

Within Our Grasp Achieving Higher Admissions Standards in Teacher Prep

Executive Summary

No parent wants his or her child to be taught by an ineffective teacher. As the school year begins each September, parents sometimes worry that their child's teacher may not be able to manage the classroom, may not be able to inspire students to reach higher levels of learning, or simply may not be up to the job. These worries grow when a teacher is new to the classroom, teaching without the benefit of a few years of experience. The responsibility for these worries often falls on a state's teacher preparation programs, so it is crucial that the programs set high standards to admit only the best candidates.

A strong body of research supports a relationship between student performance and the selectivity of admissions into teacher preparation. Nations, such as Finland, whose students outperform ours on national tests recruit teacher candidates from the top 10 percent of their college graduates. High admissions standards are especially important because after a candidate is admitted to a preparation program, he or she will probably face few hurdles for entry into the profession.

State admissions standards rose between 2011 and 2015 and fell in 2016

Raising the bar for entry into preparation programs resonates with states and school districts, which certainly recognize the importance of attracting talented college students into the teaching profession. As a result, 25 states strengthened admissions standards between 2011 and 2015, with 11 states establishing higher admissions standards through state law and 14 states doing so through national accreditation. The number of states establishing a minimum 3.0 GPA requirement went from seven in 2013 to 25 in 2015, and the number requiring that teacher candidates take tests designed for all college students (such as the ACT or SAT) went from three to 19 during that same time. While both approaches have advantages and limitations, some states have put forward admissions policies that employ multiple measures and flexibility.

Part of the increase in the number of states with stronger admissions standards came from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation's (CAEP) 2013 requirements for accredited institutions, which included a get-tough standard for admission to teacher preparation programs. That new policy meant that its partner states requiring programs to meet CAEP's standards automatically agreed to enforce or at least endorse such changes.

Unfortunately, CAEP's attempt to raise entry requirements proved to be short-lived. By the summer of 2016, CAEP's board agreed to let programs delay verifying their students' academic ability *until graduation*. Since education courses tend to award higher grades, this change essentially nullified CAEP's selection standard.

As a result, fewer states had rigorous admissions requirements in 2016. The number of states requiring a GPA of 3.0 or higher for preparation program admissions dropped from 25 in 2015 to the 11 that have this provision in state law in 2016; and only three states now require a college-level test before program entry, down from 19 in 2015. In addition, with CAEP's standards now weakened, most state admissions policies remain woefully inadequate.

Lower admissions standards cannot effectively solve teacher shortages or increase teacher diversity

One frequently heard argument against rigorous admissions policies is a fear that they will make teacher shortages worse. During shortages, institutions and policymakers may see lowering teacher preparation programs' admissions standards as a quick and easy solution to obtaining more teachers. In reality, low admissions standards not only weaken the quality of teacher candidates but also may actually exacerbate shortages by discouraging talented students from pursuing the teaching profession. A survey of college students with high GPAs found that 58 percent would be more likely to consider majoring in education *if admissions standards were raised*. Moreover, there is evidence that drops in enrollment in teacher education programs were temporary due to districts dismissing teachers and cutting back on hiring during the Great Recession. Now that more teaching jobs are available, an increasing number of college students in some states are enrolling in teacher preparation programs.

Opponents also raise concerns about a negative effect of rigorous admissions standards on efforts to increase teacher diversity. However, there is evidence showing that this does not have to happen. Many teacher preparation programs have successfully set selective admissions criteria while maintaining a diverse cohort of teacher candidates. An NCTQ analysis of nearly 900 undergraduate elementary programs finds that 13 percent – 113 programs – are both selective and diverse. Moreover, even if black and Hispanic students entered teacher preparation programs at the same rate as their white counterparts, the impact on the overall composition of the teacher workforce would be negligible. Other strategies, particularly in combination, would better patch the teacher pipeline, mostly by increasing the number of black and Hispanic undergraduates who are able to obtain a college degree and by school districts doing a better job of retaining their teachers of color.



Programs meet higher standards even when not required to do so

Given the pushback that states and CAEP have faced when trying to raise program admissions standards, it seems reasonable to expect that many programs would be unable to meet more rigorous entry requirements. But an examination of admissions policies in up to 10 institutions with the largest preparation program enrollment in each of the 14 states requiring CAEP accreditation and in the 11 states that separately passed new laws found that this was not the case.

Using the most recent program-level GPA admissions requirements, as well as average institution-level SAT and ACT scores from 2013-2014, we found that a majority of the 221 undergraduate elementary programs we examined likely met higher GPA and testing requirements for admissions. In the states with laws requiring an average GPA of 3.0, nearly three-fourths of programs likely met these requirements, and only about one in 10 likely did not. In the two states (**Rhode Island** and **West Virginia**) that also established stronger testing requirements and that had publicly available testing data, seven out of 14 programs examined likely met these requirements and only five likely did not. Even in the CAEP states that no longer require programs to meet GPA and testing standards at the point of admission, over half of the programs included in this study likely did meet CAEP's admissions standard as originally written, compared to only 13 percent that likely did not.

If these rigorous requirements really did burden teacher prep programs, far more would take advantage of the CAEP change and opt to demonstrate the academic aptitude of their students later in their preparation.

Recommendations

While there are no perfect admissions criteria, the need for a higher bar for program entry is clear. States are best positioned to meet this need if they establish a raised bar for entry while providing programs with an appropriate level of discretion over individual applicant decisions.

States, CAEP, and programs themselves can all play a major role in creating more meaningful admissions standards. Specifically:

- 1. States should maintain a commitment to stronger admissions requirements.**
- 2. CAEP should identify a pathway to achieve higher admissions standards.**
- 3. Teacher preparation programs can and should implement a more meaningful bar for admission to their programs.**

Higher standards for entrance into teacher preparation programs benefit teacher candidates, their future students, and the profession as a whole. While only a few programs in this study fail to set rigorous admissions requirements that clearly meet a higher bar for program entry, these few will

likely allow new teachers to enter classrooms without first proving their academic abilities. States, programs, and accreditation entities each have a responsibility to set high standards and hold programs accountable for meeting them.

In light of our nation’s urgent need for high-quality teachers and the evidence that weakening standards is not necessary to solve the problems voiced by opponents, states should stay on course or firmly establish a higher bar for entry into teacher preparation.

Raising admissions standards to combat a low regard for the teaching profession and to increase the talent pool of teacher candidates has to be part of the larger strategy to achieve a more talented teacher workforce. While it is just the first step, it is essential to help ensure the best possible teachers for our children.