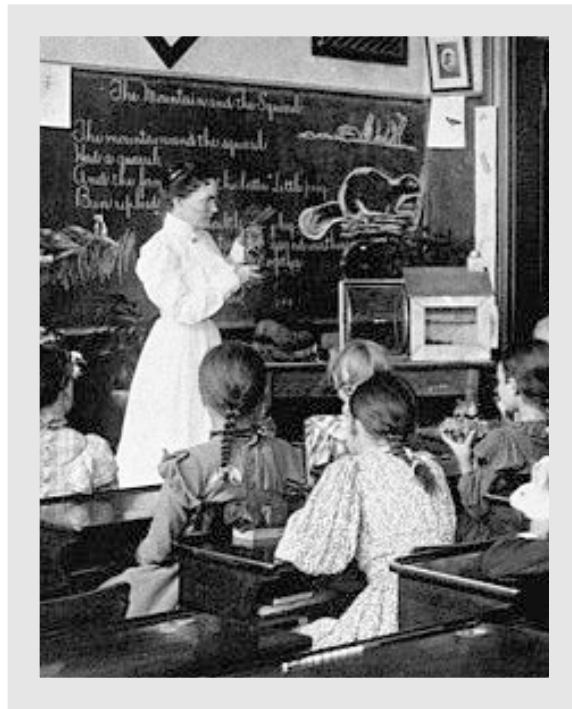


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2001



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Any errors remain my own.

Kate Walsh  
Senior Policy Analyst



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Maryland's requirement that individuals must complete a pre-  
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scribed body of coursework before teaching in a public school is  
.....  
deeply misguided. This process, known as teacher certification,  
.....  
is neither an efficient nor an effective means by which to ensure a  
.....  
competent teaching force. Worse, it is often counterproductive.  
.....

The importance of good teaching to the academic success of students is intuitively obvious to any parent and is well substantiated by a body of sound research. Correspondingly, ensuring that good teachers staff public schools is a critical policy objective in Maryland and across the nation. All states, including Maryland, have developed regulatory policies under the seemingly logical theory that requiring credentials of teachers is simply good government in action. These regulations prescribe the process for certifying teachers, whereby individuals who want to teach must first complete extensive coursework (usually completed in an undergraduate program), in both the field of education and the subject they intend to teach.

At the heart of this policy is a claim by the education establishment that taking the coursework needed to obtain certification is not only the best,

but also the only acceptable means for preparing teachers. This assertion, some claim, is supported by a body of research consisting of 100 to 200 studies. This report reveals in detail the shortcomings found in this research. In fact, the academic research attempting to link teacher certification with student achievement is astonishingly deficient.

To reach this conclusion, we reviewed every published study or paper—along with many unpublished dissertations—cited by prominent national advocates of teacher certification. We found roughly 150 studies, going back 50 years, which explored or purported to explore the relationship between teacher preparation and student achievement. To our knowledge, there has been no comparable effort by analysts to drill systematically down through these layers of evidence in order to determine what value lies at the core.



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The following deficiencies characterize the work advocating teacher certification:

- Research that is seen as helping the case for certification is cited selectively, while research that does not is overlooked.
- The lack of evidence for certification is concealed by the practice of padding analyses with multiple references that appear to provide support but, once read, do not.
- Research is cited that is too old to be reliable or retrievable.
- Research that has not been subjected to peer review is given unmerited weight, with particular reliance on unpublished dissertations.
- Instead of using standardized measures of student achievement, advocates design their own assessment measures to prove certification's value.
- Basic principles of sound statistical analysis, which are taken for granted in other academic disciplines, are violated routinely. Examples include failing to control for such key variables as poverty and prior student achievement; using sample sizes which are too small to allow generalization or reliable statistical inference; and relying on inappropriately aggregated data.

## SEEKING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

For as long as the teacher certification process has existed, there has been dissatisfaction with it. One after another reform of the process has been promoted, usually from within the ranks of the education establishment. These reforms do not address a fundamental weakness of the certification process: its crude capacity for ensuring quality under any configuration. This process consists primarily of counting course titles, showing no regard for the possibility that knowledge can be acquired by means other than coursework, for the actual content of a college course or the quality of the instruction, for the educational standards of the college, or for even the grade earned. These omissions render the process incapable of determining the true quality of teacher candidates.

Certification deems substandard all uncertified candidates, no matter what other attributes they possess, including those attributes that research correlates with effective teaching.

There is a scientifically sound body of research, conducted primarily by economists and social scientists, revealing the attributes of an effective teacher, defined as a teacher who has a positive impact on student achievement. This research does not show that certified teachers are more effective teachers than uncertified teachers. In fact,



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The teacher attribute found consistently to be most related to raising student achievement is verbal ability.

the backgrounds and attributes characterizing effective teachers are more likely to be found *outside* the domain of schools of education.

The teacher attribute found consistently to be most related to raising student achievement is *verbal ability*.

████████████████████  
Most researchers understand verbal ability, usually measured by short vocabulary tests, to be a measure of a teacher's general cognitive ability. Recent research has altered significantly our understanding of cognitive ability or intelligence. A person's cognitive ability is no longer understood to be an exclusively innate quality that depends entirely on our genetic composition at birth. Verbal ability is to some degree plastic in nature, capable of being improved at all levels of schooling, including college.

Not surprisingly, the importance of verbal ability aligns with similar findings that teachers who have attended selective colleges are more likely to raise student achievement. Private school principals routinely seek out teachers who appear to be bright and use the selectivity of the teacher's college as a possible indicator of a teacher's aptitude. On the other hand, Maryland and its public school districts not only fail to recognize the importance

of these qualities, but also often eschew them, a rejection that contains a strong undercurrent of anti-intellectualism.

Certification is an inhospitable process, deterring from entering public school teaching many capable individuals who possess the most powerful attribute identified for raising student achievement.

### THE PRACTICE IN MARYLAND

The Maryland State Department of Education appears to place considerable confidence in traditional teacher certification process, without any evidence that its certification regulations improve teacher quality. It has never sought to determine the value of its costly and time-consuming certification process. Absent any Maryland study justifying teacher certification, the State cites 12 national studies, newsletters, and articles as proof of certification's value. Only three of these even attempt, none successfully, to make the case that teacher certification improves student achievement. The remaining nine make no such case and any references to research are ambiguous (see Appendix A).

Maryland, not unlike other states, lists 66 different kinds of teaching certificates in its regulations. This regulatory excess contrasts with medicine,



## TEACHER CERTIFICATION

law, accounting and dentistry, for which states typically issue only one license. Teach for America, a national organization that supplies teachers to under-resourced school districts, identifies Maryland's regulations as "the most stringent" of any of its fifteen regions located across the United States.

If Maryland's complex regulations governing teacher credentialing do not accomplish their purpose and, in fact, undercut that purpose by discouraging potentially excellent teaching candidates, then deregulation is in order.

In its 1990 report, the Maryland Governor's Commission on School Reform put education reform at the forefront of policy changes needed in the State. The report called for the elimination of rules, regulations, and other constraints on school staffs, specifically citing its suspicion that state teacher certification requirements impede quality education.

The Commission's findings led to some early and important reforms, including the creation of the State's alternative teaching certification program, known as the Resident Teacher Certificate, along with a reduction of education coursework required for traditional certification. However, these reforms were largely eroded in the late nineties, mainly by a 30 percent increase in the requirements for education coursework created by the State's reading initiative. This initiative, though well meaning, may represent regulatory

overkill, incapable of distinguishing between the needs of different schools and different teachers in the State.

There are no direct consequences to State officials for poor school performance yet these officials are the gatekeepers of the teaching profession.

new teachers since its inception in 1990, though nearly 50,000 teachers have been hired in the State during this same time period. Resident teachers, by virtue of the high academic requirements for the certificate, bring strong academic credentials, outscoring traditionally trained teachers on the national teacher's exam, a good indication that they have higher verbal ability on average than the traditional teacher candidate.

Although the State holds its nearly 1,400 schools accountable for their student outcomes, by various punishments and rewards, it restricts these schools' ability to decide freely the single most important teacher variable in student achievement: the quality of their teachers. In contrast, the State is accountable to no one. There are no direct consequences to State officials for poor

Maryland has also placed further regulatory obstacles on the issuance of its Resident Teaching Certificate. Never embraced by State or local district education officials, this alternative route has provided only 500



## TEACHER CERTIFICATION

school performance yet these officials are the gatekeepers of the teaching profession.

**Private Schools and Public Colleges.** In contrast to its policy regulating public school teachers, Maryland does not regulate private and parochial school teachers; nor does it regulate teaching faculties at either public or private colleges and universities. Given this disparity and the lack of research to support its regulations, Maryland's zeal for certifying public school teachers does not appear to be premised on certification's ability to assure teacher quality, but rather on protecting the power wielded by the State's education establish-

ment and national teacher organizations such as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCATF) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Their overwhelming self-interest is aligned with rigid state regulations of the teaching profession.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Maryland should eliminate the coursework requirements for teacher certification**, in favor of much simpler and more flexible rules for entry.







## TEACHER CERTIFICATION

The only fixed requirement should be a bachelor's degree and a passing score on an appropriate teacher's exam. This exam must assess foremost a teacher's verbal ability, along with the basic knowledge and skills needed by an elementary teacher, including knowledge of research-based reading instruction, and the specialized content knowledge needed by secondary teachers.

2. As an accountability measure, **the Maryland Department of Education should report the average verbal ability score** of teachers in each school district and of teacher candidates graduating from the State's schools of education.

3. **Maryland should devolve its responsibility for teacher qualification and selection to its 24 public school districts.** It should encourage these districts to place hiring decisions primarily in the hands of school principals.

4. **School districts and principals should rely on more productive methods for helping teachers gain the instructional skills and knowledge needed to be effective:** comprehensive new teacher induction programs, reduced teaching loads for first-year teachers, ongoing professional development closely associated with the curriculum, including the teaching of reading, and outcomes-based performance evaluation.

Unless hiring authority is delegated to individual

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A principal's judgment may be fallible, but it is certainly no more fallible a measure than the current regulatory approach that decides who teaches.

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schools, hiring decisions will shift only from a state-level bureaucracy to a district-level bureaucracy. School principals, most appropriately, must bear the responsibility for their hiring decisions; and both the State and the school districts must hold these leaders accountable for results. A principal's judgment may be fallible, but it is certainly no more fallible a measure than the current regulatory approach to deciding who teaches.

Such an overhaul represents a direct threat to schools of education and other education groups that benefit from the flawed certification process. Although these groups will readily admit that the teacher preparation system is in dire need of repair, their reform agenda consistently leads to heavier state regulation, more time for prospective teachers in schools of education, and a crackdown on alternative certification routes and waivers. It is patently insufficient to consider another re-tooling of the certification process. Reinvention is in order.