Connecticut is on a journey, carefully designed to engage stakeholders and build consensus, to improve the quality of educator preparation in the state. The goal is to ensure that all teachers are “learner ready” on the first day they take charge of a classroom.

In 2012, at the urging of school district leaders who wanted to increase the number of well-qualified new teachers, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a policy calling for significant changes in how teachers are prepared. A few months later, the legislature codified that policy by passing a comprehensive education-reform package supported by the governor.

“That came from school superintendents,” says Sarah Barzee, the chief talent officer for the Connecticut department of education. “There were issues of capacity and supply, as well as quality.”

But state officials believed that how the policies were developed and implemented was just as important as what the policies were. So instead of moving quickly to put together new policies on educator preparation, the state department of education formed an advisory group that included a broad range of stakeholders to conduct research, deliberate over what the policies should be, and come up with a plan that had broad support from the outset.

The advisory group, known as the Educator Preparation Advisory Council (EPAC), has been meeting regularly since 2012. While its pace has been deliberate—the effort was set back for about a year when the leadership in the department of education changed—state officials believe that the result will be an approach that will answer the superintendents’ needs, strengthen the quality of Connecticut’s teaching force and improve learning in the state’s public schools.

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About NTEP

The Network for Transforming Educator Preparation is a network of states that are using policy levers identified in Our Responsibility, Our Promise—specifically, licensure, program approval, and data collection, analysis, and reporting—to reinvent educator preparation.

These network states work with educators, preparation programs, institutions of higher education, non-profit and for-profit education providers, districts and schools to make substantive changes in the policy and practice of educator workforce preparation.
Unlike other states in NTEP, Connecticut has not yet addressed whether to change its requirements for teacher licensure. For decades, the state has had a three-tiered licensure system, under which graduates of teacher-preparation programs receive an initial license. Those who teach for at least two years, and take part in an induction program, receive a provisional license. Those who teach for at least three years and, effective July 1, 2016, complete a master’s degree, receive a professional license.

Although Connecticut has been using tests to measure basic skills and the content knowledge of prospective teachers, it has not yet used an assessment to determine how well they can teach. “How do we assess the proficiency and competency of teachers to demonstrate that they are learner-ready on Day 1?” says Barzee.

So for the past two years, seven institutions have piloted edTPA, a pre-service performance assessment developed by researchers at Stanford University that is used in a number of states.

The pilot was successful, and Connecticut is supporting an additional year of implementation with seven institutions in the 2016-17 academic year.

Connecticut officials have benefited from their participation in NTEP, they say. For example, discussions with colleagues from other states helped them envision the data dashboard they are in the process of building.

They caution that each state is unique, and must address local context and considerations. But Connecticut officials are confident that their strategy of engaging stakeholders through EPAC from the inception of the transformation process will result in better teaching and learning. “We switched the culture,” says Barzee. “We are working together in partnership.”
Setting Higher Expectations for Preparation Programs

Continuing program approval for educator preparation providers (EPPs) was one of the first issues the EPAC tackled. Although the state has long had a program approval process that officials believe helped ensure that EPPs were capable of producing excellent teachers, many also viewed the process as cumbersome for the preparation programs and time-intensive for the state. A streamlined process would make it more effective, state officials say.

"Even though we have a good, strong program-approval process, it’s expensive," says Elsa Nuñez, the president of Eastern Connecticut State University. "With all the budget cuts we have had in Connecticut, we don’t have the person power to do it at the level we want."

In the end, EPAC agreed to link the state approval process to the accreditation process sponsored by a national organization, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Under the plan, Connecticut will adopt CAEP's standards for educator preparation programs, and institutions will give the same documentation they need for CAEP accreditation to the state for program approval.

Barzee says the plan is a "win-win" for institutions and the state. "Institutions gain what they need for accreditation, and we gain what we need to be able to report publicly," she says.

The Connecticut State Department of Education is waiting to see how the CAEP process works in practice, since it is relatively new. But Barzee and Nuñez say that public reporting can be a powerful tool to encourage institutions to improve their curriculum and instruction and better prepare teachers to be ready to teach.

Nuñez notes, as an example, a program that received low marks under the previous approval process. "The state found a program wanting," she says. "It made the news, and all of a sudden the university put resources into it. People want to avoid [labeling programs as failures]."

Using Data to Improve Program Effectiveness

As part of its effort to revamp program approval, Connecticut is also strengthening its data capability to provide preparation programs, prospective teachers, and the public with a range of high-quality information on program quality. The department is building a “dashboard,” available on its website, that will include information on program completion rates, pass rates on licensure exams, feedback data from surveys of recent graduates and principals who hire new teachers, and data on the quality of partnerships between EPPs and school districts, among other factors.

Significantly, the dashboard will also link educator-preparation data with data on the workforce. In that way, provider institutions and the public will be able to see where graduates of each program are hired and how long they stay in their jobs. Provider institutions can use that information to step up recruitment and programming to ensure that they are producing educators for high-needs schools.

Barzee notes that having the state develop its dashboard will improve the quality of the data on preparation programs. For example, in the past, each institution of higher education produced its own survey of graduates and employers, but the response rate on those surveys tended to be low. A state-developed survey might get a better response rate, she says.

At the same time, the statewide information will enable officials in Hartford to look across programs and identify patterns and trends. "That gives us the opportunity to go in, ask why, and support improvement," she says.

For individual providers, the availability of data can shine a light on strengths and weaknesses and enable them to address problem areas, she adds. In the past, institutions have used data on pass rates on a reading-instruction test to make changes in courses for prospective teachers, Barzee says.

"We know data can serve as leverage for program evaluation work and [continuous improvement, including] curriculum reform work," she says.