Non-program test takers in licensure test data
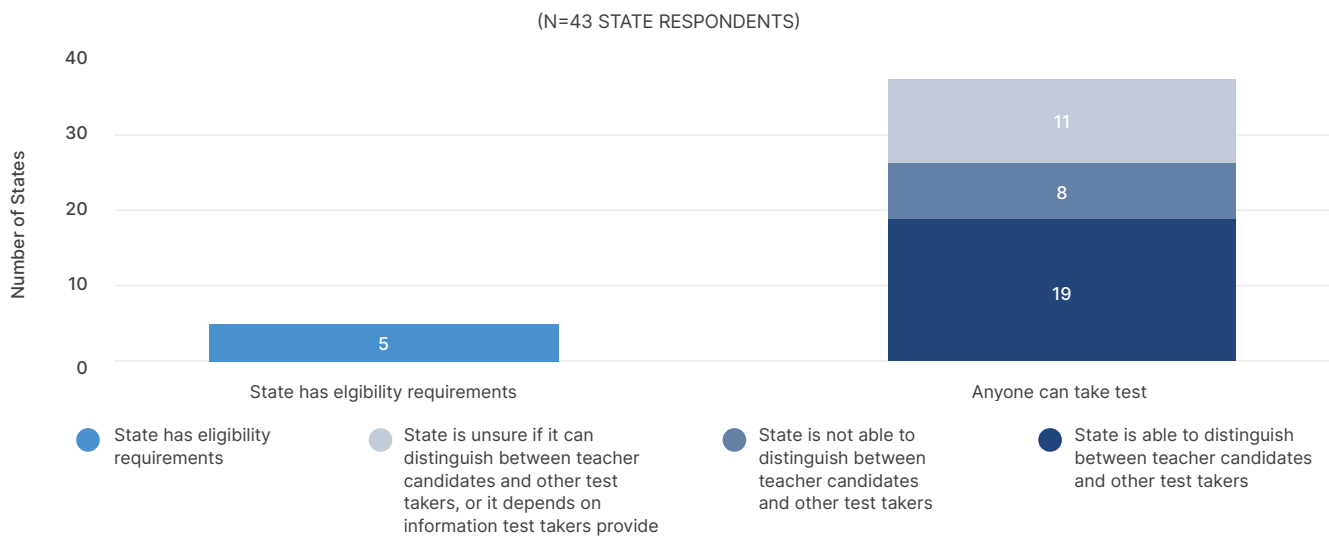
The challenge

The pass rate data from most states reflects all test takers, not all of whom are necessarily current or former teacher candidates. Nearly every state that provided pass rate data included the caveat that the data reflects all test takers who identified an institution when they applied to take the test. Those test takers may not all be enrolled in (or have completed) a preparation program.

Most states allow anyone to take a licensure test

States have different eligibility rules for who can take licensure tests.[1] An NCTQ survey of state education agencies found that nearly all states (38 of the 43 that responded) allow anyone to take a licensure test, while only five of the 43 that responded set criteria for taking the test, such as receiving approval from a preparation program, being a licensed teacher seeking an additional certification or seeking to move to the state in question, or applying for an alternative certification program. As a result, pass rates may include test takers who have not completed or are not currently enrolled in a teacher preparation program.

In NCTQ's survey, eight of the 38 states that do not have eligibility requirements for taking a licensure test responded that they cannot distinguish between pass rates for those who completed or are enrolled in a teacher preparation program and those who are not. Another 11 states either were not sure of their ability to distinguish pass rates, or their ability varied based on what information test takers provided or what was available from their testing company.

Few states set eligibility requirements to take licensure tests

(N=43 STATE RESPONDENTS)

Legend:
- State has eligibility requirements
- State is unsure if it can distinguish between teacher candidates and other test takers, or it depends on information test takers provide
- State is not able to distinguish between teacher candidates and other test takers
- State is able to distinguish between teacher candidates and other test takers

Of the 43 states that responded to NCTQ's survey exploring this issue, nearly all states allow anyone to take content licensure tests.

Prevalence of non-program test taker problem

The prevalence of test takers who are not enrolled in teacher preparation varies among the states that can make this distinction.

In Texas, programs have to "recommend" initial certification candidates to take a test if they're pursuing a certification route. But if a current teacher wants to add a certification, or if a teacher from out of state needs to take an exam to fulfill a missing requirement, he or she can take the exam and be listed as N/A for their program. In the data Texas provided to NCTQ, 39% of test takers were identified as not being in a preparation program. The fact that Texas recruits 40% of its teachers from alternate route programs may also partly explain its high proportion of non-program test takers.

In Florida, 58% of test takers are not enrolled in a preparation program. The state attributes these high numbers to the fact that anyone can take a licensure test.

Steps states can take to focus pass rate data on teacher candidates

1 To resolve this challenge, states can consider implementing an eligibility system for taking licensure tests, as states such as **Georgia**, **Iowa**, and **Texas** have done.

2 States can work with the existing data management system provided through their testing company and require preparation programs to provide rosters of candidates by program that can be matched to the testing records. This would likely follow the same process as roster verification for Title II data, and some states have worked with their testing company to create a "Title II filter" that can be applied to pass rate data within the management system. Generally, this solution shares responsibility among the state, the testing company, and the preparation programs.

For example, **Florida** worked with Pearson to create an application that cleans the pass rate data using Title II designations, allowing them to distinguish between test takers who are and are not enrolled in teacher preparation.

3 States can create their own database system. Ideally, the database would have a unique identifier for the candidates, tracking them from enrollment into teacher preparation, through testing and program completion, and into the classroom. This type of robust data system has benefits beyond providing cleaner pass rate data, including yielding more information about the state's teacher pipeline (e.g., program-level data about retention in preparation, entrance into teaching, retention in the classroom). When states have their own tracking system, they are also better situated to validate the data that programs provide for Title II reporting.

For example, **Massachusetts** has created a data system that tracks candidates from their enrollment into teacher preparation through their hiring in Massachusetts public schools, and therefore when they pull pass rate data, they are able to isolate teacher candidates.

Michigan provides teacher prep programs with a roster of candidates who claimed the prep program as their institution for a given time period. The prep program must review the roster; a nonresponse means that the candidates are presumed to be "verified."

Washington, DC, is bringing its data collection and cleaning process in-house after previously using a contractor. The city has created a "unique staff educator identifier" for every educator in the D.C. educational ecosystem, which follows them from K–12 public school to higher education to teacher preparation to the classroom, supporting efforts to match licensure test data to teacher prep programs.

Implications for current pass rate data

Pass rate data based on all test takers has some benefits and some limitations.

Presumably, anyone spending the time and money to take a licensure test has at least some interest in teaching, and so data based on all test takers provides stakeholders with a broader view of the potential teacher pipeline than data based only on teacher candidates.

Further, reporting on all test takers sidesteps issues of the data omitting failing test takers. For example, in the summary pass rate data reported to Title II, programs need only report pass rates for *program completers*; as many programs require passing the licensure test as a condition for program completion, these programs omit all candidates who failed the test.

However, the limitation is that this pass rate data may incorrectly attribute test takers to institutions when the test takers did not actually receive preparation from those institutions.

The data newly available through NCTQ's pass rates dashboards, while not perfect, offers more insight than is currently available through other data sources (such as Title II). This data can offer an unparalleled view into trends in the state and among institutions, and it can identify potentially strong institutions that may offer a model of promising practices to others. Similarly, the data can point to particularly weak institutions that merit closer scrutiny. However, states seeking to use this data for accountability purposes may need to implement one of the steps described above to further clean the data, which can help foster trust among all stakeholders.

ENDNOTES

1   Passing licensure tests is generally only one of several state requirements to earn a teaching license. States often also require completing an approved preparation program, completing a supervised practicum experience, or possessing a bachelor's degree, among other requirements.