

TEACHSTRONG POLICY PROPOSAL: PRINCIPLE 3

RAISE THE BAR FOR LICENSURE

Raise the bar for licensure so it is a meaningful
measure of readiness to teach

#TEACHSTRONG

THE NINE TEACHSTRONG PRINCIPLES

PRINCIPLE 1

IDENTIFY AND RECRUIT MORE TEACHER CANDIDATES

PRINCIPLE 2

REIMAGINE TEACHER PREPARATION

PRINCIPLE 3

**RAISE THE BAR
FOR LICENSURE**

PRINCIPLE 4

INCREASE COMPENSATION

PRINCIPLE 5

PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR NEW TEACHERS

PRINCIPLE 6

**ENSURE TENURE IS A MEANINGFUL SIGNAL
OF PROFESSIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT**

PRINCIPLE 7

**PROVIDE TEACHERS WITH MORE TIME, TOOLS,
AND SUPPORT**

PRINCIPLE 8

**DESIGN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO BETTER
ADDRESS TEACHER AND STUDENT NEEDS**

PRINCIPLE 9

CREATE CAREER PATHWAYS

THE TEACHSTRONG THEORY OF CHANGE

The TeachStrong coalition has adopted nine principles we believe must be put in practice in order to modernize and elevate the teaching profession. This policy proposal from the TeachStrong coalition explains how we can raise the bar for licensure so it is a meaningful measure of readiness to teach. This proposal builds out Principle Three, the third of the nine TeachStrong principles. Although this proposal addresses just one principle, the nine principles affect and build upon one another and must be aligned to achieve systemic changes to the teaching profession.

Thoughtful changes across the teaching career continuum are necessary to improve teaching and learning for all students—especially students of color and those from low-income families. While higher expectations for students and schools have heightened the demands placed on teachers, the systems that are designed to support teachers have not kept pace. These gaps are especially apparent in high-needs schools.

This campaign seeks to promote changes that span a teacher’s career, starting with recruitment and preparation and continuing on through compensation and career pathways, paying particular attention to the importance of the professional context in which teachers work. The TeachStrong coalition believes that all aspects of the teaching profession must be addressed in a systemic way; only then can we create a self-reinforcing cycle through which the status of the profession is raised along with the quality of teaching and learning in our nation’s classrooms.

We need a comprehensive approach to addressing the teacher pipeline because we have seen that piecemeal policy changes do not work. In the past, there have been attempts to address singular aspects of the teacher pipeline, and while these efforts may have made significant changes to one area, the system as a whole remained largely unchanged. For example, if we were to focus solely on preparation programs, it might give beginning teachers a stronger start. But student learning will not significantly improve if teacher training and development are ineffective or if teachers do not have opportunities to lead. In combination, however, changes in these areas could have powerful, lasting effects. Moreover, if we are to ensure that great teaching consistently reaches all students, we must explicitly address inequities in access to our strongest educators for low-income students and students of color.

No one simple policy fix will be enough to move the system as a whole. Many of the institutions responsible for educating, training, and setting policy for teachers operate in isolated silos that are sometimes disconnected from teachers themselves. The work is not easy: Policymakers must strive for a comprehensive system while factoring in other realities, such as existing political landscapes and the unique situations and contexts of individual states. However, as demonstrated by the consensus achieved by the diverse TeachStrong coalition around these nine principles, success is possible.

To achieve the kinds of dramatic changes we need for student achievement—and for those changes to be sustainable for teachers, students, and taxpayers alike—we need dramatic changes to all aspects of the systems designed to support teachers.

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Raise the bar for licensure so it is a meaningful measure of readiness to teach

“A profession ... differs from other occupations in part by its ability to set its own rules and standards. But it cannot do so unless its members agree, first, on criteria for belonging to the profession and, second, on what its rules and standards ought to be.”¹

– PAUL STARR, [The Social Transformation of American Medicine](#)

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT TEACHER LICENSURE SYSTEM

Currently, teacher licensure processes vary from state-to-state, creating a confusing and inconsistent patchwork system. As a result, the current teacher licensure system poorly assesses whether teachers entering the classroom meet a high standard of professional competence for beginning teachers. Four factors perpetuate this patchwork system: from state-to-state, licensure exams are rarely a meaningful measure of readiness to teach; the bar for passing is often set too low; little uniformity exists across state lines; and current processes limit the ability of teachers to easily transfer their licenses to other states.

First, current licensure exams focus heavily on baseline knowledge of subject matter and too little on skill-building and actual teaching. Most states require teachers to pass two tests: one on basic skills and another on content knowledge. Often, these tests do not examine a teacher candidate’s ability to teach this content.² Until recently, teacher licensure exams were mostly comprised of multiple-choice and a few short answer questions. These types of exams fail to assess deep content knowledge, pedagogical skill, or performance leading a classroom.³ Additionally, many believe these types of exams act as a mechanism that disproportionately filters out potential teachers of color.⁴

Research suggests that multiple types of knowledge—content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge about human development—are crucial for understanding how to teach well. State licensure and certification policies, however, often fail to include all of the dimensions of knowledge necessary for good teaching.⁵ According to the American Federation of Teachers, or AFT, most licensure examinations have been widely considered to be “insufficiently rigorous, limited in scope and unconnected to practice.”⁶

The weak correlation between passing a licensure exam and subsequent student achievement highlights this mismatch between these assessments and teacher practice. Though the test has undergone some changes, a 2007 study of North Carolina teachers found significant overlap in the effectiveness distributions of elementary teachers who did and did not

pass the Praxis II Subject Assessment Test, while large numbers of teachers who did not pass the exam achieved the same or greater levels of effectiveness in the classroom.⁷

The good news is that performance-based licensure exams exist, although many are relatively new or still in the development phase. These new exams, such as edTPA, formerly the Teacher Performance Assessment, and the Educational Testing Service's Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers focus on assessing beginning teaching competency. Less than one-third of states currently require these exams for licensure, however, and many states that do still tend to set a low bar for passage.⁸ In sum, many licensure exams do not include a performance component and do not assess the types of skills that make for great teaching in the classroom.

Not only are there problems with the ways in which these exams assess teachers, but these exams often set the bar too low—an issue that is, in part, a result of each state's ability to set passing scores for teacher licensure exams. On average, passing scores across the country are set about 15 percentage points below the mean score of all test takers.⁹ Almost every state grants licenses to teachers who score as low as the 16th percentile.¹⁰

Passing scores for the same teacher licensure exam also vary widely across states. Potential elementary school teachers in 21 states take the same test for licensure—the Praxis Principles of Learning & Teaching exam—with a possible score range of 100 to 200.¹¹ Teachers in Iowa must earn a scaled score of 167 to pass, while teachers in Alabama pass with a scaled score of just 145.¹² The average performance range—defined as the range of scaled scores earned by the middle 50 percent of the examinees—is 168 to 182; both Iowa's and Alabama's cut scores were well below the median score of 176.¹³

“It should be harder to become a teacher so that teachers earn the same respect that doctors, lawyers, and engineers do.”

— ZACHARY SWEET, math/German teacher and TeachStrong ambassador, Michigan

In order to become a medical doctor, potential practitioners must take a five-day test that takes more than 40 hours to complete.¹⁴ In order to become a licensed certified public accountant, test-takers must complete a 14-hour exam comprised of multiple-choice questions, essays, and simulations that replicate workplace situations.¹⁵ By contrast, the Praxis Subject Assessments range from one to four hours long.¹⁶ Furthermore, medicine and law have professional associations that set uniform entrance requirements, ensuring high-standards for newcomers to the profession. The teaching profession, however, fails to provide prospective teachers with a universally accepted, nationwide high standard for licensure.

In addition to a lack of uniformity across state lines for passing an exam, there is also little uniformity among teacher licensure processes generally. In other words, what it takes to become a licensed practitioner often varies by state, adding to this confusing, patchwork system. To start, there are nearly 600 different teacher licensure exams in use today.¹⁷ Although some teachers may have taken a Praxis exam to gain licensure, others may have instead taken a test created by their state's department of education.

Moreover, some states do not even recognize experienced and accomplished teachers from out-of-state as having met all the requirements for a state license. For example, in some places, out-of-state National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, or National Board, Certified Teachers must satisfy additional exam requirements before achieving licensure, even though these teachers complete a rigorous certification process based on national standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do.¹⁸

This system leads to a situation in which students in some states—such as Alabama—are taught by teachers who were held to a lower standard in their licensure process than teachers in other states. This creates an equity gap, particularly for states that are comprised of mostly rural districts that traditionally face challenges recruiting teachers. Although some reciprocity between states exists already, especially through a collection of agreements between states brokered by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification, an overall lack of uniformity among teacher licensure requirements persists.¹⁹ This incoherence makes it challenging for the public to view the teaching profession as a career that ensures that its practitioners are held to a constant, high standard.

While patterns and similarities across state licensure exams do exist, and though states need not achieve perfect uniformity between their licensure requirements, adopting similarly meaningful entry requirements into the profession would go a long way to changing this perception. This would require states to implement exams that measure deep content and pedagogical knowledge and to set passing scores comparable to those in other states.

Lastly, current teacher licensure processes are unrealistic for our increasingly mobile society. Many teachers are unable to transfer their teaching license to other states due to red tape and disparate requirements for entry into the teaching profession.²⁰ In Minnesota, which has some of the most difficult-to-navigate licensure laws, teachers who move from out-of-state famously spend thousands of dollars to complete additional requirements, classes, and tests in an attempt to receive a license—and often, to no avail.²¹

Young people, many of whom have yet to select a permanent living location, may find the current system unappealing, or may find themselves forced to leave teaching after moving across state lines. According to the Bureau of the Census, people between the ages of 20 and 29 move 16 percent more within a given year than individuals who are age 30 and older.²² To attract and retain young professionals into the teaching profession, the teacher licensure system must be brought into the 21st century to meet the demands of a more mobile population.

HOW RAISING THE BAR FOR TEACHER LICENSURE CAN MODERNIZE AND ELEVATE THE TEACHING PROFESSION

In order to modernize and elevate the teaching profession, states must raise the bar and recreate the assessments used for entry into teaching. Four key results are likely to emerge from ensuring that teacher licensure systems are uniform and include exams that are meaningful measures of readiness to teach. Raising the bar for licensure can: ensure that teachers are better prepared to lead classrooms of their own; bolster respect for teachers as professionals; provide flexibility for teachers to relocate across state lines; and increase student achievement overall.

States that make teacher licensure exams a more meaningful measure of readiness to teach can ensure that teachers are better prepared before entering classrooms of their own. Some new licensure exams require prospective teachers to demonstrate their skills leading a classroom in order to pass.²³ These types of skills-based tests have the potential to more meaningfully measure teaching skills. Additionally, the adoption of a well-designed assessment can help guide teacher preparation programs to better prepare their students for both the classroom and licensure exams.

In order to quash the misconception that teaching is easy, licensure exams must be thorough and intellectually demanding to ensure that potential teachers possess all of the content and pedagogical knowledge and skills necessary to thrive in the classroom. Indeed, research demonstrates that implementing more meaningful licensure exams, especially those rooted in teacher performance in classroom scenarios, ensures that teachers are more prepared and helps prospective teachers improve their skills as they study.²⁴

Even if states transition to a performance-based assessment, if they fail to set a meaningful cut score and eliminate other duplicative tests, they will inevitably rely on an exam that is insufficiently rigorous and even more costly and time-consuming. Furthermore, layering an additional assessment on top of existing, less meaningful tests would continue to drive up costs for the educators taking these exams. States should be cognizant of the cumulative costs of exams and implement streamlined processes for licensure that pare down on outmoded exams and replace them with performance-based assessments.

Ensuring that teacher licensure exams are a meaningful measure of readiness to teach can also allow the teaching profession to accrue the same level of respect as other professions, such as medicine and law. In these esteemed professions, difficult licensure exams, along with rigorous selection and extensive preparation, are a matter of course. Before achieving licensure, young doctors undergo a series of clinical experiences to gain essential skills. A high bar for entry into a profession connotes status. By requiring all prospective teachers to undergo a meaningful examination before receiving teaching licenses, states can ensure that teaching is viewed as a selective profession. Professionals who work in fields for which there is a high bar for entry are often granted more trust, autonomy, and pay than professionals who do not work in similarly selective fields.

“The state exams were only a basic glance of mathematics and science and contained no pedagogy—it was, in my opinion, not even representative of the content needed to teach high school math or science. Licensure exams need to show that teachers are prepared to teach, which includes so many facets. The exams need to mirror other professions.”

— GINA WILSON, National Board Certified Teacher, lead teacher, and TeachStrong ambassador, Michigan

Creating a uniform standard for teacher licensure may also reduce inequities in teacher quality and provide more flexibility for teachers to move from state to state.²⁵ If teacher licensure were universal across states, school districts would enjoy an expanded pool of qualified teachers from which to fill their vacancies. Because not all teachers certified in one state can easily transfer their license to another state, teachers can have difficulty getting licensed if they move and states are left even more challenged to fill open positions. These bureaucratic hurdles are particularly absurd when some states have shortages so severe that they have to recruit teachers from other countries, such as the Philippines, to find qualified candidates.²⁶ Though teacher shortages are the product of several shortcomings in the teacher pipeline, including low teacher salaries and poor working conditions, licensure can serve as a meaningful lever to begin to address teacher vacancies.

Especially now that the country is facing a national teacher shortage, it is imperative to elevate entry into the profession while simultaneously increasing compensation and improving working conditions. Providing teachers with the flexibility to move between states would allow teachers to go where they can be most successful, stimulating improvement within states that do not yet compensate or support teachers well and helping to curtail the issue of teacher shortages. As of now, to address teacher shortages—particularly in rural and low-income districts—school districts are often forced to place teachers in subjects outside of their area of expertise. Currently, out-of-field teaching takes place in more than half of all secondary schools.²⁷ The percentage of teachers teaching outside of their field is higher in schools attended primarily by students who come from low-income households.²⁸

Improving teacher licensure can work toward providing diverse populations of students the same high-quality teachers as their peers in other states. If teachers were allowed to go where they were needed more freely, some out-of-field placement would become less commonplace. In order to incentivize states to allow this reciprocity, however, all states must raise the bar for their teacher licensure exams. To maximize this incentive, states must also address the quality of school leadership and other working conditions in their struggling, hard-to-staff schools. Similarly, once the pathway for transferring licenses across state lines opens up, states would need to implement policies specifically designed to attract high-quality teachers to work in high-need school districts, particularly in rural locales, in order to limit shortages in those areas.

Lastly, ensuring that teacher licensure exams are a meaningful measure of readiness to teach, and creating a uniform system for licensure, can increase student achievement. In several nations where students excel on international exams, such as Singapore, South Korea, and Finland, there are established uniform licensure systems rooted in a set of consistent standards.²⁹ Germany, which performs ahead of the United States on international exams and has a federalist system like the United States, has also established uniform licensure requirements. In Germany, future teachers—as well as future physicians, pharmacists, and psychotherapists—must complete a Staatsexamen, a national examination for each field in which it is in the interest of the country that professionals are properly qualified.³⁰

In addition to performance-based exams, residency programs use ongoing performance evaluations as part of their programs. For example, Urban Teachers utilizes a one-year residency program in which “participants serve as co-teachers in four different urban classroom settings.”³¹ Urban Teachers sets rigorous benchmarks to determine if participants should continue moving forward. Student teachers must meet minimum GPA requirements, and also meet consistently increasing expectations of their teaching practice through evaluations and classroom observations, including their impact on student learning.³²

Raising the bar for entry into the teaching profession can ensure that teachers are better prepared for the challenges of the classroom, and respected and treated like other professionals. A confusing licensure system should not dissuade the prospective next generation of teachers from considering a career in teaching. Instead, uniform teacher licensure systems and meaningful exams can be one part of ensuring that every teacher feels prepared to teach in any city or state, which will ultimately lead to an increase in student success across the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

States should ensure that licensure exams are a meaningful measure of readiness to teach, requiring future teachers to demonstrate both pedagogical and content knowledge, and classroom skills

Entry into the teaching profession must be based on more than a written exam. Performance-based exams for teachers entering through both traditional and alternative pathways should assess classroom management and content pedagogy, and should require teacher candidates to demonstrate their ability to plan and deliver instruction and to assess student learning. We must ensure that more students see themselves reflected in the teacher workforce and changes to licensure requirements must be made with this consideration in mind. Increasing and maintaining diversity within the teaching profession is critical; policymakers must ensure that licensure exams incorporate several measures of potential teaching ability, including disposition for the classroom and responsiveness to feedback.³³

States should set a sufficiently high passing score on licensure exams to ensure that teachers are rigorously assessed before entering the teaching profession

Once states have meaningful exams in place that are effective predictors of subsequent classroom performance, states should set high, meaningful passing scores for teacher licensure exams, as opposed to the standard practice of setting passing scores well below the median. Tests must be sufficiently rigorous and measure specific knowledge and teaching skills based on grade level and content area. Teacher preparation programs should use data on passage rates and job placement to better serve their students.

States should create or expand reciprocal agreements, making it easier for teachers to move between states

Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law in December 2015, includes language that would allow a consortium of states to work together to develop compatible standards on licensing and certifications. The law also includes language that allows funds to be used for voluntary teacher licensure reciprocity across states.³⁴ By embracing a set of similarly high standards for licensure, more states can enter reciprocal agreements that allow teachers to move from state-to-state without licensure impediments. This increased reciprocity, combined with changes that hold teachers to similarly high standards across states, will make the profession more appealing to prospective teachers and potentially help to ease teacher shortages. Additionally, the process should be streamlined for accomplished career changers who want to teach in high-need fields. Lastly, teachers with a demonstrated record of accomplishment, such as National Board Certified Teachers, should be granted automatic reciprocity if they choose to move between states.

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