Teacher Preparation and Licensure During the COVID-19 Epidemic: Recommendations for State Leaders

Schools have already faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 outbreak, from shifting to distance learning on the fly to providing essential services like meals during extended closures. But the pandemic also raises serious questions for the future of both the 150,000 teacher candidates working to complete teacher preparation programs and current teachers working to complete professional licensing requirements. Without clear guidance and smart policy changes, aspiring teachers could be forced to wait at least a semester, if not a full school year, before they are able to pursue a full-time teaching position, and current teachers with licenses that will expire at the end of this school could be forced to temporarily step away from the classroom.

Below are our recommendations for state leaders to address these issues.

Modify Clinical and Assessment Requirements

Grant one-time waivers to individuals who are unable to earn the required scores on assessments that must be completed at testing centers affected by the closure of non-essential businesses. If aspiring or current teachers have fulfilled all other requirements to receive or renew a license, they should not be penalized for being unable to take these exams due to the closure of non-essential businesses. At the very least, states should grant licenses to these individuals and extend the deadline for earning the necessary exam scores by at least twelve months.

Grant one-time waivers to individuals who are unable to fulfill their student teaching requirement due to school closures. While some pre-service educators will be able to work towards fulfilling the required length of their student teaching by supporting the teacher of record with distance learning, many others will not. A waiver would be the most equitable solution.

Require EPPs to develop alternative methods for pre-service educators to improve their skills. Pre-service educators still need to hone their craft, even with schools closed. States should pair test waivers with a requirement that EPPs create virtual alternatives to clinical experiences. This is especially critical for EPPs that traditionally use summer school as a field experience opportunity.

Facilitate the collection and sharing of best practices for clinical experience in a virtual setting. Helping educator preparation programs learn about effective virtual clinical experience strategies will strengthen the overall quality of teacher training across states and nationally, especially given the possibility of rolling school closures during the 2020-2021 school year.

Invest in Teacher Support and Development

Use a portion of the CARES Act’s designated funding for governors to award teacher development grants to districts. When students return to school in the fall, many of them will be experiencing considerable trauma due to issues stemming from the coronavirus pandemic, such as financial instability, personal loss, and extended isolation. Teachers, especially those who were unable to fulfill licensure requirements due to the pandemic, will need additional support. Districts could use these grant funds to provide teachers with professional learning and coaching designed to help them meet the needs of the whole child, including trauma-informed care. The funds can also be used to give teachers the support they need to accelerate student learning—a necessary response to extended school closures. Districts might need to reduce their professional learning and new teacher induction budgets because of the impact of state budget shortfalls on K-12 funding, making these grant funds essential for meeting the needs of teachers and students.
Use CARES Act funding for state education agencies to design a high-quality toolkit of resources on teacher induction, development, and coaching that districts can easily adopt or adapt. District and school leaders need to be able to focus on implementing, not designing, high-quality support for teachers. To help make this a reality, state education agencies should create teacher development toolkits that provide district and school leaders with a clear, actionable roadmap of evidence-based strategies for supporting teachers to meet their students’ academic and social-emotional needs in light of the coronavirus pandemic. These toolkits should be tailored for the state’s specific context and designed for easy implementation.

Plan for the Future

Form a taskforce to revise teacher preparation program and licensure requirements before the 2020-2021 school year. If schools and non-essential businesses need to be closed periodically during the 2020-2021 school year, states will once again need to rapidly develop policy solutions for their teacher preparation program and licensure requirements. Rather than taking a “wait and see” approach toward possible changes to requirements for teacher preparation programs and licensure, states should proactively revise and reimagine these requirements to better reflect the needs of students and their teachers. They should convene a taskforce that includes teachers, family members, and students to help ensure that any changes to teacher preparation and licensure policies are grounded in the perspectives of these key stakeholders. Issues the taskforce should address include:

- **Licensure renewal and reciprocity.** For instance, licensed teachers in other states might need to move back home or to where family members live due to financial or health challenges caused by the pandemic. The taskforce is encouraged to review their state’s licensure reciprocity policy to determine the extent to which effective teachers with an out-of-state license can pursue teaching opportunities in their state.

- **Rigorous alternatives to assessments required for licensure.** The taskforce should develop recommendations for allowing evidence of effectiveness in the classroom to substitute for scores on licensure tests. These measures don’t have to include or be limited to standardized test scores: classroom observations, assessments of student work, and student surveys—some or all of which are part of many districts’ teacher evaluation systems—can provide valuable information as well. States should consider waiving any testing requirements for teachers who meet these rigorous alternate requirements.

Study the effects of policy changes and revise accordingly. During the 2020-2021 school year, the taskforce should study the impact of the state’s teacher preparation program and licensure requirements on teacher effectiveness. The taskforce should prioritize an ongoing feedback loop with key stakeholders, including students and family members. Before the end of the 2020-2021 school year, the taskforce should report the following to the relevant state agency:

- Which of the changes to the state’s teacher preparation program or licensure requirements should the state permanently adopt or adapt for the foreseeable future? The taskforce should support these recommendations with evidence collected during the 2020-2021 school year.

- What, if any, additional changes need to be made to these requirements based on key learnings from the 2020-2021 school year?

- What data should the state collect on an annual basis to identify best practices for teacher preparation as well as opportunities to continuously improve the effectiveness of the state’s teacher workforce?