

Less Is More: How to Remove Red Tape and Create a More Robust Teacher Talent Pool

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Key Points

- Current teacher talent pipelines are deficient to meet students' and schools' needs and demands.
- Reforming teacher certification laws to allow and empower individuals from diverse backgrounds—with different work experience and community ties—to enter the teacher workforce can help address teacher shortages.
- Giving local school leaders the autonomy to hire, train, and certify their own teachers puts power at the local level and allows leaders to drive their own workforce needs.

Having access to an excellent teacher is one of the most important factors for student achievement. We know the person standing in the front of the room plays a significant role in a child's education. However, access to excellent teachers—this crucial talent resource—is in increasingly limited supply.

A few key reasons explain why the teacher labor pool has not kept up with the current need. First, not as many college students are choosing the “traditional” route to teaching as they did in prior generations.¹ K-12 schools that are mandated by outdated laws to draw primarily from this single talent pool increasingly report shortages when it comes to filling all available positions.²

Second, most teacher-preparation programs are still producing educators for standardized, one-size-fits-all settings, even as more states lean into conservative ideals that honor individual students' learning styles and unique schooling models. This

limits the number of educators who are prepared to teach in creative settings, such as hybrid, micro-school, project-based learning, and personalized instructional models.

Third, and perhaps most troubling, are the calls from national teachers unions to double down on these bureaucratic, government-mandated teacher-preparation models and certification requirements that have significantly contributed to today's challenges.³

Many public charter schools are exempt from restrictions such as having to hire traditionally certified teachers, and they have numerous approaches to staffing and training for success. However, this flexibility is not universally available, leaving school districts buried under the weight of union-driven certification requirements.

Although these challenges are often framed as a problem for public schools, few solutions or calls

for change have gained traction. Meanwhile, students' learning opportunities are increasingly dependent on a shrinking talent pool that lacks diversity in thought and has a limited supply of subject-matter experts.

Conservatives can and should be a leading voice on solutions to grow high-quality teacher talent pipelines.⁴ This can be done by championing ideas that empower enterprising school leaders to hire and train the best individuals for their students, without the heavy hand of government managing their human resources decisions.

States with robust educational freedom environments are best situated to lead and support the work to end the bureaucracies that make entering the field of teaching difficult. Arizona can serve as a prime example of how less government can create better conditions to grow a safe, qualified, and diverse talent pool for America's public schools.

In 2017, Arizona took bold action on teacher certification requirements in a joint effort with A for Arizona and the US Chamber Foundation. By using the principles of Talent Pipeline Management,⁵ new Arizona laws were put in place to ensure multiple pathways for professional licensure; allow subject-matter experts to teach without the expense of an additional, unnecessary degree; and empower local leaders to train and certify their own teachers.

Arizona's actions provide a road map for how to disrupt the status quo and the teachers unions' hold on a broken preparation process. Four key components of Arizona's efforts have proved successful.

Granting Nationwide Reciprocity

Conservatives across the country have already pushed to streamline occupational licensing requirements to attract workers and residents from other states and make the transition to their new home easier and less burdensome.⁶ However, many teachers looking to relocate to a new state are still met with additional burdens, expensive training, and layers of paperwork to achieve true license reciprocity.

These additional requirements are seldom necessary for teachers to prove their ability to teach and are often just an excuse to collect fees and fill

government coffers. These additional bureaucratic hurdles to prove individuals can do a job they are already doing obstruct professionals with years of experience and strong student outcomes from returning to the classroom, exacerbating teacher shortages.

To rectify this, Arizona strengthened its national reciprocity for teachers in good standing and with a current valid certification from another state.⁷ This was accomplished by streamlining and simplifying Arizona's teacher certification reciprocity statutes to ensure that government agencies could have no requirements outside those outlined in law. While strong safety and background check requirements remain, the paper chase is nearly over.

Creating True Alternative-Preparation Programs

Nearly all states have some alternative teacher-preparation program that allows prospective teachers to earn their credential if they do not hold an education degree.⁸ However, many alternative programs are just lighter versions of traditional preparation programs. This happens because government agencies that implement alternative-preparation laws tend not to embrace the creativity or flexibility allowed under these statutes and simply apply traditional programs' standards to the alternative programs.

This was the case in Arizona before the additional legislative changes made in 2017.⁹ Policy leaders need to protect alternative programs from this bureaucratic creep, which gives many states an "alternative" route in name only, to ensure the multiple pathways approach necessary to grow a robust teaching talent pool. This includes allowing a variety of instructional formats and not requiring a prescribed sequence to become an approved provider.¹⁰ Additionally, alternative-preparation program providers should be expanded to include a broad swath of entities, including private, for-profit entities; nonprofit entities; charter schools; school districts; community colleges; universities; and private postsecondary institutions.

Table 1. Subject-Matter-Expert Standard Teaching Certificates Issued 2017–21, in Arizona

2017–21	Work Experience	Postsecondary Teaching Experience	Education	Total
Biology	2	8	308	318
Math	5	9	395	409
Computer Science	6	0	43	49
Chemistry	3	2	96	101
Physics	1	1	60	62

Note: Of the over 3,000 subject-matter-expert certificates issued since 2017, nearly a third are in high-need subject-matter areas, such as math and science. Here, I lay out which of the available pathways these subject-matter experts have taken to join the teaching force. Source: Data provided by the Arizona Department of Education.

Hiring Subject-Matter Experts

State teacher-certification systems routinely require teacher applicants to demonstrate subject knowledge for the area in which they are seeking certification. However, they usually offer only one way to do so—an expensive and time-consuming one-two punch of coursework and tests—even for experienced professionals who are experts in their field. As part of its teacher certification overhaul, Arizona created a “subject-matter expert” standard teaching certificate that may be issued when an individual has a bachelor’s degree or relevant work experience in the subject matter they will be teaching.¹¹

The state also allows individuals to use previous passing test scores from other states on corresponding exams to fulfill requirements.¹² Additionally, the state provides broad waivers for subject knowledge or professional knowledge exams for individuals who have previous teaching experience (i.e., at a charter school or postsecondary institution), other relevant work experience, or a relevant degree in a subject taught in schools.¹³

Collectively, these options give schools the flexibility to find experts and get them in the classroom with fewer hurdles. Since the passage of the law in 2017, Arizona has issued over 3,000 subject-matter-expert certificates.¹⁴ Table 1 shows some high-need subject-matter areas and the pathways individuals used to enter the classroom and earn a certification.

Permitting Locally Driven Teacher Certification

Locally driven teacher certification, or a “grow your own” pathway, is not truly available to most school leaders due to old, cumbersome laws and regulations. In 2017, Arizona addressed this problem by allowing schools to unilaterally hire and train anyone who had a bachelor’s degree, passed the required background and safety checks, and could eventually earn a full standard certification by demonstrating academic achievement with their students and completing the locally driven program.¹⁵

This approach allows schools to engage an entire talent pool that wasn’t previously accessible to them. Often, the best candidates are community members or parents of students in that school who are already volunteering or working in a classroom. Through this approach, applicants enter the classroom immediately with personalized support and differentiated training to ultimately earn a state-issued certification.

Vail Unified School District in Arizona was the first to take advantage of the law and the multiple options for training and finding teachers it provided. Vail has since entered each school year with few or no teaching vacancies.¹⁶ Upon seeing Vail’s success with its expanded teacher pool, two more school districts started their own classroom-based preparation programs.¹⁷ For these types of locally driven solutions, charter schools and school districts must have nearly complete autonomy and the ability to attest to the results of their training

without states layering on additional requirements.

Conclusion

In addition to these legislative changes, a recent partnership between Gov. Doug Ducey and A for Arizona seeded investments in innovative school and classroom models that not only provide students options for where to learn but also present options for teachers looking for unique models to teach in. Small learning communities such as micro-schools, learning hubs and pods, and unique career and technical education programming are redefining what a teacher is and are attracting educators looking for nontraditional settings.

Opponents to these reforms argued that this was an attempt to solve the teacher shortage crisis by allowing any “warm body” to supervise a classroom.¹⁸ However, this overlooks that most of Arizona’s current barriers to enter the classroom do

not ensure teaching quality or student achievement. For example, the state’s charter schools have never been required to hire certificated teachers, yet their enrollment has continued to grow year after year. Most recently, it has topped over 20 percent of the state’s entire public school student population while continuing to achieve better average results than the state average.¹⁹

Taken together, innovations in classroom models, teacher training, and broad certification pathways allow Arizona’s most entrepreneurial school leaders to tackle their own talent pipeline challenges directly and not wait for a government solution that is not coming. Conservatives have a real opportunity to lead on the national teacher workforce and retention debate if they pick up the mantle on this issue. With the policy solutions described here, policymakers can meaningfully broaden the talent pool accessible to schools with individuals who have unique backgrounds, subject-matter expertise, and community ties.

About the Author

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Notes

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13. ARIZ. REV. STAT. ANN. § 15-533 (D) (2021).

14. This information was provided as part of a data request the author made to the Arizona Department of Education and isn't publicly available.

15. ARIZ. REV. STAT. ANN. § 15-553 (2021).

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17. In addition to Vail Unified School District, the other two districts were Washington Elementary School District and Lake Havasu Unified School District.

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