

## TEACHER PREPARATION AND COMPETENCY

**Submitted for:** Action.

**Summary:** The competence of public school teachers was questioned last September when the *Chicago Sun-Times* published a series of articles documenting that many teachers had failed the basic skills test or content-related certification tests required before a standard teaching certificate is issued. The newspaper also revealed that hundreds of teachers who had never passed certification tests held teaching positions under provisional credentials permitted under state law. The series further noted that many of the least able teachers – as measured by their performance on certification tests – were teaching students who were the most educationally disadvantaged. This report examines data from the Illinois State Board of Education showing that, while the vast majority of teachers pass the certification tests on their first attempt, there are many who are recommended by colleges and universities for certification who fail their basic skills and/or subject matter certification tests. The report further raises additional issues of teacher preparation that relate to student performance.

**Action Requested:** That the Board of Higher Education work with the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board to strengthen testing requirements for candidates for teacher preparation programs, to establish policies and programs to ensure all teachers can teach to the Illinois Learning Standards, and to encourage colleges and universities to move to meeting or exceeding new national standards for accreditation of teacher prep programs.



STATE OF ILLINOIS  
BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**TEACHER PREPARATION AND COMPETENCY**

The issue – framed succinctly by the *Chicago Sun-Times* – is one of the most fundamental a parent faces: “Who’s teaching my child?”

On September 6, 2001, beneath a bold headline stating, “5,243 Illinois teachers failed key exams,” the *Sun-Times* began a series of articles that examined the record of teachers taking two pre-certification tests – the Illinois Test of Basic Skills and one of 53 subject-matter exams given to prospective teachers in the fields in which they plan to teach. The articles equated a high failure rate (or the need to take the tests multiple times before passing) with classroom incompetence. The newspaper also noted the importance of able teachers, and quoted national experts on the link between quality of teachers and performance of students. Finally, the series reported that teachers who had the most trouble with the pre-certification tests were disproportionately assigned to the weakest performing, most disadvantaged schools, particularly in Chicago and East St. Louis.

An analysis of the *Sun-Times* articles and information from the Illinois State Board of Education supports these conclusions:

1. The teacher preparation/certification system has statutory holes that permit poorly qualified teachers to slip through into K-12 classrooms.
2. Some graduates of colleges and universities cannot pass a test of basic skills at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level of difficulty.
3. Gaps in the certification statute and school district hiring practices permit individuals who have not passed pre-certification tests to teach with temporary credentials, such as transitional bilingual or substitute teachers.
4. Schools with high rates of poverty and minority enrollment are twice as likely to have poorly prepared teachers than schools with low levels of poverty and minority students.
5. At least some of the issues raised by the newspaper series have been resolved – a new, more demanding basic skills test has been implemented, and it will be used as a condition of entering or exiting one of the 57 approved teacher education programs in Illinois. But other concerns raised by the series require steps to toughen standards and procedures to ensure that graduates of approved teacher training programs meet minimum requirements for entering K-12 classrooms.
6. The Board of Higher Education, the State Board of Education, and the Illinois Community College Board should work to strengthen testing requirements for teacher candidates and reporting results of certification tests. This report also encourages all Illinois teacher preparation programs to take steps to meet or exceed the NCATE 2000 standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. This and other

measures are needed to ensure that all new graduates and all existing teachers are prepared to teach to the Illinois Learning Standards, an issue that ultimately will have more effect on performance in the classroom – by teachers and students – than the ability to pass a test of basic skills.

The *Sun-Times* series exposed a problem that, while relatively small in the whole scheme of teacher preparation (pass rates for both certification tests exceeded 90 percent), has strong resonance with the public: How can colleges and universities graduate individuals who fail a test that a high school freshman should be able to pass? And how can those college graduates get jobs teaching in K-12 schools despite failing a test so simple that many of their own students could pass it? Predictably, the articles provoked strong public reaction, helping to prompt two hearings of the Senate Education Committee and an Education Summit called by Governor George Ryan at the Executive Mansion.

### The Numbers

There are two avenues to certification. The first is called “entitlement,” and refers to those teacher candidates who are recommended by an approved teacher-training institution as “entitled” to certification. The other route is “evaluation,” which occurs when a candidate has not been recommended and certification personnel at the State Board of Education evaluate their coursework and transcripts to determine whether they qualify for certification. Since 1988, all candidates must pass the basic skills and subject matter tests to receive a regular teacher certification. But there are four teaching certificates that are exceptions to the rule. Transitional bilingual teachers, who hold a Type 29 certificate, need pass only a language proficiency exam. Those who hold a Type 39 (substitute certificate), Type 34 (provisional vocational teaching), and Type 37 (temporary provisional vocational teaching) are not required to pass any exam. This loophole accounts for many of the teachers working full-time in Chicago, who were the subject of the *Sun-Times* series.

**Table 1 Certification test results, 1988-2001**

<b>200,657 total certification test takers since 1988</b>			
<b>197,011 Basic skills tests</b>		<b>180,109 Subject matter tests</b>	
187,706	9,305	167,811	12,298
Passed on 1 <sup>st</sup> attempt	Failed	Passed on 1 <sup>st</sup> attempt	Failed
95%	5%	93%	7%
<i>Source: State Board of Education</i>			

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Here is what we know:

- There were 155,110 active teachers reported in the 2000-2001 Teacher Service Record file. Of those, 73,602 (47 percent) have never taken any certification exam because they were certified before the testing law took effect in 1988 or they hold one of the four credentials that do not require them to take the test.
- 95 percent of teachers who took the basic skills test since 1988 passed it on their first attempt, as reflected in Table 1.
- 93 percent of teachers who took subject matter tests since 1988 passed in their first attempt, also displayed in Table 1. Many more passed on subsequent attempts. It is common for teachers to seek certification in more than one field, hence necessitating that they take additional subject matter certification tests.

- There were 2,428 classroom teachers and other educational personnel (such as administrators, social workers, librarians, nurses) in the 2000-01 school year who failed the basic skills test at least once, according to data from the Teacher Service Record (TSR) system and the Teacher Certification Information System (TCIS). Of those, 1,100 (45 percent) had been recommended for certification by an approved teacher preparation program – 601 of them completed their teacher training at a public university in Illinois, 509 at a private Illinois institution.
- There were 3,167 educational personnel in 2000-01 who failed one of the 83 subject matter tests – 1,823 from Illinois public universities, 1,342 from Illinois private colleges and universities.
- According to information from the TSR database, 1,434 teachers failed the basic skills test only once since 1988. In addition, 455 flunked it twice, 201 failed three times, 112 four times, and 61 flunked five times. One person, from a foreign institution, failed 15 times.
- The State Board data show that 3,762 teachers failed a subject-matter certification test at least once. Also, 783 failed twice, 327 three times, and 185 four times.

**Table 2 Public Universities, Number, percent failed basic skills and subject matter tests, 1988-2001**

	<i>Basic skills failures</i>	<i>% of program completers who failed</i>	<i>Subject matter failures</i>	<i>% of program completers who failed</i>
<b>Chicago State</b>	146	3.86%	366	9.67%
<b>Eastern Illinois</b>	53	0.53%	211	2.13%
<b>Governors State</b>	60	1.4%	149	3.47%
<b>Illinois State</b>	46	0.33%	257	1.83%
<b>Northeastern Illinois</b>	121	1.88%	245	3.81%
<b>Northern Illinois</b>	49	0.42%	151	1.30%
<b>S. Illinois-Carbondale</b>	22	0.42%	81	1.55%
<b>S. Illinois-Edwardsville</b>	25	0.42%	70	1.19%
<b>U.-Illinois-Chicago</b>	43	0.76%	91	1.61%
<b>U.-Illinois-Springfield</b>	4	0.32%	17	1.35%
<b>U.-Ill.-Urbana-Champaign</b>	8	0.12%	57	0.84%
<b>Western Illinois</b>	24	0.4%	130	2.15%
	601	0.74%	1,823	2.25%

*Source: State Board of Education*

**This table shows the percent of education school graduates who were recommended by public universities for teacher certification and who have failed the state basic skills or subject matter certification tests at least once.**

All classroom teachers – including those who have yet to pass the basic skills test – must have a certificate issued by the State Board of Education. However, the basic skills test requirement is waived for teachers holding the transitional bilingual, substitute, and provisional vocational certificates. The Chicago Public Schools is the only school district that assigns substitute certificate holders to permanent classrooms.

**Table 3 Private Colleges and Universities, Number, percent failed basic skills and subject matter tests, 1988-2001**

	<i>Number failing basic skills test</i>	<i>% failing</i>	<i>Number failing subject matter test</i>	<i>% failing</i>
Augustana College	0	0.00%	11	1.15%
Aurora College	18	0.95%	32	1.69%
Barat College	5	1.58%	11	3.47%
Benedictine Univ.	4	0.57%	13	1.84%
Blackburn College	2	0.78%	4	1.57%
Bradley University	9	0.51%	31	1.75%
College of St. Francis	6	0.63%	29	3.06%
Columbia College	20	8.73%	18	7.86%
Concordia University	21	0.86%	60	2.47%
DePaul University	63	1.41%	109	2.44%
Dominican Univ.	13	1.10%	34	2.88%
Elmhurst College	23	1.20%	49	2.56%
Eureka College	2	0.45%	8	1.81%
Greenville College	5	0.76%	15	2.28%
Judson College	3	0.84%	2	0.56%
Illinois College	0	0.00%	13	2.82%
Illinois Wesleyan University	0	0.00%	7	1.09%
Kendall College	3	10.71%	0	0.00%
Knox College	0	0.00%	4	1.34%
Lake Forest College	0	0.00%	3	1.64%
Lewis University	26	2.10%	58	4.69%
Loyola University	41	0.94%	120	2.74%
MacMurray College	1	0.17%	14	2.43%
McKendree College	1	0.14%	18	2.45%
Millikin University	4	0.38%	14	1.32%
Monmouth College	2	0.30%	22	3.27%
Mundelein College	1	0.85%	4	3.39%
National College of Education	5	0.29%	16	0.92%
National-Louis University	64	1.01%	189	2.97%
North Central College	5	0.41%	21	1.73%
North Park College	8	1.22%	6	0.91%
Northwestern University	5	0.29%	16	0.94%
Olivet Nazarene College	2	0.18%	15	1.35%
Quincy University	5	0.73%	12	1.75%
Rockford College	8	0.78%	24	2.34%
Roosevelt University	82	2.99%	213	7.77%
School of the Art Institute	1	0.31%	4	1.25%
St. Xavier University	40	1.87%	94	4.39%
Trinity Christian College	2	0.39%	6	1.16%
Trinity Internat'l University	1	0.18%	4	0.71%
Univ. of Chicago	2	0.37%	3	0.56%
Vandercook College of Music	5	3.57%	14	10.00%
Wheaton College	1	0.09%	2	0.18%
	509	.99%	1,342	2.60%

**This table shows the percent of education school graduates who were recommended by private colleges and universities for teacher certification and who have failed the state basic skills or subject matter certification tests at least once.**

The State Board reports that 792 teachers who failed the basic skills test at least once held the Type 29 transitional bilingual certificate, and 1,504 teachers holding the Type 39 substitute certificate. Its data also show that 676 people who failed the basic skills test taught in elementary classrooms, 437 in special education, 163 in physical education, 131 in remedial reading (only two in remedial math), 24 in administration, and one in gifted education.

The State Board supplied two breakdowns of the number of teachers who failed the basic skills test or the subject matter tests by institution. One, apparently used in the *Sun-Times* series and also presented to a hearing of the Senate Education Committee, was from the Teacher Service Record data base. These data show the college or university (or state) from which the person reported receiving his or her bachelor's degree. This database does not show all institutions the person may have attended, including community colleges or other four-year colleges or universities; it only reports the baccalaureate institution the person identified when taking the basic skills or subject matter test.

The second source of institutional breakdown for those who failed one or both certification tests is the Teacher Certification Information System. This database identifies teachers who were recommended for certification by an approved teaching preparation program. So, a teacher candidate who is certified through "entitlement" has a degree from an Illinois college or university and has that institution's stamp of approval for obtaining certification as a teacher. Table 2 shows the number of basic skills and subject test failures among teachers recommended for certification by public universities' schools of education, plus the percentage those individuals represented of all who completed the teacher-training program. The subject matter tests include such fields as elementary and early childhood education, a variety of special ed categories, math, chemistry, English, history, and such. Table 3 displays the number failing and percentage of failures for graduates of Illinois private college and university teaching-training programs.

### **Remedies and Recommendations**

Until fall 2001, students majoring in education could take the Illinois Test of Basic Skills at any time during their college career. The exam tested knowledge and skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and language arts, and has widely been regarded as having about a ninth grade level of difficulty. Pass rates for most of the 57 colleges of education in Illinois typically were above 90 percent.

In fall 2001, the State Board of Education implemented a new, enhanced basic skills test, with a level of difficulty reported to be at a college sophomore level. Preliminary results of the test show that about 75 percent of students passed the test in its inaugural administration in September 2001, a pass rate significantly lower than the previous test – evidence of the increased rigor of the test.

Many institutions have adopted a requirement that students pass the new basic skills test as a gateway into a teacher preparation program. Others indicate they will use it as a gateway out of the program, a condition of graduation. Hence, in the future, there should be no student who graduates with a degree in education from an approved Illinois teacher-training program without having passed the Illinois Test of Basic Skills. The State Board of Education also has established a rule to permit colleges and universities to make passage of the subject-matter test a condition for student teaching.

These measures, however, will only address part of the problem uncovered by the articles in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The newspaper's investigation raised many questions about practices and policies related to teacher certification testing. At what level of difficulty are students asked to master "basic skills"? What remediation – if any – is available to students who fail either of the certification tests multiple times? What information is available – or should be – to school districts about the pass-fail history of prospective teachers on certification tests?

Additional steps are necessary to ensure that pre-certification tests have a meaningful function in screening candidates for teacher education and for their initial licensure and to give students a fair opportunity to pass the tests.

Further measures should be considered by the State Board of Education. For example, it could explore whether it should set a limit on the number of times a person can fail the basic skills test. It could further examine to what extent remedial opportunities are available – or should be – for those who fail the test multiple times. The Board should consider whether it is advisable to make scores on the basic skills and subject-matter tests available to school principals or other district personnel involved in hiring teachers.

The General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and the Chicago school board should examine the statutory provision that permits use of substitute teachers and others who hold provisional certificates without having passed any certification test to staff classrooms on a full-time, permanent basis.

Stopping there would be sufficient to attack most of the problems uncovered in the *Sun-Times* articles, but inadequate if state leaders are serious about addressing the full dimension of issues related to teacher quality and student learning. Beyond the narrow focus on basic skills, the *Sun-Times* articles shined a light on an issue with much broader and more significant implications. For example, in spring 2001, all high school juniors took the Prairie State Achievement Exam. The results – in every academic category more than 40 percent of students failed to meet state standards – indicates some gaps in the ability of teachers to teach to the Illinois Learning Standards, which the Prairie State Exam is designed to test.

So, it is fair and relevant to ask: How well are fresh graduates of teacher training programs being prepared to teach to the Illinois Learning Standards? What retooling do present teachers require to effectively teach the standards now being tested for all students through the Prairie State Exam? How can the higher education community contribute positively and effectively to assisting teachers in the field and in teacher prep programs to hone advanced skills to bolster student learning in K-12 classrooms? What steps can the Board of Higher Education, college and universities, and other policy-makers take to ensure that the weakest students get the strongest teachers? What steps are needed to reduce the number of teachers who teach outside their collegiate field of study? These questions beg additional study, and some immediate action.

## **Recommendation**

The staff recommends adoption of the following resolution:

*The Board of Higher Education, working in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board, should require a passing score on the Illinois Test of Basic Skills as a condition for admission to all Illinois teacher preparation programs.*

*The Board of Higher Education, working in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board, should require a passing score on the subject-matter test used for certification as a prerequisite for student teaching in that field in all Illinois teacher preparation programs.*

*The Board of Higher Education should work with the Illinois State Board of Education and the Illinois Community College Board to establish policies and programs that will:*

- *Ensure graduates of Illinois teacher education programs are able to teach to Illinois Learning Standards.*
- *Use professional development funds to help the existing teaching force teach to Illinois Learning Standards.*
- *Use technology and other means to reduce the number of teachers teaching outside their collegiate academic major.*

*The Board of Higher Education encourages Illinois colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs to move steadily toward the goal of meeting or exceeding NCATE 2000 standards.*

