

COMMENTARY

California Policy Opportunities to Support Teacher Credentialing and Diversity

Lessons From San Francisco



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Introduction

State agencies and school districts nationwide are actively working to address the problem of teacher shortages, often while simultaneously seeking to diversify their educator workforce. As California grapples with the need to improve learning significantly for a student population that is increasingly linguistically and racially diverse, policymakers must focus on opportunities to attract more teachers to the profession, diversify the teacher workforce statewide, and increase teacher retention. Reconsidering the approach to state licensure exam requirements is one way to make progress on all three fronts, and the governor's proposed [new teacher-credentialing requirements](#) in the 2024–25 state budget trailer bill provides an opportunity for changes that will support those efforts.

Why Teacher Diversity Matters

Teacher shortages affect all 50 states, and two thirds of California's school districts struggle to fill vacancies. The impacts of teacher shortages are most acutely felt in particular credential areas (e.g., math, science, special education, bilingual education) and in schools serving predominantly low-income families and students of color. High rates of staff turnover and teacher shortages derail schools' goals for effective teaching and learning, thereby exacerbating the opportunity gap for students.

Teacher diversity matters for many reasons, most notably because it increases students' academic and social-emotional outcomes. Teachers of color are more likely to work in lower resourced schools that are more difficult to staff and have higher percentages of racially minoritized students; therefore, they are an important catalyst in addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of students of color. For example, Black elementary school students who have at least one Black teacher are more likely to graduate high school and go on to higher education. Black students who have Black teachers are less likely to be recommended for special education as well. Studies have also found that having racially diverse teachers leads to a decreased likelihood of disciplinary suspensions for Black and Latinx students.

During the 2018–19 school year in California—a state in which 75 percent of students in public school are people of color—only 3.9 percent of public school teachers were Black, and only 21.3 percent were Latinx. The growing body of research that points to the positive impacts of teachers of color on students of all races should influence policymakers to double down on statewide efforts to recruit, effectively prepare, and retain teachers of color, mitigating all barriers to the teaching profession for racially minoritized candidates.

SFUSD’s Grow-Your-Own Approach to Recruit More Teachers of Color

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and Stanford University partnered to study one of SFUSD’s approaches to recruit and retain teachers of color: its [grow-your-own](#) (GYO) intern teacher credential program, [Pathway to Teaching](#). As of May 2023, 81 percent of enrolled Pathway teachers identified as teachers of color. Sixty-five percent of program graduates are teachers of color, which is nearly double the statewide average. Despite research demonstrating that California’s teacher licensure exams do not correlate to teacher effectiveness or student achievement, SFUSD Pathway to Teaching candidates are still required to complete them. And we found the licensing exams to be the most significant barrier to candidates’ credential progress and attainment, particularly for candidates of color.

Although Pathway to Teaching was originally designed to be a 1-year intern program, 32 percent of Pathway teachers needed to continue for a second year from 2021–22 to 2022–23 because they still had basic skills and/or subject matter requirements to complete; 100 percent of those teachers were teachers of color. Candidates of color struggled to exit the program successfully because of these exam requirements, although they often met all other programmatic requirements for the preliminary credential. Our findings reinforce existing research that exams are a significant barrier to the teaching credential and that Black and Latinx teachers often get caught up in this negative testing cycle. The licensure exams created a professional dead end for many of these candidates of color, as they exhausted their available teaching credentials while attempting to pass and/or afford credential exams. Some of the teachers were forced out of the teaching profession despite their dedication to becoming credentialed teachers, school administrators who were eager to retain them, and teaching performance that did not correlate with exam performance.

Recommendations for Policy

As California considers revisions to its teacher-credentialing policies, and as its \$25.6 million educator licensure exam contract with Pearson expires in 2025, there is a unique opportunity to use lessons from the [statewide COVID-19 credential policy exemptions](#) and recent improvements to the credential exam requirements to shape future policy. Based on our research, we share the following four recommendations.

EXPAND HOW CANDIDATES CAN MEET BASIC SKILLS AND SUBJECT MATTER REQUIREMENTS

Alternatives to the exams have expanded in recent years, and we commend this progress. Yet some of these new options (particularly for subject matter requirements) are time intensive for programs to assess, and they rarely result in candidates meeting equivalency. Allowing a bachelor’s degree to fulfill basic skills requirements would represent a great leap forward in streamlining the teacher-credentialing process for all candidates. This option will most positively affect teacher candidates of color for whom the [California Basic Educational Skills Test](#) (CBEST) has presented a significant barrier.

GATHER AND DISAGGREGATE CREDENTIAL EXAM DATA BY CANDIDATE RACE/ETHNICITY

Statewide data analysis could include first-time pass rates, the number of times it takes candidates to pass subtests, and program nonadmission and/or program attrition due to not passing basic skills and/or subject matter requirements. We support the bill’s inclusion of an advisory board composed primarily of classroom teachers from whom the state superintendent will seek input on the teacher licensure tests. The advisory board’s role should include analysis of long-term data so that its members can advocate for adjustments to the teacher licensure tests based on their findings, thereby helping keep California accountable to the data. We

also recommend that this advisory board represent the state’s great diversity through a concerted effort to include proportional representation of teachers of color, including Black teachers, which will help address some of the racially predictable testing disparities and credentialing experiences.

REDUCE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM COSTS FOR BOTH INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES AND PROGRAMS

We support the state’s current allocation of funds to pay all candidate fees for state-required exams and assessments. We recommend against proposals that candidates be charged fees to take tests, as the costs of the credentialing process are substantial for teacher candidates, and lack of funds for exam costs can impede progress. If testing fees must be resumed, we recommend that the state set a cap on the comprehensive costs of the credential so that it is not cost prohibitive. At the programmatic level, we support expanded funding to reduce the costs of teacher education programs for candidates, such as the continuation of the [Golden State Teacher Grant](#) or 100 percent state subsidization of these costs so that candidates can complete programs debt free.

SUPPORT INCREASED INVESTMENTS IN GYO PROGRAMS

Research has shown that GYO programs are an effective way to recruit teachers of color. Both the incredible diversity and the high rates of retention of teachers in the SFUSD Pathway to Teaching program underline this point, and we strongly encourage future state budgets to expand funding to alternative teacher-credentialing pathways, such as intern programs and apprenticeships, in addition to its funding support of teacher residency programs. Multiple high-quality, funded pathways are necessary to serve the needs of California’s districts and the diversity of its potential teacher candidates.

Summary

Although many organizations (e.g., [Learning Policy Institute](#), [National Council on Teacher Quality](#)) warn against “lowering the bar” to become a teacher, we must look critically at individual credential requirements to assess whether they are effective measures of future teaching capability and where and for whom they are reinforcing patterns of marginalization. We recommend reframing the argument that we are lowering the bar to becoming a teacher when we critically examine state-level licensure requirements and the resultant patterns of inequity in these processes, instead choosing alternative entry and/or exit requirements that are significantly more predictive of teacher quality and further our goals for teacher diversity.

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