

Should You Have to Pass a Literacy Test to Become a Teacher?

By [Madeline Will](#) on March 13, 2017 1:18 PM

New York might soon get rid of the literacy exam requirement for prospective teachers, partly because a large amount of Hispanic and black candidates were failing it.

The Associated Press reported that the state Board of Regents is expected on Monday to vote to eliminate the Academic Literacy Skills Test, which was introduced in the 2013-14 school year as one of four assessments meant to raise the level of teaching in the state. But just 46 percent of Hispanic candidates and 41 percent of black candidates passed the literacy exam on the first try, compared with 64 percent of white candidates.

"Having a white workforce really doesn't match our student body anymore," said Leslie Soodak, an education professor from Pace University who was on the state task force that recommended eliminating the exam. She told the AP that the state still wants high standards for teachers, but a test that screens out so many nonwhite candidates might not be the best way to get there.

The test, which costs \$131 to take (in addition to an optional \$20 practice exam), is administered online and consists of multiple-choice questions about a series of reading selections, as well as a written section. The test's critics say that in addition to the test being prohibitively expensive, it doesn't reflect what teachers actually do in the classroom, and that it is redundant considering everything else prospective teachers must pass—including the SAT, the GRE, and subject-matter certification tests. Meanwhile, defenders of the test say that it is necessary to maintain teacher quality.

One such defender is the National Council on Teacher Quality, which has called for higher standards for teachers. President Kate Walsh told the AP that the assessments in New York's teacher certification process, including this literacy exam, "really got at the lack of rigor in teacher prep."

My colleague Brenda Iasevoli [reported in November](#) on an NCTQ report that cites survey data suggesting that most top college students would consider majoring in education if admissions standards were higher. Instead of lowering standards to battle teacher shortages and decreasing enrollments, education schools should keep quality high, the report concludes.

And in a recent opinion essay for *Education Week*, Lawrence Baines, an associate dean at the University of Oklahoma, [bemoaned the "continual dumbing-down of the preparation of teachers."](#) He wrote: "The biggest losers here are the children in American classrooms. A child taught by an effective teacher develops a stronger work ethic, has a better chance of going to college, and earns a higher salary as an adult, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development."

Still, the New York exam might not be the appropriate measure of teacher quality, the AP reported. Charles Sahm, the director of education policy at the Manhattan Institute, took the practice exam and told the AP that it was a poorly designed assessment, since the multiple-choice questions seemed to have more than one correct answer.

"I found the reading comprehension section to be kind of infuriating," he said. "I only got 21 out of 40 right."

[mcruiz](#)

8:10 PM on March 13, 2017

Based on the reported results, and the continuous CBEST debacle in California, I'd say, yes. Yes, we need a literacy test. If you can't pass a basic literacy test, you do not belong in the classroom.

[Paul D. White](#)

11:55 AM on March 14, 2017

You'd only get rid of a literacy test for teachers if you were convinced that Black and Latino teacher candidates are not as intelligent or capable as White or Asian candidates. In other words, to get rid of the test would be the ultimate racial discrimination. It's the Black and Latino teacher candidates who should be protesting the most against dropping the test.

[Rich](#)

8:46 PM on March 14, 2017

This is another attempt to dumb down teaching. It is the penultimate level of hiring teachers who are not licensed by the state when districts do not offer compensation adequate to attract and retain licensed teachers. (The ultimate level is to replace teachers with computers.)

The people who are proposing this are folks who either do not believe in the law of supply and demand or do not care how a lack of quality teachers impacts the students who are forced to endure school with unqualified teachers.

[kmnc7](#)

4:12 PM on March 15, 2017

We need to reflect on how systems are providing rich opportunities to minority students before they enter any profession