

TEACHING PROFESSION

What Happened When States Dropped Teacher Licensing Requirements?

Studies outline how states' pandemic waivers to licensing tests affected teacher supply and effectiveness



By [Sarah Schwartz](#) — August 14, 2025 ⌚ 4 min read



A first grade teacher greets her class in front of Christa McAuliffe School in Jersey City, N.J., Thursday, April 29, 2021. New Jersey and other states waived some certification requirements for teachers during the pandemic to ease hiring, but the results of those policies contained some tradeoffs for teacher quality.

— Seth Wenig/AP

How hard should it be to become a teacher?

It's an ongoing debate, with proponents of higher barriers to entry arguing they're necessary to ensure quality candidates—and skeptics saying they unfairly shut out prospective educators who could be effective in the classroom. The research on certification requirements, licensing exams, and other professional screening mechanisms generally points to tradeoffs, rather than clear-cut answers.

When the pandemic began five years ago, it presented a natural experiment to study the question in more depth. Many states relaxed their teacher licensure rules and created emergency certification processes, removing requirements for prospective educators to take the exams that they would have otherwise had to pass.

Studies of this time period out of several states, including Massachusetts and New Jersey, showed that, in the wake of these policies, teachers' performance held steady, and a more racially diverse group of candidates entered the profession.

But two new papers from the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, orCALDER, at the American Institutes for Research present a more complicated picture.

Nationwide, there's no definitive evidence that emergency waivers resulted in large numbers of new teachers entering the profession. And in one state, Massachusetts, where the emergency licensing process remained in place past 2022, teacher performance of newly hired teachers declined over time.

Taken together, the research provides more evidence of how the pandemic period affected the composition of the teaching profession, and offers clues about how permanent changes to licensure requirements could play out for student achievement.

It's possible that the comparable performance that some states initially saw between traditionally licensed and emergency licensed teachers wouldn't last if those changes were to become permanent, said Dan Goldhaber, the director of CALDER and an author on both papers.

“That is what we saw initially, but it isn't what we saw downstream,” he said.

Mixed teacher effectiveness outcomes

To determine the overall change in teachers entering the profession, the researchers analyzed federal teacher workforce data from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, comparing measures of teacher supply—such as initial licenses awarded, and graduates from teacher-preparation programs—between states that offered flexibility in licensure test requirements in 2020 and states that did not. They controlled for a series of demographic and economic factors.

“We do not find definitive evidence that states that put in place waivers of licensure tests saw increases in teacher supply,” Goldhaber said.

That finding comes with a caution, though, he added. Because of statistical limitations, the research can only determine there weren’t large effects. It’s possible there were smaller increases in the teacher workforce that the analysis doesn’t capture, he said.

It’s also possible that the temporary nature of the waivers influenced the findings. “People are not that likely to make career decisions based on a short-term regulatory change,” Goldhaber said.

The other CALDER paper, a research brief, examined who received emergency teaching licenses in five states that instated pandemic-era policies: Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, and Washington state.

They found that teachers who entered the profession under these licenses were, on average, more racially diverse than their peers who went through a traditional certification process from 2017 onward. These emergency-licensed teachers were also more likely, in all but one state, to work in schools serving larger shares of Black and Hispanic students, and students from low-income families.

In the school year immediately after these policies were put in place, teachers who had emergency certification and those who had regular certification performed about the same—they scored similarly on measures of teacher effectiveness, and received similar performance ratings.

But in Massachusetts, which did not reinstate its testing requirements until 2023, teachers who went through emergency certification in later years were less effective in math and science.

The study, the researchers write, “underscores the idea that loosening licensure rules alone is an incomplete—and, in some cases, potentially counterproductive—strategy for reshaping the

composition and quality of the teacher workforce.”

Some argue for widening pathways to the profession

Still, some experts say there’s still not enough evidence to suggest that testing requirements need to continue in their current form.

“It’s not a slam dunk that the licensure requirements are definitely boosting teacher quality, but they are definitely limiting supply, especially for teachers of color,” said education analyst Chad Aldeman.

Aspiring teachers of color fail these tests at higher rates than their white peers, and some researchers have argued that they don’t capture important components of success in the profession, like the ability to build healthy relationships with students.

Research on licensure tests shows that, in most cases, scoring higher on the test means teachers will be more effective in the classroom. But there’s still a “reasonable argument to be made” for widening pathways into the profession, Alderman said.

“I’m willing to tolerate some risk of lower performance, for the benefit of greater supply and greater diversity,” he said.



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