



## Why MTEL, Not PRAXIS, Will Maintain Teacher Quality in Massachusetts

The tests Massachusetts uses for licensing teachers, the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL), have been developed for the state by the Evaluation Systems group of Pearson (ESP) under continuously renewed contracts with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Prospective teachers in Massachusetts must take a reading and writing skills test as well as a test of their subject-area knowledge. Pursuant to Chapter 71:38G, licensure tests for K-12 teachers must be based on what the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) has voted they must know. Therefore, for legal validity, the MTEL subject-area tests are based on the academic topics spelled out for each teaching field in the state's Regulations for Educator Licensure and Program Approval and on the standards in the state's K-12 curriculum frameworks. To judge by national and international assessments, the state's K-12 curriculum frameworks are among the most effective educational standards in the country.<sup>1</sup>

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Teacher tests for initial licensure were first given in Massachusetts in 1998, and the results revealed that large numbers of prospective teachers graduating from the state's preparation programs were deficient in their reading and writing skills, as well as academically under-qualified to teach the subjects they desired to teach. Even though one can take a relevant licensure test as many times as needed to pass (e.g., as in law, social work, medicine, or accounting and finance) many education school faculty, professional development providers, and others have since 1998 proposed legislation to substitute Educational Testing Service's (ETS)

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**The Center for School Reform** seeks more school choice for parents and an accountable system of public education for all students. The Center's work builds on Pioneer's legacy as a leader in the charter public school movement and champion of greater academic rigor in Massachusetts' schools. Current initiatives promote choice and competition, school-based management and math and science education.

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PRAXIS tests for the MTEL, rather than raise admission requirements for the state's teacher preparation programs or provide greater support to those they admit. Most recently, in October 2008, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) issued a policy brief urging the state to switch to PRAXIS tests.

The purpose of this policy brief is to suggest why such a switch would halt the gains in academic achievement in Massachusetts that all groups of K-12 students have demonstrated since 2003 and, instead, lead to a widening of the achievement gap between Asian/white students and Black/Hispanic students.

### **PRAXIS: Less-Qualified Teachers and Lower Student Achievement**

Among the causes of the gains in K-12 student achievement in the past decade are the improvements in teacher preparation that can be directly linked to implementation of the MTEL, beginning with the first administration of the Communication and Literacy Skills Test and the subject-area tests in 1998. The gains produced by these tests were enhanced by the state's nationally-regarded 2001 regulations for teacher licensing and program approval, and by the subject-area tests that were revised or developed based on these 2001 regulations and on the K-12 standards in mathematics (2000), English language arts (2001), science and technology/engineering (2002), and history and social science (2003). As indicated in 603 CMR 7.01, a chief purpose of the 2001 teacher licensing regulations (and the tests based on them) was to strengthen, academically and pedagogically, the state's traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs in order to promote higher student achievement. As the National Mathematics Advisory Panel (NMAP) noted in its 2008 report, based on the evidence from high quality research, the only identifiable characteristic of effective teachers is their knowledge of the subject they teach. Far from leading to a decline in enrollment in the state's teacher preparation programs, as some

predicted, more academically demanding teacher tests in Massachusetts have led to stronger programs, increased enrollment, and greater employability.

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In light of the above, one might reasonably ask why anyone in Massachusetts would want easier PRAXIS tests rather than the MTEL. Among the reasons offered by the MTA to justify the proposed switch to PRAXIS tests are the following:

1. The MTA claims that using PRAXIS tests instead of state-specific tests would broaden the pool of teachers available. However, no evidence is presented for this claim in areas where there are shortages. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there are shortages of mathematics, science, and foreign language teachers in every state in the country, over 35 of which use off-the-shelf PRAXIS tests. The use of these tests has not reduced the shortages in these subject areas. On the other hand, the Bay State already prepares more early childhood and elementary teachers than it can hire, and their numbers would expand with easier license tests, only profiting preparation programs and professional development providers at the expense of student achievement.

2. The MTA claims that prospective teachers spend too much money on their licensure tests because they have to take so many more than once. However, if admission standards to teacher preparation programs were generally higher, and if prospective teachers were adequately prepared in their programs, most should be able to pass the first time.

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3. The MTA claims that ESP uses items from a national bank for all its state tests. However, ESP cannot do this in Massachusetts because it must address the state's own K-12 standards and the academic topics spelled out in the licensing regulations. Moreover, most of the pools of test items or essay prompts drawn on for different forms of the same subject test for successive administrations have already been vetted by Department staff for use on MTEL. These items may also be used by ESP for other states' tests, but only those screened by the Department can be used on MTEL. For example, the items on the new mathematics test for elementary/special education teachers have been created specifically for that test and reviewed by experts. The off-the-shelf PRAXIS tests do not systematically address this state's K-12 standards or the academic topics listed for each teaching field in this state's regulations. Moreover, PRAXIS *subject* tests mingle pedagogical items with subject matter items, something that MTEL does not do.

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4. The MTA claims that there are "limited technical reports" on MTEL. However, twice the Department convened a group of nationally known and independent experts on large-scale assessment and teacher licensure (Stephen Klein of the Rand Corporation and William Mehrens of Michigan State University participated on both occasions, together with a third, different expert each time). Their reports, filed with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in January 2002 and September 2003, examined all test specification and planning documents and concluded that MTEL is a sound teacher testing system.

5. The MTA wants the state to use PRAXIS I, a test of a prospective teacher's reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, instead of the state's more demanding Communication and Literacy Skills Test. Ruth Mitchell and Patte Barth concluded in their 1999 *Education Trust* article that the Massachusetts Communication and Literacy Skills Test was the best skills test available at that time, with a level of difficulty comparable to a college examination, as opposed to PRAXIS I, which they judged to be at a middle school level in difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

6. The MTA claims that the use of state-specific tests prevents reciprocity among states. That is precisely one of its purposes. Long ago, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted that anyone who wanted to teach in Massachusetts must pass the state's own tests—because it knew its tests required the knowledge needed for teaching to the state's K-12 standards. If the Bay State pursued reciprocity in licensure tests by switching to PRAXIS tests, it would be at the expense of academic rigor and, consequently, student achievement. In any case, we would be unlikely to gain many teachers through reciprocity with PRAXIS states. The states that produce the most new teachers (e.g., California, New York, Texas, Michigan, Illinois, and Georgia), because they have the largest number of, or the biggest, teacher training institutions in the country, tend to be ESP states.

7. The MTA wants Massachusetts to use not only the PRAXIS I skills test and the PRAXIS II subject tests but also the PRAXIS II tests of the "principles of learning and teaching." These grade-level tests of pedagogical theory and practice are limited in their scope and approach. They openly favor a "constructivist" approach to teaching and discourage prospective teachers from using explicit and systematic instruction in any subject, especially beginning reading and arithmetic.

In sum, the MTA's stated reasons for switching to easier PRAXIS tests can hardly be justified.

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Indeed, the pass rates for the two largest groups of prospective teachers in the state's preparation programs, prospective early childhood and elementary teachers, suggest more clearly and concretely why the Bay State should not heed the MTA's recommendations to switch to PRAXIS tests. The next section shows and explains those pass rates.

### MTEL: Ensuring an Academically Qualified Teacher Force

Prospective early childhood teachers (whose license spans Pre-K through 2nd grade) must take two subject tests for licensure in the Bay State - the Early Childhood test and the Foundations of Reading test, which is also taken by prospective elementary and special education teachers. Based on information on

Table 1:  
Number and Percentage of Test-Takers Taking,  
Retaking, and Passing the Early Childhood Test,  
November 2007 to September 2008

Test Name	First-Time Test Takers		Test Retakers	
	N	% Passing	N	% Passing
Early Childhood Sept 2008	101	41.6	90	24.4
Early Childhood July 2008	215	47.0	143	28.7
Early Childhood May 2008	213	51.6	140	24.3
Early Childhood March 2008	218	58.3	185	31.9
Early Childhood Nov 2007	201	55.7	159	29.6

the DESE website, Table 1 shows the number and percentage of prospective early childhood teachers who passed the Early Childhood test on the first try or on a subsequent try during one of the last five administrations of the test. About 950 prospective

teachers took the test for the first time between November 2007 and September 2008, while over 700 retook the test. Only about half the test-takers passed this subject test the first time they took it, while less than one third of the very large number who retook the test passed. That is, a total of about 700 prospective teachers passed this test during this period of time.<sup>3</sup>

What does Table I tell us? Given that over 1,650 candidates took the required test, but less than half of the test-takers passed on either their first or subsequent tries, it suggests that many Early Childhood programs either have low admission standards or are failing to adequately prepare the prospective teachers they admit. And lest one argue that it might instead suggest that the test itself is too difficult, it should be pointed out that the test is, overall, at about a high school level in difficulty, as are most teacher licensure tests according to a study published in 1999 by *Education Trust*<sup>4</sup> and anecdotal evidence from professors and journalists who have voluntarily taken a teacher licensure test. Depending on where its "cut" score was set (the number of correct test items needed for passing a test, usually determined by a peer group and education faculty in that field, before the number is converted into a scaled, or pass, score), its pass score is likely to represent no more than an 8th grade level in difficulty.

Remarkably, the MTA policy brief recommends no subject area licensure test for early childhood teachers—neither a test of the subject knowledge teachers need in an early childhood program, nor a test of reading instruction—if the state switches to PRAXIS tests. In other words, a switch to PRAXIS tests, as recommended by the MTA, would enable even larger numbers of prospective early childhood teachers than at present to become licensed, but with no objective assessment of their subject knowledge.

However, there is currently no shortage of early childhood teachers in the Bay State to justify abandoning a test of their academic knowledge. Massachusetts can afford to insist upon the highest

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Table 2:  
Number and Percentage of Test Takers Taking, Retaking, and Passing the  
General Curriculum and Foundations of Reading Tests,  
November 2007 to September 2008

Test Name	First-Time Test Takers		Test Retakers	
	N	% Passing	N	% Passing
General Curriculum September 2008	504	84.1	268	51.1
Foundations of Reading September 2008	345	64.6	429	40.6
General Curriculum July 2008	918	79.8	319	47.3
Foundations of Reading July 2008	815	62.8	631	38.0
General Curriculum May 2008	837	75.6	295	32.2
Foundations of Reading May 2008	1,110	63.5	647	35.5
General Curriculum March 2008	1,015	78.5	320	30.9
Foundations of Reading March 2008	1,130	65.8	727	32.9
General Curriculum November 2007	791	83.1	306	49.3
Foundations of Reading November 2007	869	61.9	639	37.7

standards when awarding an early childhood license, and should continue to do so if schooling for pre-school children is expanded. In the context of a nationwide effort to mandate schooling for all pre-school children from the age of three on, especially those in our urban areas, the failure to maintain the highest licensing standards would, in effect, hurt our most vulnerable children, those most in need of academically-qualified teachers.

Now let us look at test results for the other large group of students in the state's preparation programs—prospective elementary teachers (whose license covers grades 1-6). Table 2 shows the number and percentage of prospective teachers who passed the General Curriculum test and/or the Foundations of Reading test on the first try and on a subsequent try

on one of the last five dates when these tests were given.

Although prospective elementary teachers and prospective special education teachers all take the General Curriculum test (a test of the major content subjects taught in elementary school), the vast bulk of test-takers are prospective elementary teachers; the same is true for the Foundations of Reading test. Because the numbers are not disaggregated by the type of license sought, we can only make estimates as to how prospective elementary teachers fared on these tests. The most likely scenario is that somewhat more than 80 percent of prospective elementary teachers passed the General Curriculum test from November 2007 to September 2008 on their first try, and between one third and one half passed it on a subsequent try. The Foundations of Reading test was likely passed by over 65 percent of prospective elementary teachers on their first try and by well over one third on a subsequent try. Thus one can estimate that close to 4,000 prospective elementary teachers passed both tests over the course of the past year if one totals up the actual number of those passing only the Foundations of Reading test. Again, because there is also no shortage of elementary teachers in Massachusetts, the state should insist on high standards when awarding elementary licenses.

The MTA, however, according to its policy brief, appears unconcerned with maintaining the Commonwealth's currently high standards for licensing teachers. It does not recommend a separate reading test for prospective elementary (or special education) teachers if the state should switch to PRAXIS tests, and its policy brief fails to disclose that a newly-configured General Curriculum test will be required of all prospective elementary and

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special education teachers beginning in the spring of 2009, which a switch to PRAXIS could undermine. The General Curriculum test has been divided in half, with one score for 40 items on mathematics and another score for 40 items on science, history, geography, and children's literature, including an essay question on each part of the test. A reconfigured test with more items in mathematics was developed to determine whether prospective elementary and special education teachers have the mathematical knowledge needed to teach mathematics effectively, and to encourage their preparation programs to strengthen their mathematics coursework.

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In May 2008, the Connecticut Board of Education mandated the use of the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading test for all its prospective elementary and early childhood teachers.

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As Charles Caleb Colton famously observed, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," and by that measure the MTEL has succeeded. In May 2008, the Connecticut Board of Education mandated the use of the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading test for all its prospective elementary and early childhood teachers. Connecticut is a PRAXIS state, but after examining all the reading instructional tests offered by ETS and ESP, it determined that the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading test was superior. Two other states are also considering adoption of this test as a licensure requirement for teachers of elementary age children.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the MTA recommends that if a switch is made to PRAXIS tests, prospective elementary teachers take a "PRAXIS II Elementary Curriculum Subject Assessment" as a substitute for both the General Curriculum test and the Foundations of Reading test. Regardless of which of the three current PRAXIS subject tests for prospective elementary teachers the MTA intends by this reference (0011,

0012, or 0014), no more than 20-25 percent of the test items (22 to 30 questions) on any of these tests assess mathematical knowledge, and no more than 3-7% percent of the test items assess knowledge of three of the five major research-based components of beginning reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary development. (The second set of numbers reflects the influence of the discredited "whole language" approach to reading instruction on these three PRAXIS tests, as at least two reviewers have found.<sup>7</sup>) Thus the MTA recommends neither a separate test of reading instruction nor a more comprehensive mathematics test for prospective elementary (or special education) teachers.

The MTA's recommended switch from MTEL to PRAXIS would hold Massachusetts preparation programs far less accountable than they now are for ensuring that new elementary or special education teachers begin their teaching careers with adequate subject area knowledge in the two critical areas in the elementary curriculum. It is quite likely that a much larger number of prospective elementary and special education teachers would be able to pass the recommended PRAXIS test (as suggested by the state tables in the *Education Trust* report), making for less preparatory work in these critical areas by education school faculty and for more remedial work by costly professional development providers after less well-prepared elementary and special education teachers begin teaching. Of utmost importance, diluted and academically weaker tests would lead to less-qualified teachers and lower student scores in this state, perpetuating the current achievement gap.

## **Recommendations**

1. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) should raise the cut scores on MTEL for prospective early childhood and elementary teachers. We should raise the cut scores to continue to raise student achievement and to narrow the achievement gap in the grades where narrowing will have the greatest long-term positive effects. The

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Bay State must strengthen, not broaden, its corps of teachers of young children. By raising the cut scores (the raw scores needed for passing the different subject tests) on MTEL in areas where we produce far more teachers than we need, we encourage higher admission requirements for teacher preparation programs.

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2. The BESE should ask the Board of Higher Education to require all schools of education to include the cost of required teacher tests as part of student tuition for its licensure programs. Many technical/trade schools guarantee that their students will pass the state's licensure tests for their trade and include the cost as part of their tuition. Our teacher preparation programs do not, but there is no reason why we should expect less of schools of education than schools for cosmetologists. If teacher-training institutions included the cost of the state's licensure tests as part of student tuition, they would have an incentive to make sure that those they admitted could pass their licensure tests, and pass the first time.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Licensure tests for prospective teachers are mandated not only by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 but also by a provision in Title II of the 1998 reauthorization of the federal Higher Education Act, which requires that states report annually the pass rates (on tests the states have chosen or developed) for each cohort of prospective teachers completing training programs in their own teacher training institutions.

<sup>2</sup> “How Teacher Licensing Tests Fall Short”, *Thinking K-1*, Spring, vol.3

<sup>3</sup> Because the Foundations of Reading test scores are not disaggregated by the type of license sought, it is not clear how prospective early childhood teachers fared on this test in this time period. There is also no way to determine from the aggregated number of all those who passed the Communication and Literacy Skills test how many of these prospective early childhood teachers also passed that test as well.

<sup>4</sup> “How Teacher Licensing Tests Fall Short”

<sup>5</sup> Most of the other New England states use PRAXIS tests, and not one is noted for having a stronger corps of teachers or higher scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) than Massachusetts. In fact, the reason why the Connecticut Board of Education adopted the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading test for all its prospective elementary and early childhood teachers is that Connecticut’s reading scores on NAEP have been plunging downward for the past decade.

<sup>6</sup> Rigden, D. (2006). Report on Licensure Alignment with the Essential Components of Effective Reading Instruction. Retrieved May 24, 2007, from [http://www.rften.org/content/Rigden\\_Report\\_9\\_7\\_06.pdf](http://www.rften.org/content/Rigden_Report_9_7_06.pdf); Stotsky, S. (2006). Why American students do not

learn to read very well: The unintended consequences of Title II and teacher testing. *Third Education Group® Review / Articles*, 2.1 Retrieved on October 21, 2007 from <http://www.thirdeeducationgroup.org/Review/Articles/v2n1.htm>



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