Diversity at Issue as States Weigh Teacher Entry

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Slowly but surely, a growing number of states are eyeing policies to select academically stronger individuals for their teaching programs as one avenue to improve the quality of new teachers.

Underneath the attention such plans are attracting, though, run deep-seated fears about their potential consequences—particularly whether they will result in a K-12 workforce with fewer black and Latino teachers.

On nearly all the measures states are considering, from GPAs to licensure-test scores, minority candidates tend to have weaker scores than their white counterparts.

"It's the dirty little secret that's not getting nearly enough discussion in the policy community," said Segun Eubanks, the director of teacher quality for the 3 million-member National Education Association, which generally supports improved teacher training.

The state action comes against the backdrop of a profession whose membership is already far less diverse than the students it serves.

For state officials, the quandary poses a difficult and politically sensitive set of choices.

"It is a huge issue," said Christopher A. Koch, the state schools superintendent in Illinois, which held fast to harder licensure tests in 2011 despite pressure from teacher colleges concerned about minority enrollments. "We've doubled our efforts to communicate with higher education, and we're opening up as many channels as possible, trying to address concerns and barriers they see."

Proponents of the higher standards agree that caution is warranted.

"When you're working with instruments like SAT, ACT, GPA, which all have significant limitations, you have a responsibility to think about what the unintended consequences are," said Mary Brabeck, the dean of New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, alluding to entrance exams and other yardsticks that factor into admissions. "But I really reject the idea that quality and diversity are somehow in conflict. They intersect. We want a diverse, highly qualified teaching force, and these factors are interrelated."
As scrutiny on the nation's teaching programs has risen, so have concerns about the type of individuals entering them. Despite improvements over time, U.S. elementary teachers hold academic credentials generally below those of other college graduates. Only about 13 percent of recent bachelor's degree recipients in education had top scores on the SAT, compared with about a quarter of all graduates, federal data show.

Proponents of the idea of raising teacher-preparation entry standards point to the practices of countries such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea, which recruit superior academic candidates.

About half of U.S. states have signed onto the principle of raising admissions standards to teacher preparation, and a handful of states have begun to act on it. Some of the changes appear more symbolic than substantive, with required grade point averages generally still falling below the B level.

Still, the concept has been picking up steam in other quarters, too, with advocacy organizations, teachers' unions, and a panel crafting new standards for the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation all putting forth versions.

One of the overarching challenges for policy actors is that, however common-sense the "brighter students, better teachers" idea may be, it remains essentially untested. Research generally supports the idea that academically stronger teachers help raise achievement, though the evidence is inconsistent, and few specific factors have been studied in depth.

'Difficult Issue'

The potential impact on candidates of color is more stark. Scores on the ACT from 2012 show that the mean score of African-American and Hispanic teachers, at 19 and 17, respectively, falls below the national mean score of 21, the score set as a goal in some proposals.

Basic-skills tests, such as those in the Educational Testing Services' Praxis I series, also pose more challenges for some groups. According to ETS data collected from 2005 to 2009, black candidates scored about a standard deviation lower on such tests and Hispanic candidates by between a third and a half of a standard deviation lower. (States choose where to set the cutoff score on the exam; most cutoffs are currently set below the mean score.)

As an entry standard, grade point average is a more difficult measure to analyze, given variations on course content and academic difficulty at both the high school and college levels.

On the whole, "this is a very difficult issue with significant trade-offs," said Douglas N. Harris, an associate professor of economics at Tulane University, in New Orleans,
who has studied the links between teachers' preservice characteristics and their classroom performance. "Ratcheting up the bar will reduce the supply of minority teachers because of the general achievement gap that still leaves minorities with lower academic achievement—which is the problem we are trying to solve."

Just 17 percent of teachers are nonwhite, compared to about 40 percent of K-12 students, according to federal data.

Research on the specific effects of matching students to same-race teachers, meanwhile, isn't conclusive either, but it has matured, and a few studies show academic benefits for black students; other social or emotional effects are also likely, researchers say.

"In the 1980s and 1990s, teacher diversity was being talked about from a cultural, 'social justice' perspective, but not with any real agenda for educative impact," Mr. Eubanks said. "Now, it has the potential to help close the academic achievement gap, [but] it's a piece that isn't really being connected."

A group that is particularly concerned about the drive to raise admissions policies is the Washington-based National Association for Equity Opportunity in Higher Education. It represents historically black institutions, which prepare about half of all black teachers.

Some of those schools have open-admissions policies and a philosophy of propelling individuals forward, so they often begin with weaker candidates, said Boyce Courtney Williams, a senior vice president for NAFEO.

"Some of them are not coming in from the same level of high-quality high schools as other candidates," she said.

**Sentiment Mixed**

As befits a complex issue, though, the sentiment among such schools isn't universal.
Although estimates suggest that 80 percent of recently admitted teacher-candidates at Alcorn State University, in Lorman, Miss., wouldn't have passed muster under a draft measure in that state, officials there said the school would meet the challenge.

"We need the best teachers in the classroom, irrespective of race," said M. Christopher Brown, the president of the historically black institution. "I don't think anyone would accept a lower-quality doctor during their heart transplant, based on an equity issue. The reality is that, as the bar rises, you have to meet it."

Mr. Brown's concerns about the measure, which was approved in modified form last month by Gov. Bill Bryant, a Republican, were rooted in contextual factors, such as the comparatively low salaries offered to teachers in Mississippi.

That, Mr. Brown said, means that it might be hard to attract a pool with enough strong candidates.

State officials, meanwhile, said that setting the bar higher is just one piece of a larger puzzle about how to recruit, support, and retain teachers of color.

"I'd argue our expectation is respectable, but we're not talking about an A, we're not recruiting from the top 5 percent of college graduates or even the upper third," said Mr. Koch, the Illinois chief. "But I think we've certainly moved in the right direction."

**Flexibility Offered**

Illinois' policies also offer a degree of flexibility for programs, by allowing candidates to enter provisionally if they pass some parts, but not all, of the required test.

A similar idea is guiding the CAEP accreditation group, said Ms. Brabeck, who chaired the committee that drafted the standard on candidate selection. The draft standard, which includes a 3.0 GPA requirement, would apply to each entering cohort, rather than individuals.

"We did that to recognize the fact that these measures are crude approximations of the quality we're trying to identify," she said.

Sandi Jacobs, the vice president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, an advocacy group based in Washington that has criticized low entry standards across the states, also endorsed a degree of flexibility to help alleviate concerns about harming teacher diversity.

Florida and Wisconsin allow programs to exempt a small percentage of candidates who don't meet admissions standards, she added. "You do want to have room to say about a candidate, 'There's something about her that makes me think she'll be a great teacher,' as long as that percent is not huge," she said.
Tougher Criteria

States are moving to change qualifications for those applying to teacher-preparation programs. Advocates for changes such as increasing the minimum grade point average for prospective teachers argue that raising these requirements will improve the quality of the education workforce.

Connecticut
On April 16, the state board of education adopted recommendations from the Educator Preparation Advisory’s Council, one of which was toughening “program entry standards.” The council’s principles do not recommend a minimum GPA or test score for admissions, but Connecticut Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, a Democrat, has endorsed a 3.3 GPA.

Delaware
Legislation introduced in April and endorsed by Gov. Jack Markell, a Democrat, would require that undergraduate teacher education programs set a minimum GPA of 3.0 for applicants during their two most recent years of secondary or postsecondary courses. They must also achieve a minimum score on a standardized test normed to the general college population. Programs could waive these requirements for up to 10 percent of all students admitted.

Kentucky
Kentucky’s Education Profession Standards Board last September raised the minimum GPA for entry into undergraduate teacher-preparation programs from 2.5 to 2.75. Candidates must also pass a basic-skills assessment.

Mississippi
Gov. Phil Bryant, a Republican, endorsed legislation to require prospective teachers to hold a minimum GPA of 3.0 in pre-major coursework and a 21 on the ACT. Pushback from higher education officials yielded a compromise measure, signed into law April 18. The bill sets admission requirements at a 2.75 GPA in pre-major courses. Candidates also must achieve an ACT score of 21 or pass a basic-skills test.

Illinois
The state raised the cutoff scores on a basic-skills test, beginning in 2010. It requires candidates to perform at a certain level on all four sections of the exam, though programs can provisionally admit students who haven’t yet passed all four. Candidates can opt out of the test with a score of 22 or higher on the ACT.

Iowa
In 2012, Gov. Terry Branstad, a Republican, succeeded in pushing through a new requirement that applicants to Iowa teacher-preparation programs must achieve a score on a preprofessional skills test in the top 75 percent nationally.

New York
In January, the state Education Reform Commission, established by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat, recommended raising the minimum GPA for entry into teacher-preparation programs from 2.75 to 3.0. The commission also said admissions should require an entry test like the Graduate Record Exam to determine how applicants stack up against other students.

—Andrew Ujifusa & Stephen Sawchuk