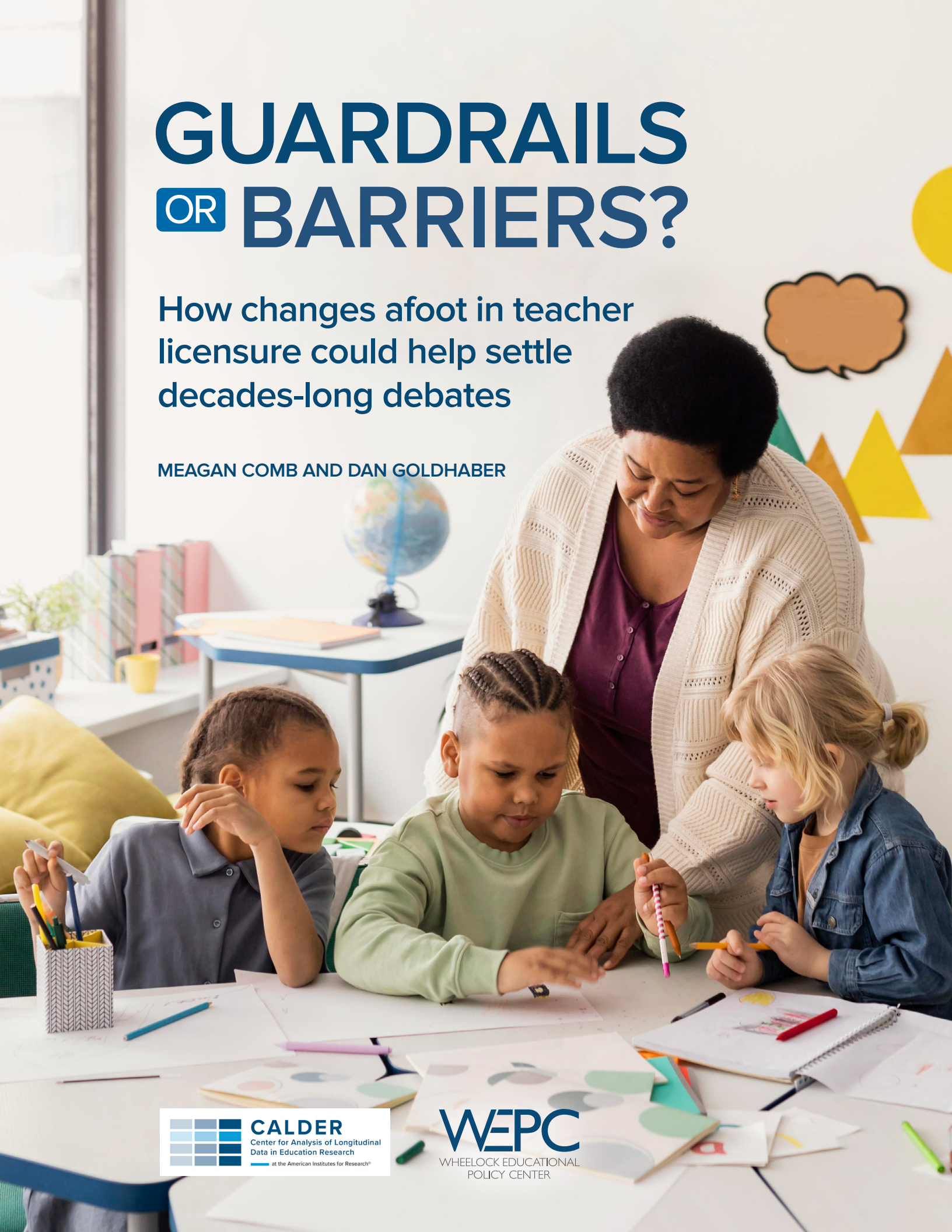


GUARDRAILS OR BARRIERS?

How changes afoot in teacher licensure could help settle decades-long debates

MEAGAN COMB AND DAN GOLDHABER



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Change is afoot with teacher licensure. In almost every state we know of, there is a conversation happening about the requirements that determine who can become a teacher. But not all states are moving in the same direction.

In some states, we've seen new and increased expectations, particularly around the knowledge needed to teach early reading. In other states, staffing shortages and a push to diversify the teaching profession have led policymakers to reconsider the role of licensure exams (Cohen, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic also induced a flurry of activity around teacher licensure. Only three states (Florida, Montana, and Washington, DC) maintained normal requirements during the 2020–2021 school year; every other state relaxed long-standing requirements that have governed entry into the profession for decades.¹

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The shifting sands of teacher licensure offer a good opportunity to revisit old debates about the efficacy of licensure requirements and highlight a significant problem: the current state of research on teacher licensure leaves policymakers without clear and convincing evidence to inform decisions about licensure policies. We don't make this statement lightly—Dan has been researching teacher licensure policies for the last two decades, and Meagan has sat in the decision-making seat as a former state education official overseeing teacher quality policies.

The current state of research on teacher licensure leaves policymakers without clear and convincing evidence to inform decisions about licensure policies.

The lack of clear direction is not for lack of effort; there are certainly studies that contribute important insights on teacher licensure policy, and many are regularly cited by education leaders as justification for their decisions. However, this research base is far from straightforward and tends to be narrow in focus. In fact, on several occasions, we've each seen the same study cited as rationale on either side of a debate.

The premise of licensure requirements—that they apply uniformly and rigidly across the workforce without much variation—has constrained opportunities for experimentation and rigorous empirical analysis, despite robust data sets that could support meaningful studies. We argue that the nature and scale of changes adopted in the last few years, and those currently under consideration, have opened a window of opportunity to learn much more than we have before about what constitutes effective licensure requirements.

Together, we are trying to organize the research side of this conversation and hope to have our policymaking colleagues seize this moment with us. In this brief, we seek to summarize some of what we know from the literature and highlight related policy considerations. Most importantly, we hope to make the case that bolstering the licensure research base would allow policymakers to make well-informed decisions around the levers of change for better supporting student experiences and outcomes.

Seizing the moment is key: the policy debates about licensure today look very similar to those more than 20 years ago. We don't want to have the same arguments 20 years from now. There is a chance to use the momentum and change underway nationwide to really understand the ways that state licensure can shape the quality and diversity of the teacher workforce and ultimately impact students. Let's take it.

We argue that the nature and scale of changes adopted in the last few years, and those currently under consideration, have opened a window of opportunity to learn much more than we have before about what constitutes effective licensure requirements.

Teacher Licensure as a State Policy Lever: A Persistent Debate

States exert immense power over the teacher labor market through licensure policy. Indeed, licensure is arguably the most direct policy lever available to state leaders for influencing teacher quality.² As a basic premise, licensure serves as the profession's initial gatekeeper, ensuring that individuals meet basic competency standards before taking on classroom responsibilities.

Given the importance of teacher quality in influencing student outcomes, it makes sense that states would prioritize setting entry requirements. But it is important to make clear that the role of the state as the arbiter of quality and prospective talent is an inherent tension point in discussions around licensure. Moreover, *this is not a new debate*. More than 20 years ago, there was vigorous back-and-forth about licensure and arguments about whether it made sense for the state to play a primary role in determining teacher employment eligibility or if, instead, it would be better to leave more of this decision-making to localities.³

Teacher Licensure and Parallels to Other Professions

Despite parallels that are often drawn between other professions (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.) and teaching, the teaching workforce is unique in ways that make it hard to compare with other professions. Here are a few reasons we'd caution against these comparisons:

- **We need a lot of teachers.** Teaching is one of the largest occupations in the U.S., employing roughly 3.8 million individuals (NCES, 2023; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This means that *any* effort to impose requirements on entry is going to naturally restrict the supply available to meet the demand for teachers.
- Indeed, broader research on occupational licensure in other professions suggests it *does restrict supply*, but many of these studies center blue-collar, trade-oriented positions (e.g., hairdressers) that are often not associated with serving or **working with vulnerable populations** (Kleiner & Krueger, 2013).
- Finally, comparisons to the legal or medical professions are problematic given differences in **salary and status**. Law and medicine are high-paying, high-prestige occupations. As a result, prospective lawyers or doctors may be more willing to tolerate rigorous and/or onerous entry requirements, whereas prospective teachers may prefer other career paths that offer similar or better compensation without strict prerequisites.

The Case for Collective Sensemaking

Part of the genesis for our collaboration and this issue brief was Meagan's personal frustration with the lack of consensus in the field as she stepped out of her former policymaking role and began advising states on changes to licensure policy. Wrestling with the various studies herself, she called Dan for help interpreting and understanding the nuances of each of the analyses and the implications of not just one study, but of the intersecting takeaways across multiple studies. Together, we waded through the mess and ultimately felt compelled to write this piece. Here is a good example of why this collective sense-making between policymakers and researchers is especially important right now.

We know of three recently released research studies that look at the extent to which the waiving or removing of licensure requirements during the pandemic impacted the supply, diversity, and quality of the workforce. These include:

- [The Relationship Between Pandemic-Era Teacher Licensure Waivers and Teacher Demographics, Retention, and Effectiveness in New Jersey](#) (CALDER, June 2023)
- [Teacher Licensure and Workforce Quality: Insights from COVID-Era Emergency Licenses in Massachusetts](#) (WEPC, December 2023)
- [Four Years of Pandemic-Era Emergency Licenses: Retention and Effectiveness of Emergency-Licensed Massachusetts Teachers Over Time](#) (CALDER, April 2024)

In our current approach to research and policymaking, research teams release their own studies, with their own sets of caveats, conclusions, recommendations, and policy implications—all on their own timeline. Policymakers might read one, two, or more of these studies. Then, they are left on their own to decide what this evidence means for their state. If they only read one study, they are left with an incomplete picture. If they read multiple studies, they may gravitate toward one that resonates most with their context, while not accounting for important caveats or considerations from the others. We've seen this type of distortion happen with media coverage, which often highlights one or two noteworthy data points without reflecting the researchers' more nuanced claims about the evidence and its limitations.

However, if we commit to working together toward collective sense making around a new research agenda, we could be much clearer about things like:

- What differences in state context or policy might be driving the different outcomes we find (e.g., do the states use different tests or the same set of tests)?
- What are the relative magnitudes of these different patterns (e.g., how many additional teachers do these effects represent)?
- What context-specific, nuanced policy implications do states other than those participating in the study think are crucial? More on how we propose to change this current dynamic is included in the Next Steps section of this brief.

The Shifting Licensure Landscape and the Learning Opportunity

The debates over teacher licensure are often oversimplified. You are either for or against it. Licensure requirements are either important quality checks or unnecessary barriers. The reality is much more complex, as the specific designs of licensure systems are likely to matter a great deal. If we want the conversation to be different and more productive moving forward, it is imperative that we study licensure carefully. In the remainder of this brief, we outline some of the key issues surrounding licensure debates for which there are varying amounts of evidence. In doing so, we hope to catalyze a national research agenda focused on these core issues.

Before diving in, we want to note three important things:⁴

1. **Licensure is about more than just tests.** There is more to “licensure policy” than the licensure tests. While licensure tests tend to garner the most attention (and research), almost all states have a complex set of requirements that determine what license you are eligible for and what you need to do to get it. Sometimes navigating these requirements is a challenge in and of itself.
2. **Varying perspectives on teacher quality shape our understanding around licensure.** Views about licensure, evidence of existing policy, and research about what is working or not are all deeply connected and rooted in other discussions about the teacher labor market and how to measure teacher quality. For instance, some components of teacher licensure are predictive of student test scores, but test scores are certainly not the only way to understand teacher effectiveness. How much stock you place on different teacher or student measures is likely going to shape how you think about the current body of research on licensure.
3. **The relationship between state licensure requirements and local hiring decisions is a complicated one.** Licensure policy is set at the state level, but an individual’s choice of where to teach and a school/district’s choice of who to hire make understanding some of the downstream effects of state licensure rules challenging. While the state attempts to ensure an important baseline for the quality of teachers who are employed, it may also supersede the judgments of district and school administrators who hire at the local level. In short, the interplay between where policies are set (local vs. state) and how they dynamically influence choices across the workforce should be carefully considered in both practice and research endeavors.

In the remainder of this brief, we present four areas of licensure policy in the context of the outcomes policymakers are typically trying to influence. Each is central to the discussions happening today in legislatures and boards of education across the country and all warrant further study. We discuss these as separate topics of inquiry, but acknowledge that they are inextricably linked.

LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS

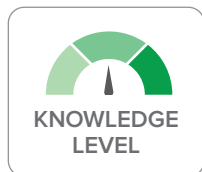
&

who pursues
a career as a
teacher

who becomes a
teacher

teacher quality

cross-state
movement



For each, we attempt to create a signal of how much rigorous research and strong empirical evidence there is to guide decision-making. As you will see, significant progress is needed to ensure that future changes and systems are built in a research-backed way.

LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS &



Who pursues a career as a teacher

One of the most important questions, and certainly a question that is central to debates over teacher licensure, is: How do licensure systems affect the pursuit of a teaching career? To be clear, here we are talking about the effects of the existence of licensure systems and requirements on individuals opting (or not) into a path toward becoming a teacher, not the effect of requirements on whether individuals who are *already on that path* are allowed to continue on that path into the teacher labor market (discussed below).

Theory would suggest that, all things being equal, licensure requirements do restrict the number of people who try to become teachers. Requirements might also change the *type* of people who pursue the profession, though the impact on their potential capabilities in the role is ambiguous.⁵ So, while we have some insight into who our in-service educators are and why they chose to enter the profession, we have a more limited perspective on whether and to what extent various licensure requirements are influencing earlier *pre-service* decisions to pursue a teaching career.

One often-made claim that demonstrates our point here is that the costs of fulfilling the licensure requirements are prohibitive and dissuade individuals from considering the profession. [There is not, in fact, rigorous, empirical evidence \(that we know of\) about the effects of the costs associated with the requirements necessary to obtain a teaching license.](#)

We could test this!

Teacher Licensure and Educator Diversity

The relationship between teacher licensure requirements and the career decisions or outcomes of prospective teachers of color is not well documented empirically. While there are likely many factors that influence the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce, one relevant consideration is the real and important disparities we observe in licensure test pass rates between white teachers and teachers of color. Gershenson et al. (2021) thoughtfully discuss the racialized history and implications of these requirements in their book *Teacher Diversity and Student Success: Why Racial Representation Matters in the Classroom*.

However, if a state's goal is to diversify the teaching profession, then changing licensure tests alone would have what is arguably limited impact on the overall demographics of the teacher workforce. Research finds that we're mostly losing potential future teachers of color much earlier in the pipeline than the licensure test stage of the process (Goldhaber & Mizrav, 2023; Rucinski, 2023).

There is evidence that some licensure requirements influence the supply of prospective teachers. Hanushek and Pace (1995), for instance, found that the probability that individuals received an education-focused bachelor's degree decreased if they were in a state requiring teachers to pass a licensure exam. Similarly, according to Chung and Zou (2023), the adoption of a relatively new licensure requirement in some states, the edTPA, served to reduce the number of individuals preparing to teach.⁶ It is worth noting, however, that there are periods of time in the last fifty years (e.g., 1980s) where both the supply of teachers *and* licensure requirements have increased simultaneously (Kraft & Lyon, 2022). While only correlational, this does seem to call into question the extent to which state requirements drive decisions to pursue a teaching career.

The evidence on this rather basic question of whether entry requirements influence teacher preparation is limited by the fact that we typically have very poor data on the early part of the teacher pipeline. In particular, as Goldhaber and Holden (2021) note, data are limited about the period between when individuals take their first definitive steps toward a career in teaching (e.g., by enrolling in a teacher preparation program) and the point in time when they are fully credentialed and eligible to teach.

The charter and private school sectors may offer a potential source of insight here, as licensure and employment requirements for these settings are typically reduced or more flexible than the ones that are in place for traditional public school teaching roles. Given this more flexible regulatory environment, understanding the motivations and incentives that influence entry into this sector of the workforce is one potential area of further research. Bruhn et al. (2022) explore licensure and employment flexibility within charter schools in Massachusetts, though this research speaks more to quality and retention than it does to an individual's decision to enter the teaching workforce.

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LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS &

Who actually becomes a teacher



By design, licensure requirements are supposed to restrict entry into the teacher workforce to those who are capable of being competent teachers. The question, then, is not *whether* they are a barrier but whether they are the *right type* of barrier. A big part of this question depends on the relationship between licensure requirements and expectations for teacher quality—we discuss this topic in the next section.

One important point to consider is the fact that licensure requirements are likely to have different impacts on different schools and systems (and hence, different student subgroups) given the marked differences in teacher labor markets (Edwards et al., 2024). [The staffing needs of schools throughout any given state, whether due to geographic variations \(e.g., urban/suburban/rural\) or the composition of the student body, are likely differentially impacted by any broadly constructed state policies.](#)

We could measure this!

The question, then, is not *whether* they are a barrier but whether they are the *right type* of barrier.

We do know that licensure requirements, particularly licensure tests, have an impact on who actually ends up in the teacher workforce.⁷ But while licensure tests are a barrier for some individuals, they screen out far fewer prospective teachers than what first-time pass rates suggest; that is because teacher candidates can and do take tests multiple times.

We also know that testing requirements have adverse impacts on the diversity of prospective teachers. Black and Hispanic teachers are far less likely to pass licensure tests (e.g., Cowan et al., 2020; Goldhaber et al., 2010; Rucinski & Goodman, 2019). Although lower pass rates among candidates of color hinder important efforts to diversify the teaching workforce, this disparity alone does not necessarily mean all licensure testing is biased or ineffective. We care about who ends up teaching, so there are legitimate questions about what requirements are appropriate and the degree to which those requirements are predictive (or differently predictive) of in-service teacher performance (Cowan et al., 2023; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010), a topic that is discussed below.

Importantly, when evaluating how licensure requirements affect teacher recruitment, licensure tests are not the only thing that matters. Graduation from an approved college or university teacher preparation program is a requirement for licensure in many states. This requirement is arguably a more significant barrier to becoming a teacher than passing licensure tests. Indeed, enrollment in preparation programs appears to have a greater impact on the diversity of the teacher pipeline than differences in test pass rates (Goldhaber & Mizrav, 2023; Rucinski & Goodman, 2019; Kilbride et al., 2023).⁸

There is limited evidence about how different types of licensure requirements compare in terms of screening out prospective teachers. But researchers have studied policies that allow people to enter



teaching through alternative “routes” or “pathways” (i.e., without having completed typical training requirements, most of which still happen in college- or university-based preparation programs [Scherer et al., 2020]).

Teach for America is a great example of an alternative pathway or program that, in many cases, allows individuals to start teaching without having satisfied typical preservice requirements. Texas is a state that has substantially increased access to the profession through alternative routes; around 50% of teachers enter through one of these nontraditional options. (Reyes et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023).

Despite high-quality research that compares the effects on students of being assigned a teacher who entered via a traditional route versus an alternative route (e.g., Glazerman et al., 2006), we should be cautious about drawing strong inferences from this literature about the value of teacher preparation more broadly (Goldhaber & Ronfeldt, 2020). This is because it is difficult to distinguish between differences in the type of training that is offered and differences in the types of people who opt into one pathway or the other. That said, the large numbers of individuals who enter teaching through alternative routes suggest that typical college- and university-based training requirements are seen by some people as a barrier to becoming a teacher.

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LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS &

Teacher quality



The teacher certification process plays a crucial role in determining teacher eligibility. However, licensure alone does not dictate who becomes a teacher. Local school systems select their staff from a pool of applicants. This makes it difficult (if not impossible) to distinguish between the way that licensure systems influence teacher quality through their impact on who pursues a teaching career versus their influence on which individuals are hired from among those deemed eligible to teach.

There is a small body of research showing that school districts can identify who will be an effective teacher based on teacher application information (e.g., Goldhaber, et al., 2017; Jacob et al., 2018). At the same time, there is also evidence that school systems often do not systematically use application information to make good hiring decisions (e.g., James et al., 2022). **No evidence that we are aware of exists about how state licensure information shapes district hiring decisions** and, in fact, in our experience, most states do not share details, such as individual applicants' licensure test scores, with schools or districts to support their hiring decisions.

We could know this!

There is also research that examines how changes to licensure requirements affect teacher quality and performance through combined effects on the supply of prospective teachers and the hiring of eligible individuals. These findings are mixed.

Angrist and Guryan (2008) examine the relationship between licensure testing requirements from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s and teacher quality as measured by the selectivity of the colleges from which teachers graduate.⁹ They find little connection between testing requirements and this measure of teacher quality and conclude that “testing has acted more as a barrier to entry than a quality screen” (p. 18). Larsen et al. (2020) look at a broader period of testing (from 1991 to 2007) and other requirements (e.g., coursework and pedagogical training) and, consistent with Angrist and Guryan, find that requirements have no discernable impact on the average quality of teachers. But they do find impacts on the *distribution* of teacher quality and, in particular, that licensure requirements raise the bottom end of the quality distribution, especially for secondary teachers.

There is more evidence on the relationship between the performance of in-service teachers on licensure tests and the achievement of their students (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2007, 2010; Cowan et al., 2023; Goldhaber, 2007; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Goldhaber et al., 2017; Hendricks, 2015; Sass, 2015).¹⁰ The strength of the relationship is mixed across studies and specific licensure tests. In some cases, the relationship between teachers' performance on licensure tests and outcomes is strong. In others, it appears nonexistent. Our read of the literature suggests that the connection between teacher test performance and student achievement is strongest for older students and in math and science.

Importantly, we caution against any claim that the evidence on the issue is definitive.



Of course, the measures we use for teacher effectiveness matter. The overwhelming majority of quantitative studies on licensure tests examine the relationship between licensure tests and student achievement on standardized tests. While test outcomes are important, they are clearly an incomplete measure of what schools and teachers contribute to student learning (Backes et al., 2023; Jackson, 2018; Kraft, 2019). However, given that most licensure tests are designed to assess the content knowledge teachers need to support student learning, it follows that we would expect to see some impact in measures of students' ability to demonstrate mastery of content knowledge on tests.

An ongoing challenge to studying these impacts has consistently been the fact that licensure policies create a statewide, uniformly applied gate to the profession, meaning we don't see the performance of people in the workforce who can't successfully complete requirements. But since the pandemic, new insights have emerged from states like New Jersey (Backes & Goldhaber, 2023) and Massachusetts (Chi et al., 2024; Backes et al., 2024), where we now have research on the effectiveness of individuals who entered the workforce under reduced or waived requirements. Studies like these are the type of research needed as licensure policies evolve. (See page 4 for more details on these studies.)

LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS &

Cross-state teacher mobility

Much of what we know about licensure systems (and licensure tests in particular) is state specific. Far less is known about how licensure systems—there are 51 different systems given the 50 states plus Washington, DC—influence important issues like cross-state teacher mobility, attrition from the profession, and the overall desirability of the teaching profession.

While there may be arguments for state-specific licensure requirements, there are also downsides. Different requirements, coupled with a lack of clarity for prospective teachers wishing to teach in a new state, create labor market frictions that inhibit cross-state teacher mobility.¹¹ The few studies that focus on this issue and use data from multiple states show this to be the case, as there are vanishingly small numbers of teachers who are licensed and work as teachers in one state that show up in the public teacher workforce in another (Podgursky et al., 2016; Goldhaber et al., 2015; Johnson & Kleiner, 2020).

Although easing cross-state mobility seems like a promising strategy, some states have been reluctant to pursue this approach due to concerns of losing some control over teacher quality standards or losing out on teachers who they are currently able to keep in the state. Still, there is an active effort underway by a group of states—largely at the behest of their governors—to address the issue through the Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact.¹² Although this initiative represents the most significant attempt to address this potential source of teacher supply, it has encountered numerous obstacles and delays.



The Downsides of State-Specific Teacher Licensure

Barriers to teacher mobility that result from state-specific requirements should be a concern for at least three reasons:¹³

- One would hope to see teachers flow to where jobs exist, easing immediate labor shortage concerns.
- When teachers make residential moves across state borders, we hope they are not lost to the teacher labor market because of onerous (or the perception of onerous) requirements to obtain a license in their new state.
- The limited portability of teaching credentials across states reduces their value, potentially discouraging individuals from pursuing careers in education.

We do not fully understand the impact of this lack of portability on mobility or on how many teachers drop out of the profession when they move to a new state.

We could know this!

Next Steps

We believe that there are too many gaps and unknowns to make strong empirically based recommendations to states seeking to craft effective licensure policies. This is a troubling state of affairs given that, as we noted earlier, current debates about this topic look very similar to those from a quarter century ago. But it does not have to be this way. We see ample opportunity for analysis and experimentation, even with the existing constraints of states' current statutory and regulatory frameworks. This will take resources and intentionality in the long term. In the short term, we propose the following.



FOR RESEARCHERS

We are working to create a more coordinated and connected network of the scholars and practitioners who are working on licensure policy efforts. For us, this includes a call to working differently as an academic community by:

1. **Sharing work in progress and early insights across academic institutions and organizations that are often siloed and somewhat secretive in nature**

In the world of academia, your publication record is your currency. It is the basis for almost all recognition, promotion, opportunity, and access. To be successful as a scholar, you must publish well (meaning often and in highly regarded journals). But to achieve that, you must present something novel in the field. It makes a difference, then, if you are the first one to say something. This creates an inherent tension in academic circles that results in people being cautious about disclosing what they are working on and about the right time to share. For state policymakers, who operate on a much more dynamic timeline, this can mean missed insights. It also means that different teams of researchers who are asking similar questions but not talking openly about their work are missing out on opportunities to learn from one another. This poses challenges for policymakers hoping to use the latest research and make sense of various findings. In short, the academic community's current norms and incentives often hinder collaborative research. Given the significant activity and opportunities surrounding licensure reform, scholars working in this area are uniquely positioned to try a more collaborative approach. We aim to work with colleagues to support that kind of paradigm shift.

2. Engaging in proactive sense-making with individual state partners and their national counterparts and producing communications and tools that share takeaways

Many researchers with ongoing work in this area are collaborating with their colleagues in state education agencies. What happens on a more limited and haphazard basis is the commitment to talking with and alongside policymakers outside of a specific research study. For instance, it could be that findings from Tennessee are only ever relevant to Tennessee. Alternatively, findings from Tennessee might influence decision-making in another state, but in an incomplete and distorted way. This approach leaves policymakers to navigate evidence about teacher licensure without clear, transparent guidance from the people with expertise in how the methods or analyses could apply in other contexts. Currently, there is no coordinated, sustained effort to help policymakers think about the results of one study relative to others, including ones with potentially conflicting takeaways. We need such an effort.

We could fix this through a meaningful shift in scholarly orientation. For most researchers, writing about their work involves summarizing prior literature that may include similar studies from other contexts, as well as identifying how their research fills gaps in what is currently known about a topic. Researchers also frequently discuss the potential policy implications of their findings. What rarely happens, however, is real-time synthesis of all the available evidence that could guide policymakers in their decision-making. Furthermore, policymakers are often missing from the conversation altogether. Including their voices in the conversation will go a long way toward ensuring that research remains relevant, specific, and realistic under various state contexts and conditions.

3. Committing to an “if I were in your shoes” dialogue with policy partners

It is critical that researchers remain objective in their research, but they also have valuable contributions to make in conversations about what the evidence and research around a particular change might suggest. Many researchers often provide such insights and suggestions informally to their trusted counterparts. Meagan and Dan had one such relationship while Meagan was in her decision-making seat in Massachusetts. Those conversations were incredibly influential in informing many of the licensure changes that continue to be studied in the state today. The challenge with this dynamic, however, is that it is not accessible for other states or leaders who do not have these existing relationships with trusted research partners. This brief is one example of what could happen if we engage in more public dialogue about what the evidence supports and where we might fill in the gaps.

To do this, though, researchers will also need to invest in understanding the political realities and constraints of what is possible and feasible in a given context. Often “policy implication” sections of research articles suggest seemingly logical action or next steps for systems changes, but many of these ideas are impossible to enact. By engaging in more frequent and open dialogue with policy partners, and committing to a slightly different mindset, we can push the policy and research agenda forward faster.



FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

Following our own recommendation, we recognize in writing this policy brief that we have left you without some of the specific actions you might have been hoping for at the outset. So, if we were in your shoes, at this moment in time, with the information currently available, here's what we'd be thinking about first:

1. An openness to changing the status quo

Licensure requirements have become a deeply entrenched part of our system. They are ubiquitous and have entire industries (e.g., testing, preparation, etc.) built around them. Thinking differently about them can be hard and fraught with tension. Even acknowledging that aspects of the system may be particularly problematic without having a solid alternative in place or without knowing what might happen as a result of change can be overwhelming. This is just one of the reasons why we think better research could be beneficial. While we are not necessarily suggesting any specific bold change, it is our hope that states will invest in a strategic investigation of the existing system and then pilot or test changes in a thorough, intentional way.

States might consider assessing the alignment between what they are asking and requiring on entry into the teacher workforce and the later outcomes they expect teachers to deliver for students. If you have subject-matter tests in place for teachers that research suggests do not yield differences in student learning according to standardized assessments in those same subjects, then you should probably revisit those tools. It's not to say that testing is the problem, but rather that that specific test may not be achieving your goal. Similarly, if there are other aspects of early-career teaching that schools and families value, it is worth asking to what extent they are reflected in your entry requirements.

2. Thinking in a differentiated way about requirements

Licensure requirements are often built to operate consistently and efficiently at scale within the state. Carving out exemptions or tailored pathways is not often a default position. However, it should be. Across the available studies, one constant is that there are usually statistically significant differences in how licensure tests affect teacher quality and student outcomes by subject area and grade level. This is especially true for areas where there are acute and persistent shortages, like special education and the STEM fields.

Emerging evidence from pandemic-era studies suggests that exploring a differentiated requirement set or timeline for individuals entering the workforce with previous experience in classroom settings (e.g., paraprofessionals) may open important new avenues to the workforce. Here, too, it is worth noting that not all licensure tests are created equal. Although they are often discussed as though they are a monolith, evidence suggests that some tests, particularly in the STEM and secondary fields, may be more predictive than others, and that even specific types of items are more informative about future effectiveness than others.

3. View licensure within the full continuum of preparation, hiring, development, and retention

These systems are connected, but we often see change made without much attention to the interplay between and across them. For instance, to solve some of the challenges facing the teacher workforce (e.g., shortages), the instinct is usually to remove or reduce licensure requirements. This may be fine if preparation and development requirements compensate on the other side. Otherwise, it might create a whole new set of problems around the quality of instruction or support to students. Similarly, it may be reasonable to reduce state oversight of or involvement in licensure if there is strong local accountability on results, but without that balance or intentionality, moves in this area may undermine overall efforts to improve student experience and outcomes.

Approaching policymaking in this way also invites state leaders to revisit foundational beliefs about the role of licensure. Are licensure requirements designed to set a floor? Establish a high bar? The answers to these questions could lead you to inherently different decisions, each with their associated trade-offs. For instance, Goldhaber (2011) theorizes that by raising the threshold around licensure requirements, you could improve the bottom of the distribution but also lower the overall average level of teacher effectiveness. Is that the desired outcome? How you answer this question should influence the related policies you put in place in other parts of the human capital continuum. For instance, if a state chooses to focus licensure requirements on establishing basic safety and a minimal set of requirements, it might create additional accountabilities in local districts for screening and supporting new hires.

4. Commit to study and evaluate policies and the changes being made

We should make changes to licensure systems with intentionality, in both policy and research design. Research can certainly be done after a policy has been implemented and outcomes are available, and that would certainly add value. But we hope to engage the policy research community around these issues earlier at the policy ideation and drafting phase. In this way, there can be a joint discussion about how evidence would be generated and the data necessary to support research. We believe this approach will provide stronger, more meaningful conclusions about the effects of a change or pilot effort than after-the-fact retrospectives.

Relatedly, while many states have worked to build out their longitudinal data systems in the last decade, these systems often do not prioritize the early phases of the teacher pipeline. For instance, in many cases, state licensure platforms are built primarily for processing applications and renewals, without much thought to other data that could be collected or connected. We know the challenge of adding even one new data element to these systems. But with meaningful, strategic enhancements, states could develop a much stronger picture of who is preparing or considering teaching than they have now.

Aligned with this last point, we see the greatest opportunity for building a more robust evidence base if the research community along with investments from the federal government are strategically employed to provide states with the infrastructure and opportunity to engage in context-specific research.

Together, we believe these actions would advance a national research agenda on teacher licensure policy that provides better and more relevant guidance to state leaders.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For more detail on the experimentation in teacher licensure and preparation that was brought on by the pandemic, see DeArmond et al. (2023).
- 2 Licensure is somewhat unique among teacher policies within a state’s toolbox as it is generally overseen and implemented entirely by the state. Other workforce influence mechanisms like preparation, compensation, hiring, evaluation, or professional development—though governed by state law and regulations—are all still highly localized and dependent on efforts at the district or school levels.
- 3 See Ballou and Podgursky (2000) for more insight into this debate.
- 4 Additional Note: **For now, we are focusing on initial teacher entry requirements.** In most states, licensure requirements also pertain to teachers staying in the profession and other educators working in districts and schools. This brief is exclusively focused on the entry-setting requirements states put in place for teachers.
- 5 For more information about the theory behind teacher licensure, see Goldhaber (2011) or Larsen et al. (2020).
- 6 Of course, in-service policies (compensation, tenure, etc.) may also influence the pursuit of a teaching career. Kraft et al. (2020), for instance, find that high-stakes evaluation reforms reduced the supply of new teachers.
- 7 Note that this is distinct from the previous section on the supply of prospective teachers, as it involves not only the choices of individuals pursuing a teaching career but also the decisions that districts make about who to hire.
- 8 These studies find that the early teacher pipeline from high school to the point of taking licensure tests becomes less diverse at most junctures in the path toward becoming a teacher.
- 9 Their measures of selectivity are the average SAT score of incoming freshmen and the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.
- 10 A positive relationship between licensure test performance and student achievement is a critical connection in the theory of action linking licensure systems (using testing) to better student outcomes (Goldhaber, 2015).
- 11 There is some evidence that licensure-related labor market frictions have negative effects on student achievement in school districts on state boundaries (Kim et al., 2017).
- 12 More information about this initiative can be found here: www.nasdtec.net/page/Teacher_Mobility_Interstate_Compact
- 13 Note that licensure is only one source of state-border teacher labor market frictions. Teachers can also take a hit on their pension wealth when they cross state lines and, in some cases, can lose tenure protections. For more discussion on these issues, see Goldhaber, Grout, & Holden (2017).

