

MELISSA TOOLEY AND TAYLOR WHITE

# RETHINKING RELICENSURE

Promoting Professional Learning Through  
Teacher Licensure Renewal Policies

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Executive Summary

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## About the Authors



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preparation, professional development, and retention, including rethinking human capital structures, but has also worked on “whole child” educational approaches and policies. Tooley and her work have been featured in the *Atlantic*, *Education Week*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, among other publications. Before joining New America, Tooley was a policy analyst at The Education Trust. While completing her master’s in public policy at the University of Chicago, Tooley interned with Chicago Public Schools’ Office of Academic Enhancement and the White House Domestic Policy Council. Prior, she worked in higher education policy at The Institute for College Access & Success, in health policy at the Epilepsy Foundation of New York City, and in market research consulting at Nielsen BASES. Tooley holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Drew University.



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# KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

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There is broad consensus that teachers should periodically take steps to renew their professional licenses. This national review of states' standard teaching license renewal policies finds that 50 states, including the District of Columbia, require relicensure in some fashion.<sup>i</sup> However, our research, which explores how these renewal policies impede or encourage the creation of effective professional development (PD), also finds little clarity around what relicensure is intended to accomplish or agreement on what that process should look like. While most states do lay out a clear purpose for licensure overall and for PD, they do not give the rationale for the intersection of the two as part of the licensure renewal process.

In fact, although relicensure is ostensibly intended to foster a culture of ongoing professional growth, this analysis of state teacher licensure renewal policies finds that the policies undergirding the licensure renewal system frequently conflict with what is known about best practices in adult learning and actually discourage more effective PD. Given recent estimates that large districts spend roughly \$18,000 on professional learning per teacher each year, not including the money teachers spend out of their own pockets for continuing education, this is a huge missed opportunity.

In general, most states' renewal requirements prioritize the accumulation of time-based credits

accrued through either formal collegiate coursework or traditional PD experiences such as in-service days, seminars, or online modules—short-term events that are often disconnected from one another and poorly matched with teachers' needs for improvement, making them unlikely to produce meaningful growth. These types of policies do nothing to encourage the sustained, targeted, and personalized learning opportunities that research shows are most likely to improve teachers' performance, favoring instead a one-size-fits all approach that offers convenience, often at the expense of quality.

Other states' renewal systems give lip service to incorporating more meaningful professional learning approaches without aligning policy requirements with activities likely to lead to learning, perpetuating a compliance-oriented culture around renewal-focused PD that fails to meet the professional needs of America's teachers or the learning needs of their students. For example, about a quarter of states have adopted some type of Professional Growth Plan (PGP) system as a vehicle to ensure the activities teachers complete as part of the licensure renewal process are better aligned with their needs for improvement. But in practice, many of these policies have continued to focus on counting credits or hours, which can hardly capture whether teachers have learned or acquired new skills through their PD experiences.

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<sup>i</sup>Only New Jersey issues lifetime standard teaching licenses that carry no requirements for maintenance. Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin offer lifetime or permanent licenses as the standard license type, but require some action (e.g., "registration") to maintain them. See full report for more details.

A few states—including Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee—have made some strides in incorporating a more vigorous assessment of professional growth into the renewal process, through PGPs or otherwise, and there is much to learn from their efforts. While aspects of each of these systems hold promise, for now, no state has yet developed a comprehensive approach to ensuring that the PD teachers engage in as part of licensure renewal is actually helping them improve.

But the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards' (NBPTS) certification process is proof that this approach can be done in a meaningful manner: NBPTS' certification process incorporates a high-quality, systematic external assessment of a teacher's professional learning and growth performed by trained reviewers, and the typical National Board certified teacher would describe the process as an authentic learning experience that requires focus and reflection, not as an exercise in hoop-jumping.

In fact, 15 states already recognize certification by the NBPTS as the gold standard for professional teaching practice, and award automatic license renewal to those teachers who choose to complete their National Board certification during the renewal period, with an additional 15 states providing full or partial credit toward licensure renewal. But, given current teacher working conditions, compensation, and status, requiring *all teachers* to complete the costly, time-intensive, and challenging National

Board certification process will prove untenable. For now, using the license renewal process to encourage some teachers to pursue National Board Certification and embracing standard license renewal processes that strive to replicate some of the elements of National Board Certification for all teachers—such as reflection on practice, submission of evidence of impact on practice and on student learning, and multiple assessors using a common assessment framework—could be a feasible middle ground.

Putting meaningful PGP systems in place that align with best practices in adult learning will require additional resources: time and energy and money. But this expenditure has the potential to provide a greater return on investment than many current PD offerings and activities and could be funded with federal dollars under Title II of the Elementary & Secondary Education Act.

Until states prioritize demonstrations of learning over time spent, PD activities tied to teacher license renewal are unlikely to yield significant improvements in teacher practice or, it follows, student achievement. But states can take the lead and change the culture of educator PD by rethinking their relicensure systems. More robust evaluation systems that draw upon state learning and professional standards provide an opportunity to identify—and measure growth on—specific teacher learning needs more adeptly than at any point in the past, but most states and districts have not harnessed their full potential for doing so.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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States unwilling to try to assess whether the PD teachers are undertaking toward standard licensure renewal is of any benefit to them or their students should remove renewal requirements altogether and offer lifetime licenses.<sup>ii</sup> But for states willing to make the relicensure process meaningful, we offer the following five-part recommendation.

**Replace systems that allow teachers to renew their standard licenses through time-oriented measures with approaches that more directly measure whether professional learning and growth have occurred.** These new approaches should draw upon lessons from states that have been early adopters to replicate what is working and eschew what is not. Additionally, such approaches should:

- 1. Ensure teachers choose professional learning based on demonstrated needs for growth.**  
Require that the vast majority of professional learning a teacher engages in that counts toward recertification be clearly tied to an area where s/he or his/her students have demonstrated room for further growth. This could also push teacher supervisors to focus on providing more nuanced teacher practice ratings and feedback.
- 2. Invest in implementation capacity, particularly around the assessment of meaningful professional learning for licensure renewal.**  
Create robust systems to manage the processes through which teachers' PGPs are created and assessed. States that devolve implementation responsibilities to the local level must provide clear guidance, ongoing training, sample resources, and some level of oversight to ensure

high-quality, consistent implementation that delivers on the promise of professional learning to enhance teacher practice. is one state that provides support for such roles, although not specifically tied to licensure renewal.

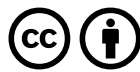
- 3. Explore incentives to promote meaningful professional growth for all teachers as part of the renewal process.**  
Create rewards for authentic engagement in a PGP process and demonstrated growth, and consequences for those unable or unwilling to do so.
- 4. Reduce duplication and ensure coherence throughout state systems that incorporate educator development.**  
Align elements of professional development in educator evaluation and support systems, school improvement systems, and educator licensure systems to minimize redundancies or conflicts. This must go beyond aligning policy language to breaking down siloes between the various divisions responsible for these areas at the state level in order to coordinate and integrate training and resources.
- 5. Develop data systems to evaluate the relevance and impact of professional development at a more macro level.**  
Invest in infrastructure to collect data on and analyze different forms of professional development, including information about the format of offerings, providers, instructors,

See the full report for additional findings from our scan of state relicensure policies, as well as further considerations for implementing these recommendations: [https://s3.amazonaws.com/newamericadotorg/documents/Rethinking\\_Relicensure\\_FINAL.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/newamericadotorg/documents/Rethinking_Relicensure_FINAL.pdf)

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<sup>ii</sup> Lifetime licenses should ensure there is, at minimum, a mechanism in place through which a licensing entity would be notified of any misconduct that would call into question a teacher's fitness for service.





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