

TEACHER SHORTAGES: RAISING THE BAR, SHRINKING THE PIPELINE

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher shortages have become a recurring concern for school districts and state policymakers. Much of the discussion has focused on low salaries, difficult working conditions, and an increasingly politicized classroom environment. Far less attention has been paid to the rules governing entry into the teaching profession.

In most states, prospective public school teachers must satisfy a series of licensing requirements, including passing an entry test, before admission into a teacher preparation program. These tests are intended to ensure that future teachers meet a minimum level of academic readiness. But higher entry standards can also shrink the pool of prospective teachers.

To examine how entry testing standards affect the teacher pipeline, we study a major change in the tests used to screen prospective teachers. Beginning in 2013, the Educational Testing Service replaced the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) with the Praxis Core Academic Skills Test, fully phasing out the PPST by September 2014. Both tests covered basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics and, in many states, had to be passed before admission into a teacher preparation program.

Under the PPST, states set their own passing scores. When the Praxis Core was introduced, most states adopted the recommended passing scores despite having very different standards under the old test. Standards therefore increased sharply in some states and changed little in others, allowing us to isolate the effects of higher testing standards.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 Reduce reliance on entry exams as the primary measure of academic preparation. States should allow prospective teachers to demonstrate academic readiness through multiple measures, including coursework, GPA, or other indicators of academic performance.
- 2 Some states (Hawaii, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Vermont) allow weaker performance on one component of the test if the applicant demonstrates greater proficiency in another component. More states should adopt this approach.

KEY FINDINGS

Using a difference in difference design and data from 507 universities in 21 states and the District of Columbia, we find that higher testing standards substantially reduced the number of students entering and completing teacher preparation programs.

A one-standard-deviation increase in test difficulty reduced education-major enrollment by 16 percent and graduations from teacher preparation programs by 22 percent.

Our estimates suggest that replacing the PPST with the Praxis Core accounted for 33 percent of the decline in graduates from teacher preparation programs between 2012 and 2020.

The decline in graduation rates suggests higher standards did more than reduce entry. They excluded some students who would otherwise have graduated and become eligible to teach, reducing the supply of prospective teachers.

Consistent with this interpretation, states experiencing larger increases in testing standards also awarded fewer new teacher licenses and, later, reported more teacher shortage areas.

- 3 Require evidence that entry tests predict teacher effectiveness. Testing requirements should be tied to outcomes policymakers care about, such as graduation rates from teacher preparation programs and future classroom performance.
- 4 Reassess passing scores in states facing teacher shortages. States should review whether current testing standards are unnecessarily restricting the supply of new teachers.

SUMMARY

Our findings show that tougher teacher testing standards reduced teacher preparation enrollments and graduations, lowered the number of new teacher licenses, and were followed by increases in reported teacher shortage areas. Higher standards may improve teacher quality, but there is little evidence that this particular increase in entry standards improved student outcomes. The supply cost, by contrast, is clear. States should therefore ask whether entry tests and passing scores identify more effective teachers and whether prospective teachers can demonstrate readiness in other ways. Where the quality benefits are uncertain, raising the bar may shrink the teacher pipeline and contribute to shortages.



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