

Certification/Licensure: Pros & Cons

The Education Commission of the States

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What Does the Evidence Say?

The emerging research is clear: High-quality teachers for all classrooms and linking teacher accountability to student achievement contribute significantly to student success.

States traditionally have relied on initial licensure and ongoing classroom evaluation to ensure teacher quality and accountability. But there are a number of shortcomings associated with the current approach:

- States vary in the number, type and duration of licenses they issue.
- Most states and districts still tie license renewal to such measures as satisfactory performance ratings by principals. The criticisms of this process are well-documented – reliance on standardized checklists, a limited amount of classroom observation, and little time devoted to understanding and acting upon results.
- States and districts link license renewal to the accumulation of academic credits without appropriate attention to the relationship among the credits earned, a teacher's individual needs and school or district needs.

There are significant areas of consensus about how to address teacher quality and accountability. There is growing agreement, for example, that the current practice of allowing significant numbers of students to be taught by teachers who are teaching out of their subject field should be stopped. There is also agreement that requirements should be imposed to limit the issuance of emergency or provisional certificates and that persons receiving such licenses should be required to become fully certified within a specified period of time.

In addition, experts agree that assessing teacher skills and content knowledge is an appropriate state function as part of the licensing process, and that the licensing process should support a teacher's continual acquisition of content knowledge throughout his or her career. Unfortunately, there is less agreement on how to evaluate teachers' ongoing performance and professional growth reliably and fairly, and who should be responsible for such evaluations.

While concerns remain about tying a teacher's evaluation to his or her students' performance, the "value-added" approach pioneered by William Sanders at the University of Tennessee is gaining some acceptance. His assessment addresses the frequently cited

criticism that teachers who start out with low-performing students are penalized if they are evaluated on the basis of student achievement rather than student progress.

Sanders' approach addresses concerns voiced in public opinion polls. These polls indicate the public is reluctant to judge teachers exclusively on student test results, recognizing that factors such as previous teachers, family background, parental involvement and student readiness to learn affect how well students do in school.

Significant progress in data collection and integration is required, however, before consensus can be reached about how to tie teacher effectiveness to student performance.

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