

State committee recommends adjusting cutoff scores for Praxis I test

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Anne C. "Christie" Hingst just wanted to teach.

After college and a master's degree and the better part of a decade working, last as a city planner, she enrolled in Virginia Wesleyan College's career-switcher program and took the necessary education classes. A transfer for her Navy husband took her cross-country to California in 2003.

There she hit a wall that always seemed a brick too high.

She needed to student-teach to earn her license.

To do that in California, she needed to be otherwise certified. But since she began her teacher training in Virginia, she was bound by Virginia's certification rules.

That meant passing the standardized Praxis I test with the highest cutoff scores among the 30 states that use the three-part, high-school-level reading, writing and math exam.

She passed the writing. After a couple of times, she passed the math. But the reading tripped her up, she said. Over and over again. And her passing scores on the other tests weren't enough to raise her composite or overall score to the required 532, which also would certify her.

Last year she remained four points shy. In the meantime, she said she passed the Praxis II test specific to her subject area, middle and high school social studies.

"They've got my hands tied, and I can't be in a classroom doing what I want to do," said Hingst, who hoped to return to Virginia to work. "I understand that there has to be a standard, and teachers and students have to be accountable, and tests are what they're using right now. But it just seems like there's got to be something – I don't feel this test is a true reflection of my academic ability. ...

"If I make those four points, does that mean all of a sudden I'm a better social-studies teacher?"

That's the crux of a decision that the Virginia Board of Education will wrestle with today. A state committee, the Advisory Board on Teacher Education and Licensure, studied the issue last summer and is recommending to the board that it lower the cutoff certifying score for math by three points to 175, where 190 is the maximum.

It also recommends raising the cutoff for writing one point to 177, and leaving reading – Hingst's nemesis – at 178. The new composite or overall score, which also meets the certification mark, would be 530, or two less than the current requirement. The proposed scores would bring Virginia back to the national pack somewhat in math, although the composite would remain the highest cutoff in the country.

The state superintendent of public instruction concurs with the advisory board's recommendation.

But it remains a touchy subject.

The board must balance maintaining high standards for teachers – particularly given the demands of Virginia's Standards of Learning and the federal No Child Left Behind law – against closing the door to otherwise good classroom instructors.

"There is just such a shortage of teachers, and it's not in their major area," Ella P. Ward, a member of the Board of Education and its liaison to the advisory board, said of some of the tests. "That's why it has been such a major concern."

Hingst said she passed the California teacher-certification exam the first time. "That just goes to show you that Virginia is really hard," she said.

Her student-teaching director in California, Clifford L. Rodgers of Chapman University, criticized the emphasis on such tests for teachers, saying he sees no correlation to good teaching. "I had never seen any evidence that all those tests made any difference in student achievement," Rodgers said.

Hingst, after taking the tests more times than she could remember, and using "every prep book known to man," last summer scored just high enough to meet Virginia's standards. She student-taught in the fall in middle and high schools in Ridgecrest, Calif., just north of Los Angeles.

Rodgers said Hingst received "very high comments" from her supervising teachers.

Hingst's husband is leaving the military soon, and she'll be hunting for a classroom to call her own.

"I could probably write a book on test-taking strategies by now," she joked recently. "For the troubled test-taker. I've been there."

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