

Push and Pull Factors in Obtaining Teacher Licensure

Implications for Increasing Pathways into the Teaching
Profession for Emergency License Holders in Massachusetts

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Abstract

In response to widespread concerns of looming teacher shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic, many states offered emergency teacher licenses, which reduced professional entry requirements and expanded access to the profession. With many of these COVID-era policies now expiring, this sequential mixed methods study seeks to understand factors that may push emergency license holders away from obtaining traditional licensure and factors that might help them stay in the profession through analyzing survey, interview, and focus group data in Massachusetts. Factors that may push this expanded pool out of the profession include difficulty completing licensure exams, unclear information about next steps in the licensure process, working conditions, and prior work experience not applying to future licensure requirements. Conversely, the factors that continue to pull the emergency license holders into the profession include fulfilling a passion for teaching and learning from supportive colleagues. Insights for how to differentiate the licensure process for emergency license holders to reduce future teacher shortages are discussed at the state, district, and educator preparation program level.¹

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Introduction

The teaching profession in the United States faces the dual challenge of attracting a steady supply of teachers to replace vacancies, while simultaneously ensuring that all educators have the training and skills necessary to be effective. Traditionally, states have used professional licensure to ensure prospective teachers have the skills to be effective in the classroom, but the relationship between licensure exam scores and teacher quality is modest, suggesting that licensure may be an inefficient screening tool (Rockoff et al., 2011; Orellana & Winters, 2023). Licensure may also deter individuals from becoming teachers, even those who would have been high-quality teachers (Goldhaber, 2011). The deterrent effect is particularly concerning for candidates of color, who are less likely than white candidates to pass state tests (Cowan et al., 2020), but have disproportionately large academic impacts on students of color (Dee, 2005; Gershenson et al., 2022; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010).

While states had been grappling with these tradeoffs before the COVID-19 pandemic (Putman & Walsh, 2021a), the closure of schools and test centers in March 2020 forced many states to quickly revise their licensure requirements. For example, potential teaching candidates were prevented from completing in-person student teaching or sitting for in-person licensure examinations in the spring of 2020. To prevent a sudden disruption to the teacher pipeline, most states made short-term changes to their licensure requirements in the summer of 2020, such as temporarily suspending or reducing licensure exam requirements (Will, 2022).

Massachusetts, the context of the current study, is one example of a state that altered its licensure process in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by offering an emergency license. Traditionally, individuals seeking teacher positions in Massachusetts public schools needed to obtain a provisional or initial license. Provisional licenses require a bachelor's degree and

passing multiple required Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTELEs).² Initial licenses require the additional completion of an educator preparation program, a student teaching practicum, and a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) endorsement.³ The majority of states similarly require a competency assessment and graduation from a preparation program (Council of State Governments, 2020).

The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 prevented many license-seeking individuals from fulfilling these requirements. In response, an emergency teaching license was created in June 2020, which only required that individuals hold a bachelor's degree (An Act Relative to Municipal Governance During the COVID-19 Emergency, 2020).

By altering entry requirements, the emergency license policy provided a pathway for two sets of individuals to enter the teaching profession in Massachusetts during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it provided a pathway for individuals who *would have* met all the licensure requirements under typical circumstances but were prevented from doing so because of pandemic-related challenges. This includes individuals who, for example, were not able to take the licensure exam due to the closure of in-person testing centers and/or could not complete student-teaching requirements. We refer to these individuals as the *existing supply* of teachers. Second, the emergency license expanded the pool of teachers by providing a path for individuals who otherwise *would not have* entered the profession under typical circumstances. This includes,

² While specific MTEL requirements vary by license type, they typically include an MTEL Communication and Literacy Skills test and a subject matter test. The MTEL tests were designed to help ensure that 1) Massachusetts educators can communicate adequately with students, parents/guardians, and other educators and 2) they are knowledgeable in the subject matter of the license(s) sought. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education oversees the suite of MTEL assessments and contracts with Evaluation Systems of Pearson to administer them. For information on how the tests are designed, see <http://www.marecruit.nesinc.com/PageView.asp?f=Development.html>.

³ A teacher can either obtain a provisional and then an initial license, or enter the profession with an initial license upon completing all of its requirements. However, provisional licenses are only valid for 5 years, at which point an individual must transition to an initial license.

for example, individuals who wanted to become a teacher but were consistently unable to meet all of the typical licensure requirements, those who lacked the time or finances to complete requirements, out-of-state licensed teachers who recently moved to the Commonwealth⁴, or career changers who had not trained to become a teacher but decided to test the profession due to the newly altered requirements. We refer to these individuals as the *expanded supply* of teachers.

While emergency licenses allowed both sets of individuals to *enter* the teacher workforce, they are only short-term licenses and may present challenges to *remain* in the workforce. Emergency licenses are only valid for one year, with the option for two additional one-year extensions, after which point emergency license holders need to obtain a provisional or initial license or show progress towards obtaining a license.⁵ Because nearly 20 percent of newly hired teachers during the pandemic entered with an emergency license (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023), it is crucial to understand the needs of this population and support their efforts to convert to a permanent license.⁶ Without doing so, the emergency license will simply delay a pipeline disruption it was created to avoid.

To address these concerns, this study examines the forces that may drive some emergency license holders (ELHs) out of the profession (push factors) and the factors that have been effective in keeping emergency license holders (ELHs) in (pull factors). Specifically, we examine the following three research questions:

⁴ Temporary licenses are also available to out-of-state license holders who have three years of teaching experience, which are valid for one year of employment.

⁵ The exceptions are licenses in special education or English as a Second Language, which go through a different extension process due to federal regulations: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/emergency/>.

⁶ Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023) show that the Massachusetts emergency license was a major pathway into the profession during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also increased the diversity of newly hired teachers along two dimensions. First, emergency license holders were more racially diverse than traditional license holders. Second, emergency license holders came from more varied professional backgrounds within and outside of education.

1. What “push” factors have prevented emergency license holders from remaining in the profession and/or from obtaining a permanent license?
2. What “pull” factors have helped emergency license holders stay in the profession and prepare for a transition to a permanent license?
3. How, if at all, do these “pull” and “push” factors differ based on emergency license holders’ prior professional background?

In analyzing the lived experiences of current emergency license holders, this study provides insights into how state policy seeking to combat teacher shortages can best support those who already have their foot in the door and help them stay in the profession long-term.

Conceptual Framework and Existing Literature

Licensure is a common labor market regulation in fields that interact with health, safety, and the provision of public goods. Licenses act as an intentional barrier to entry, with the goal of ensuring that individuals who enter these professions have the necessary training and skills to be effective. It is a particularly useful safeguard in fields where the public has limited ability to directly observe and evaluate the quality of the product or service they receive (Office of Economic Policy, 2015).

In education, individuals who enter teaching positions in public elementary and secondary schools are required to obtain state-specific teacher licenses to teach in the classroom. While each state sets their own requirements for teacher licensure, common requirements include demonstrating teaching ability through a student teaching practicum as part of completing a teacher training program, passing one or more standardized assessments of basic skills, pedagogy, or content knowledge, and, for a smaller number of states, passing the edTPA, a performance-based portfolio assessment (Aragon, 2017; DeArmond et al., 2023). These current

“buckets” of teacher licensure requirements date back to reform efforts in the 1990s to improve the quality of education and effectiveness of teachers. For example, in Massachusetts, the MTELEs became a part of teacher licensure requirements in 1998 as part of a comprehensive education reform effort that created standards for PK-12 students, school accountability provisions, and teacher training and certification requirements. Under this statute, licensure applicants, in addition to holding a Bachelor’s degree, must “pass a test” that “demonstrate the communication and literacy skills necessary for effective instruction and improved communication between school and parents” and “the subject matter knowledge for the certificate” to receive a provisional license to teach (MA General Laws Part I, Title XII, Chapter 71, Section 38G).

Licensure requirements impose an important trade-off. On the one hand, they offer protections to the public, ensuring that teachers have at least the minimally acceptable level of skill and training (Putman and Walsh, 2021a). Existing research documents a positive relationship between licensure exam scores and performance on teacher evaluations and student achievement, suggesting that screening on such measures has the potential to improve the quality of the workforce (Clotfelter et al., 2007; Goldhaber et al., 2017). For example, research specifically done in Massachusetts has found MTEL scores to be positive and statistically significant predictors of teachers in-service performance ratings and contributions to student test scores (Cowan et al., 2020). On the other hand, research in other states has found the relationship between licensure exam scores and future teacher quality to be modest, suggesting that licensure exams may only offer limited influence on overall workforce quality (Rockoff et al., 2011; Orellana & Winters, 2023). The costs of licensure – both in terms of time and money – may also

deter individuals from becoming teachers, even if they would have been high-quality teachers (Goldhaber, 2011; Orellana & Winters, 2022).

Because the emergency license is only temporary, it shifts the timing of licensure requirements rather than removing them altogether. Prior to the pandemic, individuals needed to pass all required MTELS *before gaining entry* to the teacher workforce (i.e., obtaining a provisional teaching license). Now, teachers with an emergency license who were able to gain employment as a teacher need to pass all required MTEL exams in order to *remain* in the workforce once their emergency license expires. This shift has the potential to alter not only the set of individuals who enter the teacher workforce. Research has suggested that licensure exams, time scarcity, and financial costs are pre-pandemic perennial push factors that have served as barriers to the potential pool of teacher candidates. On the other hand, supportive school organizational contexts, teacher networks, and the psychological rewards of teaching have been found to help pull teachers into the profession by supporting them through the licensure process. Below, we summarize extant literature on these factors that pushed potential teachers away from obtaining licensure and the factors that pulled them towards obtaining licensure prior to the pandemic, and how these might influence the new pool of potential teachers who received emergency licenses during the pandemic.

Push Factors that May Affect the Retention of Emergency License Holders

Licensure exam requirements. Prior work highlights the difficulty of passing licensure exams among individuals who want to become teachers, but have not been able to pass the exams (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Williams et al., 2016; Fortner et al., 2015). These exams disproportionately prevent teacher candidates of color from entering the profession. Multiple studies have found that white teacher candidates pass the Praxis exam at substantially higher

rates than BIPOC teacher candidates (Gitomer & Latham, 2000; Memory et al., 2003; Petchauer, 2012); other studies suggest that teacher candidates of color are less likely than white candidates to retake licensure exams if they fail on their first attempt (Cowan et al., 2020). Further studies have shown that teacher candidates' beliefs about their performance on the licensure exams were affected by previous, often racialized, experiences with standardized testing, including prior failure or mastery of specific subjects (Petchauer, 2016). This experience may negatively affect the experience of teachers of color while taking licensure exams and in turn, present barriers to diversifying the profession.

Prior literature has further documented the burdens of simultaneously preparing for licensure exams while holding a full-time job (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Williams et al., 2016). For example, teacher candidates who worked as paraprofessionals or teaching assistants have reported struggling with certification exams and score lower on licensure exams than teachers who did not have prior teaching assistant experience (Fortner, et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2012). While time scarcity may not be a major barrier for individuals in the *existing pool* of teachers, as this group represents those who would have taken and passed the exams while enrolled in a preservice teacher preparation program, employed emergency license holders face the burden of preparing for and taking the exams while working as a full-time classroom teacher.

Financial costs. Prior research suggests that costs related to licensure requirements may dissuade individuals from completing them. For example, an analysis of 24 states found that only 45% of test-takers pass on their attempt, requiring them to take (and pay for) the same exam multiple times (Putman & Walsh, 2021b). Nearly one-quarter of those individuals who failed on their first attempt never re-took the exam, which Putnam & Walsh (2021b) refer to as the "walk away" rate. Financial costs may also dissuade teachers from remaining in the profession if they

move to another state (Coggshall & Sexton, 2008, Goldhaber et al., 2015, Kleiner, 2015). For example, teachers who were licensed in other states and began teaching in Massachusetts with an emergency license face the financial and time costs of taking another set of licensure exams due to lack of licensing reciprocity, and, as prior research suggests, may lose their retirement or pension benefits and position on the salary scale by moving states (Coggshall & Sexton, 2008; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Kleiner, 2015; Sass, 2015). Similarly, career changers who may have previously invested financial resources in degrees in other sectors may be deterred from having to invest a similar amount of money in a new sector (Bunn & Wake, 2015; Mather, 2021).

Adverse working conditions. Previous studies have long documented the impact of working conditions on teacher job satisfaction and retention. Multiple studies have reported that factors such as school leadership, relationships with colleagues, school culture, and teacher input in decision making are integral to school working conditions (Berry et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2001; Ladd, 2009; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Lower levels of teacher-reported working conditions have been predictive of teachers' intent to move or leave the classroom, actual departure rates, and job satisfaction (Grant et al., 2019; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2009; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Recent research has found working conditions in schools to be even more strained since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with teachers reporting facing stressful work environments, challenges balancing their personal and professional roles while working remotely, difficulty engaging students, and concern for student well-being outside of academics (Kraft et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2023). Without feeling adequately supported in these areas, individuals who began their teaching careers during the COVID-19 pandemic may be more likely to leave the classroom.

Pull Factors that May Affect the Retention of Emergency License Holders

Teacher support networks. Research has pointed to formal and informal teacher networks as supporting teachers in obtaining licensure, including teacher residency programs, educator preparation programs, and colleagues that offer tangible support and advice on the licensure process. For example, teacher residency programs that provide financial support for licensure candidates while they are currently teaching have been found to increase teacher diversity and retention amongst participants (Guha et al., 2016). A recent study of Black male teacher candidates found that while only three of the 11 participants passed the Praxis exam on their first attempt, they reported feeling supported by faculty who incorporated exam materials into their program coursework as well as student learning communities and study groups (Wallace & Gagen, 2020). Further studies found that BIPOC teacher candidates who successfully passed licensure exams sought out specific information on test preparation and advice from colleagues who had previous exam success (Baker-Doyle & Petchauer, 2015; Petchauer, 2016). Because the expanded supply of teachers employed on an emergency license may not have gone through a traditional teacher preparation program, more research is needed to understand additional informal networks that may be supporting them in entering and remaining in the field.

School districts may utilize comprehensive induction and mentoring programs to support early career teachers as they integrate into their school community and the teaching profession. Multiple studies have shown that high-quality induction and mentoring programs are predictive of an early career teacher's intent to stay in teaching (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kapadia et al., 2007; Weins et al., 2019). A review of 15 empirical studies on induction and mentoring programs found that, in nearly every study of commitment and retention, teachers who participated in a mentoring or induction program reported higher levels of job satisfaction, intent

to stay in teaching, and actual retention rates (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Schools that successfully support early career teachers may assign new teachers to experienced mentors who support both their instructional development and introduction to their school community (Kapadia et al., 2007; Shuls & Flores, 2020; Wiens et al., 2019). These programs support new teachers as they navigate their first years in the profession, and would likewise be important to emergency license holders teaching for the first time.

School organizational contexts. Prior work indicates that improvements in school organizational context and working conditions are positively related to teachers' professional satisfaction, plans to stay, and reductions in teacher turnover (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). For example, one Massachusetts specific study found that teachers reported higher rates of job satisfaction and intent to stay in teaching in schools with stronger working environments including, supportive school leadership and colleagues (Johnson et al., 2012). While those in unsupportive contexts may plan to leave their positions, emergency license holders who are employed in work contexts that have supportive school leadership and positive relationships among teachers may desire to remain in their schools, therefore increasing their motivation to pursue more permanent licensure.

Psychological rewards of teaching. Research going back decades has documented that teachers are highly motivated by the "psychic rewards" that derive from helping their students learn and succeed (e.g., Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Lortie, 1975). Employed emergency license holders who experience a sense of success with their students, and the accompanying psychological rewards, may feel a greater commitment to their schools and the profession (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). These individuals may feel more motivated to convert their emergency licenses to provisional or initial licenses. Those from the expanded pool of teachers

who have never worked in classrooms before - for example, career changers - may benefit from experiencing these rewards if they become employed as classroom teachers with an emergency license.

Alternatives to traditional licensure exams. Altering licensure exam requirements may help emergency license holders to achieve licensure requirements while working full time. As previous literature has established that licensure exams pose a difficulty for people who want to become teachers, and, in particular, teacher candidates of color or those who are employed as support staff, alternative exam opportunities may reduce these barriers to licensure (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Fortner et al., 2015; Memory et al., 2003; Petchauer, 2012). Some states have begun to institute or pilot alternatives to licensure exams. Massachusetts, for example, is currently offering a pilot program that offers alternatives to the MTEL.⁷ These alternative exam requirements may benefit emergency license holders, particularly those from the expanded pool who may have sought an emergency license specifically because of MTEL-related challenges.

With the COVID-19 public health emergency ending, individuals with an emergency license from the *expanded pool* of teachers may need targeted resources to stay in the profession. While research has documented pre-pandemic challenges and supports to obtaining licensure, to date, we are unaware of any studies that examine how the expanded pool of emergency license holders are navigating the path towards traditional teaching licenses – and the extent to which those holding an emergency license face unique or the same pre-existing barriers towards long-term teaching eligibility. This research fills the gap in the literature by exploring the process of

⁷ This program allows licensure candidates to take national licensure exams, such as the Praxis, or licensure exams from select other states instead of the MTEL Communications and Literacy Skills exam or subject matter exams. Additionally, in lieu of subject matter exams, candidates can request an attestation of subject matter knowledge from their preparation program or utilize the MTEL Flex program. For select exams, MTEL Flex allows candidates who are close to passing the exam the opportunity to write an assessment essay rather than retake the entire MTEL exam. For more information, see <https://www.doe.mass.edu/mtel/alt-assess/default.html>.

obtaining teaching licensure in Massachusetts for those who held an emergency license in the first year the policy took effect.

Methods

Research Design

This study is part of a larger mixed methods study examining the emergency teacher licensure policy in Massachusetts that draws upon Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MADESE) administrative data on emergency license holders from June 2020 through January 2022, a survey sent to all individuals who obtained an emergency license between June 2020 and March 2022, semi-structured interviews, and six focus groups. This study specifically draws upon the descriptive and qualitative data from survey responses ($n = 1,341$), interviews ($n = 14$) and focus groups ($n = 6$, with 31 total participants), employing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design in which we first collected and analyzed quantitative survey data, then conducted interviews and focus groups to further explain and deepen our understanding of the descriptive trends we found (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Sample and Data Collection

Survey. A survey was developed and disseminated to all emergency license holders in Massachusetts with valid emails in MADESE records as of March 2022 ($n = 6,158$). A total of 1,341 individuals responded and they were broadly representative of the full population of emergency license holders (Table 1).⁸ The survey was designed to understand participants' time and costs associated with obtaining an emergency licensure, why they obtained an emergency license, plans to obtain additional licensure, activities, time, costs, and supports associated with

⁸ Due to data availability for the full population of emergency license holders, Table 1 presents demographic characteristics for the 5,851 individuals who were part of the first cohort of emergency license holders (June 2020 through May 2021). This population comprises the vast majority of the 6,158 who were eligible to complete the survey (i.e., those who held a license by March 2022 when the survey was conducted).

obtaining additional licensure, barriers and supports to obtaining additional licensure, current employment, perceived supports as a teacher, plans for future teaching, and demographics. The majority of questions were close-ended, providing multiple choice options and an “Other” write-in option. Open-ended survey questions asked about the greatest challenges participants faced in pursuing a teaching license in Massachusetts ($n = 1008$ responses) and their greatest successes in pursuing a teaching license in Massachusetts ($n = 892$ responses).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted on Zoom in May and June of 2022. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, and included questions on emergency licensure experience, teaching experience, additional licensure experience, future plans, and recommendations. Interview participants were recruited via email from the pool of all survey respondents who identified that they would be interested in participating in an interview and provided an email address to contact them. We utilized maximum variation sampling to select a cross-section of emergency license holders representing a range of racial/ethnic and gender demographics, current employment (e.g., classroom teachers, substitute teachers, school support staff, non-school-based employment), and professional experiences they had before the emergency license policy took effect. These professional pathways we identified included participants who had been enrolled in or graduated from *traditional* accredited educator preparation programs prior to the pandemic, *career changers* who had worked in a different field before obtaining the emergency license, *out-of-state* licensed teachers who relocated to Massachusetts, *support staff* who worked in classrooms and in schools in a non-lead classroom teacher role (e.g., paraprofessionals, classroom aides), and *substitute teachers*, many of whom had previously come from one of the aforementioned pathways.

Six focus groups were conducted on Zoom in September of 2022, and included questions on the licensure process, MTEL preparation, teacher preparedness and supports, the job application process, and future teaching plans. Focus groups ranged from four to eight participants, and lasted one hour. Focus group participants were recruited from the pool of all survey respondents who indicated that they would be interested in participating in an interview but who had not yet been contacted for an interview. Table 2 provides demographics for interview and focus group participants.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Data Analysis

Survey. For close-ended survey questions, descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies) were tabulated for categorical questions. For open-ended survey responses, we conducted a first round of open coding, wherein we derived the codes from the data itself to categorize specific successes and challenges that each participant mentioned. Then, we did a second round of focused coding, wherein we grouped similar initial codes under the same category. Under challenges, for example, we grouped 17 initial codes (including, for example, MTELS - passing, MTELS- subject area, MTELS-questions, MTELS - scheduling, MTELS - study materials) under the focused code of “MTELS” and we grouped six initial codes (including, for example, working and MTEL studying, working and school, balancing time) under the focused code of “Time.” The final focused codes for challenges that included MTELS, time, financial costs, process, participant background, lack of support, educator preparation coursework, employment, completing requirements, and completing student teaching. The final focused codes for successes, in order of frequency, included employment/teaching experience, process, students, school/district support, professional growth, and educator preparation program.

Interview and Focus Groups. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and imported into NVivo Release 1. A team of two researchers coded the transcripts through an inductive coding process, wherein codes were generated under the broad domains of benefits of an emergency license, supports, challenges, licensure plans, retention plans, recommendations, and participant backgrounds. For the successes and challenges domains, *a priori* codes were derived from the open-ended survey question codes, and additional initial codes continued to be added as they emerged from the data. For the other domains, initial codes emerged from data through an open coding process. For example, under the domain of benefits, open codes that emerged from the data included employment, working with students, fulfills passion, teaching experience, school need, easy process, and new opportunity. The research team met on a weekly basis to discuss emerging codes and come to consensus on any discrepancies or uncertainties in how pieces of text should be categorized.

After all the data were coded, researchers wrote thematic memos to make sense of patterns related to these domains. Then, the researchers created coding matrices to examine any patterns in identified supports and challenges by participants' pathway to emergency licensure (i.e., traditional, out-of-state, support staff, substitute teacher, career changer) and retention plans (i.e., staying, leaving, unsure).

Findings

The majority of emergency license holders across survey, interview and focus group responses hoped to stay in the teaching profession and planned to continue to pursue their provisional or initial license. According to survey responses, 80% were planning to pursue an initial or provisional license. Of those survey respondents who were employed as teachers, 86% planned to stay teaching in Massachusetts, with the vast majority hoping to stay at their current

school. At the same time, our qualitative data highlighted that emergency license holders expressed uncertainty about whether they would be able to complete the provisional or initial licensure requirements necessary to teach in the classroom by the time their emergency license expired.

Overall, completing the licensure exam requirements and confusion over the licensure process created challenges for emergency licensure holders who hoped to stay in the profession long-term, regardless of professional pathways into teaching. These challenges seemed to be exacerbated by the lack of time that emergency license holders had to complete requirements while employed as a full-time teacher under the emergency license. Consistent with previous literature identifying pre-pandemic pull factors into the teaching profession, our findings suggest that the relational side of teaching kept them motivated and supported in pursuing traditional licensure: fulfilling a passion, working with students, and engaging with supportive educator colleagues. This suggests that on the one hand, the emergency license policy provided an immediate “pull factor” for emergency license holders by allowing them to work with students right away, confirming their passion for the profession. On the other hand, the policy postponed challenges to licensure that emergency license holders would have faced prior to it taking effect, and created unique time constraints for those gaining what they considered valuable teaching experience.

Push Factors

Participants in the expanded pool of teachers identified “roadblocks” that could push them away from the profession in the future. The majority of push factors were consistent with pre-pandemic literature, including completing licensure exam requirements, adverse working conditions, and financial challenges. Other challenges, including unclear information about the

specific steps to take to receive a provisional or initial license based on one's unique circumstances, seemed to be unique to the expanded pool of teachers within this new licensure policy landscape.

Completing Licensure Exam Requirements. The most prevalent challenge to licensure triangulated across the survey, interview, and focus group data was the requirement to take multiple MTEs to receive a provisional or initial license. Importantly, MTEL challenges were reported by participants across all pathways into the profession, and by those who had passed the MTEs and who had not yet passed the MTEs. In close-ended survey respondents, wherein participants were asked to select the barriers they faced in obtaining a provisional or initial license, the most frequent barriers selected the lack of time to complete requirements while working and/or due to personal responsibilities ($n = 520$, 60.2%), completing the MTEL exams ($n = 515$, 59.6%), and financial costs ($n = 429$, 49.7%). In open-ended survey responses, the most common challenges that participants wrote about focused on the MTEL ($n = 600$). Likewise, eleven of the 14 interview participants and all focus group conversations described how the MTEL process posed a roadblock in translating their emergency license into a provisional or initial license. This finding is perhaps not surprising, given that the majority of emergency license holders we surveyed checked not being able to pass, take, or complete the MTEL requirements as the reason why they got an emergency license. This aligns with pre-COVID research showing low first-time pass rates (Putman & Walsh, 2021b) and was corroborated by multiple interview and focus group participants who noted how not completing the MTEs led them to get the emergency license in the first place.

A deeper dive into interview and focus group data revealed the complexities of what made the MTEL requirements challenging for emergency license holders coming from different

professional pathways, and how challenges related to the MTELS, time, and costs were largely intertwined. Nuanced MTEL-related challenges that participants reported included finding adequate time and materials to study and costs. These challenges are detailed below.

Lack of Adequate Materials and Time to Study. A challenge related to completing the MTELS was the perceived lack of adequate study materials and time to study. MTEL courses were the most frequently reported helpful support received ($n = 306$, 43%) by survey respondents planning to get an emergency license. At the same time, 76% of survey respondents ($n = 792$) reported they wished they had more MTEL support.

Participants identified a range of study materials they used, including practice tests, MTEL prep books, private courses, free university courses, study websites, and YouTube videos. Often, they sought these resources out on their own. However, many participants found that these materials “did not help” them pass the test, they needed more study materials than what existed, or in some cases, were missing entirely for certain subject-area MTELS. For example, one participant lamented that they did not have access to “any study material at all except for a practice test...That’s where the struggle is.”

Those who had failed an MTEL one or more times shared that they had studied and utilized available numerous MTEL preparation materials - and felt at a loss about what else to do. One participant noted, “The thing is I’ve taken the test and I’ve practiced the practice tests. And then when you don’t pass, it’s like okay, I guess I’ll go back to the same practice tests that I did last time that didn’t seem to help me.” Another emergency license holder explained, “For me, I tried all the study material. I tried everything five times, go in, reading end to end. I took a private course that cost me \$400. I’ve been teaching since 2014 and I can teach, I just can’t prove it to the state.” These experiences show that participants were taking advantage of available

MTEL studying resources such as courses, books, and practice tests, yet did not find the quality of resources helpful. As such, a common suggestion for modifying the MTELEs included providing better preparation materials: some participants requested more practice tests, books, or interactive study guides; others recommended courses for all MTEL subjects and on MTEL test-taking strategies.

Participants also pointed to the challenges of finding time to sufficiently study for the MTELEs due to full-time jobs and family responsibilities. This challenge was a salient aspect of the additional challenges faced by emergency license holders. While traditionally-licensed prospective teachers typically take the MTELEs prior to teaching (e.g., during a preparation program), emergency licensed teachers often were studying for and taking the MTELEs while working full-time as a teacher. One emergency license holder shared, “working full-time and in school for my master’s...finding the time to study for the MTELEs, that was probably the most difficult for me.” Another participant shared,

That’s the tough part is now that I’m back into the whole full-on teaching role, I don’t get a lunch break. So, it’s not even like I have 20 or 30 minutes during the day that I can study. So, it’s really just finding the time for studying...I have two kids at home so that makes it challenging, too.”

Others reported sacrificing time on the evenings, weekends, and summer breaks studying. For example, a classroom teacher from out-of-state noted, “I had to spend weekends studying and staying up for hours trying to pass a test.” A currently-employed support staff with an emergency license stated, “I would study three hours a day for like six weeks. And it was from soups to nuts. It was anything and everything. And that’s what’s so frustrating and hard about becoming a teacher.”

Relatedly, multiple emergency license holders who had taken or were in the process of studying for MTELs perceived the test items to be disconnected from the content they were teaching or what they believed they needed to know to teach in the classroom. As an emergency license holder who had taught for 29 years shared, “I just feel like if you’re a good test taker, which I feel like I am sort of, that’s great that you can pass it. But I don’t feel like that has anything to do with being in the classroom.” An emergency license holder who held an out-of-state teaching license explained, “I don’t think it shows how much I know as a teacher. It doesn’t show the emotional support that I can give. It just shows how smart I am in doing a test.” As such, a handful of participants shared that they focused their MTEL studying on test-taking strategies rather than teaching-related content. This further illustrates how participants perceived the MTELs as not reflective of the day-to-day of teaching, but as reflective of one’s standardized test-taking skills. Participants’ description of the MTELs being “a checklist thing” or “very removed from often what is happening in the classroom” suggests that this requirement took time and resources away from what they believed would benefit classroom teaching.

Financial Costs of Exams. Numerous participants reported the financial constraints associated with preparing for and taking the MTEL also contributed to emergency license holders’ frustration with fulfilling licensure requirements. Very few emergency license holders who participated in the survey reported receiving any financial support to obtain initial or provisional licenses, including MTEL costs. Out of 864 respondents, 84% received no financial support at all, as compared to less than 8% who received MTEL vouchers, less than 4% whose districts paid for MTEL prep or the test fee, and less than 2% who received any other funds for MTEL preparation.

Qualitative data pointed to specific MTEL-related costs that participants identified as a challenge: the fee for taking the exam and costs associated with studying for the exam. As one out-of-state teacher said, “It’s expensive, they’re not an easy test to do, it’s a stressful situation and they’re hundreds of dollars...So, on top of stressing about the materials, we’re also stressing that if I don’t pass this, I’ve just wasted hundreds of dollars that I have to pay again in a month.” The challenge of test fees were particularly salient for those participants who re-took the MTELEs multiple times.

Along with test fees, emergency license holders also shared how they spent hundreds or over a thousand dollars preparing for the exam. Others found the cost of certain study resources, particularly courses, to be out of reach. As one participant reported, “I’ve looked into courses. But \$300 to \$400 a course, I mean, that is just a lot of money right now. So, I’ve just done the testing and I’ve gotten some of the books that I’ve gone through.” As a classroom teacher who had relocated from out-of-state summed up, “Taking a course doesn’t guarantee that you will pass. So, you’re investing money into something that you will just have to re-invest into.”

Difficulty Understanding Licensure Requirements. The second most common challenge emergency license holders reported about the licensure process across the qualitative data sources centered around them not having clear information about the process of getting a provisional or initial license. This was true for participants across the expanded pool of teachers, such as career changers and out-of-state license holders, and those who went through traditional Massachusetts educator preparation programs.

Participants particularly sought clarity in differentiating between license types, and the requirements needed for each. As an out-of-state teacher remarked, “It’s not a lack of information, it’s just there’s so much stuff that they throw at you that you don’t know what is

what with provisional and initial.” While approved educator preparation programs in Massachusetts vary by provider (e.g., higher education institution, alternative/practice-based licensure programs), cost, and duration⁹, many participants only equated this requirement with receiving a Master’s degree. Multiple emergency license holders specifically stated that they were unsure which license they needed a master’s degree for, and what specific kind of master’s degree was required. This itself suggests participants’ lack of clear information about the licensure process, as the technical requirement is completing an approved educator preparation program, not all of which are graduate programs within higher education institutions. A focus group participant who had a bachelor's degree in education expressed “frustration” about not knowing whether she needed another Master’s in Education or whether she could get a Master’s in the subject area she taught. She explained:

I have no idea what to do to finish my Master’s...I have heard so many different things – your Master’s doesn’t have to be what your license is in, you can get it in anything, you have five years until you have to get it...So, that is where I am. I’m working under it [the emergency license], but I don’t know how to keep it and I don’t know how to advance it.

Participants sought out information about the licensure process from a variety of sources, including the DESE website, calling DESE directly, school or district colleagues, and teacher friend networks. Yet, these various sources did not always provide clarity on the questions participants had, resulting in them not being sure they were taking the right steps towards the next license. A classroom teacher with an out-of-state license emphasized how sources of information did not account for the unique circumstances of each prospective teacher, saying, “Going to the website has general information, but I think...everybody’s situation is just a little

⁹A directory of over 75 approved educator preparation programs in Massachusetts can be found at <https://www.doe.mass.edu/edprep/directory.html>.

bit different, and they don't have those specific kinds of things on there." Others shared how not having clear information about next steps prevented them from getting further licensure to start their teaching career. As one current classroom teacher who had gone through a traditional educator preparation program explained: "I had graduated and didn't have a counselor any longer, and I tried to navigate the page myself and I just always felt lost, and I felt like I didn't have what I needed to get that license."

As such, nine emergency license holders who participated in interviews and focus groups suggested that licensure coaches be provided that would give one-on-one support to current and prospective teachers navigating the licensure process. As a support staff who ultimately left the field of education shared:

I would love a resource to speak with. Someone that is almost a guide, or a coach, or someone that you could talk to, explain your situation, and help uncover the best path forward. I feel like that would have been very helpful, especially early on when I relied on advice from principals and teachers. I felt like there were mixed messages [since] they all have different experiences...I feel like that resource, that person that could have said, "Okay. What is your goal? Here's the path that is best for you as an individual," would have been really helpful throughout the process.

This quote reflects a sentiment found across participants, that each of their unique licensure situations warranted one-on-one guidance.

Working Conditions. Separate from the actual licensure process itself, a smaller number of emergency license holders employed in schools pointed to challenges related to school working conditions that were making them second guess whether to invest in additional licensure. Since emergency license holders joined the teaching workforce during one of the most

difficult times schools have ever experienced (Kraft et al., 2021; Kwon et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2023), not surprisingly, those employed as teachers reported facing COVID-related challenges and had a heavier-than-expected workload. COVID-related challenges, brought up by seven interview participants, included switching between virtual, hybrid, and in-person instruction, adhering to COVID protocols, staffing shortages, increased workloads, and managing student behavior as youth re-adjusted to being back in school after so much time away. Workload-related challenges, brought up primarily in interviews by career changers and former support staff, included not having time built into the school day to prep, not having a prepared curriculum, and, specific to special education teachers, an “exorbitant amount” of paperwork and meetings due to increased caseloads of students with IEPs. As one example, a career changer shared that some days “you don’t get to prep”, which was a “big challenge” made worse because “there wasn’t a prepared curriculum.”

While participants themselves stated that challenging working conditions were not related to the emergency license per se, for a few, they were one reason for not continuing on the path towards more permanent licensure. Of the 44 survey respondents who planned on leaving teaching, burnout was the most frequently selected reason why, reported by 68% of respondents ($n = 30$). One special educator, who had been previously employed as a support staff at the same school, explained how as a new teacher he could not rely on his colleagues for support because they, too, were “swamped.” For this educator, the demands of the job made him unsure that he would continue teaching:

I don’t know that I can do this again. It was a really hard year... I don’t know if I have the reservoir of energy and empathy that is required to be an effective teacher. I feel exhausted right now and depleted and really frustrated, in general. That’s not the

way to be a teacher...I think teaching is something that is extraordinarily important and requires or deserves people who are willing to give of themselves in a way that I'm not sure I can do right now.

Beyond the everyday demands of the job, seven interview and focus group participants discussed the hurdle of low teacher salary compared to other professions or the low salary of substitute teachers and support staff. Three participants noted that salary was a contributing factor to them considering or actually leaving the profession. Participants experienced different salary roadblocks - whether it be not getting paid enough to support the costs of a provisional or initial license, districts not counting years of experience as a private school teacher on the salary schedule for new hires, or schools not hiring a support staff member into a full-time teaching role. For example, a former private school teacher who ultimately switched careers said, "I loved teaching, but I just could not financially survive on a single income teaching, especially when I go into public school. They're not gonna take my years of experience teaching, and they're gonna start me at that very low starting point." For these participants, while the emergency license could get them a teaching job, the job itself could not provide the compensation they considered adequate.

Perceived Relevant Experience "Not Counted". While challenges related to MTEs, unclear information, and working conditions were common across participants regardless of professional pathway, career changers, out-of-state license holders, school support staff, and private school educators participants expressed frustration that experiences and credentials that they perceived as relevant to teaching did not count towards their licensure requirements. For example, out-of-state license holders stated that they felt "insulted" that having to spend money

repeating what they felt was the same process twice. As an out-of-state focus group participant explained,

I came here as a teacher from another state with a complete license – a professional license which I had held for 16 years, and then to come here and be told, well, you can't teach here. It's just so frustrating just to have to spend the time and the money...I know how to do the job. I was doing it somewhere else, and I came with a license.

A handful of emergency licensure holders with out-of-state teaching licenses who participated in interviews and focus groups stated that they had already left the public school system because they did not want to go through the licensure process again.

Support staff and career changers shared frustrations around their experiences not counting towards specific *initial* licensure requirements. Previous support staff and private sector educators noted that their experience in education helped to support them as they transitioned to a full-time teaching job in Massachusetts, and wished that their years of experience in education were counted towards student teaching requirements. This was primarily due to the financial constraints of taking time off to student teach when working full-time. For example, a survey respondent explained:

Student teaching is also making it hard to get a license. Hours can't be done in our own classroom which is hard for the working teacher/para. We need 300 hours which would all be unpaid. As a mom, I can't student teach because I can't afford to not work.

For these participants, it felt redundant – and, in some cases, financially unviable - to participate in a practicum that mirrored their existing professional experience.

Based on the relevant work experiences that participants had prior to receiving their emergency license, five support staff and substitute teachers suggested counting their classroom experience to replace student teaching. As one former support staff summarized:

My biggest takeaway from the licensure process is making it easier for alternative experienced people that they have demonstrated in the classroom and spent some number of years in the educational system in a different role, that that be taken into consideration... I just feel like there's very little consideration to working in a classroom as not the primary teacher, for an extended period of time, when it comes to licensure....I think that there is an opportunity to build the teaching ranks from that group, once they've demonstrated a certain amount of classroom time and ability.

Whereas emergency license holders coming from jobs in the classroom wanted their classroom experience counted, career changers expressed frustration and confusion that their graduate-level degrees that reflected content-area knowledge were not recognized in the licensure process. As one career changer asked: "Why isn't all of our professional, educational experience, our degreed experience, enough to get some sort of dispensation to be able to say, well, your degree is in this? Maybe you don't need this particular element. We'll give you some sort of credit for that." A few career changers indicated that the initial licensure requirement of completing the approved educator preparation program would be prohibitive in obtaining additional licensure. For example, one participant debated the "economics" of getting another degree late in their career. Another asserted:

If at any point in time a requirement is for me to go get some other degree or some new degree, I will not continue. I'm transitioning from a career, so if what I have, and the

experience I have, if it's a good fit, great, and if it isn't, if the public school system requires a certain degree, then I'm not going back to school or a night program.

These findings suggest that not recognizing the professional experiences of individuals seeking licensure may ultimately shrink the expanded pool of teachers, particularly when they seek requirements for an initial teaching license. It also points to another example of confusion around provisional and initial licensure requirements, indicating that emergency license holders may not have had clear information around the requirements needed for the five-year provisional license versus the longer-term initial license.

Pull Factors: A Love for Teaching and Supportive Networks

The emergency license policy provided opportunities for individuals from a range of professional backgrounds to fulfill a desire of being employed as a full-time classroom teacher without addressing the challenges they faced in completing traditional licensure requirements. These included members of the *existing pool* of teachers who were graduates from traditional educator preparation programs in Massachusetts who had not yet passed the MTELs as well as those from the *expanded pool* of out-of-state license holders needing to fulfill state-specific licensure requirements, paraprofessionals and substitutes seeking career advancement, and career changers wanting to try out teaching for the first time. Emergency license holders who were able to gain employment as a public school classroom teacher with their license appreciated how “easy” a process it was to fulfill their passion for teaching and working with students.¹⁰ Further, they described ways in which collegial support and prior experiences in the classroom helped to create a positive work experience, and supported them in pursuing additional licensure.

¹⁰ Among individuals who obtained an emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021, 51% were employed as public-school teachers in Massachusetts by the beginning of the 2021-22 school year. This is similar to the hiring rate for individuals earning a provisional license (52% hired) or initial license (62% hired) during the same period (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023)

Fulfilling a Passion for Teaching. In open-ended survey responses, interviews, and focus groups, having the employment opportunities, working with students, and fulfilling a passion were the most frequently mentioned successes of the emergency license experience, reflective of prior research on the psychological rewards of teaching keeping teachers in the profession (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Phrases such as “I love teaching” and “I love what I do” frequently came up across employed participants as they described their job as a classroom teacher. As one emergency license holder said, while teaching special education “I just fell in love. I absolutely fell head over heels.” Others employed as teachers described the joy they felt working with students and seeing them progress. For example, one said, “I get so happy when I have a kid and he’s so excited when I taught him how to do division...he knows how to divide like no other now. This is what I like. That’s what’s fueling me.” Other teachers shared how much they enjoyed forming relationships with students over shared interests and cultures. One teacher talked about working with other Latine students saying, “I liked teaching them stuff in a way they didn’t think of before, and they have someone that looks like them, if that makes sense, because I’ve noticed that there is not a lot of my culture in education.” Another participant stated, “This was the best year of my professional experience. I’ve learned so much about myself and servicing the community. I love the team approach and all of the factors that relate to teaching and managing students. I would love to have an extension with my current license and status until able to pass the MTEL.” These stories show that emergency licensure provided a pathway into the profession for people who expressed a passion for teaching that was then fostered when in a classroom environment and working with students.

Furthermore, the majority of emergency license holders who participated in interviews and focus groups uplifted the importance of classroom experience in motivating them to continue

to pursue a teaching license, expressing that having “hands-on time in the classroom” is an “invaluable” component of the licensure process to pull people into the profession. These participants, particularly those in the expanded pool of teachers, explained how classroom experience can confirm whether teaching is a career one wants to pursue and can provide ongoing learning opportunities to improve and feel self-efficacious in their teaching craft. As one teacher who began her career as a support staff shared:

There [are] people that go to college, they know they want to go into education, they probably do great in their classes, and then they get into a classroom and it’s not exactly everything that you read in a book. There’s so much more to it and I feel I had the unusual experience of getting that information first and then going through the opposite way. So, I think time in a classroom is the most valuable thing.

Supportive Colleagues and Teacher Networks. Participants across surveys, interviews, and focus groups highlighted the benefits of having supportive colleagues guide them through their first years as teachers and through the subsequent licensure process. Survey responses, interviews and focus groups illustrated how support from other educators included informal support networks of educators and formal mentors through their school districts, along with supports outside of the district such as educator preparation programs and teacher friends.

Informal collegial support. The majority of emergency license holders employed as teachers not only found colleagues to be instrumental in preparing them to work with students and helping to foster a positive view of the teaching profession. They also praised colleagues – including supervisors, fellow teachers, and union representatives – for helping prepare them for the next level of licensure. For example, one participant said that she appreciated talking with a colleague through the licensure process:

To look at the DESE website and all the information, although it's valuable, I find it's easier to sit and talk [with colleagues]. I spent some time with our director the other day. She really wants to keep me, so she really wants to make sure I do my part. And having her there, having other teachers that have gone through the process, I find that to be the most helpful.

When asked about who supported her in understanding licensure, one teacher, a former support staff, said, "I would say teachers at my school. A couple of people I found who gave me long explanations or big write-up documents explaining everything. Took the time to sit down and kind of break down how everything works." Collegial licensure support extended to preparing for the MTELS. For example, a career-changer working as a math teacher shared how an English teacher at her school was helping her prepare for the Communications and Literacy MTEL over their lunch break.

Flow of information through informal networks, rather than a centralized source, could be traced back to how they first heard about the emergency license to begin with: through informal networks of teacher friends, teacher family members, or someone at their school, rather than through a centralized source. Seven emergency license holders shared they did not know the license existed until the interview process, while four others shared that they heard about it through teacher friends or co-workers. Collectively, these findings suggest that these networks, both within the participants' schools and the greater education profession, have helped participants prepare for teacher licensure.

Formal mentors. In addition to informal support networks, multiple participants across surveys, interviews, and focus groups shared that they received support from a mentor in their school or district. 73% of survey respondents currently teaching reported that they were assigned

mentors, and roughly two-thirds of those respondents reported that mentor as being “helpful” or “very helpful” helping them navigate their first year teaching. However, only 37% of survey respondents reported that formal mentors were helpful in the licensure process. Only one interview or focus group participant, a support staff pursuing licensure in special education, described having a formal mentor to help with licensure. Her mentor helped her complete a structured guidance and support portfolio for the provisional license, which she found “really helpful.” However, this participant went on to explain that beyond the “huge help” on the structured guidance support binder, “I’ve just done everything on my own. I just figured it out and made it work.” These findings suggest that, while mentors helped some participants, the quality of the mentor and level of engagement may have played a role in whether emergency license holders felt supported by them.

Educator preparation programs. A small proportion of participants felt supported by their undergraduate or graduate educator preparation programs when it came to understanding the licensure process, identified by about a quarter of survey respondents. This was further discussed in four of the focus groups and in two interviews. A current support staff planning to student teach to get her initial license shared:

I ended up getting my information from [UNIVERSITY] and they were extremely clear. I'm so lucky we have someone who's a licensing coordinator, who actually gave me the steps saying this is what I would do first, this is what I would do second, this is what I would do third.

Another participant who had received his provisional license and was working towards his initial license at the time the study was conducted expressed similar gratitude to his post-graduate program for providing licensure information that clarified the information on the DESE website.

These participants' experiences show that communicating with people within their educator preparation programs served as a helpful resource for navigating the licensure process. This finding, coupled with participants' perceptions of colleagues as being important licensure supports, highlights the importance of interpersonal connections in getting emergency license holders the information they need to successfully transition to more permanent licensure that would allow them to stay in the teacher workforce.

Discussion

Understanding the experiences of emergency license holders in Massachusetts during the COVID-19 pandemic provided insights into 1) the ongoing challenges that this group will need to overcome in obtaining the licenses needed to continue teaching long term in Massachusetts public schools and 2) the factors driving this expanded pool of teachers to pursue additional licensure. Collectively, our findings suggest that the emergency teaching license opened multiple doors into teaching for those who are passionate about working with students within and outside of the education field. Yet, as the emergency license policy sunsets with the end of the pandemic public health emergency, individuals who wish to remain in the profession ultimately must overcome the barriers that prevented them from becoming eligible to teach prior to the pandemic (e.g., pass all licensure exams). In other words, the temporary nature of emergency licenses delayed – but did not remove – these professional barriers.

Our findings also point to new challenges that this expanded pool of teachers has faced in the wake of pandemic-induced licensure policies. These challenges include a lack of time to study for and take licensure exams as a novice classroom teacher, unclear information about specific steps needed to obtain the required license to continue teaching in the K-12 classroom, and additional perceived constraints from the inability to apply prior experience or previously

attained credentials towards traditional license requirements. First, whereas some emergency license holders had previously struggled with passing the MTEs and may continue to benefit from financial resources for additional test preparation courses or fees to retake MTEs, other individuals in the expanded pool may simply need dedicated time that is carved out for preparing for and actually taking the exam amid a full-time teaching schedule.

Second, accessing clear information on the licensure process may be a more prominent barrier for emergency license holders for a few reasons. The process for renewing license extension has been in constant motion due to the unpredicted ongoing duration of the pandemic. For instance, the emergency license has been renewed with each extension of the public health emergency, which created confusion regarding the time by which emergency license holders would need to ultimately convert to a traditional license. Further, the expanded pool of teachers included more teachers from out-of-state and from fields outside of education, who had less access to teacher networks (e.g., through educator preparation programs) that would have otherwise supported them with information about the licensure process.

Likewise, expanding the pool of teachers also expanded the professional experiences that these individuals brought with them, which generated more variation in the specific hurdles these individuals faced. For example, experienced teachers from out-of-state (e.g., already completed similar licensure requirements) faced different challenges compared to paraprofessionals (e.g., did not have financial or time flexibility to student teach) and career changers (e.g., unable or unwilling to invest in a second graduate degree or similar program). This suggests that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution in making licensure requirements more desirable or attainable to complete.

Our findings also provide important insights into the types of supports that might help the expanded pool of educators motivated to stay in the profession ultimately convert emergency licenses into more permanent teaching licenses, such as the provision of resources (e.g., time, finances, preparation materials) to help emergency license holders successfully complete licensure exam requirements and personalized guidance on the licensure process itself. Importantly, MADESE already provides MTEL supports that target specific challenges that participants reported. For example, individuals can apply for an MTEL voucher to cover the cost of exams, and the MTEL Flex program allows teacher candidates to take an alternate assessment if they do not pass the test within one standard error of measurement of the passing score. However, the fact that participants did not seem to be aware of or utilize these supports points to another common challenge that license-seekers faced: uncertainty about the licensure process itself. Teacher licensure is not a straightforward process: requirements vary based on the specific grade level or subject area license and there are multiple license steps each with their own requirements. This study highlights the need for improved information sharing that emergency license holders receive around the licensure process and available supports.

Policy Implications

While Massachusetts instituted its emergency license policy as a response to COVID-19, our findings have implications beyond the use of emergency licenses for COVID-related purposes. Prior to the pandemic, emergency or temporary licensure programs have existed that provide teaching licenses with few requirements attached to people working towards professional licensure. Findings from this study corroborate prior literature which suggests that many emergency license holders are planning on or actively working towards obtaining more permanent licensure (Darling-Hammond et al., 2011; Wilkerson, 2021), and point to ways that

state education agencies, local education agencies, and educator preparation programs can support emergency license holders in order to maintain a robust educator workforce when emergency license policies expire.

State Policy. State policies that provide targeted flexibility and supports around licensure could encourage more people from different backgrounds excited about becoming an educator to enter and remain in the profession. First, to widen pathways into the profession while maintaining quality control, one area to target policy would be differentiated flexibility and supports around licensure exams. For the majority of participants interviewed in the expanded pool of teachers, completing the MTEL requirement was a key reason why these individuals had not yet obtained a provisional license, with time scarcity being an additional challenge for individuals in the expanded pool of teachers who struggled to find time for exam preparation while simultaneously being employed full-time as a novice teacher with an emergency license. Therefore, state education agencies might consider differentiating exam requirements based on one's prior experience or subject area. This could include alternatives that Massachusetts began piloting even before the pandemic, such as expanding upon programs such as MTEL Flex that allows test takers within one standard deviation of passing the option to write an essay rather than retake the whole test, allowing candidates to use licensure exams from other states, or requesting an attestation of subject matter knowledge from an educator preparation program. Other suggestions for alternative MTEL requirements that participants in this study voiced - particularly pertaining to emergency license holders currently employed as a classroom teacher - included observations, recommendations from principals or supervisors, and teacher evaluations. One emergency license holder summarized the need for alternatives in this way:

We know that best practice is to differentiate for our kids...And I feel like it's not being done for us...Instead of a set test, we should be able to explain our knowledge content a different way... There just needs to be more paths for teachers to get from Point A to Point B instead of their very rigid straight line.

Given the stress, money, and time some participants experienced retaking the test multiple times, states might also consider capping the number of times one can take a licensure exam and provide an alternative mechanism to assess one's ability to be a classroom teacher.

In the absence of or in addition to providing alternative exam requirements, state education agencies might also consider increasing exam preparation support. MADESE, for example, provides a variety of MTEL preparation resources that participants accessed, but they also wanted more. This could include having state education agencies sponsor free preparation courses, test prep support groups, or test tutors, and provide free, and continuously updated, study materials such as practice tests and interactive study guides.

Targeted flexibility could also take the form of providing alternatives to initial licensure requirements based on a candidate's professional background and prior teaching experience. For example, this might look like paraprofessionals counting hours they have worked under a teacher to replace practicum hours, out-of-state teachers being able to transfer over equivalent licensure test scores, and career changers taking accelerated courses on lesson planning, classroom management, and pedagogy rather than paying for a full graduate degree or equivalent program.

States also might provide clear, up-to-date communications around licensure requirements. This could include making sure websites are streamlined with pertinent information about licensure options based on desired role and career stage, as well as the specific steps needed for each license, in visually easy-to-digest ways. Information might also be

organized based on pathways (e.g., a page for career changers, out-of-state license holders, paraprofessionals, etc.) to be more personalized based on each license holder's experience. State education agencies might also regularly communicate licensure information, policy changes, and supports for completing requirements directly to those that emergency license holders identified as providing the most support: including school leaders, district administrators, union representatives, and educator preparation programs. Our findings suggest that word-of-mouth may be a common mechanism through which emergency license holders received information. Therefore, it is important that administrators and colleagues regularly receive updated licensure information from state education agencies.

Local Education Agencies. School and district leaders can serve as important communication liaisons between state departments of education and emergency license holders that they employ regarding next licensure steps. Given the value the participants placed on their localized educator networks, local education agencies should consider providing individualized mentoring or coaching specific to the licensure process for those on emergency licenses. They might also provide funding or paid time off for employed emergency license holders to study for and take licensure exams, or facilitate within the district access to preparation courses or tutors.

Beyond licensure-specific support, local schools and districts might continuously cultivate workplace conditions that support novice educators. As our findings and prior research has suggested, supports such as providing high-quality mentors, creating cultures and spaces for collaboration, and keeping workloads manageable could help motivate employed emergency license holders to stay in the profession.

Educator Preparation Programs. Educator preparation programs can better support traditional teacher preparation program participants through the process by embedding licensure

exam support for those who need it into their programs to limit the number of graduates who would otherwise need to seek emergency licensure if they failed to pass the exam. Educator preparation programs could also partner directly with local districts who employ higher numbers of emergency license holders to create educator preparation programs for working teachers. The coursework of such programs could address areas where novice teachers working under an emergency license express the greatest need (e.g., lesson planning, differentiating instruction), and school employment could count as student teaching practicums with mentor teachers as supervisors. In addition, courses could meet online or on-site at the district at times that align with teachers' schedules.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Given that each state sets their own teacher licensure requirements, not all findings from this Massachusetts-focused study are transferable to each state's unique policy context. For example, some states already have licensure reciprocity with others, or use the same Praxis licensure exam. The findings of this study also might not be transferable to future points in time, as we surveyed and interviewed those who received emergency licensure within the first year and a half of the policy taking effect. While pre-COVID research has pointed to similar challenges of licensure exams (Fortner, et al., 2015; Gitomer & Latham, 2000; Memory et al., 2003; Petchauer, 2012) and working conditions (Grant et al., 2019; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2009; Simon & Johnson, 2015) as pushing people out of the teaching profession, these were unprecedented times with unpredictable school and classroom closures, hybrid teaching, and contention around health and safety protocols. As such, future studies are warranted that examine how emergency license holders experience the licensure process in other

states that similarly lifted restrictions, and even within Massachusetts as school climates continue to shift in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Furthermore, this study examines the experiences of participants going through the licensure process and teaching on an emergency license. It does not explore or measure the extent to which emergency license holders are effective at their job, or the relationship between barriers and supports that emergency license holders experienced and outcomes such as retention rates or conversion rates to more permanent licensure. These are also important areas for research that will enable policymakers to understand whether the investments they make in renewing or expanding emergency licenses, as well as the resources they provide to emergency license holders, are leading to an increased supply of high quality teachers.

Conclusion

As states seek to build and sustain robust pipelines into the teaching profession and retain those teachers in the classroom, these findings help us better understand the factors that pull prospective teachers from diverse backgrounds into the profession and the barriers that may push them away. While more efficacy research is needed in these areas, creating a more relational, personalized licensure process— for example, differentiating requirements based on one’s professional experience or providing licensure mentors that can walk prospective teachers through the process – may broaden access into the teaching profession.

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Tables

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of *Emergency License Holders* and *Survey Respondents*

	Emergency License Holders	Survey Respondents
African American or Black	0.08	0.08
Asian or Pacific Islander	0.02	0.03
Hispanic/Latinx	0.12	0.11
White	0.50	0.53
Other race/ethnicity	0.02	0.03
Missing race/ethnicity	0.26	0.22
Female	0.62	0.65
Male	0.19	0.14
Gender non-conforming		0.01
Missing Gender	0.19	0.20
n	5,851	1,425

Notes: Other race/ethnicity includes American Indian and multiracial categories. Column 1 includes all individuals who obtained an emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021. Column 2 includes all individuals who responded to the survey.

Table 1. *Interview and Focus Group Participants*

Participant Characteristic	Total (n=45)	Focus Groups (n=31)	Interviews (n=14)
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	33	23	10
Male	11	7	4
Unknown	1	1	n/a
<i>Race</i>			
White	30	22	8
Black	3	1	2
AAPI	3	1	2
Latinx	2	1	1
Mixed Race	2	1	1
Unknown	5	5	n/a
<i>Pathway*</i>			
Traditional	8	6	2
Career Changer	11	8	3
Out of State	12	9	3
Support Staff	9	3	6
Substitute	4	4	n/a
Unknown	1	1	n/a
<i>Retention Plans</i>			
Staying in Teaching	22	13	9
Unsure	8	5	3
Left/Leaving	4	3	1
<i>Teaching</i>			
Continuing	5	4	1
Pursuing Teaching			
Teaching in Private School	3	3	n/a
Other**	3	3	n/a

*Tabulated as their last pathway, regardless of if they came from multiple pathways

** Includes retiring/adult education/substituting

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