

The Academic Competence of Massachusetts Teachers: A Civil Rights Issue

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The U.S. Department of Education is clearly not satisfied with the overall quality of this country's teaching force. To judge by the criteria in its 2010 Race to the Top (RttT) application material, we don't have the kind of teachers we need, at least enough of them and in the right places.¹ Yet, its 500-point system for judging applications gave far more weight to state plans for upgrading those who are already in the classroom than for recruiting, preparing, or licensing the kind of teachers the USDE wants to see in the classroom.

A possible 58 points in the 138-point section on "great teachers and leaders" was for the kind of efforts a state planned to make to evaluate its K-12 teachers for their effectiveness. Up to 25 points more could be awarded if the state spelled out ways to ensure the "equitable distribution" of teachers determined to be effective on some measure of their students' academic gains, as well as on other measures.

The USDE apparently had a zero-sum game in mind with respect to "effective teachers"--i.e., distribute equitably who are there instead of ensuring an effective teacher for everyone. Only 14 points at the most could be awarded for a state's plan to strengthen its teacher preparation programs, although if the intention expressed in Massachusetts' June 2 application was typical of what was in other applications, this section was not worth more than 14 points. The Bay State's application promised that: "We will strengthen all preparation programs through new regulations, reporting structures and program approval requirements tightly linked to outcome measures, and offer expansion incentives to help them grow." In contrast, up to 21 points could be awarded for "providing high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals." Stunningly, this criterion implied that existing teacher preparation programs are not high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers.

However, no points were explicitly set forth for specific plans to recruit academically competent individuals for a teaching career (which is not the same thing as providing high-quality pathways for those who want to become teachers) or for ensuring that those who are awarded a license to teach a subject are academically qualified to teach it.

This enormous hole is surprising because it ignores what we have learned from high quality research--that the chief characteristic of an effective teacher is knowledge of the subject he/she teaches--a finding highlighted in the National Mathematics Advisory Panel's final report. There is no body of evidence for

¹ The Obama administration's Race to the Top program is a grant competition among states for \$4.35 billion in Federal economic stimulus funds for K-12 public education. These funds are not intended to plug budget deficits and protect jobs but to advance education reforms, including raising caps on charter schools and evaluating teachers based on student performance. State applications are scored on selection criteria worth a total of 500 points, 70 of which are based on a commitment by the state to adopt common standards and assessments based on them.

any other characteristic of an "effective" teacher, although educational researchers have tried to find one. Thus, the criteria for judging the seriousness of a state's efforts to reform teacher education might well have included its intention to work out ways to attract or admit to teaching the kind of person who gives initial promise of becoming an effective teacher (i.e., an academically competent individual), with enough points awarded to encourage state departments of education to spend time coming up with some concrete ideas. About all Massachusetts had to say on this topic in its RttT application was that it would partner with an unspecified UTeach program to train 250 mathematics, science, and computer science teachers and develop "rigorous admissions standards" for its teacher preparation programs.² How it would upgrade admissions standards it did not tell us. Lack of rigorous admissions standards is one reason why Arthur Levine, former President of Teachers College, Columbia University, in his 2006 report *Educating School Teachers* recommends closing down most of our education schools.

This hole is also surprising because it is common knowledge that this country draws most of its teachers from the *bottom* two-thirds of our college population (most elementary teachers actually come from the *bottom third*). This was noted in a 2010 McKinsey report as well as in a 2006 report by the National Center on Education and the Economy titled "Tough Choices or Tough Times." The McKinsey report further notes that high-achieving countries like South Korea, Finland, and Singapore draw those they train as teachers very selectively from an application pool consisting of their most academically able college students--the top third. In contrast, only 23% of American teachers come from the top third.

The metrics for judging RttT applications might also have included points for specific ways a state planned to upgrade academically the content of its licensure tests, given that licensure tests in other professions (e.g., accounting) are known to shape, as well as reflect, the programs that prepare candidates for their tests. Instead, the USDE (perhaps deliberately) missed the opportunity to call attention to the quality controls in place in other countries that ensure the academic competence of those who are allowed to become teachers. It is reasonable to infer that these quality controls not only assure parents that their children's teachers are academically qualified but also drastically reduce the need for massive amounts of remedial professional development--a distinctly American phenomenon. No other country would spend what we lavish on professional development, especially when most of it is for remedial purposes and there is so little evidence of its effectiveness.

Why is teachers' academic competence a civil rights issue? As reported by the Center for American Progress, urban students tend to be taught by academically less able teachers than are their suburban peers. According to this report, academically stronger teachers tend to choose to teach in non-urban schools or move there from urban schools to continue teaching. The use of academically weak licensure tests, in effect, discriminates against urban students, who depend far more than do suburban students on the academic quality of their teachers for fostering their academic growth. This is precisely what Massachusetts sought to avoid by means of its teacher tests.

² UTEACH is an arts and sciences-based initiative to recruit and prepare science, mathematics, and computer science majors for secondary teaching careers.

Massachusetts parents were given some assurance that their children's teachers would have a good grasp of the content of the subject they plan to teach by a requirement in the 1993 Education Reform Act that they pass a subject area test for licensure (as well as a skills test). No test of pedagogy was mandated because it was assumed that schools of education would ensure prospective teachers knew pedagogical basics after completing their student teaching. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) developed the strongest subject (and skills) tests it could, and the Bay State's teacher tests, called the Massachusetts Tests of Educator Licensure (MTEL), are considered among the best tests in the country, especially the Foundations of Reading test required of prospective elementary, early childhood, and special education teachers. The Connecticut State Board of Education voted to adopt the test in 2008, and Minnesota's Teaching Board just developed a test for prospective elementary teachers incorporating many of its features. The effects of the tests are a significant factor in raising student achievement in the state, especially minority group achievement.

The proof is in the pudding as far as results on both the SAT and AP exams are concerned. On the SATs in 2010 in Massachusetts, African-American students made strong gains in all three subjects, including an eight-point gain in Critical Reading (from 416 to 424), a nine-point gain in Mathematics (from 423 to 433), and a seven-point gain in Writing (from 411 to 418). Those gains in Math and Writing outpaced national gains, and as a result Massachusetts African-American students on average now outscore their peers nationally in Math (432 to 427) and Writing (418 to 416). Results released in September 2010 by the College Board also show that Massachusetts' overall participation in Advanced Placement (AP) exams rose by 9.5 percent in 2010, and that the state's increase in African-American and Hispanic test takers is the highest in the nation. The number of exams that received scores of 3, 4, or 5 increased by 7.2 percent since last year. African-American and Hispanic students made large gains in participation (17.8 percent and 18.2 percent increases, respectively) and in the number scoring 3 or higher (17.7 percent and 20.7 percent increases, respectively). These results can be attributed in part to an academically stronger teaching corps in urban as well as suburban schools.

Because Massachusetts has reasonably strong subject matter licensure tests for prospective teachers of young children, many undergraduates and graduates admitted into teacher preparation programs at Bay State education schools fail these tests. (See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/results.html> for pass rates on all tests by test administration.) Some people in the state are critical of MTEL because of the failure rate on certain tests. But MTEL was given a sound bill of health by independent large-scale assessment experts in 2002. What we don't know is whether our preparation programs have given aspiring teachers enough support, required enough academic coursework, or simply admitted too many weak students as tuition-paying bodies in order to maintain or expand the number of education faculty positions the legislature funds. Contrary to what test critics charge, the tests are not the problem. They serve their intended purpose--to safeguard the public interest in ensuring academically competent teachers. They also show where there are problems in our education schools' admissions criteria, academic support, and/or required coursework--another intended purpose.

As one example, first-time test-takers for the Early Childhood subject matter test have a little over a 50% pass rate. The test is at a high school level of difficulty. As another example, in addition to a separately scored subject matter test of beginning reading instructional knowledge for prospective elementary, early

childhood, and special education teachers (with a pass rate of around 70%), the DESE developed in 2007-2008 a separately scored test of mathematics knowledge for prospective elementary and special education teachers. Since the first administration of this test in the spring of 2009, less than 60% of test-takers have passed it. But no education school has yet to require those they admit to take the two or three tailored mathematics courses that would undoubtedly help many aspiring elementary teachers to pass this test.

The DESE is planning a RFP for a new five-year contract for teacher test development next spring. Our current test developer by law has to re-apply, as part of a competitive bidding process, for a five-year renewal. The DESE says that it is developing the new RFP "via the benefit of feedback from the field." The DESE needs to hear from more than the "field," i.e., higher education faculty, teacher unions, and educational organizations with an interest in making the tests easier and in lowering the cut scores. It also needs to hear from business organizations, school committees, and other public interest groups with an interest in maintaining if not further upgrading the academic level of the state's current licensure tests for the sake of equity.

There is a legitimate reason for revisiting and revising the current contract. In July 2010, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) voted to adopt Common Core's standards in mathematics and English language arts. Since teacher tests and teacher licensing regulations are based on the state's K-12 standards, it is reasonable to review current licensure tests to ensure that they address the state's new standards. But public interest groups need to ensure that the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (a large umbrella organization consisting mainly of technology companies eager for school business) has not influenced the RFP. This organization, which is informally allied with the USED and the organizations that developed Common Core's standards, wants K-12 students tested on such undefinable topics as "creativity," "creative thinking," and "problem solving." It also wants these unmeasurable topics assessed on teacher licensure tests as well as the focus for costly professional development. The effect is to compel schools to require instructional time and professional development on activities that take time away from learning the academic content on which these skills are based.

For Massachusetts to continue to increase the academic quality of its urban as well as suburban teaching corps and to see further increases in the academic achievement of all its students, including minority groups, I offer the following recommendations and their rationale.

1. ***Ask for transparency about the draft RFP before it is finalized by the DESE and posted.*** The draft is currently being developed by the DESE. Community organizations should ask for draft copies as they evolve over the fall and winter and hold public meetings to discuss what is in these drafts. Invite independent assessment experts to comment on these drafts at public meetings.

2. ***Ask for education schools to be held accountable for teaching aspiring teachers so-called "21st century skills."*** Ask that P 21 skills be assessed only in the performance tests now being developed for student teachers and insist that education schools be held accountable for ensuring that newly licensed teachers can satisfactorily teach these skills to their students. If K-12 students don't show proficiency in these skills, the education schools, not the students' teachers, must be held accountable.

3. Ask the legislature to require representation by public interest groups (e.g., school committees, Chamber of Commerce, other community organizations) on the committees for reviewing test objectives and test items, and for setting cut scores. Current planning specifications for membership on these crucial committees include only teachers and higher education faculty; there is no representation for broad public interest groups.

4. Ask the legislature to require that cut scores be set higher, not lower, on current subject matter knowledge tests for all fields.

5. Ask the legislature to require the Board of Higher Education to set higher admissions requirements for undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation programs.

Concluding Remarks

One of the major goals in the state's RtT application in June, for which it received \$250 million, speaks to the intention to recruit academically competent individuals.

"Attract, develop, and retain an effective, academically capable, diverse and culturally proficient educator workforce to ensure every student is taught by a great teacher and every school and district is led by a great leader."

Massachusetts will put its urban schools at greater risk than its suburban schools if it fails to ensure that teachers hired by urban superintendents have passed tests that are sufficiently academically demanding. So far, MTEL has tried to ensure that all teachers are academically competent for the grade levels and subject they are licensed to teach. State policies should continue to ensure that subject area tests are demanding academically, and that performance tests of teaching skill are evidence-based. If any major change is to take place in current tests for prospective teachers of elementary age children, it is to raise the cut score. And if we really want more effective teachers in all our schools, the legislature should insist that the academic requirements for admission to and exit from teacher preparation programs be raised.

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Estimated Percentage of Tests for Prospective Elementary Teachers Assessing Three Major Components of Reading Instruction (Vocabulary, Phonemic Awareness, and Phonics)

Licensure Tests Assessing Reading Instruction for Prospective Elementary and Sometimes Other Teachers*	Percent in Three Areas of Reading
PRAXIS 0011 (<i>Elementary Education: Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment</i>), ETS (17 states)	7%
PRAXIS 0012 (<i>Elementary Education: Content Area Exercises</i>), ETS (7 states)	1%
PRAXIS 0014 (<i>Elementary Education: Content Knowledge</i>), ETS (22 states)	3%
PRAXIS 0201 (<i>Reading across the Curriculum: Elementary</i>), ETS (1 state)	39%
Multiple Subjects Exam (<i>for Elementary Education</i>), ABCTE**	9-10%
Reading Endorsement for K-6, ABCTE	38%
California RICA, ESP** (1 state)	45-50%
Connecticut (<i>Foundations of Reading Test</i>), ESP**** (1 state)	54%
Illinois 110 (<i>Elementary/Middle</i>), ESP (1 state)	5-6%
Michigan 83 (<i>Elementary Education</i>), ESP (1 state)	2%
Massachusetts 90 (<i>Foundations of Reading</i>), ESP*** (1 state)	54%
Minnesota Elementary Education (<i>Subtest I</i>), ESP (1 state)	40%
New York 02 (<i>Multi-Subject Test: Grades PreK-9</i>), ESP (1 state)	12%
Oklahoma 50 (<i>Elementary Education Subtest I</i>), ESP (1 state)	25%
Virginia VRA, ESP *** (1 state)	25%
Licensure Tests for Prospective Special Education Teachers	
PRAXIS 0353 (<i>Education of Exceptional Students: Core Content Knowledge</i>), ETS	0%
PRAXIS 0351 (<i>Special Education: Knowledge-Based Core Principles</i>), ETS	0%
PRAXIS 0511 (<i>Fundamental Subjects: Content Knowledge</i>), ETS	1%
Special Education (K-6), ABCTE	9%
Illinois 155 (<i>Learning Behavior Specialist I</i>), ESP	1%
Michigan 63 (<i>Learning Disabled</i>), ESP	4%
New York 60 (<i>Students with Disabilities, CST</i>), ESP	1%

* The number of states requiring the test for prospective elementary teachers is in parentheses after its title.
 RICA = *Reading Instruction Competence Assessment*; VRA = *Virginia Reading Assessment*; CST = *Content Specialty Test*.
 ** Required of prospective elementary and special education teachers.
 *** Required of prospective elementary, early childhood, and special education teachers.
 ****Required of prospective elementary and early childhood teachers.

Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL)

Number of Examinees and Percent of Examinees Passing Each Test by Examinee Category*

Test Administration: July 10, 2010

Test Name	First-Time Test Takers		Test Retakers	
	N	% Passing	N	% Passing
Communication and Literacy Skills:				
Reading	2,069	83	492	45.5
Writing	2,031	86.4	515	58.3
Both Subtests	1,828	78.5	147	23.8
Vocational Technical Literacy Skills:				
Reading	35	94.3	5	40
Writing	37	81.1	23	39.1
Both Subtests	33	78.8	2	50
Subject Tests:				
Early Childhood	243	58.8	177	29.9
General Curriculum: Multi-Subject	718	67	410	41.2
General Curriculum: Mathematics	679	57	468	40.4
History	257	75.9	89	40.4
English	291	84.2	70	48.6
Reading Specialist	92	75	47	36.2
Mathematics	186	67.7	57	35.1
General Science	73	78.1	11	36.4
Physics	58	60.3	23	39.1
Chemistry	42	45.2	26	34.6
Biology	89	76.4	37	32.4
Earth Science	18	38.9	13	23.1
Latin and Classical Humanities	9	66.7	5	20
Music	62	85.5	6	50
Visual Art	75	94.7	13	69.2
Business	15	46.7	2	50

Health/Family and Consumer Sciences	62	85.5	13	61.5
Physical Education	78	43.6	63	19
French	--	--	--	--
German	--	--	--	--
Spanish	86	75.6	25	20
Chinese (Mandarin)	--	--	--	--
Italian	--	--	--	--
Russian	--	--	--	--
Portuguese	--	--	--	--
Technology/Engineering	19	68.4	4	50
Speech	--	--	--	--
Theater	6	50	2	0
Dance	4	50	1	0
Middle School Mathematics	129	59.7	79	36.7
Political Science/Political Philosophy	10	40	6	0
Middle School Humanities	44	56.8	13	23.1
Middle School Mathematics/Science	32	50	20	35
Academically Advanced	1	100	--	--
Elementary Mathematics	90	48.9	20	30
English as a Second Language	405	58	95	27.4
Adult Basic Education	4	100	--	--
Foundations of Reading	821	56.5	594	35
All Subject Tests	4,698	64	2,389	36.6
Communication & Literacy Skills and Subject Test	640	70.6	7	0

Total Number of Test Takers:	8,424
Number (Percent) of First-Time Test Takers:	5,443 (64.6)
Number (Percent) of Test Retakers:	2,981 (35.4)