

Creating a Consistent & Rigorous Teacher Licensure Process



Tamara Hiler

Deputy Director of Education

[@TamaraHiler](#)



Stephenie Johnson

Fellow, Social Policy & Politics Program

Takeaways

- With nearly 600 different teacher licensure exams in use today, teachers in various states are held to grossly different standards of rigor in the teacher certification process.
- The bar for teacher licensure exams is set shockingly low—with almost every state granting licenses to teachers who score as low as the 16th percentile.
- Teachers who are certified to teach in one state can't easily transfer their credentials, leaving states like Arizona in a better position to recruit teachers from the Philippines rather than neighboring states.
- Instead of maintaining an outdated system that's unattractive to Millennials, we propose a certification framework that lays out a consistent set of entry requirements, demands a high bar for entry, and allows teachers to readily take their skills across state lines.

When a person chooses to become a lawyer, the process from day one is clear-cut: LSAT, law school, and bar exam. These three well-defined, linear, and rigorous steps provide every candidate with a distinct picture of the expectations required to practice law—and ensure that they are prepared when they step foot in a courtroom. The pathway into the teaching

profession couldn't be more different. Each state sets its own wildly different parameters for licensure, and prospective teachers are left to navigate through a jumbled patchwork of futile requirements and low expectations. This process is out-of-step with the ambitions of today's highly-mobile workforce, and it is deterring the best and brightest from entering and remaining in our classrooms. To ensure we can attract and retain the next generation of excellent public school teachers, we need a more linear pathway into the profession that lays out a consistent set of entry requirements, demands a high bar for entry, and allows teachers to readily take their skills across state lines.

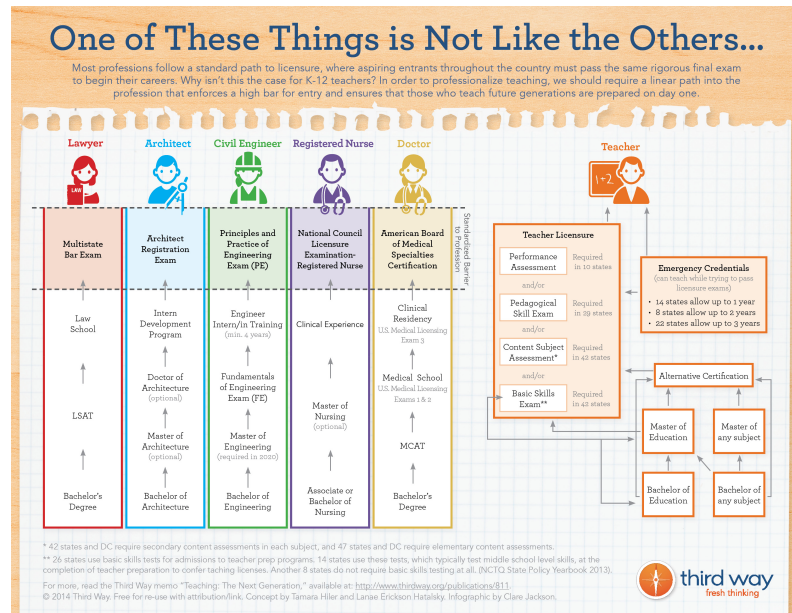
The Problem

Teacher licensure is both unwieldy & undemanding.

The licensure process is a jumbled mess that differs in each state.

Our country has 50 states but no less than 600 different teacher licensure tests.¹ While other professions have clear and uniform roadmaps for what entry into their career entails, the current teacher licensure system is an ambiguous and confusing maze. Similar to a disorganized “choose your own adventure” book, prospective teachers are required to navigate a series of entry points, testing benchmarks, and licensure requirements that can vary widely in time, cost, and rigor from state-to-state. In some states, teachers are required to pass licensure exams *before* even entering into a teacher preparation program, while other states use comparable (or in some cases, the exact same) exams as a final step taken *after* program completion.² And states use a mix of assessment tools to evaluate readiness to enter the classroom: some simply use fill-in-the-bubble tests to assess content or pedagogical knowledge and count those as sufficient markers of competency, while others require much more comprehensive stand-and-deliver performance assessments. This lack of continuity across states results not

only in confusion and frustration for teachers themselves, but also in an inequitable distribution of teacher quality based on geographic location, with students in some states or districts benefiting from teachers that are markedly more prepared than others.



The bar for licensure is set shockingly low.

In addition to creating their own professional standards and accompanying licensure exams, states are also able to choose where to place the cut scores (the minimum score necessary to pass) for their teacher certification exams.³ Sadly, rather than setting a high bar for entry, states often make these passing scores embarrassingly low—with the majority of states setting the bar at or below the 16th percentile—ensuring that virtually all candidates pass, particularly when given unlimited attempts to do so.⁴ What parent would (or should) be satisfied with knowing their child's teacher scored 17th from the bottom out of 100? The truth is that if their child earned a similar grade on a test in that teacher's class, they'd be handed a failing grade.

But even when states are using the exact same tests, passing scores vary considerably state-to-state and fall well below the median score.⁵ For example, K-6 teachers in 21 states

take the same Praxis Principles of Learning & Teaching exam to assess their knowledge of foundational practices, with a possible score range of 100 to 200. Yet teachers in Iowa must earn a scaled score of 167 to pass, while teachers in Alabama can pass with a scaled score of just 145.⁶ What's more, even though teachers score an average of 176 on that very same test, 16 out of the 21 states who used it this year set their cut score at a measly 160 (16 points less, again out of 100).⁷ This means most states are welcoming teachers who scored far below average into their classrooms, even though most teachers are capable of meeting higher expectations.

This incongruous system sends a message to both prospective and current teachers alike that they are unable to meet a consistently high bar. One explanation for these low expectations is the fact that state departments of education are responsible for approving their own teaching profession standards.⁸ In order to increase the number of teachers with a quick fix during times of shortages, state departments across the country lower their standards to increase their hiring pools.⁹ And without an external check of any kind, states can set the bar as low as they wish. It should not come as a surprise, then, that six in ten Americans believe entry into the teaching profession isn't rigorous enough—in fact, they are right.¹⁰ If this perception doesn't change and the bar for entry into the teaching profession remains where it is, high-achieving Millennials may decide to reject teaching as a viable and prestigious career path.

Today's patchwork of licensure requirements traps teachers in one place.

Unlike most professionals, teachers can't transfer their professional skills across state lines.

A doctor in Los Angeles can perform surgery in Baltimore, but a teacher in Bethesda can't teach algebra in San Diego. And there's no reasonable rationale—it's just that way because it's always been so.

In today's ever-growing population of highly-mobile workers, this disorganized licensure system presents a cumbersome and unnecessary barrier for teachers looking to transfer their skills across state lines. Teachers who move find themselves having to re-take licensure exams, repeat teacher preparation coursework, and re-pay high credentialing fees. And depending on the number of years spent in the classroom, some teachers must actually start the licensure process over again from scratch.¹¹ But under the current system, you can't blame a state for not taking another state's word that a teacher is qualified, since the standard of entry into the profession varies widely. That needs to change to bring teaching into the 21st century.

The National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) has attempted to reduce mobility barriers by creating the "Interstate Agreement," which is a collection of individual agreements that allow states to grant reciprocity to certain out-of-state teachers who have completed comparable licensure processes. However, these reciprocity agreements don't actually guarantee that a teacher will be able to fully transfer his or her certification to a new state. This is because many states still require all incoming teachers, regardless of their years of experience in the classroom, to start with a provisional license that can only be bumped up to permanent status after fulfilling additional state requirements and/or waiting a certain number of additional years.¹² And to make matters worse, whatever level of reciprocity is available doesn't flow both ways. According to NASDTEC, these reciprocity agreements are "not a collection of two-way agreements of reciprocal assistance." For example, Georgia may accept out-of-state credentials from Connecticut, but Connecticut does not necessarily accept out-of-state credentials from Georgia.¹³

One notable exception to this patchwork of reciprocity agreements is the attainment of National Board Certification. Once a teacher has gone through the rigorous process of becoming a National Board Certified Teacher, most states will

allow teachers to transfer their credentials with few or no strings attached.¹⁴ It is certainly a step in the right direction to see states uniformly recognize and reward the accomplishments of teachers meeting this high bar; however, only three percent of the teacher workforce is currently board certified, so even if those numbers continue to grow, this remedy does little to address the widespread mobility needs of the vast majority of today's teachers.¹⁵

This lack of mobility conflicts with the needs of a 21st century labor market.

The lack of true reciprocity for teacher licensure in the United States is becoming increasingly at odds with the needs of today's modern workforce—for both teachers themselves and the school districts who employ them. A preposterous illustration of this problem comes out of Arizona, where there has been a recent state-wide teacher shortage. Because the convoluted licensure system makes it so difficult to hire teachers from neighboring states, districts in Arizona have resorted to recruiting internationally—filling their classrooms with teachers from the Philippines instead.¹⁶ It is the height of absurdity that it is easier to staff our schools with international teachers than it is to simply hire qualified teachers from the next state over.

The unnecessary hoops teachers must jump through in order to practice in different states prohibit teachers from being able to make the same professional choices that Americans in any other career are able to make (and frequently do in our modern economy)—to relocate in order to further their careers. And as a 2008 NASDTEC report noted, the frustration associated with the reciprocity process has led to “an untold number of teachers opting to leave the profession.”¹⁷ This lack of permeability contributes to a perception problem as well, sending a clear message that the knowledge, experience, and professional skills gained in the teaching profession are not worthy of recognition by other states. It leaves many high-achieving Millennials to view the teaching

profession as both an outdated and parochial career option, and one that you should only choose if you intend to stay put for the rest of your life. Until states are able to come to a more widespread consensus about the standard of entry and allow teachers to more easily move wherever their career may take them, teaching will not be seen as the dynamic profession that it truly is.

The Solution

Require every teacher across the country to demonstrate complete content knowledge & classroom performance assessments.

The teaching profession should move toward a licensure process that more closely mirrors the clear and streamlined pathways outlined in other highly-esteemed professions. We suggest a rigorous, two-step licensure process that assesses both content (subject area knowledge) and performance (the ability to impart that knowledge in front of pupils). This would mean requiring 1) a demonstration of content and pedagogical knowledge before a teacher ever enters the classroom and 2) the completion of a performance assessment within one year of full-time teaching to remain there. Even this first step would be a huge improvement, as many states already test for content, but not all. While 47 states require some sort of content knowledge exam for their elementary and secondary teachers in each subject area, only 29 currently require all new teachers to pass a pedagogy test to ensure they understand how to teach the subjects in which they have content knowledge.¹⁸ Teachers should pass these exams in every state, though states could customize what these tests look like in order to make sure that their teachers can demonstrate a basic understanding of local issues and topics unique to their regions or states, similar to the bar examination for hopeful lawyers. (For example, a teacher in Hawaii may need to have a foundational understanding of indigenous student populations.)

After earning a provisional license, and the ability to step foot in a classroom, teachers would then need to complete a performance assessment as a way to earn full licensure in their state. This stand-and-deliver component would be completed within the first year of a teacher's career and would be based on his or her actual performance and student progress during that time period, as evidenced through the submission of videoed lessons and/or a portfolio of work. Although states would have the flexibility to design their own performance-based assessments for their teachers, they could also choose to adopt pre-existing exemplary models, such as the edTPA, which was developed and field tested by "more than 1,000 educators from 29 states and the District of Columbia and more than 450 institutions of higher learning," and already serves as a model for requiring the submission of artifacts, such as videotaped lessons and student work.¹⁹ Many states are already moving in the direction of performance-based assessments, with teacher preparation providers in 33 states and D.C. currently piloting edTPA in some way and 10 states putting statewide policies in place that require a state-approved performance assessment.²⁰ Creating a consistent, streamlined, two-step process in each state would not only clarify and raise the standards for the teaching profession, it would also set up a situation in which states could more sufficiently trust the licensure process of a neighboring state, laying the groundwork to move toward a more mobile profession.

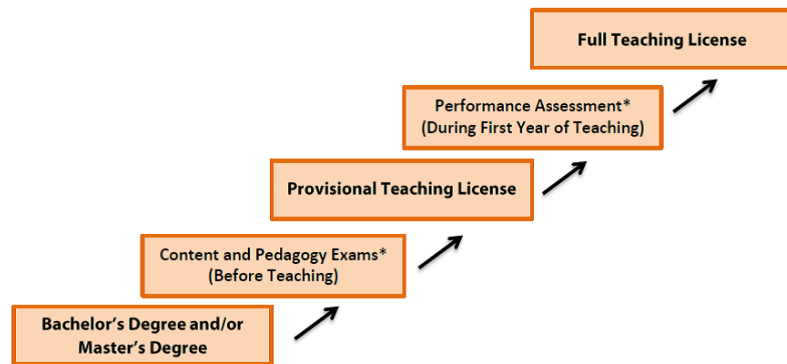
Raise the bar to make licensure more challenging.

To ensure that each state's licensure process is sufficiently challenging and comprehensive, we must rely not just on the state boards of education but should also include oversight from an external and impartial organization, as recommended in the 2011 Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching report commissioned by the National Educators Association.²¹ One strong contender for this role could be the Interstate New Teacher and Support Consortium (InTASC), a consortium of state education agencies and

national education organizations that currently operates under the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).²² This commission could endorse a minimum bar for passage of initial content and pedagogy exams, looking individually at the tests chosen by states to determine the appropriate pass/fail threshold, eliminating the issue of states continuously setting their cut scores well below the median. Even though InTASC has already created its own set of standards and resources for teacher development, the consortium could also collaborate with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to create stronger alignment between existing teacher licensing standards and the standards for board certification, which would continue to provide the gold standard for advanced teaching practice.

Serving in this capacity as an objective and unbiased check on states' credentialing systems, one of the first responsibilities of InTASC could be to raise the passing scores for existing, widely-used licensure assessments so that they are comparable across state lines. Similar to how the U.S. Medical Licensing Exam sets a uniform passing score for all doctors regardless of their state of residency, InTASC could play a critical role in ensuring that teachers in every state are held to a similar level of rigor.²³ Not only would this prevent states from setting artificially low cut scores that are well below average, it would also create a more equitable distribution of high-quality teachers across state lines. In states that use their own licensure tests, InTASC could create an equivalency chart to allow for an easier comparison of the level of rigor for these various exams. This would provide states with a greater level of assurance that any teacher transferring from out-of-state was held to a high standard throughout the licensure process. Because participation in InTASC's new standards-based review system would give them more consistent access to a wider and more qualified pool of teachers outside their own boundaries, states would have an incentive to meet this higher bar at every stage of the licensure process.

Third Way's Vision for a Streamlined Licensure Process



*The content and pedagogy exams and the performance assessments would be state-developed and approved by INTASC upon their review using new, higher standards.

Create a common application for reciprocity that makes it easier for teachers to transfer their credentials across state lines.

In today's increasingly mobile society, states should encourage, rather than inhibit, the transferability of teaching credentials across state lines. Despite almost full state participation in NASDTEC's Interstate Agreement, the majority of the teacher workforce still faces arbitrary barriers that stand in the way of true reciprocity for their professional licenses.²⁴ Instead, we should implement a streamlined reciprocity process we will call the Interstate Teaching Application (ITA). Similar to the Common Application adopted by over 500 institutions of higher education to help simplify the college application process for students, states could choose to adopt the ITA as a uniform procedure for evaluating and awarding licensure to out-of-state teacher candidates.²⁵ The federal government would fund and provide the platform for this new online system, which would provide the infrastructure for teachers with at least one year of teaching experience (enough time to have completed a performance assessment in their home state) to submit their resume, licensure test scores, and performance assessment video and evaluation to any participating state as part of a baseline application. States could also have the option to request supplemental materials as a way to customize the ITA to meet their state-specific needs if they felt it was necessary to do so.

Any state looking to participate in the ITA would be required to implement the rigorous, two-step licensure process and have their cut scores approved by InTASC. This would give states the reassurance that any out-of-state applicants will have met the same high bar expected of their own teachers. By having all out-of-state teaching candidates available in one, centralized location, states would be able to more seamlessly and expeditiously recruit high-quality teachers from other states to fill any staffing shortages. This would be a large departure from the status quo, where states either simply lower their own state requirements when facing a teacher shortage, or as in the case of Arizona, find themselves having to recruit teachers from other countries.²⁶ Similarly, this system would increase mobility within the teaching profession by providing those willing to relocate with the infrastructure to apply for positions in states where their skills are needed most.

Allowing teachers to use one uniform process to transfer their credentials across state lines would substantially alleviate the confusion and variability that exists in today's convoluted interstate agreement process. States looking to recruit high-quality candidates from other states would have a built-in incentive to raise their own standards in order to participate in the ITA process. Established teachers wanting to move across state lines would find a reciprocity process which is fair and clear, as the baseline expectations would be consistent for every state. And prospective teachers looking to enter the profession could be certain that a career in teaching would actually allow them to engage in a modern and mobile lifestyle—not cementing them into a geographical choice they make in their teens or early twenties. By opening up state lines while simultaneously raising the standards of entry, the teaching profession could take an important step toward helping the American public see it as a more prestigious and viable career option for decades to come.

Critiques & Responses

States should be allowed to decide how and when a teacher gets certified.

We are not proposing a federal takeover of teacher licensure. Title II of the *Higher Education Act* (HEA) explicitly prohibits the federal government from “establishing or supporting a national system of teacher certification,” and there is nothing in this proposal that would take away the states’ ability to design and implement their own state licensure systems and grant state-specific certification.²⁷ We simply believe that states should ask all teachers to demonstrate a meaningful level of content and pedagogical knowledge before they step foot in a classroom and participate in a performance assessment before earning full licensure (which more states have already begun to require on their own since the development of the edTPA).²⁸ This process should be monitored by an external reviewer comprised of state and local experts to provide a check to ensure that states and teachers are better informed as to the quality and rigor of certification standards in various states. While there would be no federal mandate requiring states to participate, states would have the incentive to raise their standards to meet these baseline recommendations in order to take part in the Interstate Teacher Application (ITA). We see this system as analogous to the way the Federation of State Medical Boards & National Board of Medical Examiners oversee medical licensing, ensuring that the standards for state-developed certification are clear, rigorous, and consistent, and recognizing that a doctor shouldn’t have to start the medical licensure process completely anew if he or she moves to a neighboring state.²⁹

Raising the bar will create a teacher shortage.

There is no evidence to suggest that raising the standard of entry into the profession would lead to a shortage of teachers. While some states have experienced teacher shortages in the areas of math and science, teacher preparation programs nationwide routinely graduate twice as many elementary

teachers as are needed each year. This means that Millennials who major in STEM fields are not entering the teaching profession, although they are desperately needed. Raising the bar for entry into the profession could eliminate the elementary teacher surplus problem while making the career more prestigious and attractive to graduates from the science and math fields who are looking for an entry point into a prestigious career pathway.³⁰ There is strong reason to believe that setting a low bar drives high-achieving students away from entering the profession. A recent Third Way poll found that top-tier undergraduate students have a dismal perception of the teaching profession — only 35% said teachers were “smart,” and teaching was ranked as *the* top profession they believe “average” people choose.³¹ If we enhance the prestige of the profession by creating a more linear and rigorous pathway to full teacher licensure, more high-achieving Millennials will line up to fill our classrooms.

Making the licensure process more difficult will result in less diversity in the teaching pool.

Today, people of color comprise a paltry 17% of the teaching force.³² We have seen, however, that it is possible to raise standards and increase diversity simultaneously. According to the Center for American Progress, Massachusetts has been able to maintain a diversity index that is equivalent to the national average, despite the state’s recent overhaul to make entry into the teaching profession more rigorous.³³ In addition, Teach For America, a highly-selective alternative certification program, announced earlier this year that over half of its incoming corps members identify as people of color and 47% received Pell Grants.³⁴ While there are certainly larger systemic issues that need to be addressed to increase the diversity of the teaching profession, lowering the standards of entry is a haphazard approach, not a long-term solution, and it is offensive to teachers everywhere to suggest that they cannot meet higher standards with new and improved measures. Greater emphasis should instead be

placed on actively recruiting a more diverse population of teachers into the profession in the first place and preparing them well for the classroom.

This isn't that different from other proposals to standardize the teacher licensure process, like a "bar exam for teachers."

The solutions proposed in this report are unique in several respects. First, our proposal for a streamlined licensure process keeps control of teacher licensure at the state level by allowing state actors and teachers to design and recalibrate their own systems. In addition, recommending InTASC as the organization to review and approve these systems reinforces the notion that teachers themselves should be the primary agents of change and accreditation. Indeed, InTASC is comprised of education leaders and on-the-ground professionals; there is no federal oversight in the certification pathway we have proposed. Moreover, the ITA is an entirely new concept that would provide an incentive for states to opt in and voluntarily raise their own standards. While participation would not be mandatory, it would be in the best interests of each state and their teachers to opt in. Refusal to be part of the InTASC approval process would indicate failure to meet these new standards, sending a signal to prospective teachers that a state's certification process is neither rigorous nor prestigious. By continuing to set a low bar, non-participating states would not have access to the common application database and the resulting wider range of excellent teachers from which to choose when hiring, leaving them at a significant disadvantage when experiencing a teacher shortage.

A standardized licensure process will lead to increased corporate involvement in education, rather than teacher-led efforts.

Teacher input is crucial to the success of any new certification system. Today, states use over 600 different standardized tests for entry into the teaching profession, including

content exams required in 47 states, and basic skills exams required in 42. We are not proposing the continued use of solely rote basic skills and content exams—rather, we believe we must encourage states to replace those watered-down basic skills exams with a stand-and-deliver component designed and assessed by expert teachers. The edTPA, which was created by educators and includes a review process performed by teams of university faculty and K-12 classroom teachers, is one such model.³⁵ The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards provides another example of a challenging, multi-step peer-reviewed process with the goal of advancing the profession.³⁶ Under our proposal, teachers would be heavily involved in the design of the new ITA system and work closely with InTASC to help determine where the raised bar of entry should be set. The goal is not to increase the number of undemanding tests designed by testing companies, but to recognize teachers' true capabilities through a system built by teachers from the ground up.

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