Kentucky started on a path to dramatically improve student achievement in 2009 with the passage of Senate Bill 1, a law that transformed education in the state. That statute called on the state to adopt much higher standards for student performance and to realign all the parts of the education system to ensure that schools enabled students to reach those targets.

A key element of the transformation is educator preparation. Kentucky has been hard at work revamping the system for ensuring that preparation programs produce teachers who are capable of teaching to the new high standards for students. State officials have placed a strong emphasis on the development of data systems to help institutions and the state understand whether programs are successful in producing excellent teachers, and providing them with information and tools to help them improve.

“We saw data collection—to be able to help us weigh how programs are doing—as a crucial part,” says Jimmy Adams, the executive director of Kentucky’s Education Professional Standards Board.

The system has taken a while to create, Adams adds, because the state wanted to be sure to do it right. But now he and other state officials believe they are poised to strengthen educator preparation programs to take on the challenge presented to them seven years ago—to raise student performance significantly.

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.
Raising the Bar for Teachers

The state has revised its licensure exam for teacher-candidates to align with the standards that are used for evaluating practicing teachers. These revisions will help prospective teachers understand the standards they are expected to meet in the classroom and prepare for them even before they take on teaching positions. That way, state officials say, teachers will be prepared for their role on Day 1.

Kentucky awards licenses to candidates who complete a preparation program and pass certain tests. Teachers are required to renew their certificates every five years. Within 10 years, a teacher either has to complete a master’s program related to the area of teaching or complete an approved continuing education program.

April Wood, senior fellow at the Council for Postsecondary Education, notes that Kentucky is looking into ways to offer accomplished teachers additional responsibilities and encourage them to stay in teaching.

“We are looking at the number of people who leave the profession,” she says. “Are there different tracks they can go in?”

The Role of the Network

Through NTEP, Kentucky officials have been talking with colleagues in other states about “grow-your-own” programs. The state also has shared its knowledge of how to evaluate data from preparation programs with small enrollments, and is developing a paper on the topic.

Kentucky has combined a robust data system that can guide efforts to continuously improve teacher preparation with a focus on helping to develop districts’ workforces. Ensuring that teachers are highly skilled and equitably distributed are key state-level strategies for increasing student outcomes.
In an effort to get better information about the quality of preparation programs, Kentucky has developed an extensive data system that contains a wealth of information about the programs and the candidates who complete them. The system, known as the Kentucky Educator Preparation Accountability System (KEPAS), includes data on the selectivity of the programs, the performance of candidates on licensure exams, placement rates of completers, the satisfaction of completers and their employers with the preparation programs, scores on evaluations of practicing teachers, and more.

The state has conducted research and found that the influence of the preparation programs on teachers’ practice declines over time, so it has developed what it calls “proportional accountability.” Under that approach, the preparation institution is primarily responsible for teachers’ outcomes in their first three years of teaching; after that, the district takes on greater accountability for teacher performance. The state has adjusted the weights of the data to reflect those findings in assessing the quality of preparation programs.

Other research Kentucky has conducted has enabled the state to solve the vexing problem of how to measure the effectiveness of very small programs with relatively few teacher candidates. In many cases, states cannot produce data on these types of programs because the error rate is too large—one strong candidate (or one weak candidate) can skew the results.

In fact, the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), a national accrediting organization, cannot gather data on about half the programs in the country because they are too small to yield reliable and valid results. But Kentucky has been able to use a statistical technique to capture data on nearly all the programs in the state, according to Adams.

“They no longer get a pass,” he says. “We are able to determine the quality and effectiveness of the program.”

The primary purpose of the approval system is to help programs identify strengths and weaknesses and make their own improvements, according to Wood. For example, with the publicly available data, an institution that seems weak in mathematics can find a program that appears better in that area and find out what they are doing to produce better-prepared teachers.

However, Adams notes, the state is looking into what it can do if institutions consistently fall short of standards. And, he says, the program providers want the state to be able to step in to support them: “We need greater authority to ensure compliance. And programs are asking for us to have greater authority.”

Developing KEPAS has been a major undertaking. State officials have spent a lot of time consulting with stakeholders to ensure that the data are accurate and useful. “We wanted to build the thing right,” says Adams. “We were slow in getting out of the gate, because we wanted to establish the foundation we needed to build a solid system.”

State officials are now expanding the system to link the teacher preparation data with employment data from the Kentucky Center for Education and Workforce Statistics. This connection is a critical step toward ensuring equity for Kentucky's students, since it will allow program providers and school districts to see where well-qualified teachers are hired and where there are gaps. Rural areas of the state, and schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students, have more difficulty attracting well-qualified teachers, according to Wood.

“People are saying there’s a teacher shortage in the state,” says Wood. “That’s not necessarily the case. There’s a distribution problem.”

But with the data system, “we can identify areas we can recruit from a little bit more,” she adds.

Kentucky is conducting a study of every district in the state to make projections about its teacher workforce over the next five to eight years. To help school districts address workforce needs identified by the study, the state is developing guidance for how districts can establish “grow-your-own” programs that will help districts meet shortages by recruiting teacher-candidates from within.