

Perseverance in Teacher Preparation and Certification Assessments During the COVID-19 Pandemic (or Not)

By Rebecca Z. Grunzke

Abstract: Once lauded for its potential to increase the quality of novice educators entering the teaching profession by representing a performance-based assessment akin to professional licensure examinations in other fields, edTPA was discontinued by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) as a required credential for professional educator certification in the state of Georgia after almost six years of implementation. The decision accompanied the removal of a second ethics assessment in the midst of school and testing center closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite administrative efforts to clarify accommodations for completing the portfolio-based assessment in online teaching environments. Time will tell if our institution's temporary solution to replace edTPA will lead to the meaningful changes in teacher education envisioned by our college.

On November 12, 2013, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) proudly announced the official launch of “the first nationally available, standards-based performance assessment for preservice teachers: edTPA” (Robinson, 2013; AACTE, 2013). Developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE), edTPA is a subject-specific, multiple-measure assessment for which teacher candidates must prepare a portfolio containing lesson plans, classroom video clips, sample student work, and analytical commentaries (SCALE, 2020; SCALE, 2019). The assessment has been compared to practical exams required for professional licensure in engineering, architecture, pharmacy, medicine, nursing, and law (NYSED, 2015).

In Georgia, the Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC) is responsible for “the preparation, certification, and professional conduct of certified personnel employed in the Georgia public schools” (GaPSC, 2018). This responsibility includes establishing certification rules governing how a candidate becomes a teacher. Educator preparation providers (EPPs) across the state must conform to these rules when designing and revising their programs. On April 10, 2014, with much celebration of edTPA’s potential for professional growth and increased quality of novice teachers, the GaPSC voted to adopt new rules requiring teacher candidates to earn a passing score on edTPA for program completion and eligibility for an induction teaching certificate.

Thus began Georgia EPPs’ love-hate relationship with edTPA, which was initially dismissed by some faculty as “just another high-stakes test in the alphabet soup of education reform” and criticized by others for representing the accountability movement in higher education. Between its launch and the onset of COVID-19-related school closures, eighteen other states had signed on to require edTPA for professional educator certification, with two additional states taking steps toward implementation and twenty more states and the District of Columbia having at least one teacher preparation program exploring edTPA as an approved performance assessment for program completion, state licensure or program accreditation (AACTE, 2019).

Most teacher education programs worked tirelessly to align their curricula to this new certification requirement, replacing culminating field experience assessments with edTPA’s components and using the periodic data reports in program improvement efforts. Some teacher educators were concerned about the potential for edTPA to narrow the student learning outcomes of key program courses in order to prepare candidates to perform the required tasks, a charge often characterized as “teaching to the test.” Stories of the rigors of edTPA would trickle

down from students teachers to newly admitted candidates. Faculty and university supervisors spoke of consoling candidates through tears, expressions of inadequacy, and near nervous breakdowns. More than one candidate reported seeking therapy. The investment of time and energy spent during the years following edTPA's implementation was reified in the Fall of 2017, when the GaPSC increased the score required for passing edTPA by three points. It appeared as though edTPA was here to stay.

When schools began closing for an early and prolonged "Spring break" in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and classroom teachers transitioned to online learning, SCALE responded to concerns about completing edTPA with reassurance that candidates would still be able to capture their required video clips by following an already existing protocol of requesting prior approval for "alternative learning environments." Even the GaPSC, in its "Guidance for Addressing Educator Preparation Program Disruptions Caused by COVID-19," assuaged pre-service teachers faced with passing their required program-exit assessments under these challenging conditions by offering a one-year, Non-Renewable Induction Certificate to candidates scheduled to complete their initial teacher preparation programs in Spring 2020 (GaPSC, 2020). This generous offer was followed by another, more permanent accommodation. In a letter dated April 9, 2020, GaPSC Executive Secretary Matt Arthur announced that, effective immediately and in "an effort to ease certification assessment requirements" for initial teacher and educational leadership candidates, the Commission decided to remove one of the two ethics assessments from the testing schedule of prospective educators.

Three weeks later, on April 30, 2020, Matt Arthur penned yet another memo, this one even more substantial in its effect of making it easier to become a teacher in Georgia, but not before recognizing the immense work of implementing what was to become an assessment of the past:

edTPA became consequential for program completion and certification in Georgia in 2015, after a thoughtful three-year process of examination, pilots, and scaling up for successful implementation. Program providers, their P-12 partners, and state agencies worked closely together to learn, build capacity, and maximize outcomes for initial teacher candidates, EPPs, and employing districts. We are proud of that collaborative journey.

We recognize, however, that while we have gained much from edTPA, we, as an agency, need to be as responsive as possible to the expressed needs of schools related to staffing and capacity. Therefore, during a special called meeting of the Commission, rule amendments were initiated that, if adopted, will remove edTPA as a program completion and certification requirement effective July 1, 2020.

The Commission met on June 11, 2020 and adopted the anticipated rule amendments. After six years of dedication to an assessment that promised to increase teacher quality, the edTPA implementation map boasts one less state with "policy in place." Georgia EPPs faced a difficult choice: accept SCALE's support to continue using edTPA or develop an instructional practice assessment to fill the void left by the withdrawal from "the first nationally available, standards-based performance assessment for preservice teachers."

For programs (like ours) that have relied on edTPA as a key summative assessment for both program approval by the GaPSC and accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the task of developing a replacement assessment before the new academic year was urgent. Because of this ambitious

timeline, faculty input regarding which courses would be impacted and their recommendations for possible solutions was necessarily solicited via an electronic survey after most had departed for the summer. Despite its late delivery and approximately 50 percent response rate, the survey yielded data that indicated the faculty's desire to replace edTPA with a rigorous, research-based, summative assessment or series of culminating assessments, perhaps in the form of a portfolio, designed with significant collaboration among the faculty (versus decisions regarding program assessments and requirements being made at a staff or administrative level) after the development of a set mutually agreed upon competencies that incorporate our shared beliefs about quality teacher education.

The temporary solution is a set of revised portfolio assignments closely resembling the tasks student teachers and interns developed previously for edTPA, developed by an ad hoc committee of four—one associate dean, one staff member representing the fieldwork office, and two faculty members, one of whom is the former edTPA coordinator (me). The real work (hopefully) begins in August with the return of the program faculty. Time will tell if the “band-aid” treatment developed over this most unusual summer will lead to the meaningful changes in teacher education envisioned by our college.

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