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Carmel Martin: R.I. is national model for teacher preparation

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Under regulations recently promulgated by President Obama, all states will soon be called upon to improve their teacher preparation programs. Because many states will be starting from scratch, it's likely they will look to Rhode Island for a road map.

Rhode Island has become one of the few national models for making teacher preparation more rigorous and selective. The state raised the bar for admission into teacher preparation, required new teachers to pass tests verifying that they have the necessary subject knowledge to be effective, and developed a system for connecting teacher effectiveness to teacher preparation programs and reporting publicly on their impact.

Recently, for the first time, the state released easy-to-read report cards containing key outcome measures of teacher preparation programs. By providing principals and aspiring teachers with hard data on which programs produce the most effective teachers, Rhode Island is enabling its key stakeholders to become savvy consumers, a practice that will ultimately benefit students.

Teachers today are being asked to do more than they have ever had to do: implement the Common Core, teach students 21st century skills, provide tailored instruction, employ rapidly changing technology programs, and support the development of students with a wide range of academic and socio-emotional needs. Nationally, 30 percent of teachers will quit within their first five years. Close to 10 percent will quit after their first year. A significant percentage will stay in their jobs but fail. Many will struggle greatly.

But despite the demands of the job, teaching in most states other than Rhode Island is not a selective profession. At many colleges, the academic bar is higher to be a Division I athlete than to enter a teacher preparation program. And with few exceptions, states set the passing rate for licensure tests so low that they weed out almost no one.

As a result, almost 50 percent of new teachers come from the bottom third of their class in terms of SAT or ACT scores. And while good test scores aren't everything — some research shows that characteristics like grit

and perseverance matter as much or more in predicting who will be an effective teacher — teacher preparation programs are failing to screen prospective teachers on those traits as well.

Rhode Island has been at the forefront of the movement to change the status quo, but it is not alone. Massachusetts, which requires elementary school teachers to prove that they understand math and reading instruction before earning their teaching licenses, provides another national model. So does Delaware, which has raised admission standards for teacher preparation programs, and Tennessee, which lets only effective master teachers mentor novices.

Like Rhode Island, Tennessee, Ohio, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida report information about the performance of beginning teachers back to their teacher preparation programs, which can help programs identify their own strengths and weaknesses. And since this performance data is public, school districts can make informed decisions about where to target their recruitment efforts, and prospective teachers can apply to only the most successful training programs. With the implementation of President Obama's new regulations, all states will have to establish systems for rating the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs. Programs that fail to measure up will risk losing federal funding.

There is a growing consensus even in the teacher preparation field itself that programs must be accountable for their graduates' classroom performance. Last summer, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) released new, outcome-oriented standards for accreditation that may provide a useful framework for states as they embark on this work.

States, school districts and teacher preparation programs are also turning to models of professional training in other fields. The Boston Teacher Residency and other programs like it let novice teachers learn from highly effective teachers and mix classroom practice with subject matter training in the same way that doctors-in-training work alongside experienced physicians to learn medical practice after spending years developing expertise in subject areas like anatomy and biochemistry. The National Education Association, a teachers union, has embraced this model too. States across the country should create incentives for similar programs.

By improving teacher preparation, we can shape the next generation of teachers. Rhode Island is showing the rest of the country how.

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