

Performance-Based Test for Teachers Rolls Out



Jaclyn Midgette, helps Trell Chalmers, 10, with his homework while others play at recess. Midgette, a 4th grade reading and social studies teacher at Bullock Elementary School in Sanford, N.C., was part of the pilot group who took the new edTPA, a performance-based licensure test, when she was in school at East Carolina University. —Justin Cook for Education Week

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#) **Premium article access courtesy of Edweek.org.**

Jaclyn Midgette has no shortage of adjectives to describe a new performance-based licensing test she took as an undergraduate teacher-candidate at East Carolina University: stressful, drawn out, and exhausting, to name a few.

But now that she's a bona fide, full-time teacher, Ms. Midgette acknowledges that the planning, instructional, and analytical skills measured in the test—which at least seven states are already planning to use—surface frequently in her instruction.

"The reflection process they forced us to do is something I see myself doing daily. It's just not written out," said Ms. Midgette, now a 4th grade teacher in Lee County, N.C.

As the test, known as the edTPA, kicks into high gear in 2013-14 after two years of pilot testing, thousands more teacher-candidates will be expected to demonstrate those competencies to receive a teaching certificate. New York and Washington state plan to introduce it into licensing by spring. By 2015-16, seven states will make it part of teacher certification or use it to review their preparation programs.

University-based programs have been dogged by criticism—[including from U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan](#) and [nongovernmental groups](#)—and have been pressured to do more to hold themselves accountable. The edTPA, developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, with the help of state officials and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, is the teacher education field's main response to those pressures.

But questions linger about whether the edTPA will galvanize widespread improvements in teacher preparation, as its supporters hope. Much of that depends on where states choose to set the passing bar on the exam, whether forthcoming research will demonstrate that high scores are linked to better teaching, and finally, whether teacher-educators, who hold a range of opinions on the exam—some less than flattering—come to embrace it.

Proponents believe it could launch new ways of defining and measuring teaching practices in ways that professions like medicine and nursing have used for decades.

"I look at this as a first, really good step in a process of a profession moving to performance-based assessment," said Ameer Adkins, the associate dean for undergraduate programs and assessment at Illinois State University, in Normal, where the exam has been piloted since 2010-11. "That's probably really long overdue for us in teacher ed."

Developing a Measure

In development since 2009, the edTPA (short for teacher performance assessment) differs from most current licensing exams measuring teachers' basic skills or content knowledge. Drawing on the portfolio assessment used as part of national-board certification, an independent honor, the edTPA requires teachers to complete a portfolio centered on several successive days' lessons.

Teacher-candidates submit lesson plans and tapes of their teaching, evidence that they assessed their students and tailored the lesson to particular groups, as well as their reflections detailing what next steps to take.



"Touch your nose when you are on the right page," Jaclyn Midgette tells her students. Midgette, a 4th grade reading and social studies teacher at Bullock Elementary School in Sanford, N.C., took the new edTPA as a teacher-candidate at East Carolina University as part of the pilot group for the performance-based licensure test.

—Justin Cook for Education Week

The content and teaching styles are largely left up to teacher-candidates. Ms. Midgette's edTPA portfolio, for instance, used the children's favorite *Amelia Bedelia*, about a maid who takes everything literally, to teach idioms.

There are some 27 iterations of the exam across subjects and grades, all scored against frameworks by two trained education faculty or teachers.

About half the states joined a consortium [to support the exam's development](#). Pilot testing of the exam included some 12,000 teacher-candidates in more than 300 colleges across those states.

AACTE, a membership group based in Washington, has been a major proponent of the exam, helping to drum up support for the pilot among its members.

"It is a common measure aligned with high standards that will give us the confidence a teacher is ready to take charge of her classroom on Day 1," Sharon P. Robinson, the president of AACTE, said at the exam's formal launch in Washington last month.

Faculty Reactions

Teacher-educators' responses to the exam, so far, are varied. Some have been proponents.

In North Carolina, a handful of programs have begun using the edTPA even in the absence of a legislative mandate to administer it. Six schools in the University of North Carolina system now use it to set a common benchmark across campuses and facilitate the sharing of best practices.

Ms. Adkins of ISU said that after initial misgivings, most faculty members have come to see the exam as something that can strengthen their teaching.

"There are still pieces of it that different faculty don't appreciate to different extents but, by and large, most of our faculty have settled into how this can be embedded into their practice," she said.

Policy Landscape

States are in various stages of adopting a new performance-based licensing test for teachers, called edTPA, as part of their teacher-preparation programs.



SOURCE: Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity

Still, a vocal group of teacher-educators view the exercise as a Trojan horse that invites corporate influences into higher education. The Stanford group's selection of the for-profit publisher and testing company Pearson to administer the exam and oversee scoring has [fueled such criticism](#). Claims that the assessment will standardize teaching and learning in education programs have also emerged and seem particularly prevalent in New York, which adopted the exam just last year and is moving to implementation faster than other states.

"We won't be a test-prep program," said David Cantaffa, the assistant dean for teacher education at the University at Buffalo, of the State University of New York. "Some of what we do already will help our students pass, but we're really trying not to make the edTPA something our program is structured around. I refuse to have the edTPA control who we are as teacher-educators and what it means to be a successful teacher."

To an extent, such debates illuminate a long-standing tension within teacher preparation: whether there is a core body of knowledge and skills every preparation program should convey—or whether, as proponents of "critical pedagogy" theory assert, programs' primary

duty is to help candidates question traditional education policies and structures that purportedly contribute to inequities.

Setting the Bar

As states move to attach stakes to the exam, among the first challenges they face is setting a cutoff score.

Based on the results of the pilot exam, panels convened by edTPA's developers recommended a maximum cutoff point of 42 out of 75, which would result in 58 percent of candidates passing the exam on their first try.

But states get the final decision on standards-setting, and depending on how much breathing room they leave, passing rates could be significantly higher.

Washington state held its standards-setting last month and finalized a cutoff score of 35—a standard deviation below the score of 40 that a panel of teachers recommended earlier in the year. About 85 percent of candidates are expected to pass at that level, officials said.

"Given that it's a brand-new assessment and that it's as much for continuous improvement as for accountability, we went conservative," said Jennifer Wallace, the executive director of the Washington professional educator standards board, which oversees licensing and teacher-preparation programs.

In some sense, the stakes are highest for policy on teacher education writ large.

Among policy analysts, the edTPA continues to generate some skepticism. For one, there's no evidence yet showing that prospective teachers who pass the exam are better teachers—or that principals will be able to make use of the scores in hiring decisions, said Melissa Tooley, a policy analyst at the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank.

"We don't know whether there are certain areas that are much more clearly linked with performance in the classroom than others, and if so, maybe those are the ones that we need to put the most focus on," Ms. Tooley said.

Research Forthcoming

Two small-scale studies conducted by the Stanford center on an earlier exam that informed development of the edTPA show connections between teachers' scores and student learning,

but the two tests aren't identical. The center plans to conduct studies on the new assessment as greater numbers of teacher-candidates take it.

"I don't know of an exam in another field where predictive validity has been established before adoption," said Raymond L. Pecheone, the executive director of the center, "so I think education is well out ahead of many other fields."

In the meantime, teachers such as Ms. Midgette feel that parts of the exam could be slimmed down or refined, but they also see value in some exercises.

Alyssa Thompson, a first-year biology teacher and graduate of Illinois State University who took the edTPA last year, agrees that some parts of the exam felt repetitive. But she appreciated its focus on lesson planning and how to assess students, and believes it's given her a leg up on understanding Illinois' new teacher-evaluation system.

And she endorses the idea that getting a license should require a demonstration of skill.

"It's hard," Ms. Thompson said, "but becoming a professional should be hard."

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