

National Association of State Boards of Education

⊕ Michigan Narrows Licensure Bands to Improve Early Learning

By Winona Hao and Valerie Norville

States have often adopted broad bands for teacher certificates that cover grades K-5, K-6, or even K-8, which may offer more flexibility to district and school administrators but at the cost of ensuring adequate preparation for those who will be teaching in early grades. In order to better equip its teachers with developmentally appropriate knowledge and skills when they enter classrooms, Michigan is jettisoning its broad elementary licenses in favor of preK-3 and 3-6 licenses.

Only 23 states offer a license to focus on early childhood—typically birth–grade 3 or preK-3 but with other variants. Among these states, however, many also provide a broader K-8 or 1-6 certification, which teachers may choose in order to make them competitive for more potential placements.

BROAD VERSUS NARROW

Teaching young children requires a skill set different from that for teaching older children.¹ Teachers of young children need deep knowledge of early childhood development—what preschoolers think, how they behave, and why. Teachers in preK-3 classrooms must keep constant watch over their charges to ensure they are learning basic life skills such as relationship building, communicating, taking turns, sharing, collaborating with peers, understanding feelings, and regulating the strong feelings that arise when working with peers.² Without these skills, children will fail to build the critical foundation they need and face challenges in their future learning.

Children younger than 8 require more interactive time with teachers in their classrooms and cannot readily sit still for long periods, as most older children are able to do. They learn from extensive, meaningful interaction with adults and caregivers. As children reach age 8, they begin to accomplish more complex tasks, and the role of the teacher shifts as children begin to work more independently.³

Yet teacher candidates whose preparation programs prepare them for a broad elementary certification tend to spend more time on content areas for the later elementary grades and less on early child development and early literacy and numeracy skills.

“Our current K-5 All Subjects—ELA, math, social studies, French, German, music—is really way too broad,” said Kelli Cassaday, an early literacy consultant in the Michigan Department of Education’s Office of Educator Excellence. “To have that blanket expectation—that [teachers] are going to learn everything they need to know for all subjects—is unfair.”

When the state sets broad bands for its teacher certificates, teacher preparation programs place more emphasis on upper elementary grades than lower elementary grades because the content to be taught is perceived as more difficult, said Richard Lower, director for preschool and out-of-school time learning in the department’s Office of Great Start. There is an assumption that teachers already know the content for the lower elementary grades so they do not need as much preparation. Methods coursework covers content but often in one subject and across the entire grade band, he said.

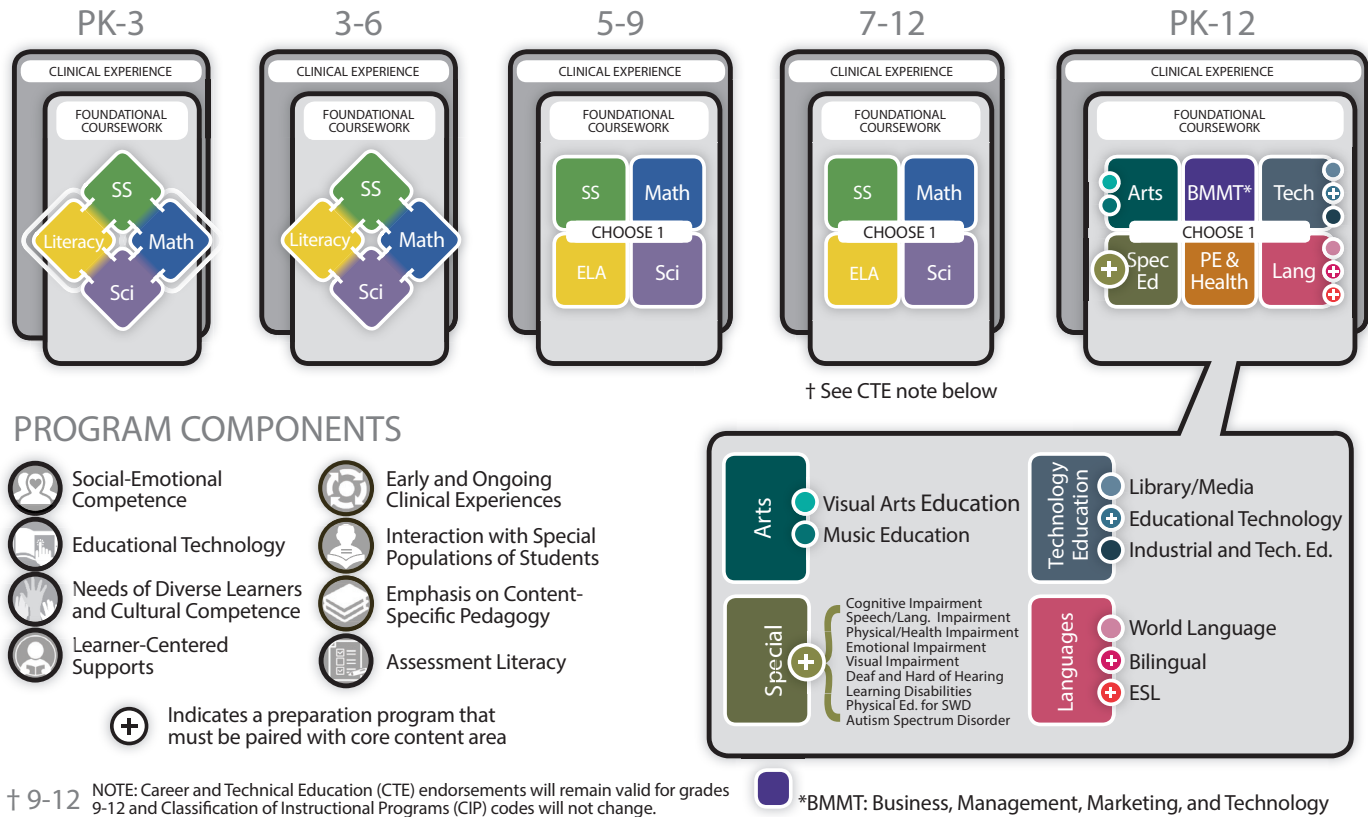
In November 2018, the **Michigan State Board of Education** approved new teacher preparation standards that bifurcated an old certification for K-5 into two: one for lower elementary (preK-3) and another for upper elementary (grades 3-6).⁴ In addition, they are working on the standards for certifications to cover grades 5-9, 7-12, and preK-12, which focuses on a particular content area or student population. The grade overlaps in the bands are intentional. They build professional learning, facilitate placement, and mitigate the risk of teacher shortages in a particular band, Cassaday said.

TIED TO STRATEGIC GOALS

The Michigan board’s approval of the preparation standards marked a milestone in a process that Michigan’s education department has been shepherding since 2014, Cassaday said. As part of the state’s Top 10 in 10 initiative—to put Michigan in the top 10 education systems within 10 years—the new standards and band structure for teacher licenses support its goal to develop and support effective teachers, she said.

The Top 10 in 10 strategic plan outlined goals and strategies for developing a more coherent, aligned education system at all levels. Department leadership has identified three priorities—prenatal through age 8, whole child, and early literacy—to provide a focused direction and guide for its work over the next few years. Restructuring teacher certification to improve early learning cuts across all three priorities and supports the goals of Top 10 in 10. Specifically, the approved standards provide specialized preparation in teaching early literacy, using differentiated supports to meet the needs of the whole child, Cassaday said.

Figure 1. Michigan's Teacher Certification Structure



Source: Michigan Department of Education (February 8, 2019).

As a member of NASBE's Early Childhood Education Network and with support from NASBE, Michigan began statewide discussions on elementary school licensure, and it was particularly important that the new preK-3 band begins with preschool, Lower said. This change reflects deepened interest in the education community in the transition to kindergarten, and the preK-3 band connects the typically disparate fields of early childhood and early elementary education. "It removes the artificial kindergarten cliff and pushes past the artificial divide between systems," he said.

COMMUNICATIONS AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Michigan established a communication strategy to further its ECE workforce project and its licensure restructuring process. A NASBE leadership group met regularly to guide the NASBE project and coordinate various efforts involving the early childhood workforce, and it set a foundation by adopting common definitions and language. The leadership group comprised staff across offices within

the Michigan Department of Education and also key external stakeholders, such as business leaders, higher education faculty, and advocacy group leaders.

Another group of Michigan educators and experts from higher education started work on the certification structure early in 2016, Cassaday said. The stakeholder group studied district hiring patterns and licensure in other states, and they sent out a survey of the Michigan education community that received 3,600 responses.

To accompany the survey, the group prepared a video to explain the proposed changes, narrated by a teacher who was a committee member. Approximately 70 percent approved the proposed structure, consistent across all groups, Cassaday said, but with less enthusiasm from superintendents in very small schools. That result led to a recommendation to add more flexibility for small schools. Survey comments provided significant support for the increased preparation in early literacy instructional skills, the addition of pre-K to the

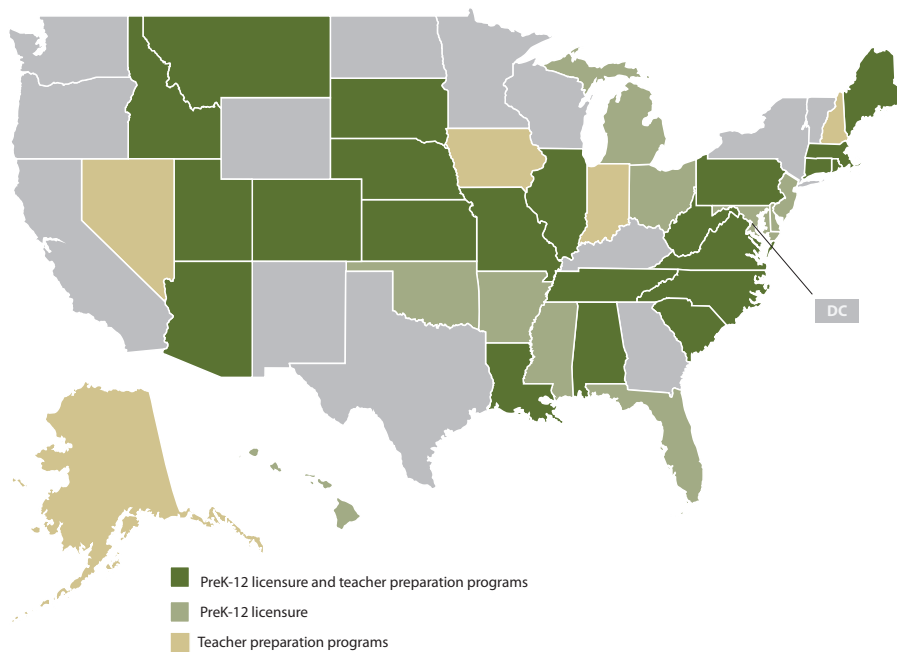
structure, and foundational coursework for teaching the whole child.

Teams of experts began writing teacher preparation standards around the new bands, which additional experts reviewed. Stakeholders, writing teams, and department staff championed the changes with the aid of a graphic that communicated the breadth of their ambition for Michigan licensure (figure 1).

In addition, department staff have been meeting with deans of teacher education programs and with faculty, and they have spoken at conferences of the Michigan Reading Association and the Michigan Association of Mathematics Teacher Educators to update them on the process and to get feedback.

This elementary licensure portion of the proposal culminated in an August 2018 presentation to the state board, just before the group's work was opened for public comment. With the end of the comment period and board approval of the new standards

Map 1. State Board Authority over PreK-12 Licensure and Teacher Preparation Programs



last fall, the department is looking ahead to developing assessments aligned to the standards and on helping teacher preparation programs implement them.

ROLE OF STATE BOARD

Many state boards have authority over preK-12 licensure or teacher preparation programs or both (see map). But even where authority over teacher preparation does not fall to the board, boards can ask their state education agencies to engage with higher education and educators on licensure changes in order to affect how teachers are prepared.

“We appreciated their approval process,” Cassaday said of the Michigan board. The department dovetailed its efforts to get additional perspectives and buy-in around that process, she said. Plus, board members “always have good questions for us,” she added.

In Michigan, the elected board represents a broad constituency. “When the standards were adopted, the board was split 4-4 Democrats and Republicans, which gave us a balanced perspective,” Lower said.

It has been helpful to have early childhood and professional standards under one board, Cassaday added. This enables higher education

and the preK-12 community to convene in one room “and have common language around expectations for first-year teachers,” she said.

Cross-office collaboration in the department has been an important ingredient of the process, Lower and Cassaday agree. Lower noted that in Michigan the state board makes policy and hires the state superintendent, independent of the governor. This model of governance has promoted a departmental culture in which every office has a stake in the success of the state’s vision for education, he said. “I think this benefits the learners of Michigan.”

PLACEMENT AND TEACHER SHORTAGES

In some states, teacher shortages and a desire for administrators to have maximum flexibility in placing teachers where they are needed are used to justify broad licensure bands. And although Michigan also has locales and content areas with shortages, Cassaday has urged stakeholders to consider teacher preparation and placement as separate issues. “That has been a huge shift,” she said, from designing licensure around hiring practice versus asking, “Now that we know how teachers are being prepared, what decisions do we want to make around how teachers are placed?”

Michigan will do other things to increase administrative flexibility, she said. A separate stakeholder group is looking at the issue, and asking, for example, whether it makes sense to allow a teacher to teach one grade above or below what their certificate says they are prepared to teach or if teachers can teach in content areas similar to those in which they were prepared. They also are looking into “grow your own” programs to allow for temporary permits for teacher candidates while they pursue the appropriate license or endorsements.

LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

Bringing the early learning and early elementary fields together was critical but also challenging, Lower said, because the fields have different jargon. “Sometimes we were speaking about the exact same thing but using completely different terms, and yet we were talking in circles for hours,” Lower said. Recognizing this difference early “would save time for other states going down this road,” he added. “You have to take time to get to clarity on what the charge is, what the intent is, what the goals are.”

Multiple feedback loops were important to the success of the process, as was the descriptive graphic, Cassaday said. And it is key to think about the next level: How will programs manage candidates who want to earn certificates at two levels at once?

In addition to working on secondary school bands, Michigan is also looking forward to the work it has launched on a birth through kindergarten certificate. Eventually, the department aims to have preparation standards for bands that cover birth to grade 12. “The NASBE grant for the early childhood workforce has assisted us with a lot of this work, especially in gathering robust stakeholder engagement,” Lower said. It also enabled the department to come together across offices, he said. “As a department, we have a unified definition now of the early childhood workforce, and that’s because of the support of NASBE.”

Winona Hao is NASBE’s director of early learning, and Valerie Norville is its editorial director.

NOTES

1 LaRue Allen and Bridget B. Kelly, eds., *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015).

2 Sarah Jackson et al., “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: The Need for Specialized Teacher Licenses in the Early Grades” (Washington, DC: New America, June 2017).

3 Laura Bornfreund et al., “Beyond Subprime Learning: Accelerating Progress in Early Education” (Washington, DC: New America, 2014).

4 Michigan Department of Education, “Introduction to Standards for the Preparation of Teachers of Lower and Upper Elementary Education” (Lansing, MI, July 2018).