
Teacher Licensing Testing: Testing Our Teachers to Reflect Changing Demands

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There's a lot of talk about how educational research can impact our teacher licensing system. Up till now, there's been a lot of educational research that hasn't actually been very helpful. We have fights about phonics and whole-language instruction, the difference that class and school size makes, and so on. Too many of these studies are actually little more than opinion, and in the United States right now, there probably isn't enough money to do the rigorous studies that might actually make a difference.

Education in America is in crisis, and we're sleeping right through it. We've all seen the studies about the number of kids who start ninth grade but never actually graduate from high school—approximately 1.2 million a year. In fact, statistics show that the United States once had the lead in the percentage of its citizens who had high school diplomas, and in the last thirty years we've stayed still while the rest of the world has either caught up or, in most cases, gone beyond us (Alliance for Excellent Education). That's the real crisis and the challenge for anybody providing services for the education system today.

Variability among Teacher Licensing Tests

Teacher licensing tests across the country consist of an array of different tests, some just minimally testing what people think teachers should know and be able to do, and others containing much more elaborate measures. This is something that every state has to wrestle with. Some states have introduced ELL or special education as a component for all of its candidates, or mathematics for elementary teachers. Perhaps state teacher-licensing tests could model the National Board Certification program—now being developed by Evaluation Systems—which requires videotaped recordings of classroom interactions between students and teacher candidates. Our licensing programs

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need to be designed to determine whether these people have the pedagogy that's needed to give our students twenty-first-century skills, or whether these skills need to be introduced.

Our school year goes from September to June, as if kids still work on farms. We dump millions of teenagers into the streets of Detroit, Miami, and other big cities at 2:30 in the afternoon with no supervision. Nothing seems to change. We have students who go back to school in September, having had no educational stimulation during the summer whatsoever, and teachers will say they have to spend time getting those students back to where they were the year before. With or without educational research, we certainly know that content makes a difference, which is why teacher licensing tests typically have some kind of content testing. We had a strong Reading Excellence program in our state, which was replaced by the scientifically based Reading First program—part of No Child Left Behind. The good thing about Reading First was that it introduced the concept of periodic testing. We had previously raved about our results with the Reading Excellence program, which were based on annual tests given in the spring. But when you're talking about young children trying to develop reading skills, it makes no sense not to have periodic assessments to inform the teacher of student progress. There are a number of ideas coming to the forefront out there, but I'm not sure they're necessarily found in research. Certainly, the more data we get, the more analysis we get, which can help us determine where we are and where we ought to be going.

There are some exciting things starting to happen out there, based on the call for change by governors, legislatures, Congress, and others who realize that the current system isn't getting the job done. These recommendations will have an effect on teacher certification, up to and including master teachers. Changes are taking place in the world very rapidly. By figuring out what our students need to know, we can determine what it is that incoming teachers should know and be able to do, and consequently how to test for it.

Keeping Up with a Changing World

When we look at the world around us, we are inundated with new technologies, from laptops, to portable media players, to smartphones. At the same time, many of our schools remain untouched by these changes and function much the same as they always have. So there's a juxtaposition of change and stagnation. If Horace Mann were alive today, the only institution he would recognize would be our schools. Education isn't keeping up with the changing world the way our kids are. There's a whole different world out there, and unfortunately we're sleeping right through it.

The Maine laptop initiative is one area where we have taken a giant step forward. What's interesting about this isn't just the kids using technology, which is great in and of itself, but how it has paved the way for teacher collaboration and professional development. Discipline issues have greatly diminished as kids have become engaged and excited about learning. To the extent that teacher certification can help inspire learning, teacher certification testing can be part of the system, providing accountability and a way to make sure our teachers have certain skills and knowledge as they enter the field.

We know we need to change in order to face the challenges before us—both those we currently face and those that will develop as we try our hand at new ways of doing things. Some of our tried-and-true solutions will surely need to be revamped as we embark on this transformation. We need to wake up and be part of a revolution here in America; we owe it to our kids to change the system to be more responsive, so that they can in fact have a shot at a future in this global world.

Reference

Alliance for Excellent Education. About the crisis. http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis