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Measuring What Matters

A Stronger Accountability Model for Teacher Education

Edward Crowe July 2010

Introduction and summary

Our current system for holding U.S. teacher education programs accountable doesn't guarantee program quality or serve the needs of schools and students. State oversight for teacher preparation programs mostly ignores the impact of graduates on the K-12 students they teach, and it gives little attention to where graduates teach or how long they remain in the profession. There is no evidence that current state policies hold programs to high standards in order to produce teachers who can help students achieve. Moreover, every state does its own thing when it comes to program oversight—another barrier to effective quality control.

New ways of preparing teachers have been created in the last few decades in large part because they offer solutions to serious problems that many university-based teacher preparation programs appear unwilling to address. Academically strong college students as well as school districts, foundations, and policymakers are proponents of initiatives such as Teach for America, the New Teacher Project, other teaching fellows programs such as those of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and teacher residency programs.

Despite these competitive developments, however, states have done little to focus traditional preparation programs on issues like selective recruitment through high standards for entry into programs, carefully constructed and monitored clinical experiences for teacher candidates, and program evaluation focused on important outcomes.

The redesigned accountability system proposed in this paper is an effort to direct regulatory oversight to things that matter: whether or not K-12 students are learning, how well teachers have developed the classroom teaching skills to be effective with their students, a graduate's commitment to teaching as a professional career, feedback from graduates and employers, and high-quality tests of teacher knowledge and skills that are tied to classroom teaching performance and K-12 student learning.

A stronger accountability system for teacher education programs

Real quality control will hold programs responsible for how their graduates perform in classroom teaching. It will use empirically based indicators showing that students are learning from their teachers, that program graduates stay in the profession, and that they teach in the hard-to-staff schools that badly need them.

This paper argues that all states should adopt a new system of program accountability guided by these principles:

- Program accountability—and teacher preparation itself—must focus exclusively on what improves instruction and produces necessary school changes.
- State accountability for teacher preparation should be built on a set of clear signals about program quality that policymakers can understand and program faculty and institutional leaders can use.
- Signals of program quality must be empirically based, measurable indicators and should be derived from a small number of key outcomes.
- Accountability measures and their consequences for preparation programs with poor performance should be applied *equally* to all teacher preparation programs in a state, whatever the program label (traditional or alternative route) or the organization that produces new teachers.
- Full public disclosure of all program accountability findings is essential for credibility and legitimacy of state oversight policies. Clear statements, graphs, and charts devoid of jargon or evasions ought to communicate state regulators' program quality judgments.

These principles should drive development of new state accountability policies for teacher education through five essential components:

- Every state's teacher preparation program accountability system should include a teacher effectiveness measure that reports the extent to which program graduates help their K-12 students to learn.
- Classroom teaching performance of program graduates should be used by states to judge the quality of all teacher preparation programs.

- Program graduates' persistence rates in teaching should be reported for every teacher preparation program. Public disclosure of this information for up to five years post-completion will stimulate progress in addressing high teacher turnover rates by drawing attention from teacher education programs, schools, districts, and policymakers.
- Feedback surveys from preparation program graduates and from their employers should be part of state program accountability. The findings should be made public and used as a key performance indicator by all states to judge the quality of every teacher preparation program.
- A new system of teacher licensure tests should be designed and implemented for state accountability as an indicator of program quality. The number of tests now in use should be cut by more than 90 percent, and every state should adopt the same tests and the same pass rate policies.

Every state should adopt the same system of accountability indicators for it to be most effective. One set of common standards would ensure that quality is defined the same way no matter where the program is located or where the graduate is employed. More than 50 versions of quality standards, policies, and accountability systems for teaching and teacher education currently exist, in contrast to engineering, nursing, accountancy, and medicine, which all have one. This paper will dig deeper into why uniformity across states is so important.

Some of the changes proposed here will take time—especially the development of high-quality tests for teacher candidates and new teachers. Even so, states can take significant steps now toward more rigorous accountability policies for teacher education programs. They can implement these four accountability measures with data systems that are already in place or on the horizon:

- Tie K-12 pupil learning outcomes to preparation program graduates and hold the programs accountable for teacher effectiveness.
- Begin to implement high-quality observational assessments of classroom teaching by supporting efforts to link these assessments to student achievement and by developing rigorous training for classroom observers to ensure reliable assessment findings.
- Employ current state data systems to track the teaching persistence rates for graduates of every program, and use the findings as a public disclosure measure.

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- Implement feedback surveys of preparation program graduates and their employers using state education, labor department (or state insurance department), university, and school district data systems.

Individual states can take these steps right away. Another option is for consortia of states to work together and implement identical accountability measures and performance criteria—just as groups of states are now working on common K-12 student assessments. And finally, all states should raise passing cut-off scores on every test now in use, and they ought to make dramatic reductions in the number of redundant tests used for licensure.

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