Redesigning Educator Preparation Programs

I. Why Redesign Educator Preparation?

Why do new college- and career-ready standards demand changes in teacher preparation?

Our society desires and expects professionals to keep up to date with the latest developments and emerging knowledge in their fields. We want our doctors to know the latest techniques and treatment protocols. We want our lawyers to be familiar with new laws and precedents. We want our auto mechanics to know how to handle the computers and new technology in our vehicles. We want them all to be able to accommodate changes that are almost constantly unfolding.

We want the same thing for teachers. As states implement college- and career-ready standards with the expectation that greater numbers of K–12 students will graduate ready to enter and succeed in postsecondary education or the workforce, they understand that teachers play an essential role. No one is more important—teachers are central to the work. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), along with many other state-based college- and career-ready standards initiatives, ask that current and future educators be ready to prepare K–12 students to a new, higher benchmark of academic success.

The essential role of teachers has focused a great deal of attention on the quality of teacher preparation programs. Are graduates of these programs ready to effectively teach students? Survey research suggests that most principals believe that teachers are not well prepared for what they will encounter in classrooms.[1] Interestingly, the same finding applies to preparation program graduates themselves. Policymakers and stakeholders have been asking for better information about the effectiveness of preparation programs. Early efforts by the federal government to require states to report on the quality of preparation programs focused on inputs. An inputs approach, however, did not fully reflect how graduates were actually performing with students. The federal government is now proposing a shift to a more outcomes-based approach recognizing that a teacher's performance in the classroom is the ultimate measure of a teacher preparation program. Separately, the National Center for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is annually publishing results of a much-debated ranking system of teacher preparation programs.[2] While the rankings show few programs meet the highest standard of performance defined by NCTQ, they have stimulated significant conversations around program and policy redesign.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS OF AN ALIGNMENT AGENDA?

This is the sixth in a series of briefs that provide an introduction to important areas for K–12/ higher education collaboration and alignment. Each brief includes basic information, practical advice, vignettes based on real state experiences and a list of resources for additional information. The other briefs are:

BRIEF 1: Achieving the Benefits of K–12/ Higher Education Alignment.

BRIEF 2: Defining College and Career Readiness.

BRIEF 3: Adopting New College- and Career- Ready Assessments.

BRIEF 4: Developing and Using College Readiness Courses.

BRIEF 5: Aligning Gateway College Courses.

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At this time of greater scrutiny, many educator preparation programs are examining their current practices and making adjustments to better prepare educators to address the new standards and the pedagogical shifts taking place in classrooms. Entering teachers need to employ advanced teaching techniques to help all students meet college- and career-ready standards; understand and use technology to enhance learning; set achievement goals, design classroom assessments, and gather and interpret student data from many kinds of assessments to continuously inform teaching and reteaching and to personalize learning for each student; address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population; and take on building leadership roles, such as coaching and leading instructional improvement in collaboration with other teachers.

The question is not whether educator preparation programs should adapt but how and when they will. Two national organizations have developed new standards for educator preparation. The Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) newly revised Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Model Core Teaching Standards and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation's Accreditation Standards move beyond content and pedagogical knowledge and include expectations for clinical practice, partnerships with higher education, the performance of teachers in the classroom and measuring the impact program graduates have on K–12 student learning. Many states are beginning to align educator program requirements to these new standards, and increasing numbers of preparation programs are engaged in the process of redesign.

What is higher education's role in the work?

Educator preparation has traditionally been the purview of higher education, and transforming teacher preparation is the clearest of the responsibilities of higher education in this era of K–12 education reform. A recent American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education study shows that more than 80 percent of all teacher preparation program completers in the United States came through higher education–based programs.[3] Moving the needle on preparation programs at postsecondary institutions can make a significant difference to the quality of educators nationwide and can affect the learning of millions of students.

The higher education role is most clearly defined in developing the structure and content of the educator preparation programs themselves. In aligning to more rigorous college- and career-ready standards, programs should prepare educators not only to master a higher level of content but also to teach it effectively (pedagogy). Furthermore, programs need to embrace the context in which teachers will practice their profession and help them master the use of technology, understand and use differentiated instructional strategies, understand and use assessment tools, and make use of data to improve teaching and learning.

Higher education also must foster collaboration with colleagues from the K–12 sector. K–12 educators have direct insight into the implementation of college- and career-ready standards in their classrooms, their own preparation and professional development needs, and the needs of their students. School principals deeply understand what skills and capacities are essential to classroom success. To successfully address the changing needs of educator preparation, working together across sectors is not an option; it is a necessity.

Finally, higher education can play a role in discussions about changes to state laws and requirements, such as those for licensure and program approval. Here, too, K–12 and higher education leaders have an excellent opportunity to work together to increase the effectiveness of the state's educator preparation programs and related policies and structures.

II. Practical Advice for Redesigning and Aligning Educator Preparation

A number of states and institutions have redesigned their educator preparation programs to align to new college- and career-ready standards and the realities of the focus on helping all children succeed. The following advice comes from the experiences of some of these leading states and institutions and is presented here to support the efforts of states or institutions planning their own redesign initiatives.

1. Build public commitment to the redesign initiative from postsecondary leadership.

The success and sustainability of a redesign initiative depends on buy-in and support from institutional leadership. The support of presidents, provosts and deans can mean the difference between a well-intentioned but short-lived set of changes and a systemic redesign effort that the institution as a whole supports administratively and financially. State postsecondary leaders can generate high-level support through direct communications with institutional leadership about the critical role of educator preparation programs in statewide implementation of higher standards. Committed institutional leaders then carry the message to faculty, teachers, communities and other stakeholders about the importance of higher standards, improving college readiness outcomes and the role that well-prepared teachers play in helping students succeed.

2. Engage postsecondary faculty from both education and arts and sciences, and foster cross-college alignment.

In most postsecondary educator preparation programs, instruction in core content areas (math, science, history) is the purview of the college of arts and sciences, while the pedagogy, methods and clinical practice components are taught through the college of education. Collaborative partnerships across the colleges of education and of arts and sciences can lead to a common understanding of new expectations for teachers and how to meet them and ensure that educator preparation programs emerge with a more integrated approach to preparing new teachers. Collaborating to deeply understand the new K–12 standards and assessments is a good first step. Kentucky facilitated this type of collaboration by creating a set of easily accessible online modules about the state's new standards for use by teacher preparation faculty.[4]

Institutional leadership can support this work by establishing collaborative governance structures, in which faculty and leadership from both departments work together to provide guidance to the institution's teacher education program, and an academic culture that supports and rewards such collaboration.

3. Engage K–12 teachers and leadership.

Current K–12 teachers and administrators can serve as invaluable partners to higher education in the redesign of educator preparation programs. As the employers of new graduates, the implementers of new state standards, and those held accountable for meeting new state and federal requirements, K–12 educators and leaders can provide great insight into the needed knowledge and skills of incoming teachers. Postsecondary leaders and faculty can build on existing partnerships with local K–12 schools to establish cross-sector working groups focused on program redesign. They can also collaborate to identify and implement more and better clinical experiences that expose candidates to real-world teaching earlier and more intensely.

4. Address content and pedagogy elements of new standards in program redesign, as well as new assessment approaches and evaluation frameworks.

New teachers should understand content in a framework that allows them to effectively teach that content to students. New college- and career-ready standards often require new emphases within content areas; for instance, the CCSS require students to be adept at close reading of complex text and the application of key mathematical practices. Using active learning principles, programs can incorporate opportunities for candidates to model these behaviors within their coursework, as well as during their student teaching.

Many states are developing and implementing educator evaluation systems that set clearer and higher expectations and are linked to statewide student assessments. These systems are motivated by the desire to make a clear connection between strong teaching practices and improving student outcomes. Future educators who become familiar with state K–12 assessments and evaluation systems have a better understanding of the expectations for teaching practice and the practical realities of being a successful teacher.

5. Ensure a strong clinical preparation component.

Possibly the most critical part of educator preparation is hands-on experience for candidates. New expectations for preparation programs, including emerging state and federal accountability structures and accreditation requirements, encourage or require more significant classroom experience prior to licensure. Student teaching in a real classroom setting, once relegated to the final year (or semester) of preparation, is frequently being infused throughout a much longer period in many preparation programs.

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Postsecondary institutions need to work with K–12 colleagues to reassess strategies for placement and supervision of preservice students during their student teaching to ensure that preservice students gain the fullest benefits of practical experience. It is important that experiences take place in high-quality settings and that mentor teachers can guide candidates' growth and development. Preparation programs can use surveys of their graduates to determine which parts of clinical experiences helped them the most or were the weakest. Georgia has initiated regional collaboratives among preparation programs and K–12 districts with the purpose of creating stronger partnerships to support more and better clinical opportunities.

6. Provide in-service professional development that reflects content and pedagogy changes.

Many colleges of education play an important role in in-service teacher professional development. Colleges should leverage this role to help drive alignment of professional development to new standards and new pedagogical demands. A highly regarded presence in providing high-quality in-service professional development can strengthen the contribution of higher education to the successful implementation of the new standards and to improvements in student outcomes. The most effective programs are developed in close collaboration with K–12 partners based on identified needs. Kentucky supports Partnership Academies, which link higher education institutions to K–12 partners, and focuses professional development on areas for which assessment data show that improvement is needed. Sharing data and engaging in joint data analysis can be a helpful strategy in efforts to design more effective in-service professional development.

7. Use state policy levers to align and codify structural changes.

State leaders are often concerned about how to make effective practices systemic and sustainable. Changes to state laws and regulations, while not always necessary, can solidify a state's commitment to structural changes. In the case of educator preparation programs, these policy levers include program approval, educator licensure, and assessment and certification requirements. If a state is already in the process of revisiting laws and policies, it may make sense for state leadership to consider how to align such revisions to new college- and career-ready K–12 content and teaching standards. By presenting a united front to state legislators, K–12 and higher education leaders can more convincingly advocate for changes to regulations that will ultimately increase the effectiveness of the educator workforce.

8. Collect and analyze data related to program effectiveness.

Increasingly states and the federal government are turning to data-driven approaches to gauge the success of educator preparation programs. Colleges of education should similarly embrace a data-driven perspective, identify valid metrics, and collect and analyze appropriate data. Such data collection and analysis can help drive efforts to continuously improve program structures and preservice experiences.

III. Actions in States: Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts and Tennessee

Georgia

In Georgia, the Department of Education, the University System of Georgia and the Professional Standards Commission, along with the Georgia Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, work closely to support a comprehensive reform of teaching practice. The state's Race to the Top grant drove the development of new educator effectiveness systems, new teacher and principal induction guidance for districts, and new measures to gauge the success of teacher preparation programs. These changes were accompanied by a transformative revision to the state's teacher preparation program regulations, which required assurances that teacher candidates be prepared to implement the state's new standards and the new educator effectiveness system. The regulations required preparation providers to maintain formalized partnerships with P–12 schools focusing on continuous school improvement and student learning and growth and called for more robust teacher field and clinical experience. The state also adopted edTPA (a content-specific, performance-based assessment for teachers developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity). All of these changes were highly aligned and integrated.

The state also benefited from participation in the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation (NTEP), developed and supported by CCSSO. Participation in this initiative deepened the state's focus and actions on teacher preparation and licensure, program approval, and tracking teacher candidate performance in the classroom.

State agencies jointly provide support to preparation providers in adapting to these changes. The support is based on the results of a state survey of institutional needs for technical assistance. A process guide and self-assessment tool were developed to ensure that the differentiated support the agencies provide meets those needs. Significant electronic resources are available to support the work. The state also supports a regional structure to help broker improved P–12/preparation provider partnerships and foster regional sharing of information and collective problem solving.

Maryland

Maryland's approach to improving teacher preparation features the Governor's P–20 Leadership Council playing a significant policy formulation and coordination role. The state's work represents a collaboration among the Department of Education, the University System of Maryland, the Higher Education Commission, the Maryland Association of Community Colleges, and the Maryland Independent College and University Association.

In October 2013, Maryland convened a Teacher Education Summit hosted by the University System of Maryland. The goal of the convening was to "conduct a comprehensive review of the major issues and components of teacher education in Maryland in order to identify common challenges, themes and priorities to meet the changing needs of students and society." One outcome of the summit was the formation by the Governor's P–20 Leadership Council of a Task Force on Teacher Education to develop a set of recommendations to advance the quality of teacher education programs. In May 2014, the task force presented a draft report with some initial recommendations. The task force presented an action plan based on some of the recommendations to the P–20 Council Executive Committee in September 2014 calling for the state to institute a three-year residency program that would reflect a scaling up of teaching responsibilities during pretenure years. It also called for embedding continuous improvement and accountability into educator preparation programs and educator career advancement structures. These recommendations led to a legislative briefing in 2015 to the Maryland General Assembly and a request from the General Assembly for an implementation plan by 2016.

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One area of focus for Maryland has been teacher induction. Maryland is developing creative and sustainable strategies that focus on the quality of the induction process. This work includes exploring a regional approach that supports new teachers regardless of the institution where they received their education. Maryland hopes to create benefits not only for new teachers but also for teacher preparation faculty who will receive increased feedback about the quality of preparation programs and school systems, which will benefit from a greater presence of teacher preparation faculty.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts also initiated its focus on teacher preparation with a statewide summit in September 2013. The Advancing Educator Preparation in Massachusetts convening highlighted the issues of aligning teacher preparation programs to state standards and education system needs. The summit focused on three goals:

- Comprehensive integration of the CCSS in Massachusetts' educator preparation programs;
- Embedding the goal of an effective educator in every classroom and school; and
- Advancing collaborative work around educator preparation, standards and assessment.

Like Georgia, in October 2013 Massachusetts also joined the NTEP. As part of this effort, the state outlined an ambitious action plan that touches issues of licensure, program approval, data systems and the realignment of subject matter knowledge requirements for teacher preparation programs.

Massachusetts has continued to use statewide summits to promote reform. For example, in May 2014, the state convened a summit entitled Unpacking the New Curriculum Standards to create greater understanding of the state's new standards as well as best practices for the use of data for program improvement and enhancement.

Over the next several years, educator preparation programs will be working in Alignment Working Groups to develop and implement action plans for program changes. The work will include assessing current conditions and planning needed changes (phase 1) for initial implementation, program monitoring and plan adjustments (phase 2), and completing full implementation, including the use of teacher performance assessment for all candidates (phase 3). The state is also exploring whether it should require educator preparation programs in public institutions of higher education to hold national accreditation.

Tennessee

In Tennessee, the success of teacher preparation reform hinges on voluntary collaboration among the state's teacher preparation programs. The Institutions of Higher Education Advisory Board was created by the state to assist institutions in coordinating their efforts to align to the state's new standards and improve the overall quality of new teachers. The work of the advisory board is coordinated by the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation at Lipscomb University and is supported by the state Department of Education and the Higher Education Commission.

The enactment in 2007 of legislation requiring the creation of a report card to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs catalyzed the state's teacher preparation reform efforts. The report cards include data on the academic profile of completers, placement and retention rates, licensing exam pass rates, and the effectiveness of each program's graduates based on Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System results. The state's successful federal Race to the Top grant application in 2010 included a commitment to use the report card information as a factor in educator preparation program approval.

The Ayers Institute has developed a number of useful resources to support reform efforts. These include self-assessment instruments that allow teacher preparation programs to examine their own practices and curricula and plan for changes and improvements. A video library illustrates various practices and provides examples of model lessons in each grade level and subject area. Videos also address coaching, collaboration, data use and other related topics. A series of online courses provide an introduction to the standards as well as educate teacher candidates in student engagement, instructional strategies that capture the pedagogical shifts in the standards, and planning and assessing for learning.

Endnotes

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