

## Seven states hike standards for teacher prep programs, licenses

By Stephanie Simon

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Seven states are announcing ambitious efforts to raise the quality of their teachers by making it tougher to get into teacher training programs — and tougher to get a license after graduating.

Among the steps they're contemplating: Restricting admission to teacher prep programs to students in the top half of their high school class or those with GPAs of at least 3.0, challenging aspiring educators with rigorous exams in the subjects they will be teaching and requiring them to demonstrate their ability to instruct diverse groups of students before granting them licenses.

"As we raise the bar for our students in the Common Core era, we need to raise the bar for our educators," Connecticut Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor said.

Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Washington joined Connecticut in Wednesday's announcement at the state capitol in Hartford. Their efforts, designed as two-year projects, are supported with grants from the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#) and technical advice from more than a dozen organizations, such as the National Council on Teacher Quality.

"This is a big deal," said Dennis Van Roekel, president of the National Education Association, which helped develop the initiative.

Too often, he said, reform efforts focus on developing complex formulas to identify and oust the worst teachers in a given district, rather than working to ensure that all educators are equipped to do well from the start. "They should be profession-ready on day one," Van Roekel said.

It's hard to argue with that goal.

The initiative has been met with some skepticism, however.

Bruce Baker, a professor in the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, said it made little sense to raise admissions standards without also raising teacher pay — not just starting pay, but expected earnings throughout a long career in education. "That's what's going to change the nature of the people willing to enter the profession," Baker said.

Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, agreed: Right now, he said, "teaching is not a profession, it's a blue-collar occupation" because there's no real career ladder and most teachers end their careers doing pretty much the same job they signed on for when they entered the field. "If you don't make teaching more attractive as a profession, you don't get the kids who could otherwise be doctors, lawyers and so forth," Tucker said.

Some participating states are addressing that concern. Kentucky hopes to land foundation grants to raise starting salaries in select school districts from roughly \$30,000 to more than \$45,000 a year, Education Commissioner Terry Holliday said.

Other states, however, aren't making that a priority. In Connecticut, Commissioner Pryor said he hoped making teacher training programs more selective would raise the profession's prestige and thus draw in better candidates, even without sizable pay hikes.

Baker also questioned the utility of using a student's high school or undergraduate grade point average as a criteria for admission into teacher prep programs.

Grading standards and course rigor vary greatly, so a 3.0 at one school doesn't signify the same accomplishments as a 3.0 at another. Plus, a GPA cutoff could discourage aspiring teachers from taking tough courses or majoring in challenging subjects such as chemistry. "The incentives that creates are really problematic," Baker said.

Another key challenge for participating states: Whether — or how — to apply the new standards to alternative certification programs, run outside traditional schools of education.

Some 40 percent of teachers now come up through alternative certification routes, which include Teach for America, Relay Graduate School and online trainings run by both for-profit and non-profit entities. By federal law, teachers still working their way through such programs are considered "highly qualified" and eligible to take charge of classrooms even before their training is complete. One alternative certification center in Texas urges aspiring teachers to start applying for jobs just as soon as they put down their deposit for the online classes.

In interviews, the commissioners in Kentucky and Connecticut said they plan to hold alternative certification programs to the same standards as education colleges. That could mean raising the bar even at prestigious programs like Teach for America, which currently accepts applicants with GPAs as low as 2.5.

Van Roekel, the union president, said states should go further and demand that all teachers be fully trained by accredited schools and licensed by the state before beginning work.

"You need a license to cut hair. Why shouldn't you need a license to teach?" he asked.

These and other issues will be debated over the next two years as the seven participating states test drive their plans to raise teacher quality. Officials in these states and in advocacy groups say they're confident the lessons learned in the pilot phase will transform teacher preparation nationwide.

"This is a chance to prove this can be done," said Janice Poda, director of educator workforce for the Council of Chief State School Officers.