

ELEMENTARY TEACHERS NOT GETTING THE PREPARATION NEEDED FOR CLASSROOM; EXTRAORDINARILY HIGH NUMBERS FAIL PROFESSIONAL LICENSING TESTS

Few Teacher Prep Programs Deliver the Math, English, Science, and Social Studies Content Elementary Teachers Need

Washington, D.C.—New analysis from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reveals both astonishingly high numbers of elementary teacher candidates failing their professional licensing tests each year, as well as widespread evidence that teacher preparation programs give scant attention to the content knowledge candidates need. Teacher candidates who do not pass these tests, even though they have finished their program of study, are generally denied a standard license by their state to teach.

As documented in [*A Fair Chance: Simple steps to strengthen and diversify the teacher workforce*](#), few teacher preparation programs either conduct any sort of screening or require specific coursework in the subject area knowledge traditionally taught in elementary grades. The fact that more candidates fail their professional exams on their first attempt (54 percent) than pass them suggests a lack of adequate preparation and lies in stark comparison to other professions. Nursing, for example, achieves an 85 percent first-time pass rate.

Candidates of color are hit hardest. Already more likely to be disadvantaged by an inequitable system of K-12 education, only **38 percent** of black teacher candidates and **57 percent** of Hispanic teacher candidates pass the most widely used licensing test even after multiple attempts, compared to 75 percent of white candidates. If the pass rate for black and Hispanic teacher candidates were comparable to white candidates, the diversity of the new teaching pool would increase by half.

The report features the many voices of aspiring teachers who were unable to pass their test, as well as those teachers who needed multiple attempts. Says one aspiring teacher: "It's just really frustrating and discouraging. I was Dean's List, Ed Honors Society. You think you are prepared, and it's the only thing holding you back from doing the thing you love."

The report examined the undergraduate course requirements at each of 817 institutions, both the 'general education' coursework required of all students at an institution and the coursework required by the education program. The dearth of relevant coursework is unmistakable:

- **A tiny percentage of programs (3 percent) require courses to ensure candidates gain foundational knowledge across science topics.** For example, instead of directing teacher candidates to a basic chemistry course (or first requiring evidence of the candidate's knowledge of chemistry), candidates often have a choice of courses, such as how chemistry is used in art restoration or herbal medicines. Further, while some courses appear to be suitable, they are often too narrow in scope (e.g. "Lightning and Thunderstorms") to benefit a teacher who lacks a broad knowledge of science.
- **Only a quarter of programs (27 percent) require sufficient coursework in mathematics.**
- **History, geography, and literature courses aligned with elementary standards are similarly absent from course requirements.** For example, only half of all programs even require an adequate course in children's literature, in spite of the fundamental role it plays in all elementary curricula.

“Of all the different strategies to try and attract more individuals of color to the teaching profession,” commented Kate Walsh, NCTQ’s President, “here we surface thousands of candidates a year who want to teach, who would teach, but whose institutions are not providing what they need to be successful. Few challenges faced by the teaching profession can be solved as easily as this one—just guide them to the right coursework.”

Low pass rates on the elementary content licensing exam have fueled a backlash in many states against the tests themselves, with calls to discard licensing tests or lower the passing scores to make it easier to diversify the profession. But these responses elide the central problem that these tests diagnose: aspiring teachers are not prepared by either their K-12 education or their teacher preparation programs in the content they will have to teach. Government surveys routinely report elementary teachers feel inadequately prepared for the classroom.

The NCTQ analysis uses data from the most popular elementary content test, found in 23 states, the Praxis Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects Exam, but uncovers evidence that states using other tests also have low pass rates. Currently 45 states and the District of Columbia require aspiring teachers to pass one of 22 content tests that are on the market for becoming licensed to teach, with five states (Hawaii, New Jersey, Ohio, Iowa, and Arizona) exempting some elementary teachers from content tests. Only two companies, ETS and Pearson, are in this market.

While the report includes details on what each of the 817 institutions provide by way of content coverage, it was not able to report the pass rates for individual institutions. Although every state publishes institution-level pass rate data, NCTQ could not identify a single state that publishes first-time and final pass rate data for all programs, for all licensure exams. State data reported to the federal government are only available for “program completers,” which many institutions define as individuals who have passed the licensing tests, not all test takers. Accordingly, these pass rates are misleading, with programs posting average pass rates of 95 to 96 percent. In the handful of states that claim to post data on all test takers, their data are generally fraught with other reporting issues.

Recommendations for institutions and state regulators:

Higher education leaders and teacher preparation programs

- Provide better parameters for selecting from courses that count toward general education requirements for undergraduate students who indicate an interest in teaching.
- Use the teacher preparation program admissions process as an opportunity to diagnose weaknesses in content knowledge, then tailor teacher candidates’ course of study to fill in gaps.
- Set undergraduate and graduate program content course requirements to align with what elementary teachers need to know.

State policymakers

- Revisit current licensing tests to ensure they capture the content knowledge teachers need to fully prepare students to meet college-and-career readiness standards.
- Understand that the response to low pass rates is not to abandon tests or make them easier to pass, but to hold teacher prep programs accountable for preparing candidates in the content aligned to elementary standards.
- Publish first-time and highest-score licensing test pass rates for all candidates enrolled in a teacher prep program to give prospective teacher candidates the information they deserve to choose a program where they are more likely to be successful.

Read the full NCTQ report here: <https://www.nctq.org/publications/A-Fair-Chance>

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To schedule an interview with NCTQ, please contact Nicole Gerber at (202) 393- 0020 ext. 712.

About the National Council on Teacher Quality:

The National Council on Teacher Quality is a nonpartisan research and policy group, committed to modernizing the teaching profession and based on the belief that all children deserve effective teachers. We recognize that it is not teachers who bear responsibility for their profession's many challenges, but the institutions with the greatest authority and influence over teachers. More information about NCTQ can be found on our website, www.nctq.org.