it assesses how a candidate demonstrates real classroom teaching against 15 rubrics

covering three core areas: planning, instruction, and assessment.

Teacher Educators Propel Shift

The impetus for edTPA's adoption in Georgia came not from a state mandate but because Georgia's teacher educators recognized in it their own aspirations for what teacher preparation ought to look like.

The path toward statewide adoption began in fall 2011, when a few Georgia teacher educators began to explore edTPA and some attended the national edTPA Implementation Conference to learn more. One of the attendees was Deirdre Greer, then department chair at Columbus State University (CSU). She called a colleague from the conference to relay her reaction: edTPA assessment was measuring what they had long felt were the most important qualities of effective teaching.

In spring 2012, Georgia was invited to participate in a national edTPA field test, in which seven educator preparation providers explored edTPA with their candidates. CSU was one of those, and while their edTPA journey is only one example of the focused efforts toward educative implementation by Georgia preparation providers across the state, it is a good example.

For the national field test, CSU selected 10 teacher candidates from a pool of volunteers to go through the full process. The candidates completed the requirements for edTPA's portfolio in addition to their existing assignments. When the detailed score reports for these initial 10 came in at the end of the semester, faculty pored over the data. It was clear that some preparation methods needed attention. For example, the reports revealed that candidates needed more preparation for developing relevant, authentic assessments of student learning. They also needed more support as they analyzed their students' learning and used results to inform future instruction.

As Georgia preparation providers were exploring edTPA, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission was developing a tiered certification structure for teachers. A

diverse task force informed this work, including preparation providers, preK-12 schools and districts, regional education service agencies (RESAs), educational organizations, the Georgia Department of Education, the university system of Georgia, and others. Programs that had participated in the edTPA field test presented their experiences to the task force; their positive accounts as well as additional examination prompted the task force to recommend that the commission consider edTPA for use statewide.

In the 2012–13 academic year, CSU decided to do a more extensive pilot involving about half its candidates. To help faculty learn in detail what edTPA requires, CSU faculty used materials developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) to evaluate the assessment locally, which helped them better understand edTPA's rubrics and process. CSU faculty and candidates dug deep that year. Faculty called the 2012–13 cohort of candidates the Pioneer Group, awarded them certificates, and celebrated candidates' completion of their edTPA portfolios.

Other Georgia preparation providers, both public and private, traditional and nontraditional, were similarly getting their feet wet. As with any transition in education, the providers needed time to evaluate edTPA and develop their own structures to support it.

Taking a Collaborative Path

Several preparation providers convened a summit later in 2012 in Macon, Georgia, to share the paths their programs were taking. For many attendees, this was the first in-depth conversation with their counterparts about course sequences, candidate portfolio components, and evaluating instruction using the edTPA rubrics. In fact, Georgia's education agency delayed edTPA implementation to give time for an organic approach to emerge based on providers' interests. Eventually, the agency hosted a series of local, regional, and statewide meetings and began creating support structures for programs and their preK-12 school partners. To enhance communication during this period, each provider appointed an edTPA coordinator as a statewide point of contact.

This groundwork helped preparation providers tackle edTPA implementation. Participants

gained insight from their colleagues at these forums and developed strong, self-sustaining relationships. Another benefit for teacher educators was edTPA's detailed tasks and standards, which provided a common language for talking about teacher preparation. From state agencies to deans and faculty and their school-based partners, this shared lexicon helped clarify goals and expectations among the providers, the state agencies, and preK-12 school leaders.

To maintain this collaborative spirit, the state formed a Policy and Implementation Advisory Group consisting of preparation providers, preK-12 representatives, RESAs, and state agencies. Part-time regional consultants also offered technical assistance to colleagues across the state.

One of the last tasks before full implementation in 2015 was to set the performance standard or cut score needed to pass. Following an evidence-based process similar to that used by SCALE with a large national panel of preK-12 educators and teacher educators in 2013, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission proposed ramping up the cut score over time, starting at 35 and moving to 38 for the 2017–18 academic year. With advisory group input, the state decided to examine data each year over the next three years before setting a timeline to move toward the nationally recommended professional performance standard. That score, 42, will require continued dialogue and familiarity with edTPA among candidates, their program providers, and preK-12 partners—an ongoing project for Georgia.

“Better at a Faster Rate”

Meanwhile, CSU faculty were finding that edTPA helped address long-standing quandaries: What's the best way to prepare candidates who are weak instructors or poor classroom managers for student teaching? What steps ensure that faculty have honest conversations with candidates about their performance before they're eligible for student teaching?

To foster such frank conversations, CSU reorganized its education program around “critical assignments,” which serve as gateways for continued progress in the program. For example, in the second semester of their junior year, candidates take on assignments that help

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prepare them for edTPA's task 2, Analysis of Effective Teaching. They watch videos of their own teaching, evaluating it using accepted standards for excellent teaching. This assignment builds candidates' comfort in being recorded, helps them understand student-privacy policies, encourages them to closely examine their own practice, and increases their awareness of the many dimensions on which student learning occurs.

CSU candidates must pass three such formative assignments before they begin student teaching. All candidates fashion professional development plans with their advisers; these prompt faculty to talk with candidates about their progress and to suggest changes if they are struggling with a critical assignment. Thanks to edTPA, this feedback is rooted in faculty supervisors' comparisons of their observations of candidate performance with characteristics of effective instructional practice.

The rigors of edTPA catch some candidates off-guard. In fall 2014, one CSU candidate, who had just begun student teaching, sat sullenly, arms crossed in a meeting with CSU faculty. He expressed frustration at the demands the assignments were making of him, on top of his student teaching. His instructor reiterated that the candidate's work was being evaluated against an accepted yardstick for great teaching so that he would be fully prepared for his first day as a new teacher. Eventually, the candidate said, "I get it. You guys want us to become better at a faster rate." He's now a successful teacher in Gwinnett County Schools, outside Atlanta.

Generally, candidates see edTPA as a boon: They feel more confident in their abilities heading into the classroom and are clearer about their strengths as well as areas for growth. edTPA's focus on differentiated instruction contributes to this increased confidence. It requires candidates to see the classroom as a group of individuals who each have needs and strengths rather than a mass of students.

Schools and districts also see a positive impact. "We have noticed a significant difference in the levels of preparedness of CSU pre-service teachers and first-year teachers since edTPA has been introduced," said Justin M. Finney, principal at Harris County's Mulberry Creek Elementary. "CSU pre-service teachers and first-year teachers now make an immediate

positive impact in our school. They now come to us prepared to provide high levels of instruction that result directly in student learning and growth."

"The edTPA performance assessment raises the bar for our preservice teachers and better prepares them for the real world of education," said Richard Rogers, director of personnel with the Houston County School System and part-time professor at CSU. "In addition, P-20 institutions are now working together to understand, support, and be accountable to one another." Wendy Sands, a teacher at Richards Middle School in Muscogee County said, "The edTPA has streamlined the expectations for preservice teachers to better prepare them for the necessity of documentation when they are in their own classrooms."

Celebrating candidates as they go through edTPA, as CSU did with its Pioneer Group, has emerged as a means of maintaining candidate investment in the process and of welcoming them into the teaching profession. Professors, friends, and family members all celebrate prospective attorneys who pass the bar exam. The same goes for doctors, nurses, accountants, or other professionals who pass their professional entrance exams. Fully professionalizing teaching also means publicly celebrating those who attain this high bar for entrance.

Peach State Spreads the Word

In August 2014, the Alabama State Department of Education invited the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to a convening of Alabama educator preparation providers at Auburn University to discuss Georgia's implementation, as well as requirements and options for state certification. Turnout was impressive: 21 of Alabama's 27 state institutions were represented.

Rhonda Morton, associate dean of education at the Auburn University Montgomery, was among the attendees. She booked a trip to the next edTPA Implementation Conference in Los Angeles, where she met with Andrea Whittaker, SCALE's director of teacher assessment and a national leader of edTPA implementation.

Energized by her experience, Morton became deeply involved in Alabama's edTPA push.

To broaden the base of support in the state, she invited a mix of new and veteran faculty members to the edTPA Southeast Regional Summit, held in Savannah in April 2015. Testimonials from Georgia candidates about the value of the assessment convinced many of Morton's colleagues of the benefits of edTPA's focus on performance.

Georgia faculty members at the summit were also candid about the challenges they encountered and how they overcame them. These include the need for careful mapping of edTPA to the curriculum, integrating a common understanding of academic language into each subject area, and strengthening communication across state agencies, educator preparation providers, and preK-12 districts and schools.

Alabama's department of education offered grants to institutions for technical assistance, faculty training in scoring, and conference attendance to support edTPA pilots. According to Morton, edTPA was "just a little twist" on what Alabama was already doing—since many state institutions were already using an electronic portfolio model that included videos. But the programs needed time to adapt and to increase their comfort with the idea of outside national scorers evaluating their candidates' performance.

As in Georgia, edTPA sparked increased collaboration in Alabama. Small meetings of edTPA coordinators now precede gatherings of the Alabama Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (ALACTE). Thomas Bice, Alabama state superintendent of education, has briefed superintendents, who have held discussions with principals, who have had conversations with cooperating teachers. Alabama educators are now beginning to "pay it forward": ALACTE has met with counterparts throughout Alabama.

Georgia's edTPA implementation reconfirmed the value of collaboration for Georgia's educators. Whether through technical assistance meetings and conferences, webinars, or monthly calls for edTPA coordinators (held regularly since 2013), edTPA has resulted in more conversations about all aspects of effective teaching, and it is a common topic of conversation at local, regional, and statewide meetings.

Another benefit is the intentional interaction between preparation providers and preK-12 schools. The nuts-and-bolts demands

of edTPA, particularly the videotaping of lessons, have necessitated many conversations about the means and ends of student teaching. Conversely, new graduates can use their edTPA experience and data to articulate their strengths and where they need support. Employing districts and principals are finding edTPA sheds light on one of their biggest questions about new teachers: How can I best support them during their first years of teaching? District induction programs can now make better-informed support decisions.

"We believe that adding a performance assessment for new teachers is the right step for Georgia preK-12 students," said Kelly Henson, executive secretary of the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. "We also know that change is not easy. That is why we have taken time to build partnerships across the state and at all levels of education, creating a community of learning and collaboration with the state, providers and their faculty, and P-12 school districts and schools to support each other during this transition and beyond."

Although edTPA was required for teacher candidates' program completion only with this academic year—and Georgia is still building capacity to fully support it—the state is already seeing positive outcomes, as expressed by one CSU candidate, Kimberly Adkins, who wrote, "It's comforting to know that edTPA is in fact making me a better teacher." ■

¹Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity, "Review of Research on Teacher Education: edTPA Task Dimensions and Rubric Constructs," (Stanford, CA, 2015), https://secure.aacte.org/apps/rl/res_get.php?fid=1705&ref=edtpa.

²See edTPA, "Educative Assessment & Meaningful Support: 2014 edTPA Administrative Report," (Washington, DC, September 2015), https://secure.aacte.org/apps/rl/res_get.php?fid=2183&ref=edtpa. As of 2014, California, Iowa, Minnesota, New York, Tennessee, and Washington had such policies in place.

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