When Massachusetts won a federal Race to the Top grant in 2010, state officials began to take a hard look at their system for preparing educators. The grant gave state officials the opportunity to improve teacher quality, but they realized that the current preparation system provided little information about whether the state was producing excellent teachers.

“We recognized that the system we had in place for reviewing programs needed to change. It was inputs-driven. We wanted to shift to an outputs-driven, evidence-based system,” says Elizabeth Losee, director of educator preparation and assessment for the Massachusetts Department of Education. The state decided to make changes, she adds, “not because we were not doing a good job. We didn’t know if we were doing a good job.”

The state instituted a number of changes to give educators better information on the outcomes of educator preparation, so that the data could be used to help programs improve. And the early results suggest that’s happening. The number of preparation programs with identified problems has declined, and surveys of providers confirm that the reforms are taking effect.

“Organizations report they believe their programs are better as a result of going through the [revised program-approval] process,” Losee says.

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.
In its efforts to upgrade the preparation system to ensure that teachers are ready to teach on Day 1, Massachusetts made several significant changes to its teacher-licensure system. One change was to double the minimum requirement for field experience for teacher candidates, from 150 to 300 hours, and to mandate that all candidates spend the equivalent of a full school year in their clinical teacher experiences.

These changes, state officials say, provide all candidates with the opportunity they need to experience all aspects of a school year, and to spend more time under the watchful eye of an expert mentor. Such opportunities will make them more experienced and more confident—and more prepared—by the time they become teachers of record.

To make sure that expectations were consistent across teachers’ careers, the state also revamped its performance assessment for teacher candidates by aligning it to the standards used to evaluate teachers in Massachusetts schools. That change will familiarize teachers with those standards and help ensure that they know what they need to do to meet them when they teach, according to Losee.

The change in the performance assessment has had profound effects on preparation programs, notes Sara Quay, the dean of the school of education at Endicott College. Her school has revised its entire field experience program to prepare students to succeed on the assessment, she says. Candidates now spend more time in classrooms in their pre-practicum period, which enables them to be ready to conduct more lessons for K-12 students in their practicum. In that way, faculty members and mentors can work with candidates who are struggling early in their practicum, rather than try to fix problems late in the year, she adds.

“Not only is [the revised performance assessment] an introduction for teacher candidates to the professional standards they will be evaluated on when they become teachers of record—which makes so much sense—it’s backed up into the whole program,” Quay says. “It’s ramped up expectations, and also provided opportunities for teacher-candidates to get in there, start practice teaching, and get feedback early and often. We think it’s really positive.”

Losee agrees, saying, “Candidates feel better prepared.”

Like the preparation program providers, the state is also looking at data constantly to improve educator preparation in Massachusetts. “We are tweaking the process as we go, based on the feedback we’ve received,” says Losee. “We’re never feeling that because it is this way now it will look the same way next year.”

In fact, one benefit for Massachusetts of participating in the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation (NTEP) has been collaborating with other states on data questions. For example, Massachusetts officials are working with peers from Delaware to examine ways to collect and share data about preparation programs.

But perhaps the greatest benefit of the network is the way it has made educator preparation a high priority, Losee says.

“We believe educator preparation is a huge lever in making a difference in student achievement and growth,” she says. “I’m pleased CCSSO is bringing the work to the surface. As a result of their efforts, educator preparation has got more of a voice nationally.”
In their effort to produce better information on the quality of preparation programs, Massachusetts officials revamped their program-approval process to focus on the outcomes of the programs. To accomplish this goal, the officials created a set of standards for all programs and asked them to provide evidence that they were meeting the standards, rather than prescribing precisely what the programs should look like.

For example, says Losee, the standards stress that recruitment practices should yield a diverse candidate pool, while stopping short of requiring specific percentages for members of minority groups. “We say, ‘Are you putting things in place that will yield a diverse candidate pool?’” Losee says.

The new system also requires preparation program providers to complete a “needs assessment” for programs with very low enrollments. The state engaged with various stakeholders to ensure a transparent and responsive process for examining programs with low enrollment. The state agreed to allow institutions to maintain programs in science, mathematics, technology, and engineering education (STEM), as long as the president signs a letter in support of the programs. That exception is based on the recognition that teachers in STEM fields are in perpetually short supply, and the state agreed with the institutions that these programs should be continued, according to Losee. Other programs that can’t demonstrate need will be eliminated, Losee explains.

The new rules focus on elevating best practices and recognizing high-quality programs. They add a new category, “approved with distinction,” which will recognize exemplary programs that could become resources to other institutions throughout the state. Massachusetts can also approve a program conditionally, after which the institution must come up with an improvement plan, and can shut down programs that are seriously deficient.

The new rules focus on elevating best practices and recognizing high-quality programs.

Using Data to Measure Success

The program-approval process is also designed to encourage institutions to examine their own data and consider revising programs on their own. Unlike in the past, when institutions amassed volumes of data and sent them to state officials for review, the new system expects institutions to conduct an analysis of the data before submitting their reports.

Massachusetts officials have also encouraged institutions to improve the way they collect and analyze data. The state paid for institutions to attend a weeklong summer institute at the Harvard Graduate School of Education on data analysis. That experience has led to substantial improvements at Endicott College, according to Quay, the dean.

For example, the faculty used the process they learned at the institute to examine data from the content exam teachers must pass to earn a license. The pass rate on the mathematics exam had been declining, and when the faculty looked closely at the test, they found that the candidates had struggled with a question about a teaching scenario. They worked to develop an instructional strategy to teach candidates how to deal with the scenario, and the pass rate immediately shot up from 45 percent to 72 percent.

“We’re digging into student data, reflecting on our practice as educators in teacher prep, and making program adjustments based on what we learned from the process,” says Quay. “That’s brand new.”