



Plotting a New Course on Teacher Preparation Reform

In early 2017, Congress used an obscure law called the Congressional Review Act to rescind two education regulations passed late in the Obama administration. One of those, which attempted to define and implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), received the bulk of the media attention at the time. It was the first crack at defining some of ESSA's vaguer passages, and it also was more urgent, with states busy

planning how to implement the new law in the 2017–18 school year.

But the second regulation that was rescinded, which would have redefined the way states held teacher preparation programs accountable, deserved more attention than it got. It would have defined legislative language originally inserted into the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act by asking states to design rating systems for their

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preparation programs based on the outcomes of their graduates, including whether they found jobs, remained as teachers, and demonstrated effectiveness in classrooms.

The policy would have provided crucial information about the effectiveness of preparation program completers, and thus it could have nudged teacher preparation programs to improve and changed the way teachers get hired in schools. But it had no natural political constituency, and therefore few people fought to retain it when the Trump administration cut it. States (rightfully) pointed out that the regulation came with no new money, congressional Republicans called it a federal overreach, and national teachers unions disagreed with the premise that preparation programs were responsible for the student learning gains of their graduates.

With the regulation gone, and with states well under way in implementing their ESSA plans, what steps can state boards of education take to encourage teacher preparation programs to improve? We see at least three potential paths forward:

1. Execute the proposed regulation anyway.

Our first recommendation to state boards is to act as if the proposed teacher preparation regulation had not been rescinded. Despite being politically unpopular at the federal level, the proposed regulation was based on facts that are still true:

- Most states hold preparation programs accountable via inputs—things like admissions criteria and certain coursework. Historically, states relied on these inputs because they were thought to be predictive of teacher effectiveness and because the data were readily available and easily measured.
- There is very little evidence that these input measures actually affect student learning.

Taken together, these facts suggest that states need to change the way they hold preparation programs accountable. The proposed regulation offers an alternative—one that mirrors work already happening in more than a dozen states. **Louisiana** and **Tennessee** were some of the first: As early as 2000, Louisiana started assessing teacher preparation programs based on the

outcomes of their graduates. In recent years, other states shifted to outcomes-focused accountability frameworks to capitalize on their access to a multitude of data on program completers.

State boards, especially those with explicit authority over teacher preparation programs, could push to adopt rules that look similar to the proposed regulation and work done in other states. Specifically, state boards should collect and publicly report program completer data and use those data to foster continuous improvement at the program level.

State boards could also work to amend educator preparation program standards to require that the state collects and publicly reports data on program completer placement rates, retention rates, and classroom effectiveness. Rhode Island, for example, rewrote their state standards in 2013 to explicitly assess programs on their evaluation and employment outcomes, including placement, retention, and measures of professional practice.¹

Florida takes this work one step further: Its state board annually analyzes statewide data to identify critical teacher shortage areas, habitually high-need content areas, and high-priority locations.² The state then assesses programs on their production of teachers in those critical areas.

Further, state boards could push their state education agencies (SEAs) to design a public website that houses programs' completer data and allows “consumers”—potential teacher candidates and their employers—to compare data by program. Of the states currently doing this work, almost all of them make these data publicly available but not necessarily in a way that lets the end user glean the information they need. For example, a state may publish provider-level reports in PDF format. If a teacher candidate wanted to determine which program produces graduates with consistently high evaluation scores, they would have to manually toggle to compare a single data point across multiple PDFs for multiple programs and years. It would not be impossible, but it would be tedious.

There are real barriers to finding the right teacher preparation program, but data formatting should not be one of them. Massachusetts provides a good example of how one could design a format to compare data across potential providers.³

Collecting and publishing outcome data will likely have only some effect on preparation

programs' practices, however. To foster significant and continuous improvement, state boards should urge their SEAs to ask strategic questions about program quality and practice and to analyze program data. How effective are specific program practices? Under what circumstances? For whom? By looking at program data across the state, the SEA could identify programs that consistently perform well on state metrics and then work to determine which elements of the program's practice produced those effects.

If the SEA cannot conduct those analyses at the state level, state boards should encourage programs to do this work as a smaller networked learning community. Where programs are in the driver seat and intentionally using data to inform continuous improvement rather than solely providing data for use as an accountability tool, sustainable improvement becomes possible.

2. Help districts make better decisions.

Even if states decide not to collect new information on their teacher preparation programs, they could still benefit from shifting their thinking away from a primary focus on licensing initial teachers. Instead, they should turn to helping their school districts make smarter decisions about whom to hire in the first place. Under this strategy, states should consider how to expand district access to actionable data that already exists.

This recommendation bucks against recent trends, where states have tried to “raise the bar” on the teaching profession. Counterintuitive though it may seem, states would be better off acknowledging the limits of setting hard barriers to entry and instead turn toward softer strategies to influence teacher recruitment efforts.

Why not just raise the bar? State leaders must recognize that it is almost impossible to know in advance, based on paper credentials, who will be a good teacher. In this context, all metrics that states use to set barriers to entry suffer from similar flaws. Today, 46 states and the District of Columbia require teacher candidates to pass some form of ETS's Praxis assessments, which focus on math and reading content knowledge.⁴ A 1999 analysis found that its questions were roughly as difficult as what we ask of most high schoolers.⁵ Still, lots of would-be teachers cannot pass it. But that does not necessarily mean they will be bad teachers.

A recent report from the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics was able to approximate the effect of raising the passing score on Praxis by comparing results in Arkansas and Louisiana, two states with different cut scores in 2010.⁶ The study found that, from a statistical perspective, teachers who performed better on the Praxis math test on average were better math teachers. But the differences were tiny, and there was wide variation at nearly every score. Some great teachers scored poorly on the Praxis, and some poor teachers scored well.

If Arkansas were to raise its Praxis cut score to match Louisiana's minimum, it would effectively block some lower-performing teachers from ever becoming teachers, but it would also lose many teachers who could have performed at similar levels—or even better than average. Rather than weeding out bad teachers, the policy change would mostly just limit the supply of new teachers.

The Arkansas study mirrored findings from an earlier one looking at Praxis test-takers in North Carolina,⁷ as well as another one looking at principal candidates taking a common licensure exam in Tennessee. The Tennessee⁸ study had another troubling finding: Although white test-takers tended to score higher than nonwhite candidates, they performed no better on measures of job performance like evaluation ratings or surveys of teachers' perceptions of school leadership. In effect, the state's licensure exam was screening out minority candidates, even though the exam had no ability to distinguish between good and bad prospective principals.

More recently, a number of states have moved beyond the multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank Praxis test for teachers, requiring assessments tied to specific subject areas. There are now multiple Praxis II tests, all pitched to a particular content area or pedagogical skill set. These should produce more discerning results, but the same Arkansas study found that they do not.

Even the edTPA—a portfolio-based assessment based on videos of teacher candidates delivering actual lessons, teacher lesson plans, student work, and candidate reflections—had similar results. A study of teacher candidates in Washington State found that the edTPA was not much better than the Praxis as a policy tool.⁹ There was no clear-cut point at which a state

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would want to set its passing score, and every point higher they raised the bar meant they would lose teachers, some of whom would have been good and some not so good.

Instead of continuing down this policy path, states should shift their gaze to helping school districts make better hiring decisions. They could start by opening up existing information to school districts. States have a unique role in providing access to teacher data, or at least allowing districts to request it, and a district choosing between two otherwise identical teachers should want to give the edge to the teacher with the better credentials, assuming they have access to that information. This is true of traditional licensure test scores and whether candidates are able to meet a state's expectation on their first try as well as newer requirements like edTPA.

EdTPA in particular has a host of information that would aid districts' hiring efforts. Any edTPA state could explicitly allow districts to request the same teacher videos that were scored as part of the edTPA. While not all districts can require teacher candidates to do an in-person practice lesson, opening up the edTPA videos to future employers would allow districts to evaluate potential teachers based on performance. States could also build websites to help match teacher candidates with prospective employers and include dedicated space for candidates to upload their performance videos.

There is evidence that these types of activities can boost the quality of incoming teachers. In Spokane, Washington, for example, the district uses a screening mechanism that helps identify future teaching ability.¹⁰ And as part of sweeping reforms to its recruiting process, the **District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)** now requires all candidates to either conduct in-person lessons or submit a video of actual teaching. Those mock teaching lessons strongly predict future classroom effectiveness and have enabled DCPS to significantly improve the caliber of its incoming teachers. Districts may not necessarily pursue these reforms on their own, but states can help create the conditions for more districts to do so.

Helping districts improve their hiring practices could have other positive benefits. It could help districts recruit more candidates per opening, hire candidates earlier in the year,

and land a higher percentage of their preferred candidates, leaving fewer unfilled openings at the start of the school year. All this would, in turn, lead to more effectively run school systems and to better teachers coming into schools.

3. Spur innovation among high-performing programs.

Finally, state boards should explore how they can encourage innovation among high-performing preparation programs. Boards involved in the state's program approval process can offer high-performing programs the option to forgo some of the more arduous program approval requirements in exchange for developing and piloting innovative, evidence-based practices.

Only programs with a history of complying with program approval requirements and evidence of producing effective program completers should be given this opportunity, but doing so will create the space for high-performing programs to innovate and incentivize other programs to focus on their completers' performance data. The types of flexibility that states can offer programs depend on a state's approval process, but two options are shorter, lighter touch program approval visits and longer approval timelines. State boards, with the support of state legislatures, can also offer programs financial incentives to innovate. They can create a bucket of money to expand high-quality programs—based on completer performance data, specifically in shortage areas. Additionally, states can encourage high performers to adopt innovative program models through use of the 5 percent of Title II funding set aside for this purpose.

Boards involved with their states' program approval processes can also encourage innovation by approving certain alternative pathways to teacher licensure. Most, though not all, states allow alternative certification programs, but the requirements for program approval—and the degree to which they allow innovation—varies by state. State boards must carefully balance program approval requirements for alternative certification pathways; requirements that are too stringent and prescriptive stifle innovation, while lax requirements encourage low program quality. (Our first recommendation—to execute the proposed Higher Education Act regulation—can also serve as the foundation for a new, more

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What are your expectations for ESSA plan implementation?

State Superintendent Smith: At the beginning, there were people who did not really believe that their input would show up in the plan. But we kept showing up, and the drafts changed based on stakeholder input. We were trying to change the relationship between the field and the state agency to build trust and relationships so that we could do the real work of implementing. Conversations are ongoing on how the plan works, and it is going to take feedback from the field to implement this plan. How we are going to eliminate performance gaps and pay attention to equity are going to take dialogue. We believe we have built some relationships to be a part of that dialogue. It is the relationship that makes it possible to transform outcomes so we can create more opportunities for kids.

Board Member Jacobson: Next steps are really important to D.C. We know our plan is not perfect and plans should evolve over time. At our immediate meeting after the approval of the state plan, we considered a resolution to set up a task force that is broader than the board's previous committee. We started our work on ESSA with just board members around the table. Although we did go out into our communities, we did not involve some communities as robustly as we could in the crafting of the plan and in our daily engagement. Our board set up a working group that will include members of the public charter sector and traditional schools, parents, students, business groups, teachers, and others. We are going to start conversations immediately about technical changes that need to be made to the plan and how we can think bigger. We wanted to start small and grow over time. There are big ideas out there, and we want to try those out. This working group will be our mechanism to conduct our work in a really targeted and thoughtful manner over the next year. ■

¹Comments from state leaders were collected from NASBE's May 9, 2017, webinar on ESSA state plans and from the U.S. House of Representatives Workforce and Education committee hearing on ESSA Implementation held on July 18, 2017.

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flexible program approval strategy that ensures high program quality standards while encouraging innovation.)

States boards have a number of options for encouraging teacher preparation programs to improve, even in the absence of federal requirements. These recommendations, in their most basic forms, propose that state boards pursue a simple strategy: Figure out how preparation programs are performing, help program “consumers”—specifically districts—make better “purchasing” decisions, and give high-performing programs flexibility to innovate. ■

¹Rhode Island Department of Education, “Rhode Island Standards for Educator Preparation,” http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Teachers-and-Administrators-Excellent-Educators/Educator-Certification/Becoming-an-Educator/RIPA_Standards_2013.pdf.

²Florida Department of State, “Educator Standards, Preparation and Performance,” Florida Administrative Code Rule 6A-5.066, <https://www.flrules.org/gateway/ruleNo.asp?ID=6A-5.066>.

³Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Educator Preparation Employment by Program,” School and District Profiles database, http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/eppempratebyprogram.aspx.

⁴ETS, “State Requirements,” <https://www.ets.org/praxis/states>.

⁵“Not Good Enough: A Content Analysis of Teacher Licensing Examinations,” *Thinking K-16* 3, no. 1 (Washington, DC: Education Trust).

⁶James Shuls, “Can We Simply Raise the Bar on Teacher Quality?” (Arkansas Center for Research in Economics, 2016), http://uca.edu/acre/files/2014/11/Shuls_RaisingtheBar_05312016.pdf.

⁷Dan Goldhaber, “Everyone’s Doing It, but What Does Teacher Testing Tell Us about Teacher Effectiveness?” *Journal of Human Resources* 42, no. 4 (fall 2007): 765–94.

⁸Jason A. Grissom et al., “Principal Licensure Exams and Future Job Performance: Evidence from the School Leaders Licensure Assessment,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39, no. 2 (2017): 248–80, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716680293>.

⁹Dan Goldhaber et al., “Evaluating Prospective Teachers: Testing the Predictive Validity of the edTPA,” Working Paper 157 (Washington, DC: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, American Institutes for Research, November 2016).

¹⁰Dan Goldhaber et al., “Screen Twice, Cut Once: Assessing the Predictive Validity of Teacher Selection Tools,” Working Paper 120 (Washington, DC: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, American Institutes for Research, December 2014).

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(Washington, DC, 2017), <https://www.achieve.org/state-profiles>.

⁵Achieve, “State Transparency on College and Career Readiness,” State CCR Database (2015), <https://states.achieve.org/transparency-report>.

⁶Indiana Commission for Higher Education, “College Readiness at a Glance, 2016,” http://www.in.gov/che/files/2016_CRR_AtGlance_Final.pdf; Indiana Commission for Higher Education, “College Readiness Report Supplement: A Closer Look at Dual Credit Students” (May 2016), http://www.in.gov/che/files/College_Readiness_Report_Supplement_A_Closer_Look_at_Dual_Credit_Students.pdf.

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