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REVIEW OF *WITHIN OUR GRASP: ACHIEVING HIGHER ADMISSIONS STANDARDS IN TEACHER PREP*

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Summary of Review

Based on a review of GPA and SAT/ACT requirements at 221 institutions in 25 states, a new report from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) recommends that states, institutions of higher education, and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) maintain or establish a higher bar for entry into teacher preparation programs. The NCTQ report suggests that boosting teacher candidate entry requirements in ways they advocate would significantly improve teacher quality in the U.S. Yet the report does not provide the needed supports for its assertions or recommendations. In addition, the report makes multiple unsupported and unfounded claims about the impact on teacher diversity of raising admissions requirements for teacher candidates, about public perceptions of teaching and teacher education, and about attracting more academically able teacher candidates. Each claim is based on one or two cherry-picked citations while ignoring the substantial body of research that either provides conflicting evidence or shows that the issues are much more complex and nuanced than the report suggests. Ultimately the report offers little guidance for policymakers or institutions.



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I. Introduction

NCTQ is a private non-profit U.S. organization, created and funded in 2000 by the conservative Fordham Institute to promote alternative routes to teacher certification and to challenge education schools as the major provider of teacher preparation. *Within Our Grasp* is NCTQ's 2016 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. It focuses solely on selected states' standards regarding GPAs and SAT/ACT scores for the admission of teacher candidates to preparation programs. In particular the report zeroes in on the impact of CAEP's 2016 decision to change its "get tough" 2013 standard, which stipulated that teacher preparation programs ensure that the average GPA of any accepted cohort of teacher candidates meet a minimum of 3.0. In 2016, CAEP changed this standard by allowing teacher preparation programs to meet the 3.0 cohort average GPA requirement either at the point of admission or at another point in time prior to program completion, as determined by the program. Although the words of the report's title, "within our grasp," and "achieving higher admissions standards," indicate that boosting teacher candidate entry requirements in the precise ways advocated in the report would significantly alleviate the problem of teacher quality in the U.S., the report does not make this case, and it offers little guidance for policymakers or institutions.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Within Our Grasp reports the results of two analyses: The first summarizes state policies regarding candidate admissions to teacher education programs. The point of this analysis was to determine whether states had raised admissions standards for teacher education candidates between 2011 and 2015, and then in 2016. The second analysis considers the credentials of undergraduate teacher candidates in up to ten of the largest teacher preparation institutions in 25 states—11 that have state-level 3.0 GPA average program admissions requirements and/or require a test normed to the college-going population and 14 that require CAEP accreditation for all programs (and thus require CAEP's admission standards). The point of the second analysis was to estimate whether or not 221 selected institutions in

these 25 states were “likely meeting” or “not likely meeting” state admissions requirements and/or CAEP’s admissions standards as initially written in 2013. The report represents the results of this analysis using bar graphs showing the institutions that were “likely meeting” the requirements in each of the 25 states. The NCTQ report lists three findings:

- Between 2011 and 2015, 25 states established higher admissions standards for teacher education with 11 doing so through state law and 14 through national accreditation requirements.
- The number of states with higher admissions standards dropped from 25 in 2015 to 11 in 2016 following the changed CAEP requirement in 2016.
- A majority of the programs the report examined were “likely meeting” higher GPA and test score requirements for admissions. In states with laws requiring higher admissions standards, 75% were “likely meeting” the requirements, 10% were “likely not meeting” requirements. In CAEP states more than 50% were “likely meeting” and only 13% were “likely not meeting” CAEP’s 2013 admissions standards.

The report makes three recommendations (p. *iii*) based on the idea that if states have higher standards, programs generally meet them:

- States should maintain a commitment to stronger admissions requirements.
- CAEP should identify a pathway to achieve higher admissions standards.
- Teacher preparation programs can and should implement a more meaningful bar for admission to their programs.

III. Rationale for Findings and Conclusions

The report’s rationale is based on several interrelated assertions about what is wrong with teacher education and how to fix it: entry requirements for U.S. teacher education programs are too low; low entry requirements (GPA and test scores) are a central determinant of low teacher quality generally; we need to boost admissions requirements—especially GPAs at entry. The NCTQ report asserts that this would go a long way toward solving the teacher quality problem by enticing more talented people to enter teaching and simultaneously boost the public’s regard for teaching and teacher education. The report makes this rationale explicit in its conclusions, which, as we show below, are somewhat circular, are not adequately justified in the report, and are not based on the report’s analyses: “Higher standards for entrance into teacher preparation programs benefit teacher candidates, their future students, and the profession as a whole...Raising admissions standards to combat a low regard for the teaching profession and to increase the talent pool of teacher candidates has to be part of the larger strategy to achieve a more talented teacher workforce” (p. 14).

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The NCTQ report cites 39 sources, some of which are intended to support their claims. Just under a third of the references are peer-reviewed journal articles or research institution reports. Other references include six to NCTQ's own reports as well as commentary and other non-peer-reviewed reports from think tanks, advocacy organization, and the government.

The assertion at the heart of the NCTQ report, which zeroes in on teacher candidates' scores on tests taken by the college-going population and on GPAs *at the point of entry*, is this: a "strong body of research supports a relationship between student performance and the selectivity of admissions into teacher preparation" (p. 2). To support this assertion, the report mentions Finland, wherein teachers are recruited into teacher preparation programs from the top 10% of college graduates, along with a string of citations in the report's Footnote #8. A closer look at these and other citations reveals several trends in the report's use of research: the report works almost exclusively from an underlying market logic of education reform, as evidenced by multiple citations to econometric studies; the report implies there are straightforward linear relationships between single policy levers such as teacher candidate admissions standards and increases in both teacher candidate quality and student achievement; and the report fails to take account of the research literature's complex questions and its nuances, qualifications, and variations in findings. For example, although Finland does indeed recruit teacher candidates from top college graduates, the complex historical and socio-political features of Finland's education system interact to make teaching a highly professional and sought-after career in that context, but this in no way implies that other countries can select singular inputs, such as teachers' GPAs, and expect higher student achievement. Similarly, Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff & Wycoff,² which is one study among the string of citations in NCTQ Footnote #8, did indeed find that changes in teacher qualifications in New York City's poorest schools had a modest impact on students' math achievement in grades 4 and 5 (student achievement was increased by 0.029 standard deviations). However Boyd et. al. also found that the variables used to capture teacher qualifications were not limited to admission standards, multiple factors were highly correlated with one another, and teacher qualifications did not have a similar impact on ELA achievement. These researchers also acknowledged that other unobserved measures probably influenced students' achievement. In short, although there is some widely-accepted evidence (not cited in the NCTQ report)³ indicating that teachers' "academic ability" is relevant to teaching performance and student achievement, NCTQ report does not include this evidence. In addition the report misrepresents nuanced findings about program selectivity embedded within other issues such as program type or co-variation of GPA or test score levels with other variables, and it very selectively uses sources. Finally the report implies that state, program and/or accreditor admissions policies will have a much more direct and substantial effect on teacher quality than the research warrants.

V. Review of Report's Methods

The NCTQ report includes more than three pages of what the report calls “detailed methodology.” This label misleads at best—obfuscates at worst—given that careful unpacking of this confusing discussion reveals that results were based on arbitrary classification of teacher education admissions requirements in selected states. Although it could be argued that these classifications are somewhat intuitive, they are not scientific and involve no statistical analysis.

Specifically, the NCTQ report obtained data on required GPAs for admission from college course catalogs or institutional websites. In order to label each of the 221 undergraduate elementary level teacher preparation programs as “likely meeting” or “not likely meeting” state or CAEP GPA admissions requirements, this procedure was used: in cases where a cohort average of 3.0 was required, programs requiring individual candidates to have at least a 2.75 were deemed “likely meeting” requirements, programs accepting a 2.5 GPA were deemed “possibly meeting” requirements, and programs accepting less than a 2.5 GPA were deemed “likely not meeting” requirements. Although the report claims that analysts relied on a national distribution of college students’ GPA scores to create these labels, it is not clear how the labels relate to this information or what criteria were used. The labels were not determined using actual data about the distribution of candidate GPAs at given teacher preparation programs, and they did not involve statistical analyses of the probability that a program would or would not meet admissions requirements. Further the report does not provide statistical evidence justifying these particular numerical cut-off levels, nor does it explain the meaning of these cut-offs in relation to the language of “likely” meeting requirements.

Average institution-wide SAT/ACT test scores for 2013-14 were obtained for 126 institutions of the 225 in this study from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the College Board’s Annual Survey of Colleges. For each institution, average institution-wide test scores were compared to the 50th percentile scores for either the ACT or SAT for students entering college in 2015. This information was used to classify each institution as “likely meeting” or “not likely meeting” state or CAEP testing admissions requirements at entry. The same issues regarding the meaning of “likely” and “not likely” meeting requirements as above apply here.

VI. Review of Validity of Findings and Conclusions

As noted above, the NCTQ report found that only 10% of institutions in states with laws requiring higher admissions standards were “likely not meeting” these requirements and that only 13% of institutions in CAEP states were “likely not meeting” CAEP’s original 2013 admission standards. The NCTQ report concludes that states, CAEP, and teacher education programs should “stay the course” of higher admissions standards, which they claim will boost teacher effectiveness and student achievement, enhance public perceptions and thus

increase interest in teaching as a career choice, and will not adversely affect the diversity of the teacher candidate pool.

There are multiple problems with these conclusions. One is that neither SAT/ACT scores nor high school GPAs as college admissions requirements are intended to predict the effectiveness of teachers or their impact on students' achievement. Rather test scores and GPAs are intended to predict college success, particularly college student performance in courses during the first year.⁴ In addition, it is widely known that many other qualities besides academic ability are important for teaching success, and many analysts have concluded that teacher education "inputs" account for a very small amount of the variance in students' achievement.⁵

Second, there is inconsistency in interpretation of the data. The categories (e.g., likely meeting, possibly meeting, likely not meeting) have different cut-off scores depending on whether the analysis is based on CAEP or state requirements. This means that a program in a CAEP state could receive a different designation from a program with the same GPA requirement but located in a non-CAEP state.

Third, the NCTQ report makes multiple claims about the impact of raising admissions requirements for teacher candidates. These claims include the assertions that: teacher education programs use low admissions standards strategically to recruit a diverse pool of teacher

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candidates; the benefit of students having teachers with the same race is smaller than the benefit of having an effective teacher; higher admissions standards will attract more academically able people into teaching; and higher admissions standards will enhance the public's regard for the teaching profession. None of these claims is based on

the analyses offered in this report. Rather each of these claims is followed by one or two cherry-picked citations while ignoring the substantial body of research that either provides conflicting evidence or shows that the issues are much more complex and nuanced than the report suggests. Finally throughout the report it is implied that precise admissions requirements lead to improved outcomes for school students. There is no evidence for this. As noted above, although there is some evidence indicating that teachers' "academic ability" is relevant to teaching performance and student achievement, it is one of many complex and interacting factors, and there is no evidence that precise cut-off scores predict improvement.

Finally, the NCTQ report applauds states requiring high standards for program admission and berates CAEP for its "retreat" from higher admissions standards. The NCTQ recommendation that CAEP return to its 2013 entry standards is confusing, given that the vast majority of institutions in CAEP states were meeting the "tougher" 2013 requirement even though they were not required to do so. This seems to be either the wrong conclusion for this report or the wrong report for this conclusion.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

This NCTQ report is of very little use for the guidance of policy or practice. Based on the analyses the report actually provides (in contrast to its many unjustified cherry-picked sidebar comments), the report concludes that in states with higher entry standards all but a few institutions meet higher entry standards. This limited finding is not generalizable across programs, institutions, or states; the cut-off scores are arbitrary; and, the report vastly over-emphasizes the impact of a single input factor on students' achievement. Nevertheless the report recommends that states, CAEP, and institutions raise entry standards. While this may be a worthy idea, the report does not make a compelling case for it. In terms of states, the report does not compare high admissions standards states to other states in terms of student achievement nor does it explore the unintended consequences of state admissions policies, both of which are necessary pieces of information for wise policy decisions. In terms of CAEP, the report indicates that the vast majority of institutions in CAEP states already meet high standards, even when not required to do so, which seems to suggest the current admission standard is already working. In terms of institutions, the report does not examine the impact of higher admissions standards on the diversity of the pool entering teaching nor does it investigate the relationship between higher standards and application/enrollment trends, both of which are central concerns to teacher education program leaders. Given the report's very limited usefulness, it is worth questioning whether its intent is simply to sustain NCTQ's highly publicized and politicized disparagement of university teacher education programs and to question CAEP's capacity to function as a teacher quality watchdog representing the profession.

Notes and References

- 1 The authors of this review are members of Project TEER (Teacher Education and Education Reform), a group of scholars and practitioners who work collectively on issues related to teacher education, policy, and politics. The group is directed by Marilyn Cochran-Smith; other group members' names are listed alphabetically and should be considered co-equal second authors.
- 2 Boyd, D., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., Rockoff, J., & Wyckoff, J. (2008). *The narrowing gap in New York City teacher qualifications and its implications for student achievement in high-poverty schools* (Working Paper No. w14021). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- 3 See:
National Research Council (2010). *Preparing teachers: Building evidence for sound policy*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
Teacher Preparation Analytics. (2014). *Building an evidence based system for teacher preparation*. Washington, DC: CAEP. Retrieved April 23, 2015, from <http://caepnet.org/accreditation/caep-accreditation/caep-accreditation-resources/building-an-evidence-based-system>
Zumwalt, K., & Craig, E. (2005). Teachers' characteristics: Research on the demographic profile. In M. Cochran-Smith & K. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 111-156). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 4 Meyer, E.J. (2016). Review of "smart, skilled, and striving: transforming and elevating the teaching profession." Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-tprep>. Also see Mathis, W. (2016). Alice in PARCCland: Does "validity study" really prove the Common Core test is valid? Washington Post. May 27, 2016. Retrieved March 2, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/05/27/alice-in-parccland-does-validity-study-really-prove-the-common-core-test-is-valid/?utm_term=.814f8b4ed68e. Mathis points out that most tests intended to predict college performance actually account for very little of the variance.
- 5 See:
Steele, J. et al. (2015). The distribution and mobility of effective teachers: Evidence from a large urban school district. *Economics of Education Review*, 48 (October): 86-101.

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