

Ed School Essentials: A Review of Illinois Teacher Preparation

Executive Summary

There have been many attempts over the years to identify the features of a good education school, but none is like the effort here, a comprehensive examination of the 53 institutions in Illinois.

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has undertaken this outsized effort because, in our view, it is desperately needed. Well over a century after formal teacher preparation became the norm, followed by decades of multiple attempts at reform by the federal government, state governments and national accrediting bodies, the core components of teacher preparation have yet to be adequately defined. In this effort, we pursue what we believe to be a singular definition of high-quality teacher preparation, namely identifying the necessary preparation and assessment that superintendents and principals say their new teachers *should* have had but routinely do not *receive*.

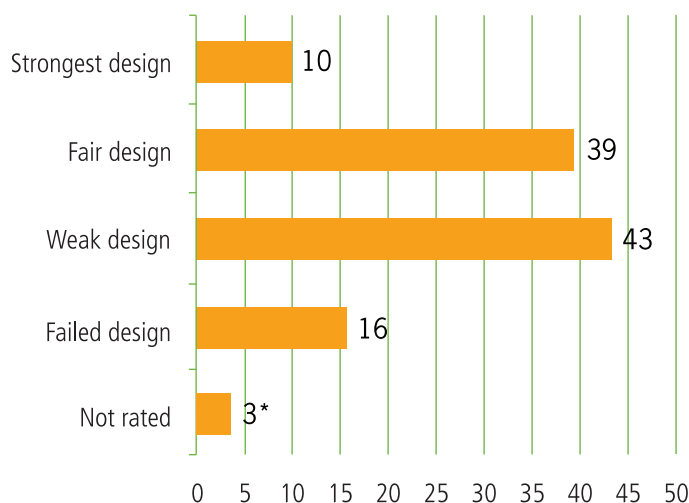
If teacher quality is to improve, it is imperative that prospective teachers, school districts, Illinois policymakers and the public learn more about the quality of teacher preparation by institutions of higher education. That was the motivation behind a decision by Advance Illinois, a relatively new state education advocacy group, to ask NCTQ to review all of the education schools in Illinois. It is work to which we bring considerable expertise, having produced similar reports, though none this ambitious, in ten other states.

In Illinois, we evaluated 111 undergraduate and graduate programs in 53 education schools, as well as three “independent providers” that recruit, but do not fully train, teachers. This is the first time we have evaluated graduate programs, not just undergraduate, and we have expanded the scope of our evaluation of special education. Each program is evaluated against a set of standards drawn from 39 standards in total that indicate if education schools are, first and foremost, attracting talented individuals and, second, preparing them in the specific ways that will make teachers more effective in the classroom.

Keep in mind when interpreting the results that the point of this review is not to assess whether an Illinois education school is producing good or bad teachers. When we note the “deficiencies” of a program, the only proper take away is that the education school in question is not doing *everything possible* to maximize the potential of its teacher graduates. **Institutions still may be producing some very good teachers, just not as many as they could with better training.**

The most meaningful way to look at these findings is not at the institutional level, but at the level of the undergraduate and graduate programs housed within those institutions. We provide ratings on individual standards and program grades in our report.

Overall performance of Illinois teacher preparation programs



* Grades for three Olivet Nazarene University programs could not be determined because, despite repeated requests, the institution would not cooperate.

When we step back from ratings and grades to take in the big picture of Illinois teacher preparation, this is what we see:

- 1. Inconsistency is the “name of the game.”** For example, the same education school may house an undergraduate program that does a fairly good job preparing its candidates to be elementary teachers, in contrast to its graduate program for elementary teachers, which might appear almost slapdash.
- 2. Coursework isn’t focused enough on the tough job ahead.** Many of the assignments required of teacher candidates are frivolous in nature, demeaning the intent of higher education, or utterly irrelevant, demeaning the challenges all teachers face. In spite of the fact that early childhood teachers are qualified to teach up through grade 3, the poor performance of early childhood programs, particularly in the area of reading instruction, suggests that these programs are focusing only on the knowledge and skills needed to teach preschoolers.
- 3. Student teaching: good set-up, questionable follow through.** Most Illinois education schools have most of the right components of a good student teaching program in place, including that it is full-time and well-supervised and that it will last at least a semester. But the schools fall flat on the one component that matters the most: ensuring that the mentor teacher is effective.
- 4. Far too many Illinois education schools discount the importance of selecting the most academically capable teacher candidates.** For example, considering assessments that allow general comparison of the applicant’s academic proficiency, three-fourths of the *graduate* education schools we evaluated rely *only* on a test of middle-school-level skills for admission.
- 5. While the state is beginning to make up for years of regulatory neglect, far more urgency is in order.** State regulators are well intentioned and working to advance long-needed changes, but the timetable set by the state legislature is too slow and the goals are hardly ambitious. In particular:
 - a. The state is not exerting leadership in the timely delivery of a longitudinal data system, a system that is necessary for identifying which education schools are producing the most and the least effective graduates. With the current timetable, it will be another *eight* years before these data will be reported.



- b. Illinois has reduced the number of attempts by teacher candidates to pass the state's basic skills test, but only from an unlimited number of attempts down to five.

6. National accreditation is not adding value. Forty percent of Illinois' education schools are accredited by the profession's national accreditor NCATE, but evaluation by our standards reveals no measurable differences in the grades of programs at these schools compared to programs at schools that have not been accredited.

Recommendations

For the state:

1. Prepare for the arrival of the Common Core standards by requiring that elementary and special education teacher candidates have sufficient knowledge in core subjects, as **Massachusetts** has done; structure licensing tests so that strong performance in one subject area no longer compensates for failing performance in another.
2. As **Massachusetts** and **Virginia** have done, adopt a strong stand-alone test of reading instruction for both elementary and special education teachers.
3. As **Massachusetts** has done, improve elementary mathematics preparation by specifying the nature of the coursework that should be offered and then testing for that content in a stand-alone test.
4. As **Louisiana, Tennessee** and **Florida** have done, and a number of other states are poised to do, accelerate plans to develop data systems that can be used to show evidence of teacher effectiveness.
5. As **29 other states** have done, eliminate grades K-9 elementary certification—or, at the very least, beef up middle school endorsement for elementary teachers.
6. As so many states have done—**Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee** and **Virginia**—eliminate general secondary science certification and ensure through preparation and licensing tests that teacher candidates have adequate content knowledge in every subject they intend to teach. Eliminate general secondary social science certification as well, or at least follow **Georgia's** example and require a licensing test in every subject teacher candidates intend to teach.
7. As most nations with high-performing students have done, continue to raise admissions standards. Require education schools to admit only teacher candidates who are in the upper half of the population of college students. Absent far more rigorous standards for exit from teacher preparation programs, this is a critically important move.

For the institutions:

Ratings against the standards applied in this review are intended to provide each education school with a blueprint of high quality teacher preparation. We urge focused attention on these areas in particular, the first three of relevance to elementary and special education teacher preparation, the second of relevance to secondary teacher preparation and the last of general relevance:

1. As **Eureka College, Kendall College, Lake Forest College, Rockford College, Roosevelt University** and **Western Illinois University** do in the programs we evaluated, teach effective reading instruction.
2. As **St. Xavier University** and the **University of Illinois at Chicago** do in their undergraduate elementary programs, teach elementary mathematics.

3. As **Trinity Christian College** and the **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign** do in their undergraduate elementary programs, deliver strong content preparation.
4. As the **Illinois Institute of Technology**, **Northwestern University** and **Roosevelt University** do in the programs we evaluated, *really* prepare science and social studies teachers.
5. As no institution in Illinois now does, adopt independent exit standards of content mastery or actively endorse a state-wide effort to adopt more rigorous licensing tests, a move which would have the benefit of giving institutions greater flexibility on their admissions standards.

Conclusion

Even as education schools in Illinois comply with standards set by the state and accrediting agencies, they suggest that measuring them against a set of standards represents an irrelevant focus on inputs, that the only thing that should matter are outputs. Value added-methodology *will* be important, but here's why it can't stand alone:

- We run the risk of identifying programs that aren't giants, simply giants among midgets.
- We may learn which are the worst programs—but we won't know how to fix them.
- More selective programs may score higher, but may not be adding significant value.
- It's hard for researchers to parse out the impact of districts from the impact of preparation.
- The capacity to use value-added analysis on a statewide basis is at least several years away.

Given these limitations, meaningful standards—those based on what will make teachers more effective—remain an essential complement to output data as it increasingly becomes available. In essence, we are recommending that institutions redesign their teacher preparation programs in ways that will ensure that every component is in line with excellence. We do not do so as an enemy of high-quality traditional teacher preparation, but as a strong defender. As such, institutions should take this review not as a call to arms against this messenger, but as an opportunity for surmounting a growing national sentiment that the time has come to give up on improving education schools. In effect, what we offer is a survival guide.

This report is available online from www.nctq.org/edschoolreports/illinois



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The National Council on Teacher Quality advocates for reforms in a broad range of teacher policies at the federal, state and local levels in order to increase the number of effective teachers.

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