

Tougher Teacher-Prep Admissions Standards Called for in Report

By Brenda Iasevoli Nov. 15, 2016

How can teacher preparation programs attract the best and brightest? Raise admissions standards, says a new study published on Tuesday.

Education schools nationwide are battling teacher shortages and ever-decreasing enrollments. But according to a new report, it's a mistake for education schools to choose a quick fix: downgrading requirements to make it all too easy for students to gain admission.

Lowering the bar for ed school admission would fill the profession with subpar teachers, the report says, and discourage top students from considering a career in teaching. As evidence, the report points to a survey of top college students that found that 58 percent would consider majoring in education if admissions standards were higher.

The report, "Within Our Grasp: Achieving Higher Admission Standards in Teacher Prep," was published by the National Council on Teacher Quality, a DC-based group that tracks teacher policies.

"You want a surefire way to keep talent from considering teaching?" said NCTQ's president, Kate Walsh. "Keep it a low-status proposition to major in education."

We need only look at Finland, according to the report, to see the benefits of high standards when choosing future teachers. Finland recruits candidates from among the top 10 percent of its college graduates, the report says, and its students outperform U.S. students on international tests.

Despite Finland's example and "a strong body of research," the idea of raising ed school admission standards faces opposition. Yet NCTQ's analysis found that most of the 221 undergraduate elementary education programs it studied "likely met" higher GPA and testing standards than were actually required.

Walsh said researchers had to classify programs as "likely meeting the standard" based on the data available. Data on GPA requirements for admission came from course catalogues and program websites, while average SAT and ACT score data of admitted students came from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the most recent College Board's Annual Survey of Success. Walsh suggested the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education do a more exact analysis using data from the teacher-prep programs it represents, which is not available to NCTQ.

The report questions the decision to lower ed school admissions requirements by the Council for Accreditation for Educator Preparation. (You can read about the CAEP's troubled history here). Under the ed school accreditor's old Standard 3, ed programs would have been required to admit a group of candidates with at least an average 3.0 GPA and have scores averaging in the top half on nationally norm-referenced tests like the SAT or other similar evidence of academic achievement. The rewrite of Standard 3, however, allows teacher prep programs to delay meeting the requirements until candidates are ready to graduate. The report argues that under this arrangement, ed schools have an easier time of meeting the GPA requirement since teacher candidates tend to earn higher grades than students with other majors.

Chris Koch, the president of CAEP, explained that part of the concern around Standard 3 was the notion that it barred potential candidates who may have become good teachers simply because they couldn't meet the standards at the beginning of the teacher prep program. The standard, in Koch's view, is the same, it just allows candidates more time to meet it.

"The standard is still in place, it's just the time line that has changed," he said. "Students still have to meet the standard before they graduate. So if you're not good in math, you could conceivably work on your math skills and when it's time for you to do your licensure exam, you could meet the requirements. The quality is still there."

Koch also pointed out that many high school students graduate unprepared for college, and about half are reading below grade level. "This is the supply chain into our institutions and we're trying to address what's actually there and give them a chance to meet the standards," he said.

When CAEP backed down from tougher standards due to pressure from ed schools, so did many states that had already put in place high admissions standards. Twenty-five states set high admissions standards in 2013, according to the report, but many backed away when CAEP agreed to allow ed schools until graduation to prove their candidates' academic eligibility.

The report faults that move with states and ed schools abandoning previous commitments to higher standards. For instance, the number of states requiring a GPA of 3.0 or higher before being admitted to a teacher prep program fell from 25 to 11. The number requiring a test taken by general college applicants (such as the ACT or SAT) dropped from 19 to three.

The kicker for NCTQ was that the study found more than half of the programs it examined "likely met" the requirements under CAEP's original, tougher admissions standards, and another 35 percent were close to meeting them.

The report also addresses the concern that tougher admissions standards will thwart efforts to diversify the teacher workforce. Ed programs can set selective admission criteria, according to the report, and still fill its student body with diverse teacher candidates. The evidence for that claim is NCTQ's analysis of 900 undergraduate elementary ed programs, which finds that 13 percent are both selective and diverse.

Walsh said the number isn't perfect, but it proves that it's not impossible for ed programs to both require higher admissions standards and recruit diverse candidates. "It's deeply insulting for people of color to always hear that the only way anyone can expect you'll qualify for the profession is if you keep the standards really low."

Drops in ed prep program enrollment were temporary, according to the report, resulting from teacher layoffs during the Great Recession. Now that there are more teaching jobs, the report claims, more students are enrolling in ed school.

There's no need then for ed schools to make hasty decisions, such as lowering admissions standards, that will degrade the profession and possibly turn off talented prospective teaching candidates.

The report advises CAEP to approach the problem of raising admissions standards with the help of teacher prep programs that are already meeting the previous, more rigorous standards. They can work together to convince other programs to adopt the original standards. If we don't hold teacher candidates to a higher standards, argues Walsh, "we will continue to perpetuate a reputation on college campuses that the education major is for students who can't cut it in other fields."

"If we continue the argument that anyone should have access to the teaching profession, that how smart they are is immaterial, the people who will most suffer are poor children and minorities," she said. "You often hate to use the word

intelligent or smart when talking about teachers. It sounds elitist. But being intelligent means you're a quick thinker and what job requires quicker thinking than teaching?"

Koch argued that the problem is not as simple as barring students who can't immediately meet admissions requirements from entering teacher prep programs. "We agree that K-12 learning is likely to be higher when the teacher has higher academic achievement," he said. "However, achievement is a prerequisite, rather than a predictor because it takes a lot more than knowledge of content to do well in teaching."