

COVID'S UNDER-THE-RADAR EXPERIMENT WITH TEACHER LICENSURE

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WHAT COULD TEACHER LICENSURE MODIFICATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC TELL US ABOUT THE TEACHER WORKFORCE?

The decision to close schools in March 2020 was a massive disruption to public education. But pandemic-related closures did more than put in-person instruction on hold. School closures also meant that teacher candidates could not complete their student teaching experiences (Choate et al., 2021). And when licensure test centers closed, prospective teachers could not sit for the exams they needed to get credentialed. As COVID wreaked havoc on the school system—and worries over staffing shortages grew—most states responded to these disruptions by modifying and relaxing their requirements for becoming a teacher during the pandemic.

Three years later, the negative consequences of school closures for students are well known: learning declined and pre-existing inequities grew (Goldhaber et al., 2022). But how (if at all) changes to licensure requirements affected teachers and students is less clear.

To provide an initial picture of what happened, this research brief describes the nature of pandemic-era licensure modifications, how many teachers they might have affected, and why we should care. Our rough estimate suggests that around 100,000 graduates of traditional preparation programs might have entered the profession under changed licensure rules in

2020-2021. Most of these teachers likely would have entered the teacher workforce, regardless of the changes to licensure rules. Still, under normal circumstances, some of them might have failed their licensure test or balked at the costs of entering the profession; virtually all of them would, absent the changes, have completed student teaching before being hired.

This under-the-radar experiment with pre-service and licensure regulations during COVID deserves attention. After all, teachers have far-reaching effects on students—from how much they learn (Aaronson et al., 2007; Rivkin et al., 2005) to how they experience school (Backes et al., 2022) to what happens to them later in life (Chetty et al., 2014). If we are prepared to study it, opening the door to teaching for tens of thousands of individuals without the usual appraisals could also provide fresh evidence about the benefits and costs of how states regulate who enters teaching.

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DEBATES ABOUT LICENSURE AND THE TEACHER WORKFORCE ARE LONG-STANDING

Arguments about the substance and value of professional standards in teaching are decades old (Preston, 2021). These debates were especially lively in the 1990s. Licensure advocates argued that higher standards would increase the quality of the teacher workforce (Darling-Hammond, 2001; NCTAF, 1996). Critics argued that precise standards for teaching were misplaced, unreliable, and costly (Ballou and Podgursky, 1998; Hess, 2002; Walsh, 2001). Meanwhile, state laws requiring basic licensure tests expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. Following NCLB's highly qualified teacher requirements, more and more states started adopting subject-matter test requirements. And by the mid-2010s, the nation saw "a sharp rise in all licensure testing types" for aspiring teachers (Kraft & Lyon, 2022, p. 30).

During the policy debates of the 1990s, researchers used data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) to study what licensure tells us about the quality of the teacher workforce.¹ Using the SASS, researchers found few links between licensure policy and teacher quality, at least as measured by proxies like the selectivity of a teacher's college (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Angrist & Guryan, 2003). In the early 2000s, researchers started using new quantitative data on students and schools collected during the NCLB-era to study the issue. These more detailed data allowed researchers to look at the relationship between individual licensure scores and value-added measures of teacher effectiveness. A different picture emerged: researchers found licensure test performance predicted teacher effectiveness, although the predictive validity of scores varied across tests, grades, and subjects (Chung & Zou, 2022; Clotfelter et al., 2007; 2010; Cowan et al., 2020; Goldhaber 2007; Goldhaber & Hansen 2010; Sass, 2015). Researchers also found that licensure tests disproportionately screened out candidates of color (Cowan et al., 2020; Goldhaber & Hansen 2010; Putman & Walsh, 2019) and could reduce the overall supply of prospective teachers (Larsen et al., 2020).

With results like these, debates about licensure tests and teacher training have resurfaced (Will, July 21, 2021). How might these reinvigorated debates be informed by COVID-related licensure modifications? To answer that question, we first need to characterize licensure policy before the pandemic.

Differing Views about Licensure and Entry Standards

In the 1990s, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future famously saw the lack of professional teaching standards as a major problem:

Although no state will allow a person to fix plumbing, guard swimming pools, style hair, write wills, design a building, or practice medicine without completing training and passing an examination, more than 40 states allow school districts to hire teachers on emergency licenses who have not met these basic requirements...Our society can no longer accept the hit-or-miss hiring, sink-or-swim induction, trial-and-error teaching, and take-it-or-leave-it professional development it has tolerated in the past. The time has come to put teachers and teaching at the top of the nation's education reform agenda (NCTAF, 1996, p. 14, 20).

Critics of licensure standards agreed that teachers matter to student learning. But they saw strong entry standards as misaligned with the nature of the profession.

Certification will work poorly in professions in which practice depends on amorphous interpersonal relationships, criteria for determining effectiveness is lacking, and different kinds of styles may prove more or less effective with different clients (Hess, 2002, p. 173).

Both sides were also making broader arguments. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), for example, advocated for higher licensure standards but also for other capacity-building reforms, like better professional development. "The first step [to improving the profession]," the Commission wrote, "is to recognize that these ideas must be pursued together—as an entire tapestry that is tightly interwoven" (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 11).

Meanwhile, licensure critics, like Ballou and Podgursky (1998), associated deregulation with outcomes-focused reforms and market competition. "In this [deregulated] vision of reform," Ballou and Podgursky wrote, "...performance would be enhanced not by strengthening bureaucratic control but by increasing consumer sovereignty." (Ballou and Podgursky, 1998, p. 394).

These broader arguments are beyond this issue brief's scope. But they suggest some of the underlying assumptions and interests that can be at play in discussions about licensure rules and waivers.

BASELINE POLICIES PRE-COVID

States have complex and varied rules for determining who is eligible to teach. To avoid getting lost in the weeds, it is helpful to conceive of three buckets of rules that were likely affected by COVID: the expectations that new teachers in traditional preparation programs complete a student-teaching placement prior to employment; the requirement that prospective teachers pass a licensure test (either a basic skills test, a subject-matter test, or both), and—in a handful of states—the requirement that teachers pass a performance-based portfolio assessment, called the edTPA.²

Another simplification is useful: rather than talk about a range of changes, we use the word “waiver” to refer to various regulatory changes. This means we consider states that suspended all student teaching requirements and states that replaced an in-person student teaching requirement with a virtual or other option as both having issued a “waiver” (versus states that kept the requirement and issued no waiver).

Future work should explore the nuances beneath these simplifications. For example, what happened with different approaches to changing student teaching requirements? How did testing requirements differ by grade level and subject? What

was the role of performance assessments besides the edTPA? For now, our simplifications offer a useful, if basic, starting point for identifying high-level policy changes during the pandemic.

We begin in Figure 1 with our baseline: high-level state regulations for obtaining an initial traditional license that were in place *prior to the pandemic*.³ Before the pandemic, every state required prospective teachers in traditional preparation programs to pass some type of licensure test (i.e., a basic skills test and/or a subject test) and complete a student teaching experience to get a standard teaching license. Eight states also required elementary teachers to pass the edTPA performance assessment (Although not shown in Figure 1, some states recognized the edTPA but did not require it for licensure). Figure 1 shows states with more requirements in darker shades of blue.

Figure 1. Prior to COVID, Most States Required Teachers to Pass Licensure Tests and Complete Student Teaching: 2020 Pre-Pandemic Requirements for Licensure Test, Student Teaching, and edTPA by State



Source: Basic skill and subject test requirements based on 2018 data from the U.S. Department of Education’s State Education Practices (SEP) at the U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Science’s National Center for Education Statistics Table 71: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/staterreform/tab7_1.asp. Data on student teaching and the edTPA come from the National Council on Teacher Quality’s March 2020 State Teacher Policy Database <https://www.nctq.org/yearbook/home> and reviews of state education agency websites.

WAIVERS IN YEAR ONE OF THE PANDEMIC, 2020-2021

When the pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, the regulations shown in Figure 1 became untenable in most places. Figure 2 shows this by highlighting the states that waived requirements during the 2020-2021 school year, as well as the number of requirements they waived, shown in different shades of green (one, two, or three). Nineteen states waived one requirement (light green). Twenty-six waived two (more saturated green); Washington State, Connecticut, and Tennessee waived three (darkest green). Only Florida, Montana, and Washington D.C. remain blue, having not waived employment regulations in 2020-2021.⁴

edTPA in New Jersey in 2020-2021, they had one year to make up the requirement. But if they missed it in Illinois, they did not have to make up the requirement at all.

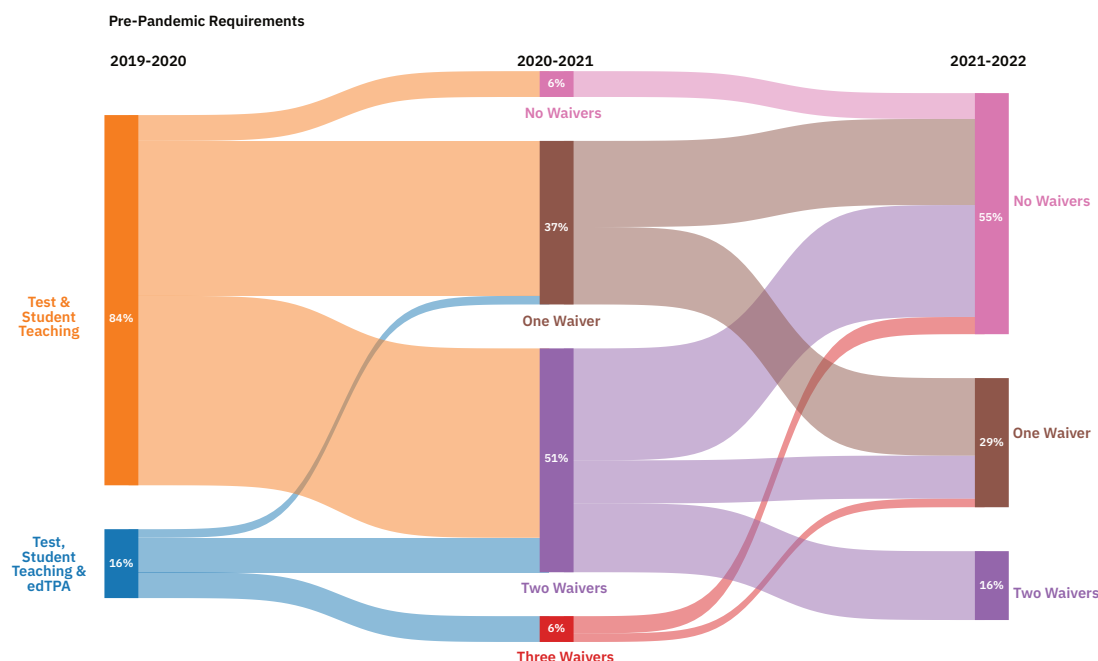
Most of the waivers captured in Figure 2 were temporary (e.g., granting of provisional or emergency licenses). Whether and when current classroom teachers will need to circle back to the requirements they avoided, by passing a licensure test or completing the edTPA, differed by state. For example, Mississippi gave teachers five years to make up the basic skills tests they skipped in 2020-2021. Massachusetts and North Dakota gave teachers three years to make the basic tests they missed. Eleven other states required teachers to make up their missed test within a year. Requirements for making up subject tests and the edTPA also varied. If a teacher missed taking the

Figure 2. When COVID Hit, Most States Waived or Changed Their Licensure Test and Student Teaching Requirements: Employment Waivers in 2020-2021 by State.



Source: We collected waiver data from three main sources: the [AACTE State Policy Tracking Map: State Actions to Support EPPs and Teacher Candidates](#), the Deans for Impact [COVID-19 Teacher Preparation Policy Database](#), and NCTQ's [Provisional and Emergency Licensure State Teacher Policy Database](#). When waiver data was unavailable or inconsistent among these sources, we examined individual state education agency websites and state executive orders to determine whether a state used waivers.

Figure 3. The Wave of Waivers Crested in 2020-2021, With A Return to Normal in Most States in 2021-2022: Employment Waivers 2020-2021 to 2021-2022



Source: We collected waiver data from three main sources: the [AACTE State Policy Tracking Map: State Actions to Support EPPs and Teacher Candidates](#), the Deans for Impact [COVID-19 Teacher Preparation Policy Database](#), and NCTQ's [Provisional and Emergency Licensure State Teacher Policy Database](#). When waiver data was unavailable or inconsistent among these sources, we examined individual state education agency websites and state executive orders to determine whether a state used waivers.

WAIVERS IN YEAR 2, 2021-2022

With the return of in-person schooling in more places in 2021-2022, states started reinstating requirements. Figure 3 captures the ebb and flow of waivers and requirements. The left side of the figure shows the share of states with different requirements prior to the pandemic. Consistent with the map in Figure 1, most states (80%) required student teaching and licensure tests. The middle of the figure shows the share of states that used waivers in 2020-2021 (again, zero, one, two, or three waivers). This corresponds with the map in Figure 2. The right of the figure shows the share of states that continued to use waivers in 2021-2022. As states started rescinding their waivers, the “no waivers” group on the right side of the figure is larger here than it is in the middle of the figure.

Two patterns stand out from Figure 3. First, although employment waivers remained in effect in some places during the pandemic's second year (2021-2022), they were mostly a short-term adaptation. By the pandemic's second year, about half of the states had given up their waivers.

Second, states with similar baseline policies made different waiver choices. The largest baseline group (states requiring a test and student teaching), for example, made three different choices in 2020-2021. Some states waived two requirements (student teaching and testing); some waived only one requirement (e.g., they kept their testing requirement but waived

the student teaching requirement); and Montana and Washington D.C. offered no waivers.

These patterns make up the “under-the-radar experiment” in how regulatory regimes shape the teacher workforce—and they raise a host of interesting questions. Did teachers who entered the profession through a waiver stay or leave teaching at different rates than those who entered under traditional rules? Are waiver-hires more (or less) effective at improving test and non-test outcomes for students? Did states that used waivers have an easier (or harder) time filling teaching vacancies during the pandemic compared to states without waivers? Did states with waivers attract more diverse teachers? More broadly, what do the answers to these questions suggest about tight-loose debates about licensure regulations?

HOW MANY NEW TEACHERS MIGHT HAVE BEEN AFFECTED?

There is no national data on the number of individuals who entered the profession through a waiver during COVID. But historical counts of the number of individuals who completed traditional teacher preparation programs can provide a rough estimate of the number of credentialed individuals who might have entered the workforce and been affected by waivers. Given the pandemic's broader social and economic impact, it is also unclear if historical program completions persisted during the pandemic. Also, if individuals outside of the traditional teacher pipeline used waivers to enter the profession, these counts would be an underestimate.

With caveats in mind, we use counts of teachers who completed traditional teacher preparation programs in each state prior to the pandemic (2019-2020) to estimate that COVID-related waivers could have affected just over 100,000 teachers nationwide.⁵ As expected, most of these individuals (79,320) would be in states that offered two-waivers in 2020-2021 (i.e., the largest waiver category in the middle of Figure 3). Also, as expected, the biggest absolute counts would appear in populous states, like New York (12,217), California (9,980), and Texas (9,160). As a share of the overall teacher workforce,⁶ the most waived candidates would appear in Arizona (11%), North Dakota (8%), South Dakota (7%), and New York (6%).⁷

Beyond questions about how well hire counts during the pandemic match historical completer counts, our account of the waivers themselves is imprecise. As far as we know, there is no comprehensive database about public school employment waivers during COVID and who they affected. Data about waivers compiled by groups like Deans for Impact and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, as well as information we collected from state department of education websites, are useful. But our picture of policy developments during COVID—and the teacher candidates they affect—is necessarily incomplete. Future studies will need to use individual-level data on the waiver status of teachers hired during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Teacher licensing systems are an important state-level lever for shaping the teacher workforce. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these systems in the spring of 2020 in ways that present a learning opportunity. Our unanticipated national experiment with teacher licensure could provide information

about how temporarily waiving teacher licensure requirements affected the diversity, effectiveness, and mobility of the teacher workforce. For example, early evidence from Massachusetts suggests teachers hired with an emergency teaching license were more likely to be teachers of color compared to teachers hired with initial or provisional licenses (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). Is that the case in other states? As we have already noted, the waivers also raise interesting questions about shortages and teacher effectiveness. Did states that changed their employment requirements have an easier time filling vacancies during the pandemic than states that did not? Were teachers hired through a waiver as effective as teachers who completed all the standard requirements?

Beyond questions about the labor market and teacher effectiveness, the pandemic-era waivers may also raise important political and practical questions for states and school systems in the months and years ahead:

- What, for example, will happen if some states require classroom teachers to make up the waived requirements?
- Will successful in-service teachers hired on a waiver resist or resent calls to finish up their waived pre-service requirements?
- What about teachers who have positive on-the-job evaluations (i.e., most teachers) who do not pass a make-up test?
- If teachers hired via waivers are concentrated in some schools more than others, will time-consuming make-up requirements (like the edTPA) have a disproportionate impact on learning for concentrated groups of students?
- Will any of these political and practical challenges force states to revisit their approach to pandemic-era waivers?

The answers to all these questions are far from clear. What happens will vary state-by-state and only emerge over time, as educators and policymakers at all levels of the system negotiate prior rules and future reforms. To learn more, researchers and state education agencies need to work together to better understand the opportunities and outcomes associated with COVID-related waivers and any other under-the-radar experiments that happened during this unprecedented time in the nation's schools.

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NOTES

¹The SASS was a national survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics between 1987 and 2011.

²According to edTPA's website "edTPA requires aspiring teachers to demonstrate readiness to teach through lesson plans designed to support their students' strengths and needs; engage real students in ambitious learning; analyze whether their students are learning, and adjust their instruction to become more effective. Teacher candidates submit unedited video recordings of themselves at work in a real classroom as part of a portfolio that is scored by highly trained educators." https://www.edtpa.com/pageview.aspx?f=gen_aboutedtpa.html

³For now, we ignore alternative pathways into teaching, which follow their own set of rules and regulations.

⁴Some states also waived testing requirements for entering teaching preparation programs. For example, prior to the pandemic 16 states required program applicants to pass a basic skill test to enter a program; 4 states required applicants to take, but not necessarily pass a basic skills test; and 6 states allows applicants to substitute other evidence for passing a basic skills test to enter a teacher preparation program. In 2020-2021, 9 states waived their testing requirements for entering a teacher preparation program (WA, CA, KY, MS, WV, NC, GA, NJ, RI). Kentucky and Mississippi retained their waivers the following year (2021-2022).

⁵Traditional program completer data from AY 2019-2020 from U.S. Department of Education, Higher Education Act Title II State Report Card System. <https://title2.ed.gov/Public/DataTools/Tables.aspx>.

⁶Workforce totals from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/ Secondary School Universe Survey", 2020–21, Provisional Version 1a, "Local Education Agency Universe Survey", 2020–21, Provisional Version 1a, and "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education", 2020–21, Provisional Version 1a.

⁷Although these may be non-trivial numbers, passing any missed requirements is unlikely to be an issue for many teachers hired with a waiver. The National Council on Teacher Quality, for example, found that the average first-time pass rate for the 21 states they identified as having stronger testing systems was 45%. For the 30 states they identified as having weaker testing systems, the first-time pass rate was 76% (Putnam & Walsh, 2021).

NOTES ON DATA SOURCES

Waiver data was collected from three main sources: the AACTE State Policy Tracking Map: State Actions to Support EPPs and Teacher Candidates, the Deans for Impact COVID-19 Teacher Preparation Policy Database, and NCTQ's Provisional and Emergency Licensure State Teacher Policy Database. When waiver data was unavailable or inconsistent among these sources, individual state education agency websites and state executive orders were examined to determine whether waivers were used in that state. edTPA states were identified based on NCTQ's policy database. States that required a basic skills test and/or subject test before entering the teacher workforce pre-pandemic were identified using 2018 NCES data. For footnote 4, States that required a basic skills test before *entering an educator preparation program* pre-pandemic were identified using early March 2020 NCTQ data.

About CALDER and Bellwether's Learning from COVID Research Briefs

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted the U.S. education system. It will be years before we fully understand the implications for students, teacher, and schools. In the meantime, it's important to capture lessons from the pandemic to inform policymakers about COVID recovery and what comes next. With that in mind, CALDER's Learning from COVID Research Brief series looks at what we can learn from accidental and natural experiments set in motion during the pandemic. These natural experiments affect everything from teacher licensure to high school graduation. CALDER's Learning from COVID work is a joint project of the CALDER and Bellwether, a national education non-profit. <https://caldercenter.org/>.

SUMMARY TABLE: LICENSURE WAIVERS IN YEAR 1 AND YEAR 2 OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Basic licensure requirements and waiver status 2020-21 to 2021-22. Policies waived in 2020-21 indicated by (*). Policies waived in 2020-21 and 2021-22 indicated by (**).

State	Student Teaching	Licensure Test	edTPA	State	Student Teaching	Licensure Test	edTPA
AK	Yes*	Yes*	No	MS	Yes	Yes**	No
AL	Yes*	Yes	Yes*	MT	Yes	Yes	No
AR	Yes*	Yes*	No	NC	Yes*	Yes*	No
AZ	Yes	Yes**	No	ND	Yes**	Yes**	No
CA	Yes**	Yes**	No	NE	Yes	Yes*	No
CO	Yes	Yes*	No	NH	Yes	Yes**	No
CT	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*	NJ	Yes	Yes*	Yes*
DC	Yes	Yes	No	NM	Yes	Yes*	No
DE	Yes	Yes**	No	NV	Yes	Yes*	No
FL	Yes	Yes	No	NY	Yes	Yes**	Yes**
GA	Yes**	Yes**	No	OH	Yes*	Yes*	No
HI	Yes**	Yes**	No	OK	Yes*	Yes*	No
IA	Yes*	Yes**	No	OR	Yes**	Yes**	No
ID	Yes	Yes**	No	PA	Yes*	Yes**	No
IL	Yes*	Yes	Yes**	RI	Yes	Yes*	No
IN	Yes*	Yes*	No	SC	Yes*	Yes*	No
KS	Yes	Yes**	No	SD	Yes*	Yes*	No
KY	Yes	Yes**	No	TN	Yes*	Yes*	Yes*
LA	Yes**	Yes**	No	TX	Yes*	Yes*	No
MA	Yes*	Yes**	No	UT	Yes*	Yes	Yes
MD	Yes*	Yes*	No	VA	Yes**	Yes**	No
ME	Yes	Yes*	No	VT	Yes*	Yes	No
MI	Yes*	Yes*	No	WA	Yes**	Yes*	Yes*
MN	Yes	Yes**	No	WI	Yes*	Yes	No
MO	Yes	Yes*	No	WV	Yes**	Yes*	No
				WY	Yes	Yes**	No