Washington

Washington has taken an inclusive approach to revamping teacher preparation policies and program reviews. That has made it easier to launch new measures, including a portfolio-based assessment for teacher candidates and a data-based system for reviewing teacher preparation programs.

These efforts began in 2000, when the legislature created the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB). Then in 2006, PESB was given authority over educator preparation. At the time, Washington was like most states. It monitored preparation programs with state evaluators who would visit programs periodically, using their professional judgment to determine whether programs were acceptable.

Jennifer Wallace, the board’s executive director, says that system created the “Lake Wobegon” effect, referring to Garrison Keillor’s fictional town in which “all the children are above average.” But she and other state officials could not say with certainty if new teachers were ready to teach when they entered classrooms.

“Particularly at a time when the K-12 system was transforming itself using data for continuous improvement, for us to respond with an antiquated accreditation model wasn’t cutting it,” Wallace says. “How do we know teachers are having a positive impact on students?”

So the board and its partners set out to redesign how the state oversees teacher preparation and to drive program improvements. The system is not fully in place, but early signs suggest it is making a positive difference. “Principals say recent graduates seem to be more ready,” says Lucinda Young, a lobbyist for the Washington Education Association.

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.
Washington is using a multi-pronged approach to confront the challenges that most states face, such as making sure that teachers are ready to lead instruction when they are hired, creating a steady supply of teachers for high-need communities and in all subjects, and diversifying the teacher workforce.

The educator standards board’s focus on teacher readiness has led to stronger and uniform requirements for teacher licensure and a data-driven system to guide the continuous improvement of teacher preparation programs.

Today, the state’s revamped, two-tiered licensure system grants a residency certificate to beginning teachers who complete an approved preparation program—including alternative routes—and pass content tests. In addition, practicing teachers can get a professional certificate by passing a portfolio-based performance assessment, known as ProTeach, or earning certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Washington also was one of the first states to pilot edTPA, a portfolio-based assessment for teacher candidates that is based on their work in K-12 classrooms during student teaching. Washington now requires candidates to pass edTPA to complete their preparation programs, not to take it separately as a licensure exam. That’s because many teachers come from other states that do not require edTPA.

The use of the portfolio assessment also has given preparation programs data they can use to identify program strengths and areas of need. For example, programs have responded by changing courses to better support lesson planning or student assessment, and have carved out time for candidates to complete the reflections required for edTPA. Initial reports suggest such changes have helped teachers become more prepared for the classroom. “We’re now hearing from new teachers that it’s a lot of work during the student teaching experience, but it’s helping them be a better teacher,” Young says.

In their work, Washington officials have benefited from participation in the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation (NTEP). For example, the state team is looking to Georgia to help solve its dilemma about local capacity for data collection, since Georgia has established an indicator system in which the state does the bulk of gathering data.

Washington also has taken the lead in convening states from across the network. The goal is to explore a new vision for how licensure systems might evolve and become a more complementary part of wider state efforts to support teachers in their preparation programs and after they enter their first classroom.

Washington’s NTEP team also has helped facilitate important local conversations about educator preparation, according to Young.

For several years, Washington has brought in stakeholders from across the education spectrum to be part of the conversation and development of the new policies and systems. This has included P-12 representatives as well as faculty and administrators from educator preparation programs. The 10-member Professional Educator Standards Board is made up of P-12 teachers and administrators as well as staff from educator preparation programs.

Young notes that the fact that she, as a union official, is part of the conversation will help make change possible. “If teachers and school districts are not in the discussion, it’s harder to bring home radical changes,” she says. “The best changes are when all are in the room together to learn and make change a reality.”
Washington is a national leader in the transition to a more data-informed system of program review that can support preparation programs’ continuous improvement and answer questions about the effectiveness of various aspects of educator preparation. The overall goal is to establish transparency and public accountability for preparation, program quality and program approval that is linked to the success of program completers and measured by student-based evidence.

When the system is complete, the state will produce an array of indicators on each program. The data will help Washington hold programs accountable for how well they prepare teachers and encourage them to make the changes necessary to improve. Washington began piloting an array of indicators of program effectiveness in 2015 and 2016. Eventually, the system will include indicators that reflect the selectivity of preparation programs; candidate completion rates by race and ethnicity; knowledge and skills of graduates, based on exam scores; perceptions of first-year teachers; student perceptions of their novice teachers; retention rates; and effects on student learning.

The data also will indicate whether programs are graduating students in high-need subject areas and placing new teachers in communities with large populations of low-income students.

“For us, the question is what they look like when they are exiting, how effective they are in the classroom, and are they staying in teaching?” Wallace says.

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State officials are still discussing what should happen if the indicators show problems in preparation programs. Under current plans, institutions themselves should take the first look. “Indicators are just that—indicators,” says Wallace. “They’re like the check engine light in a car.” A self-study by the institution, she adds, would enable the institution to “see if it’s something electrical or a problem with the engine.”

If problems persist, the state would likely intervene more aggressively, and ultimately, could decline to accredit a program, Wallace notes. But the primary purpose of the system should be to encourage program providers to look at their data and make adjustments outside of a formal state review. To assist, the Professional Educator Standards Board has held a data summit to help providers understand the indicators and how to address them, and to look to other institutions for guidance.

“We’re working with them to create a different culture,” says Wallace. “We want to facilitate a conversation outside formal program review.”

With new changes to how programs are reviewed and approved, Wallace notes, the state is working to make sure that programs are prepared to really drive their own ongoing improvement. This will require supports to institutional leaders as they look to provide resources, particularly around data collection, to their faculty and their staff during this transition.