Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development
Wheelock Educational Policy Center

Teacher Licensure and Workforce Quality

Insights from Emergency Licenses in Massachusetts

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In 2022-2023, researchers with Boston University Wheelock Educational Policy Center (WEPC) continued to partner with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to examine measures of effectiveness among emergency-licensed teachers (educator evaluation ratings and impacts on student test score growth), as well as additional insights collected through surveys of emergency license holders (ELHs) themselves and the school administrators that hired them.

While additional years of data are necessary to understand the long-term implications of this policy intervention, this analysis of short-term results shows that emergency-licensed teachers fill an important need in the Massachusetts educator workforce, perform similarly to other newly hired educators, and are committed to remaining in the profession. Evidence also suggests that this cohort of emergency-licensed teachers is unique and faces a different set of challenges relative to other newly hired teachers with traditional licenses. As a result, they may require tailored supports for retention and development. It also means that broader implications around future licensure requirements should be carefully considered given the unique context surrounding the first few years of the policy.

The report that follows shares emerging insights around three key considerations–hiring, quality, and retention–as Massachusetts, along with other states and education leaders nationally, continue to monitor the implications of this unprecedented change to the standard entry requirements for becoming a teacher.

Project & Policy Background

In the spring of 2020, as the nation's schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the typical pathways into teaching were also disrupted. Teacher candidates completing their student teaching could no longer attend their practicum sites, and individuals preparing to take required licensure tests found test centers closed. Entry into the profession essentially ceased.

To ensure those working to become educators could still enter the workforce, and to prevent a pandemic-induced teacher shortage, Massachusetts authorized an emergency teaching license in June 2020. The emergency license allowed

EARLY INSIGHTS[1]

- **Hiring:** Emergency-licensed teachers are filling a need in Massachusetts schools, especially in shortage areas
- **Quality:** Emergency-licensed teachers are performing similarly to other newly hired educators
- **Retention:** Emergency-licensed teachers want to stay, school leaders want to keep them, but they face challenges in doing so

Work conducted on behalf of:

dese
MASSACHUSETTS
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districts to employ individuals who had not yet completed standard licensure requirements. Under the emergency license, individuals could functionally begin teaching with just a bachelor's degree, though they must eventually complete traditional requirements once their emergency licenses expire. In essence, this policy shifted traditional licensure requirements to later in the typical timeline of training and employment, rather than completely removing them.

Findings from a **first-year analysis of the policy** suggest that the emergency license provision served its primary role of avoiding significant teacher shortages during the pandemic. In addition, the research suggested that the policy intervention appeared to provide some positive, unintended consequences, such as increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce. But with the implementation of this temporary provision, which loosened the state's otherwise rigorous licensure requirements, questions remain about the policy's lasting impacts on the quality and composition of the teacher workforce.[2]

Hiring

Hiring takes place locally within a district or school, but it is also deeply connected to the state's licensure requirements. In this way, licensure serves both as a potential signal of qualifications as well as a required provision for employment. With the reduction in screening requirements occurring at the state level with the emergency license provision in place, an open question remains about the ways in which locales, specifically hiring principals, have responded to this new cohort of candidates and their certification standing.

EARLY INSIGHT

All available evidence suggests that school leaders valued the flexibility offered by the emergency license, using it to fill shortage areas and to hire individuals best fit to their communities and school culture.

There are several factors from this initial review of the policy that contribute to our understanding of how hiring administrators viewed the emergency license. First, across both the first and second cohorts[3] of emergency-licensed educators, approximately half (50.2% and 48.6%, respectively) became employed as a teacher in a Massachusetts public school. This employment rate is similar to that of individuals who received a provisional license during the same period; however, it is lower than that of initial license holders. This suggests that hiring principals may have placed greater value on an initial license, which requires completion of a teacher preparation program, but viewed emergency and provisional licensure similarly. Still, the relatively consistent employment rates for ELHs in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years—despite the evolving context of the pandemic through Fall 2022—suggest that principals saw a need for this flexibility in their hiring.

ELHS: A UNIQUE COHORT OF NEWLY HIRED TEACHERS[4]

Ways emergency-licensed teachers are **similar** to other newly hired teachers in Massachusetts:

- Similar range and levels of effectiveness (as measured by educator evaluation scores and student growth percentiles)
- Intend to remain in the profession and have similar retention rates
- Hired for "fit" with local school and students

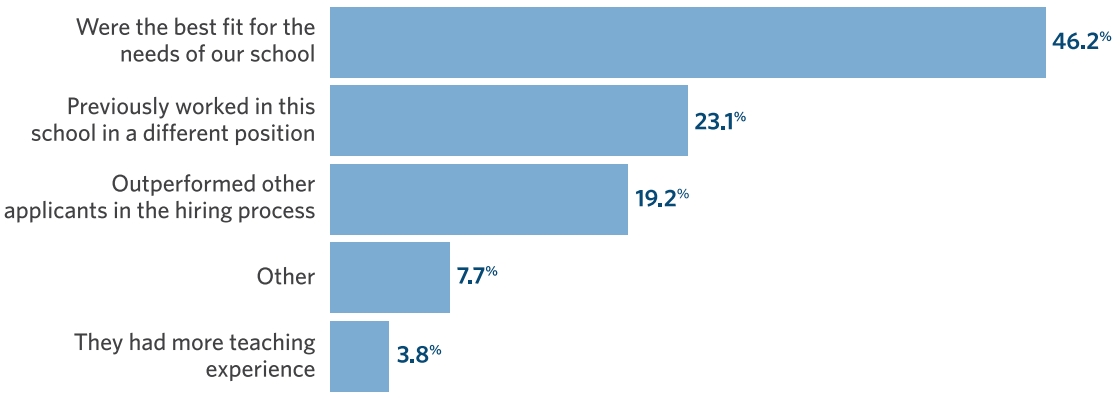
Ways emergency-licensed teachers are **different** from other newly hired teachers:

- More racially/ethnically diverse
- More likely to enter teaching from a non-traditional background, e.g., prior experience as paraprofessionals or substitute teachers, licensed in another state, and career changers
- Working to meet all licensure requirements while teaching full-time
- Disproportionally filling hard-to-staff teaching assignments and being assigned to work with more students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students

To better understand administrators' reasoning behind these employment decisions, WEPC surveyed hiring principals in the state. Of the 168 responses to the survey (9% of the potential pool), 84% indicated hiring at least one ELH. This group of administrators was split on why they hired ELHs; half indicated that ELHs were the strongest applicants in the hiring pool, while the other half indicated that ELHs were the only applicants for the position. In both cases, administrators indicated that they often hired ELHs to fill shortage areas, most notably in special education. One hiring principal shared: "Special education is one of our greatest needs, yet it is one of the most complex licensures to attain—the emergency licensure has helped us give GREAT candidates the time needed to get certified."

In addition to filling shortages, evidence from the survey of hiring principals also suggests that the emergency license provided administrators with the flexibility to consider other important dimensions in hiring decisions. See, for example, Figure 1. Among school administrators who indicated that ELHs were the strongest applicants in the candidate pool, many (46.2%) reported that they hired ELHs because they were the best fit for the needs of the school. In open-ended responses to this question, many administrators described culture alignment, community connection, or the race/ethnicity match of prospective applicants with students in the school as additional factors influencing their hiring of ELHs.

Figure 1: What Made ELHs Strong Candidates



Note: Sample includes responses from 52 school administrators who indicated that ELHs were the strongest applicants in their hiring pool.

The survey results from school administrators comport with observed patterns in state administrative data: ELHs appear to be filling hard-to-staff positions and are disproportionally being assigned to students with disabilities, English Learners, and economically disadvantaged students. While we know that these assignment patterns tend to be **true generally of novice educators in Massachusetts**,[5] it seems to be especially pronounced for ELHs. This is important context in considering both quality and retention, as there are likely significant equity implications for students. That said, it is also worth noting that we do not know what would have happened with these shortage area vacancies in the absence of hiring emergency-licensed educators and whether those alternatives (e.g., long-term substitutes, vacant roles, etc.) would be any better for students.

Administrators (n=119) reported that the ELHs they hired came from a variety of pathways, with about two-thirds indicating that at least one of the ELHs they hired was a former paraprofessional.

"We hired the right people for the jobs we had. The emergency licensure helped because we needed certified people. The two we hired were outstanding members of our community already."

Quality

In the absence of typical entry requirements (i.e., passing licensure tests, completing preparation programs), the state permitted individuals to enter the teacher workforce without assessing specific educator knowledge and skills. One critical concern is whether—in an effort to minimize workforce disruptions—the state inadvertently impacted student learning outcomes at a crucial period (post-pandemic) for accelerated student supports.

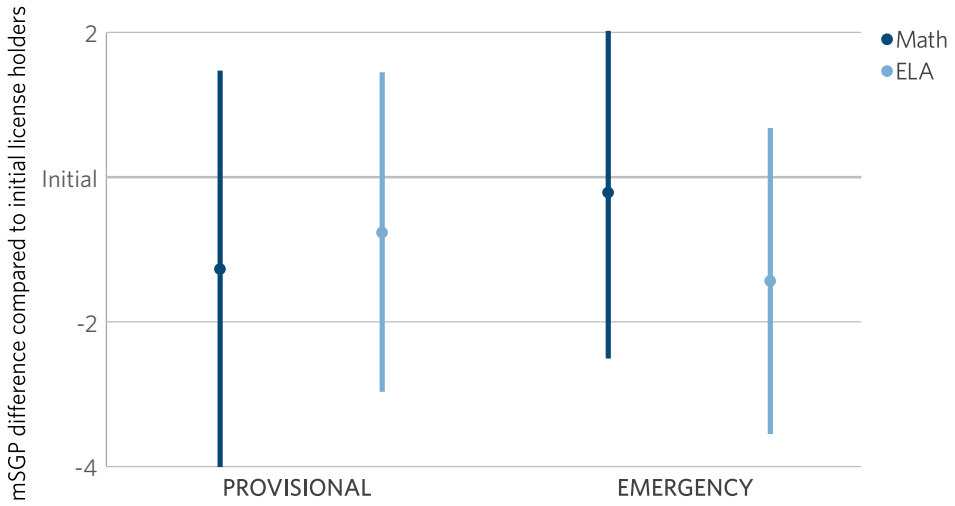
EARLY INSIGHT

Using what information is available, evidence suggests that students taught by emergency licensed educators are not at risk of being harmed by this policy. We examined educator effectiveness through three lenses: a survey of hiring principals, performance ratings on the state's educator evaluation framework, and student growth on the Massachusetts standardized assessment. In each of these cases, sample sizes are small because the measures do not pertain to all teachers and because there is currently only one year of data. Therefore, any claims around effectiveness are of limited conclusiveness. That said, all three measures point in a similar direction, which is that ELHs, particularly those with prior experience working in schools or prior involvement in the teacher pipeline, appear to be comparable to other newly hired teachers.

Student Growth Percentiles

As one indicator of quality, the field often examines the growth in student learning that various teachers facilitate as measured through standardized assessments administered by the state. Figure 2 shows the differences in mean student growth percentiles (mSGP) of newly hired teachers with provisional and emergency licenses relative to other newly hired teachers with initial licenses.[6] Though mean Math and ELA SGPs are lower for provisional- and emergency-licensed teachers compared to teachers with initial licenses (i.e., the differences are negative), none of these differences are statistically significant (as evidenced by the vertical confidence interval lines, all of which cross the baseline mSGP value for initial-licensed teachers).

Figure 2: 2022 Mean Student Growth Percentiles (mSGP) of Newly Hired Teachers with Provisional and Emergency Licenses Relative to Those with Initial Licenses



Note: Regression coefficients present the mean differences between newly hired teachers with initial licenses and those with provisional and emergency licenses, respectively. 95% confidence intervals are also presented. All models control for characteristics of students assigned to each teacher, including low-income status, race/ethnicity, gender, English learner status, special education status, and grade level (elementary or middle).

The unique nature of the cohort of emergency-licensed teachers included in this analysis is also important to consider. Researchers examined several aspects of these results in an effort to assess where and when there might be important differences. This includes examining how the results differ based on teacher race/ethnicity, grade level, and the number of MTEL attempts they made prior to obtaining an emergency license. In all of these cases, they did not find meaningful differences. However, they did observe statistically significant lower mean ELA SGPs among emergency-licensed individuals with neither prior employment (e.g., as a paraprofessional) nor prior participation in the teacher pipeline,

as compared to initial license holders. Because the sample size of ELH educators who meet both of these criteria is very small (n=36), further analysis using additional years of data will be important to confirm these patterns.

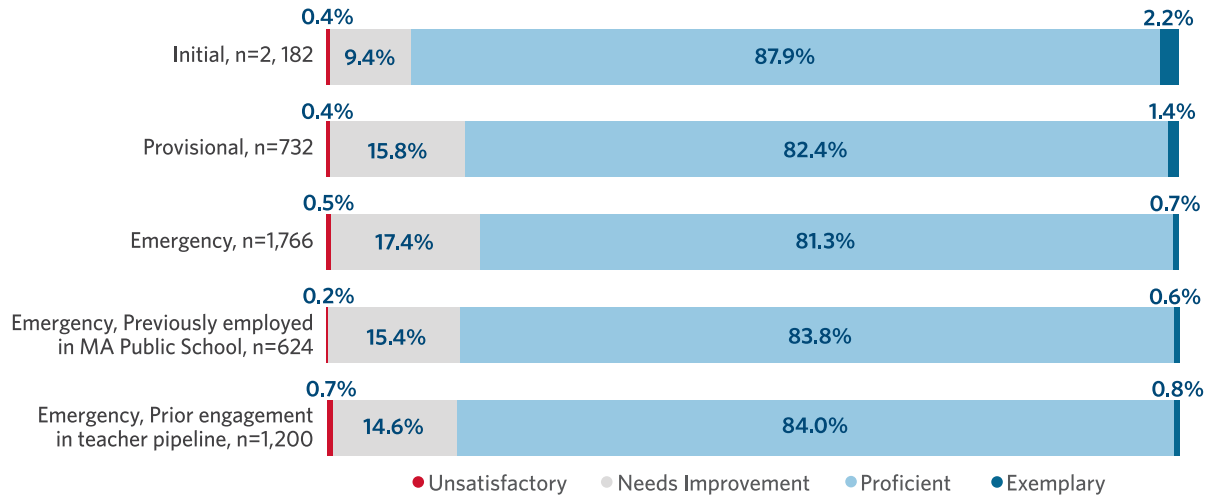
Though teachers' average SGPs are an important measure, they are only available for those who teach in tested grades and subjects. Charter school teachers and special education teachers not assigned as a core instructional teacher also do not have average SGPs. As a result, the average SGP measure is available for only 15% of ELHs in this study. Moreover, average SGPs are not reflective of other important aspects of teaching that are not captured within the test-based performance of students. Despite these limitations, continuing to monitor ELHs' impacts on test scores will contribute to the state's ongoing understanding of various licensure requirements, namely the subject-matter MTELs. Prior research in the state shows a **positive relationship between performance on MTELs**.[7] This first year of data on the effectiveness of ELHs adds some potential caveats to that understanding, underscoring the complex relationship between workforce supply and licensure requirements.

Performance Evaluation Ratings

In addition to measures of impacts on student growth, researchers also examined the performance ratings assigned to teachers as part of the **Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework**. Under state guidelines, newly hired teachers are required to be evaluated annually, receiving a summative rating of Exemplary, Proficient, Needs Improvement, or Unsatisfactory, which is an overall assessment summarizing performance across four domains. Due to the pandemic, this analysis includes only the 2021-2022 academic year, in which only 83% of newly hired teachers with emergency licenses, 74% of newly hired teachers with provisional licenses, and 81% of newly hired teachers with initial licenses have evaluation ratings. As with the student growth analysis, due to the one-year context and small sample sizes associated with these data, we caution against placing a strong emphasis on any single result.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of evaluation ratings by license type. Among emergency-licensed teachers, 81% were rated Proficient, and 17% were rated Needs Improvement. This is largely similar to other newly hired teachers with provisional licenses. However, roughly double the share of ELHs are rated Needs Improvement compared to their peers with initial licenses, though additional statistical analyses indicate that this is partially explained by differences in the characteristics of the schools in which these teachers teach. Finally, the differences in evaluation ratings are marginal for ELHs with prior employment or educator preparation experience.

Figure 3: SY2021-2022 Evaluation Ratings of Newly Hired Teachers by License Type



Note: Sample includes emergency-licensed teachers who received their emergency license by June 30, 2022. Sample excludes teachers in charter schools. Prior engagement in the teacher pipeline is defined as a) enrollment in a teacher preparation program and/or b) taking any MTEL since June 1, 2017.

Survey of School Administrators

Prior research suggests that administrators' judgements about teacher practice become more nuanced when not in a high-stakes context (e.g., official evaluation ratings), so collecting their perceptions of performance in an anonymous survey adds yet another dimension to our sense of overall effectiveness.

On the survey, school administrators (n=120) who had hired ELHs were most likely to say that they were just as effective or more effective relative to other newly hired teachers across all four Massachusetts Educator Evaluation performance standards.[9] Responses ranged from roughly 60% to 90% agreement with one of these top two categories. The smallest share of administrators (59.2%) indicated ELHs were just as or more effective on the Curriculum, Planning and Assessment Standard and the most (90.7%) rated highly on ELHs contributions to Professional Culture.

Responses from a survey of school administrators indicated that ELHs seemed to be working hard to improve within their classrooms.

"Emergency licensure has allowed principals to select what they feel are the best applicants that fit their needs and work with them at the school level, while they work on completing required coursework. If you think of a coach picking the best athlete and then training and developing the skills needed to excel, emergency licensure provides the same opportunity for advancement."

"Some work extremely well and some struggled. It was the hardest year ever. We did find some very good teachers and are helping them become extremely effective."

Retention & Supports

One concern around removing standard entry requirements to licensure is that it may mean individuals who are not committed to the profession come to "try it out" but do not intend to stay long term. This could introduce additional turnover in a profession that already has high rates of turnover, especially among those early in their career. Therefore, in examining the overall impact of the emergency license, it is important to not only assess ELHs' intention to stay but also the mechanisms that are in place to support them to do so, especially given their unique path to the classroom.

EARLY INSIGHT

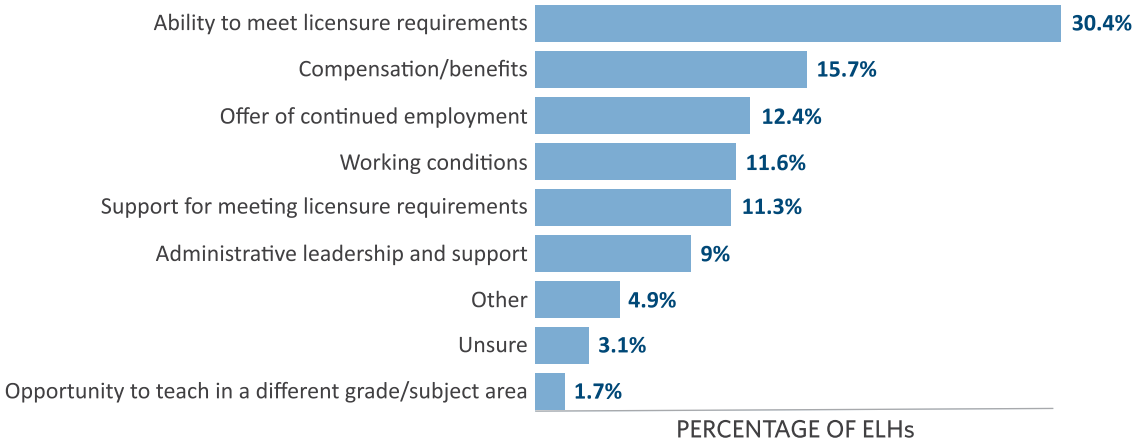
Emergency-licensed educators want to continue teaching in the state, and school administrators hope to retain ELHs as teachers. However, ELHs will likely need additional and tailored supports to remain in the workforce.

A survey of emergency-licensed teachers (n=1,327) found that among those employed as teachers in 2022-2023, 91% would like to remain teaching in Massachusetts public schools next year, with 77% hoping to stay in their current job. Importantly, survey responses from school administrators suggest that administrators also wish to continue employing ELHs; 96% of respondents indicated that they plan to retain at least some of the ELHs that they hired in the prior school year. Moreover, analysis of the administrative data indicates relatively consistent retention rates over the last two years. Among ELHs in teaching positions in the spring of 2021, 59% returned as teachers in the following fall; this rate grew to 64% in the following year. These retention rates are comparable to those among provisionally licensed new hires but are slightly lower than those with an initial license (60% and 68%, respectively).

Despite ELHs' intentions to continue teaching, and administrators' desires to retain them in their schools, the context in which ELHs are attempting to stay in the classroom is unique, and therefore examining the supports required to do so has been an important component of study. ELHs are likely a unique cohort of individuals teaching in Massachusetts' classrooms. One major difference is that unlike most other newly hired teachers, their continued employment is dependent on a relatively short window in which to complete licensure requirements. For instance, both provisional and initial licenses are valid for at least five years of teaching (with potential extensions), whereas the emergency license, even with additional extensions added to the original timeline, is a much narrower window in which to complete requirements.[10] This pressure is clearly felt by ELHs. Figure 4 shows the factors that ELHs perceive as influencing their ability to remain

in the classroom. The most commonly reported factor (30%) influencing their ability to teach next year is their ability to meet licensure requirements.

Figure 4: Factors Most Likely to Influence ELHs' Ability to Remain Teaching Next Year



Note: Represents the survey responses of 648 ELHs who reported being employed as teachers. Respondents could select only one option.

As of June 2023, just over one-third of employed teachers from ELH cohort 1 and less than one-quarter from ELH cohort 2 had converted from an emergency license to either a provisional or initial license. This low conversion rate could be concerning, though it is not yet clear whether it is because ELHs are not able meet the requirements for a standard license or if the policy extensions by the state have decreased the urgency to convert quickly. In survey responses of employed ELHs who had not yet converted their license, 31% are "extremely or very confident" about converting, while 16% are "not confident."

Figure 5 breaks down ELHs' perceptions of the challenges to obtaining an initial or provisional license. About half of respondents report lack of time (53%), financial costs (48%), and subject matter MTEL tests (47%) as large or insurmountable challenges. Teacher preparation coursework and practicum requirements are viewed as less of a challenge, which may be explained in part due to the lack of proximity to that requirement. This is in contrast to the MTELs, for instance, which are the immediate and necessary requirement for staying in the profession.

Figure 5: Challenges in Obtaining Provisional or Initial Licenses

CHALLENGE	SMALL OR NOT AT ALL	LARGE OR INSURMOUNTABLE
Coursework and Practicum		
EPP coursework (n=672)	75%	25%
Student teaching (n=657)	79%	21%
SEI endorsement (n=666)	77%	23%
MTELs		
Communications and Literature MTEL (n=724)	74%	26%
Subject-matter MTEL (n=721)	53%	47%
MTEL Alternative Assessment (n=654)	72%	28%
Time, Costs and Information		
Lack of time to complete requirements while working (n=695)	47%	53%
Lack of time to complete requirements for personal reasons (n=684)	56%	44%
Lack of information about licensure requirements (n=688)	69%	31%
Financial costs (n=740)	52%	48%

Note: This question was answered by a subset of ELHs who indicated an intention for pursuing initial or provisional licensure. It includes ELHs who were both employed and not employed as teachers.

The lack of time to complete requirements noted by many ELHs is yet another way in which this group of teachers differs from others in the workforce. Recognizing and addressing the implications of this within the typical framework and structure of teaching is necessary but also a place where disconnects exist. For example, despite time being the top challenge for ELHs in staying in the workforce, surveyed school administrators (n=116) perceived that dedicated time during the workday to work on licensure requirements was the least helpful support they could provide; 53% rated this form of support as simply not helpful. Instead, they perceived that licensure coaches to help ELHs navigate the process would be the most helpful, though only 31% of ELHs suggested that information about the licensure requirements was a large or insurmountable challenge.

Despite time being the top challenge for ELHs in staying in the workforce, surveyed school administrators (n=116) perceived that dedicated time during the workday to work on licensure requirements was the least helpful support they could provide; 53% rated this form of support as simply not helpful.

Implications

With small samples and a single year of data, these findings should be considered cautiously. Continued study and analysis are necessary to understand the full effects of ELHs in classrooms and the long-term impact of the emergency license policy on the quality and composition of the Massachusetts workforce at large.

That said, these early insights are directionally aligned. Together, they suggest that the emergency license policy has: 1) created valuable flexibility in hiring for school needs; 2) brought additional capacity to the workforce that is, on average, performing comparably to other newly hired teachers; and 3) added new teachers to the workforce who want to remain in the profession and whose school administrators wish to retain them. In light of these early trends, education leaders should consider the following short- and long-term implications of this policy.

Short-term

The most immediate implication of this study affects the ELHs who are currently teaching in Massachusetts classrooms. Findings from this report suggest that it would be prudent to retain emergency-licensed teachers given the staffing needs they are meeting throughout the state. Based on evidence reviewed for this study, this requires either A) providing tailored supports to ensure ELHs can convert to traditional licenses with a reasonable amount of time and effort, or B) continuing to adjust the licensure requirements to provide additional opportunity and flexibility for ELHs to remain employees in the long run.

Long-term

States should continue to evaluate licensure requirements and, where appropriate, create flexibility within entry pathways to the classroom. Massachusetts is a model of this effort, both in creating alternative approaches to licensure and in committing the capacity and resources necessary to study these efforts.

Moving forward, it may be important to continue exploring the balance between statewide licensure requirements and locally determined requirements. Evidence from the survey of school administrators collected during this study suggests that there may be other signals of teacher quality and school fit that matter in hiring new teachers, but that these measures are not currently captured in existing statewide licensure requirements. To the extent that state requirements place disproportionate constraints on some schools and districts (including those with perennial shortages), providing additional local autonomy around hiring decisions for specific candidates may help alleviate some of these challenges while also allowing for these administrators to select the best candidates for their needs.[11]

Flexibility in the timing and type of licensure requirements will also be important as prospective teachers bring increasingly different experiences with them to the classroom. For instance, the paraprofessionals tapped to become teachers under this emergency license provision might be providing a unique classroom experience for students. In the absence

of this policy, those individuals would likely have been less likely to make the transition to full-time teacher of record status. Identifying ways to differentiate the licensure process by relevant prior work experiences may increase the supply of teachers, particularly in historically hard-to-staff roles, such as special education.

Continued efforts to study the ongoing effects of this statewide intervention are underway and will undoubtedly add insights and evolve our understanding of the emergency license policy beyond these initial findings. This investment in studying the impacts of statewide policy changes highlights a commitment to using research to inform decision-making. We hope that other states looking to make similar changes to licensure policy follow this lead to ensure that the immediate and lasting effects of efforts to improve the quality and composition of the workforce are well understood.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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ENDNOTES

1 These findings present early evidence given the limited nature of data available for analysis. While we believe it is important to release evidence as soon as possible, we also believe that these findings should be used with caution. Continued study and analysis will be important to understand the long-term effects of ELHs in classrooms and the full impact of the emergency license policy on the quality and composition of the Massachusetts workforce.

2 Prior to the pandemic, the state had initiated several efforts aimed at increasing the accessibility and flexibility of teacher licensure requirements, including, for instance, the MTEL Alternative Assessment Pilot. The unprecedented circumstances that led to the authorization of the emergency license provide a unique opportunity to carefully examine the experiences of individuals facing reduced entry requirements to joining the teacher workforce.

3 Cohort 1 ELHs were licensed between June 1, 2020 and May 31, 2021. Cohort 2 ELHs were licensed between June 1, 2021 and May 31, 2022. Employment rates for both are reported for the Fall of 2022.

4 Evidence from this two-year study of the emergency license in Massachusetts suggests that individuals who received an emergency license and were employed during this 2021–2023 period may be especially unique. That is, the characteristics and effectiveness of these emergency-licensed teachers may not necessarily be replicated in future cohorts if elements of the policy were to continue. For instance, the first-year analysis of the policy indicates that many ELHs were already engaged in the broader educator workforce (e.g., as paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, teaching on waivers) and/or had previously attempted licensure requirements in some form. This may mean that the swell of individuals entering the teacher workforce under the emergency license provision were "waiting in the wings," and future cohorts of entering teachers could be quite distinct with respect to prior experience and effectiveness in the classroom.

5 Cowan, J., Goldhaber, D., & Theobald, R. (2017). Teacher equity gaps in Massachusetts. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED589944.pdf

6 If one were to examine only the raw differences in average SGP between ELHs and their peers with initial licenses, one could mistakenly conclude that those employed under the emergency license are less effective; however, these differences disappear when controlling for the characteristics of students assigned to each teacher, as done in the analysis shared in Figure 2. Controlling for the characteristics of assigned students (e.g., race, gender, income status, etc.) is important, as emergency licensed teachers are disproportionately assigned to less advantaged students.

7 Cowan, J., Goldhaber, D., Jin, Z., & Theobald, R. (2020). Teacher licensure tests: Barrier or predictive tool? CALDER Working Paper No. 245-1020. https://caldercenter.org/publications/teacher-licensure-tests-barrier-or-predictive-tool

8 Grissom, J. A. & Loeb, S. (2017). Assessing principals' assessments: Subjective evaluations of teacher effectiveness in low- and high-stakes environments. Education Finance and Policy, 12(3): 369–395. doi.org/10.1162/EDFP_a_00210

9 Standards of Effective Practice used in the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework include: Curriculum, Planning, and Assessment; Teaching All Students; Family and Community Engagement; Professional Culture

10 The emergency license was originally constructed as a one-year emergency certification, requiring conversion to a standard license as soon as possible. As the effects of the pandemic have continued to be felt, the state has extended the deadline for eligibility and expiration of the license a few times. As of the date of publication, no new emergency licenses will be granted in the state after November 7, 2023. Those employed on an existing emergency license are generally expected to complete requirements within a year or demonstrate sufficient progress to be granted up to two one-yearlong extensions. Full details at: https://www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/emergency/

11 Massachusetts has an existing process through which districts can apply to the state for, and hire a teacher on, a waiver. Unlike the emergency license however, it requires the district to provide additional documentation and evidence of a hardship in hiring other licensed teachers (e.g., list of all applicants and an explanation for not hiring them). https://www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/resources/set-up-request-waiver.html

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