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In July 1998, the first-ever administration of the Massachusetts Educator Certification Test caused a furor. Harrington describes the initial decision to go forward with a statewide test, choosing a vendor, the decisions around the development of the test, and the consequences that resulted from the test administration. "The Sound and the Fury" is a case study of good intentions gone awry. The Massachusetts story teaches some critically important lessons that will help other states as they move forward in reforming teacher education.

The Sound and Fury of Teacher Testing in Massachusetts

The 59% failure rate on the first-ever administration of the Massachusetts Educator Certification test, reported in July 1998, produced a local furor that was reported nationwide. The first results were followed quickly by the second set of scores with similar failure rates. Much activity occurred within the state, as various constituencies sought to respond to what was referred to as a "wake-up call" and "a rude awakening." Eight months later, the 49% failure rate received little public attention. And it is not clear that deep and sustained changes in the ways in which teachers are prepared and inducted into the field emerged from the public furor.

It takes more than eight months to change a system that has been functioning for many years. What has occurred in the eight months since the turmoil broke over the educator certification test has been the beginning of movement and change. Multiple conversations and strategies have been proposed. What is needed now is a mechanism or structure that will continue to ensure that communication flows among all affected constituencies. Imposed change, whether by legislation or regulation, may not be as effective as change that emerges from a commitment by all parties to address the problem. Piecemeal change, in which each constituency institutes change only in its own purview, may not affect the entire system.

This article examines the background of the test, circumstances surrounding the resulting public response, and the potential long-term consequences of the discussion over teacher education and preparation.

The Origins of the Test

The requirement that teachers pass a test before being certified in Massachusetts first became law in July 1985. However, a test was not developed and the legislation went unenforced for the next eight years. Then, in 1993, Massachusetts legislators passed the Education Reform Act, addressing a broad spectrum of educational policies that included curriculum standards, student learning assessment, teacher preparation certification, and teachers' professional development. The 1993 Act included language specifying that candidates would have to pass a "writing and subject matter test" in order to be certified. This requirement also remained unenforced for three years, while the state Department of Education concentrated on writing the curriculum standards and frameworks mandated by the new law and selected a test vendor.

The Education Commissioner announced on December 15, 1997, that he had selected National Evaluation Systems (NES) to develop the Massachusetts Certification Test (Massachusetts Department of Education, 12/15/97).

In January 1998, the Department of Education released an information and registration packet for the certification tests. The material included a series of frequently asked questions and answers that included the following:

“Question: If I am now enrolled in a teacher preparation program, when should I take the tests?”

Answer: Candidates who expect to complete their teacher preparation programs by August 31, 1998 are encouraged to take the teacher tests on either April 4 or July 11, 1998. Candidates who take the tests on these dates will satisfy the testing requirement automatically. Candidates who take the tests beginning with the October 3, 1998 administration will be required to achieve a qualifying score in order to be certified” (Massachusetts Teacher Tests, 1998).”

Prospective test-takers and teacher preparation program educators interpreted this answer to indicate that cut scores (minimum scores required for passing) would not be used to determine certification status for the first two test administrations.

It was NES's intent to use the first two rounds of testing to validate the tests. Scores would be given to prospective teachers, but the standard for passing the test for certification would be set for the third test administration.

The Education Commissioner was not in favor of allowing students to pass the test simply by showing up. Therefore, the department announced to registered test-takers on March 25th that the April 4th administration of the test would be scored and that passing scores would be required for certification.

Registered test-takers and educators immediately expressed concern that inadequate notice had been given for such a high-stakes test. The Board of Education Chair dismissed these concerns, saying that education schools and students knew for years that testing with required passing scores would be initiated.

The first administration of the test took place on April 4th. The test consisted of two parts: writing and reading competency, measured by the Communications and Literacy Skills test, and content competency measured by a subject test. Candidates

needed to receive a passing score in each of the three areas to be eligible for certification. Scoring panels convened from April to July to set recommended cut scores for each test.

On June 22 the commissioner recommended that the board set passing scores one standard deviation below the scores recommended by the scoring panels. Even with this change, 44% of the test-takers failed the test. The rationale was to make allowance for the confusion regarding the test. The Board of Education, after much discussion, approved the lower cut scores with a proviso that higher cut scores would be implemented in October 1998.

The board's decision was seen by many in the public arena as a lowering of standards. In response, the board voted to raise the cut scores back to the originally recommended level, resulting in 59% of the test-takers failing the first administration of the test. The commissioner resigned, citing political influences on a process that should have been directed by educational leadership.

Candidates' scores were mailed on July 6th, five days before the next scheduled test administration. Candidates who had failed any portion of the first test were allowed to retake separate portions or the entire test free of charge. However, they still had only a few days in which to prepare to retake the test.

Proposals for Change

National headlines reported the failure of 59% of candidates to pass the Massachusetts' Educator Certification Test. Many constituencies sought to find responses that would be seen as promoting high educational standards and quality teacher preparation. Many of the immediate responses proposed legislative or regulatory changes.

Legislative Changes

Legislative leadership was quick to react, passing Chapter 260 of the Acts of 1998 on July 27th. This legislation focused on recruiting high quality talented people to the teaching field and provided funding for a number of new initiatives:

- Tomorrow's Teachers clubs, a program to encourage middle and high-school students of diverse backgrounds to consider the teaching profession. Funding was made available to schools that had previously not had such clubs.
- Teachers for Tomorrow Scholarship Program, a program offering tuition remission at a Massachusetts public undergraduate program for high-school seniors who graduate in the top 25% of their class and agree to teach for a minimum of four years after graduation. Funding was made available for 700 scholarships beginning in fall 1999, covering full tuition and fees.
- Attracting Excellence to Teaching Program, a program of loan reimbursement for high achieving college graduates. Guidelines for the program, already in existence, were expanded to allow more students to take advantage of the program. Increased funding was also provided.
- Massachusetts Signing Bonus Program for New Teachers. This initiative received perhaps the most publicity of all the legislative ac-

tions. Under this program, funding was provided to give qualified new teachers a \$20,000 signing bonus, payable over four years. Recipients would receive an \$8,000 bonus in the first year and \$4,000 in the subsequent three years, pending satisfactory performance evaluations and continued full-time employment in a Massachusetts public school. The program, modeled after Teach for America, aimed at attracting college graduates and mid-career professionals who would not have otherwise considered teaching as a career. In its first year, this program attracted 783 applicants.

- Establishment of a Master Teacher Corps, consisting of teachers who had received National Board Certification. Funding and other support was provided for teachers who wish to seek this national certification.

The Board of Higher Education submitted “Creating Tomorrow: Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers” in response to the governor’s request for recommendations. This plan, written after consultation with constituencies such as teacher unions, teacher preparation programs, teachers, and the Department of Education, included more than twenty actions. Among the recommendations were the following:

- Eliminate certification approval for underperforming institutions
- Eliminate certification approval for underperforming programs
- Raise admission standards for all teacher education programs
- Raise requirements for student teaching
- Establish a Joint Board of Education/Board of Higher Education Commission to monitor the implementation of the plan and make recommendations on issues related to teacher education (Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, 1999).

The governor also proposed that all veteran teachers be required to pass a test in order to remain certified. He submitted legislation to that effect in 1998, which did not pass. He submitted new legislation with the same provision in January 1999. Currently, there is no “lifetime” certification in Massachusetts—teachers must renew their certification every five years. Veteran teachers who have standard certification must present evidence of accumulated professional development points to be recertified. Under the governor’s proposal, teachers would also have to pass a test to be recertified.

The House Chair of the Joint Committee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, also submitted legislation in January 1999 to improve teacher quality. Elements of the bill address professional development for administrators on evaluation of teacher performance, expansion of mentoring for new teachers, creation of an independent Educator Dismissal Review Board, and school-based management.

Regulatory Changes

In Massachusetts, as in many states, the Department of Education has the defined regulatory authority to initiate changes that would affect teacher preparation. The department defines the terms under which programs or institutions receive authority to offer certification programs to students and revisions to these regulations are currently

under way. Proposed regulations will include an accountability system, though the details of that accountability are as yet undefined. New regulations may promote a field-based learning experience with a comprehensive performance assessment. Most likely, there will be a minimum passing rate for institutions and/or programs, meaning that a certain percentage of their students will have to pass the certification test or sanctions would be imposed. Additional changes to the ways in which teachers are admitted, prepared, and assessed while in college are being considered.

The department has also discussed changing the standards under which teachers would be recertified. Current guidelines allow for an accumulation of professional development points; the individual teacher is free to choose what professional development opportunities are taken. Proposed changes may include a stronger emphasis on requiring the teacher to earn a substantial portion of the professional development points in content-based areas.

What emerges clearly from the rhetoric of the past year is commitment on the part of the Board of Education and Department of Education to reconceptualize the ways in which teachers enter the profession, are prepared, inducted, and retained. To attract the highest quality teachers and to increase the number entering the profession, the department is focusing on recruiting those who have never considered teaching as a career. It is looking for models to train these teachers quickly and move them into the classroom in a shorter period of time than is usually the case. Developing a statewide mentoring program for first year teachers is also a departmental priority.

Piecemeal Changes

There is no such single entity as “higher education”; rather the term refers to the many singular institutions that educate students. Yet “higher education,” and particularly schools of education, was labeled as the source of the poor student performance on the teacher certification test. It is difficult to assess the changes made by higher education institutions in response to the performance on the teacher certification test. While some campuses announced immediate changes, others are still considering appropriate responses and changes such as raising admissions standards, requiring candidates to pass the certification test or a similar instrument to gain admission to the program, and offering workshops to assist students in test preparation. There has been less public comment regarding strategies to strengthen the relationship between the arts and sciences fields and the schools of education, although many see these changes as critical to the reform of teacher education.

While accepting the judgment that weak performance on the certification test raises serious concerns regarding students’ educational preparation, schools of education have been particularly cautious in responding to a test that is viewed as fundamentally flawed. It is not the purpose of this article to detail the specific concerns regarding reliability and validity that have been raised regarding the Massachusetts Educator Certification Test. Those who are interested in such specifics should read the suggested article by Walter Haney and others. This is not to say that the deans do not support testing for prospective teachers. Rather, they support the use of a valid and reliable instrument.

In the end, however, higher education institutions must respond to the questions raised by performance on the certification test. Not just the school of education, but

the entire institution, must take responsibility for preparing teachers. Serious conversations must take place between arts and sciences faculty and education faculty in Massachusetts to determine what it is that teachers need to know in order to be able to teach to the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. Appropriate changes must be made in the curriculum taken by prospective teachers.

More critically, higher education institutions must be willing to rethink their offerings and processes for preparing teachers. There is a need for nimbleness, a need to respond to change, and a need to find ways in which innovative programs can be developed to prepare content-knowledgeable teachers for the classroom. The traditional model of an undergraduate track, or a year-long master's program, will not suffice for current needs. "Faster" need not mean less rigor or quality. Higher education needs to move from its traditional setting to the K-12 classrooms, to work more extensively with K-12 teachers in the schools to provide both pre and inservice training.

Conclusion

The clearest outcome of candidates' performance on the first administration of the Massachusetts' Educator Certification Test is a heightened sense of awareness among various constituencies that teacher preparation is under the microscope. Attention has been focused on the quality of the teaching force and on strategies for enhancing its quality. Unfortunately, the proposals for change have come from various constituencies without a concerted coordinated effort. At this point in time, it appears that change will be imposed. Legislators and regulators have been quick to respond. Higher education, whether through schools of education or otherwise, has not offered proposals for significant changes. This is not to suggest that higher education does not recognize the need to improve the quality of teachers. It does, but change within higher education occurs slowly. The agenda in Massachusetts for enhancing teacher quality is on a fast track. The result may be that teacher education and preparation will look different in the next five years because higher education will have no choice but to respond to legislation and regulation.

Suggested Readings

Bradley, Ann., "Test Questions," *Education Week*, 12/9/98.

Haney, Walt, C. Fowler, A. Wheelock, D. Bebell, and N. Malec, "Less truth than error? An independent study of the Massachusetts Teacher Tests" *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 7(4/1999) (electronic journal)

Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, *Creating Tomorrow: Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers. A Statewide Plan for Action and Results*. Recommendations to Governor A. Paul Cellucci, October 1998.

Massachusetts Department of Education, *Board in Brief*. (10/24/96, 11/21/96, 12/15/97).

Massachusetts Teacher Tests, *Questions and Answers* (January 1998): 3.