



Change Careers to Teaching? Take the SAT New bureaucratic rule constricts educator pipeline

By Ben DeGrow

The Michigan Department of Education has given experienced professionals one more reason not to consider a career switch to teaching: They would have to retake a college entrance examination. And that's on top of other requirements from the state.

Genesee County teacher Jeff Piechowski recently learned that to convert his temporary teaching certificate to a permanent one, he must take the SAT. Once known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the SAT is given to all Michigan 11th-graders. Piechowski, who focuses on special education, didn't enter the profession through a traditional college program. Instead, he left a broadcasting career for the classroom, gaining years of experience in Texas before moving to Michigan.

"As I approach age 50, with a 20-year broadcasting career and an advanced degree, and in my fifth year of teaching, I must take a college prep exam — alongside students as young as those I teach," Piechowski said.

This case is merely the tip of the spear. Michigan's newly approved alternative certification program, Teachers of Tomorrow, reports it has received 837 qualified applications for its program since securing approval from the Michigan Department of Education in August.

Of those 837 applicants, all but four would have to take the SAT to get a standard teaching certificate, according to information provided by Teachers of Tomorrow. Nearly one out of five Michigan applicants has earned a master's degree, and just over 40 percent have work experience in Michigan public schools as aides or substitute teachers. Yet, like Piechowski, they would have to sit with high school students and take a college entrance exam before they can help fill classroom vacancies.

If Michigan were experiencing a general teacher shortage, as some claim, state officials would urgently be cutting this sort of red tape — just like local leaders would be changing policies to address shortages in key instructional areas. By all logic, state officials should look for more high-quality alternative providers, not make it much more difficult for the only active program to fulfill its mission.

State law requires all incoming teachers, regardless of certification type, to pass a "basic skills examination" to get their professional certificate. On Oct. 1, an Education Department memo declared the new SAT (administered since March 2016) as the only acceptable testing option for new applicants. Even if Teachers of Tomorrow candidates are willing to retake the SAT in its new format, there are only a handful of exam dates left this school year.

Summary

If the Michigan Department of Education thinks the state faces a shortage of teachers, it should address an unnecessary obstacle it recently placed in the way of midcareer professionals who wish to enter teaching.

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Michigan shouldn't be making it even harder for midcareer professionals to enter the teaching field.

The “basic skills examination” exceptions detailed in the memo may help recent college graduates from traditional teacher preparation programs. But older, nontraditional candidates are out of luck.

The state will recognize passing marks on the ACT since 2004 (technically back to 1989, but only for the few who took the optional writing portion, says Teachers of Tomorrow). It will also accept passing marks on the Michigan Merit Exam given to the state’s high school students between 2007 and 2015. Two other options — the Professional Readiness Examination and Basic Skills Test — only benefit those who may have pursued teaching in the past when the tests were still administered.

The new administrative rule further constricts the pipeline of incoming teachers. It effectively holds back most experienced professionals from changing careers to make a difference in Michigan’s public school classrooms.

In the short term, the Education Department could loosen its interpretation of state law to recognize other tests already taken to demonstrate basic skills. A more permanent fix may require the Legislature to amend the law to reduce the number of hoops and give people more test-taking flexibility. Most evidence shows that alternatively certified teachers perform about as well as their traditionally certified peers, even without having fulfilled the extra coursework requirements.

Meanwhile, until state officials take the idea of a potential teacher shortage seriously, the rest of us should avoid hitting the panic button.

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