

## Disparities in Teacher Certification

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**Abstract:** The United States Constitution did not give the federal government the power to regulate education. Consequently there is a lack of cohesion and standardization within the United States in teacher certification. The differences and quantity of teacher training and certification leads to inconsistency in teacher certification.

The professional development and certification process of teachers within the United States is an inconsistent process in which there is not one guiding policy that insures a single, consistent educational process to train teachers. This problem has implications for this country's ability to ensure a standardized quality of education throughout the United States.

This paper will review national recommendations for certification and samplings of different state processes for certification along with private sector attempts to influence the professional development of teachers.

In a lecture given in November, 2002, at Florida International University, Dr. Peter Cistone stated that since the United States Constitution makes no mention of education and the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution gives powers to the individual states not reserved to the federal government then the states become "all powerful" in education. Additionally, Dr. Cistone also argued that since the United States has a "strong religion of localism," the states have therefore become all powerful in education .

Despite the Constitution's lack of mentioning education the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) developed a mission statement that reads:

The National Boards mission is to advance the quality of teaching and learning by: (a) maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do, (b) providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards, and (c) advocating related education reforms to integrate National Board Certification in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of National Board Certified Teachers. (p. 1)

According to Dilworth and Imig (1995) a comprehensive system of national certification assessments began operating in late 1994. The NBPTS, which draws membership and support from both major national teacher unions and a wide range of education constituents, has the potential to affect a broad range of issues through certification. These include:

(a) a national agreed-upon definition of advance teaching practice in the individual disciplines and grade levels; (b) state incentives for teachers to apply for certification, including differentiated pay scales;(c) school district hiring practices that would recognize national certification status; (d) equity in the distribution of nationally certified teachers across school districts within a state; (e) differentiated staffing in schools to recognize distinct roles for certified teachers; and (f) reciprocity arrangements across states to recognize the status of nationally certified teachers. (p. 3)

As the NBPTS states in their mission statement the certification process for them is voluntary. So therefore as Dilworth and Imig (1995) point out the NBPTS “has the potential to affect...certification” (p. 3). A review of just a few of the states’ individual certification requirements further drives home the point that there is no standardized certification process that any national agency can enforce.

I will begin with a review of Florida’s certification requirements and will use our state as a basis for comparing certification requirements with other states. As of July 1, 2002 there are three basic steps to obtain certification in Florida. Step 1: to earn a Statement of Eligibility. prospective teacher must submit \$56.00, hold a bachelor’s degree (minimum), meet specialization requirements in a subject Florida offers certification in or a passing score on the Florida Subject Area Exam, and hold a minimum 2.5 grade point average in the certification subject. Step 2: to be used a three-year nonrenewable Temporary Certificate, teachers must in addition to include the above-mentioned Status of Eligibility, provide proof of employment in an instructional position, and submit fingerprints for a back ground check. Step 3: to be issued a five-year Professional Certificate, significant for this paper, in addition to meeting the requirements for Steps 1 and 2, the teacher candidate must satisfy the education courses as outlined in Rule 6A-4.006, FAC; pass the: Florida General Knowledge Test, the Florida Professional Education Test, and a subject test; complete what is simply called an “approved system for demonstration of Professional Education Competence” (Educator Certification, 2002, p.2). The requirements as outlined in Rule 6A-4.006 General and Professional Preparations are the following: twenty semester hours in professional preparation to include six semester hours in foundations of education courses (specifically sociological and/or psychological foundations); six semester hours in general methods of teaching, administration, and curriculum; two semester hours of teaching methods of the subject being applied for; and six semester hours in a supervised teaching program.

Although an aspiring teacher from Florida who wishes to get a five-year Professional Certificate has many gates to pass through, Florida’s requirements for granting a professional certificate to a teacher from another state can be less or more stringent. Applicants from another state have three routes of getting a professional certificate in Florida. Route 1: Hold a valid certificate from another state, have two years of continuous teaching within a five-year period before the date of application for the Florida Certificate, and apply for the Florida Certificate for only the subjects shown on the out of state certificate. Route 2: (Holder of a Nationally Certified Certificate) Already hold a valid certificate from another state, a valid certificate issued by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and apply only for the subjects already granted certification in on the state and National certificates. Then there is Route 3, which is entitled Educator Certified by a comprehensive testing state (of which Florida is considered one of these states). “To qualify for a Professional Certificate..., the applicant must hold a valid standard certificate from a state which requires general knowledge, professional knowledge, and subject knowledge tests for certification” (Florida Department of Education, 2002b, p 3). Currently, these states are Hawaii, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia. The three tests mentioned above are of course the equivalent to the Florida General Knowledge Test, Professional Education Test, and subject test required for the five-year certificate of Florida educators.

Routes 2 and 3 are rather straight forward and in the case of Route 3 they allow an out of state teacher from one of the 12 states requiring tests for certification to get a Florida Certificate.

But, what about a teacher from a state other than those twelve? That teacher would have to get a Florida Certificate via Route 1. Route 1 does not require that three tests be taken by the applicant. All that is essentially required is a valid out of state certificate, two years teaching experience within the last five years, and an application in the subject area the out of state certificate is valid for. The actual document the state publishes explaining the procedures for Route 1 states, “All of the above testing requirements for a Professional Certificate in Florida are satisfied if the following criteria are met” (Florida Department of Education, 2002c, p. 1). Therefore, there is built into the certification system for Florida an institutional lack of consistency in granting Professional Teaching Certificates.

A sample of two states, Idaho and South Dakota can illustrate the extreme disparity between their requirements for certification and Florida’s. Idaho requires the usual processing fee and fingerprinting (which is part of the initial teacher application process). An aspiring Idaho teacher who wants to obtain a professional certificate must submit transcripts and a Professional Experience Form after they have two or more years teaching experience. If all forms are in order, then a professional certificate will be issued. South Dakota requires that “the candidate has met the standards of an approved program and can be recommended for certification” (South Dakota Division of Education, 2002a, p.1). The South Dakota rules also require a teacher take a three-semester hour course in Human Relations and another three-semester hour course in South Dakota Indian Studies. Superficially this is a unique requirement until you realize that about half of South Dakota is a Lakota/Dakota Indian Reservation. Obviously then a South Dakota or Idaho teacher could apply for and get a Florida Professional Teacher Certificate via “Route 1” and never have to meet the requirements that Florida demands of its Professional Teacher Candidates.

As opposed to South Dakota and Idaho, Georgia grants out of state teachers applying for certification a one-year certificate to complete any special Georgia educational requirements for certification provided the applicant already has a valid teaching certificate from another state. Georgia’s special requirements include course work in “identification and education of children with special education needs is required for all teaching fields, Educational Leadership, Media Specialist, and School Counseling” (Georgia Professional Standard Commission, 2002, p.1). Also certain fields require course work in reading, and everyone must take a content knowledge test in field. Clearly, Georgia has very specific requirements that they expect to have met. Even a teacher coming from Florida would still have to take some classes to meet the Georgia standards, the special education classes being the most obvious since they are not required for a Florida Certificate. On the other hand a Florida teacher has gone through testing “overkill” since Georgia does not require the three certification tests that Florida requires.

On the other hand, New York has more stringent requirements than the other states discussed. As I have noted earlier in the Florida section, New York requires a teacher to pass the same three tests as Florida. However, New York also requires eighteen-semester hours in professional education courses and thirty-six hours in subject matter specialization (as opposed to South Dakota’s requirement of 24 hours). Teachers must also complete one-year of language study, a school violence prevention workshop, and a child abuse identification workshop. These are the requirements for a temporary certificate (entry level certificate). To receive a permanent certificate to teach in New York State the candidate must also hold a Master’s degree. This includes out of state teacher applicants.

Besides the individual state requirements (which only 10% of the United States were addressed), 39 out of 50 states are exploring alternative teacher certification. Festritzer and

Chester's study (as cited in Otuya, 1992) "identified about 91 alternative routes to certification with varying programmatic characteristics" (p. 2). Basically, the alternative certification process is designed to "certify candidates who have subject-matter competencies, without going through formal teacher preparation" (Otuya, 1992, p. 1). Additionally all candidates must hold a four year degree, pass a certification test, go through a teacher training period, and complete an internship. Georgia and Florida are two of the states exploring this alternative route to certification. Georgia, in its literature merely states "alternative routes to certification in Georgia exist for individuals who have completed college degrees in disciplines other than education and who are interested in the education profession" (Otuya, 2002, p. 1). An example of this used in Georgia is "Troops to Teachers," which targets retired military personnel.

The final area in which certification is influenced is in the private sector. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence (CREDE) is a prime example. CREDE has a system that is meant to guide teacher professional development and evaluation. A template is used to accomplish this, which as the CREDE literature says "will contain elements from your school, district, and state, as well as CREDE's Standards for Effective Teaching" (CREDE, 2002, p.1). Basically this is designed to be integrated within a state's accreditation procedures with this private firm providing the materials improving teacher practices, professional dialogues, and student achievement. As they state in their literature, "our goal is to organize, simplify, and integrate all district professional development requirements into a cohesive, relevant process" (CREDE, 2002, p.1). All of this is available to any state or district for a fee.

There is a huge gap in the standardization of teacher certification in the United States as evidenced by the National Board of Teaching Standards recommendations, the five states sampled, the movement toward alternative certification, and the private sector represented by CREDE. Indeed, to quote Dr. Cistone's phrase, the "religion of localism" prevails within this country for teacher certification and until a Constitutional Amendment can be ratified correcting this, inconsistency in training teachers and lack of standardization in certification procedures throughout the fifty states will be the rule and not the exception. The implications for the future are obvious. Unless something is done beginning with an amendment to the Constitution, which would guarantee a centralized authority; the United States will never have uniformity in teacher certification and consequently will not be able to standardize education quality within this country.

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