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The Case Against the Professional Readiness Exam

ROBERT ROZEMA

“Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,
Shrunk to this little measure?”
—*Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 1

In 2009, the Obama administration and the U.S. Department of Education implemented Race to the Top, a far-reaching educational reform that initiated a state-to-state competition for a sizable federal grant. To be eligible to compete, states were required to meet several criteria: they had to institute performance-based teacher and administrator evaluation systems; foster conditions that allowed for creation of charter schools; commit to improving low-performing schools; begin building state-wide data-gathering systems; and most consequentially, adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the newly minted set of national curriculum standards developed in 2009-2010 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governor’s Association (NGA) and underwritten by the Gates Foundation.

The widespread adoption of the CCSS has substantially altered curriculum, instruction, and especially assessment in K-12 schools throughout the nation. In the 48 states where the CCSS were initially deployed, state departments of education were compelled to align their annual standardized tests (mandated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind law) with the new Common Core standards. To facilitate this effort, two multi-state consortia were formed: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers Assessment Consortium (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

These organizations share the goal of implementing standardized assessments of Common Core skills in K-12 schools. They have largely succeeded in their efforts, though a handful of states have defected from the Common Core altogether. In the majority of states, however, large corporations such as Educational Testing Service (ETS) and Pearson Education have been brought in to deliver new standardized

assessments that reflect the Common Core. Pearson, according to a 2015 report by the Center for Media and Democracy, won a one billion dollar contract to administer tests within PARCC consortium states (CMD, 2015, p. 5)

Higher education has not been unaffected by the Common Core, particularly in the field of teacher education. Certification tests have been redesigned to reflect the new standards. If K-12 students must know the Common Core, the logic goes, K-12 teachers should also know the Common Core—in fact, their certification should depend on it. Michigan law requires that teacher candidates pass two standardized assessments: first, a basic skills exam that must be passed prior to student teaching; and second, a subject-area test that must be passed in order to be certified by the state (Revised School Code, 1976).

Michigan is currently contracted with Pearson, the global company that dominates the educational publishing industry in North America. Thus teacher candidates in Michigan must pass the Professional Readiness Exam (PRE), a Pearson basic skills test on Reading, Math, and Writing that is typically administered prior to entrance into the teacher education programs. Candidates also take subject area certification tests, also provided by Pearson, to complete the certification process. The vast majority of teacher candidates in Michigan pass subject area exams with ease, but the basic skills PRE has been a different story. Across the state, teacher candidates in every subject and at every instructional level are taking the PRE, some on paper and others by computer. And they are failing in droves.

Statewide, the average pass rate during the initial 2013-2014 testing year was 31 percent. At my university, only 41 percent of test takers passed the PRE during the initial 2013-2014 testing year. Remarkably, this score was among the best in the state, a comparatively strong showing for our mid-sized public university. Other institutions, some with highly regarded education programs, suffered similarly low scores. Calvin, an elite private liberal arts college, achieved a 42 percent pass

rate; Central Michigan came in at 20 percent; and Western Michigan, originally a normal school, scored only 20 percent. The University of Michigan, home to one of the first teacher education programs in the nation, posted the highest score in the state, with a 71 percent pass rate. At the opposite extreme, some schools had pass rates below 10 percent (MTTC Annual Legislative Report, 2013-2014, p. 24). The situation is not improving, either. According to recent data provided by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), scores have *declined* over the past three years (MDE Data, 2016).

What could these failures indicate? The simplest explanation is that the PRE is just a hard test, and there is some truth to this answer. The PRE is certainly a more exacting gatekeeper to the teaching profession than its predecessor, another standardized assessment called the Basic Skills, a test which yielded an 85 percent pass rate across the state in 2012-2013 (MTTC Annual Legislative Report, 2012-2013, p. 24). By design, the PRE contains more demanding content, especially in mathematics and writing, as well as less forgiving cut scores, the minimal scores necessary to pass. MDE State Superintendent Brian Whiston has justified the more rigorous PRE on the grounds that Michigan has “a responsibility to . . . uphold our teacher candidates to a level of rigor commensurate with the demands of their future professions” (Letter to MCEE, March 30, 2016). Following this logic, a more selective test produces better teachers, and better teachers make for more successful students. By analogy, the famously difficult MCAT screens out a large number of would-be doctors, improving the quality of the medical profession as a whole.

The logic of this position is both seductive and seemingly unassailable, particularly when the talismanic word *rigor* is invoked, as it often is in matters of educational reform. But there is no reason to believe that the new PRE, higher cut scores and harder math notwithstanding, will do anything to improve the quality of teachers in Michigan schools. In contrast, test data from teacher preparation institutions across the state offer proof that the continued use of the PRE has the potential to do great harm to Michigan schools in the long run.

How the PRE Hurts Michigan Teachers and Students

Within the testing industry, standardized tests are themselves assessed for reliability, validity, and lack of bias. The first criterion, reliability, is based on statistical analysis of test scores, chiefly to determine internal consistency over time. Thus if an individual takes the same test twice, his or her

scores should be very similar, or positively correlated. According to the Michigan Department of Education, the PRE meets industry standards of reliability, and there no reason to call this into question (PRE FAQ, 2015, p. 3).

The second criterion is test validity, which judges whether the test actually measures what it purports to measure. There are several ways to evaluate validity, but two essential measures are called *content validity* and *construct validity*. Content validity measures if the test accurately reflects the subject matter itself. Generally, a panel of experts determines the content validity of a test: thus math teachers and professors might evaluate whether a standardized test in mathematics includes key concepts from algebra, trigonometry, statistics, and geometry. Construct validity, by comparison, measures if the content of the standardized test aligns with the theoretical framework underlying the subject matter. If the same math test embedded its problems in lengthy prose paragraphs, it would align more readily with a reading framework than a math one, and therefore not satisfy construct validity (College Board, n.d.).

Again according to the MDE, the PRE is valid by these industry measures: the objective framework has been approved by K-12 teachers and university faculty and aligned to Michigan standards; test content and test items have been reviewed by Michigan teachers and professors; the test was field tested; and its new cut scores were recommended by Michigan teachers and professors (PRE FAQ, 2015, p. 3). All this to say that the PRE is a valid standardized test—at least, ostensibly.

But there are other, more meaningful methods of determining test validity, and this is where the PRE misses the mark most dramatically. Messick (1995) originated the term *consequential validity* to describe “the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of interpretations and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment.” In his view, validity must involve “the extent to which score meaning and action implications hold across persons or population groups and across settings or contexts” (p.1). Though not without controversy in the testing industry, consequential validity insists that standardized tests should be evaluated according to the effects they might have in society. Meant to complement, not replace, internal measures of test validity, consequential validity recognizes that a test has an impact that goes beyond the examination room.

When viewed from this wider angle, it is already clear that the PRE has dire consequences for Michigan teachers

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and schools. First, the PRE is systematically reducing the diversity of Michigan teachers. As the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (2015) has argued, the *New York Times* has reported (Harris, 2015), and research has demonstrated (Angrista & Guryan, 2008), basic skills tests such as the PRE and the Praxis significantly reduce diversity in teacher preparation programs by allowing fewer African Americans and Hispanics to enter colleges of education.

At my university, for example, pass rates among African Americans, Hispanics, and other students of color were alarmingly lower than pass rates for whites. If these failing students do not manage to pass, the PRE will have preemptively excluded teachers of color from the future ranks of Michigan educators. The pattern repeats itself at other Michigan teacher preparation institutions, where whites are

far more likely to pass the PRE than are Hispanics or African Americans. Moreover, this pattern fits into the long history of bias against people of color that research into standardized testing has proven to exist (Aguinis, Culpepper, & Piece, 2016).

Beyond raising the specter of institutional racism, these statistics are also ominous for K-12 students of color in our state. Put simply, the continued use of the PRE means that Michigan's K-12 African Americans and Hispanics are much less likely to have a teacher who shares their race or ethnicity. Does it matter? A growing body of research finds that students perform better when they are taught by teachers from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A 2015 longitudinal study of three million students enrolled in Florida public schools found that African-American, white, and Asian-American students perform better in reading and math when taught by a same-race teacher (Egalite, Kasida & Winters, 2015). An earlier study by Dee (2005) found that student race/ethnicity negatively affected teacher perceptions of disruptiveness, inattention, and academic ability.

Such results have led states to actively recruit minority teachers as one means to narrow the achievement gap between white and minority students. Indeed, accreditation of teacher preparation institutions depends, to some degree, on the program showing a commitment to increasing diversity. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) requires evidence that teacher preparation institutions have made good faith efforts to recruit a diverse

pool of candidates (CAEP, 2013), an especially urgent mandate, given the nationwide under-representation of minority teachers. But instead of encouraging diversity, the PRE effectively whitewashes our colleges of education, robbing our K-12 classrooms of potentially excellent African-American and Hispanic teachers.

The Michigan Department of Education knows it is losing these teachers. In a March 2015 FAQ that has since been removed from its web site, the MDE included the following item:

Question: Some educators have noted that the diversity of our teaching force will be compromised if we put up inappropriate, archaic, unnecessarily academic, decontextualized, and meaningless hurdles. How would MDE respond?

Answer: MDE believes all teacher candidates regardless of background should be held to consistent standards . . . Ethically, we are required, as educators, to model the behavior we expect and support the idea that all teacher candidates are capable of learning the content on the PRE *if they truly wish to become teachers* [emphasis mine]. Michigan's institutes of higher education have a responsibility to support teacher candidates of diversity in such a way that does not include a differential level of expectation on teacher assessments, but supports their achievement on those assessments. (PRE FAQ, 2015, p. 7)

The implication is disturbingly familiar: people of color who fail must not be trying hard enough, or they would manage, somehow, to pass the test. This underlying assumption, steeped in the myth of American meritocracy, ignores the larger socioeconomic realities faced by many students of color. These students already face long odds to attend and complete college, and we increase these odds when we screen potential teachers of color from our colleges of education. Doing so denies these individuals the chance to mentor minority K-12 students along the pathway to college, a proven method for increasing college preparedness among students of color (Cooper, 2002).

A second and related danger resulting from high PRE failure rates is the ongoing teacher shortage in Michigan. Over the past three years, Michigan has seen a dramatic drop in the number of students in our undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs: institutions in Michigan saw a 22 percent decline in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2014). This precipitous drop in enrollment

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comes at an inopportune time, as Michigan faces educator shortages in many fields, including early childhood, English as a second language, and special education (USDE, 2015, p. 76). Compounding this problem is the impending retirement of many Michigan teachers, nearly 50 percent of whom are 50 or older, as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future reports.

The PRE is worsening our state shortage by preventing many qualified and potentially effective teachers from entering our field. Instead of joining the profession, many teacher candidates in Michigan are caught in perpetual limbo in education programs: they have completed the coursework necessary for graduation, they have passed their subject area tests, and they have even finished their first semester of teacher assisting in the field. But they are not passing a supposedly basic-skills test that is required for student teaching. At my mid-sized university, 60 of the 130 students who have so far been unable to pass the PRE are currently caught in this particular purgatory. These teachers need to be in our classrooms, not stuck in our College of Education. Or, as one of my more litigious colleagues suggested, they should sue the joint.

A third consequence of the PRE is less significant but still critical to many students undergoing the financial stress of paying for college. At a time when the average college student accumulates \$35,000.00 of debt by graduation (Noguchi, 2016), many students are retaking the test two, three, and even four times, with each try incurring a cost of \$50.00 for a paper-based test. The price goes up for the computer-based version: the complete test costs \$140.00, and retaking individual subtests costs \$75.00 apiece for Reading and Math and \$85.00 for Writing. Because testing centers that offer the paper-based test are less common, rural students must either drive long distances or take the more expensive computer-based test at a closer location. The most expensive subtest, Writing, has a retake rate of 40 percent at my university, and with each subsequent attempt, the chance of passing radically diminishes. By the fifth attempt, MDE data show that only 6 percent pass the Writing subtest, even after spending \$250.00 on test fees (MDE Data, 2016). It seems unnecessary to extrapolate beyond the fifth attempt, though a colleague in another Michigan university related that one of her students had failed the test twelve times, paying at least \$600.00 in test fees with no certification to show for it.

This gouging of Michigan education students is more than unethical. Until a recent change in Michigan law, it may also have been illegal. While Michigan has now lifted the

\$50.00 fee cap on the basic skills certification exam, the limit was still in place when Pearson first implemented the exam in October 2013. In fact, one reason Michigan originally chose the PRE was that at \$50.00 for the initial test, it met the conditions of the law. But somehow, the cost of retaking the test was not figured into the equation, and most Michigan students end up paying well over the original \$50.00, particularly if they purchase the practice exam for an additional \$29.00. To be fair, the ETS Praxis used by 31 states is, at \$150.00, a more expensive test. Despite its cost, however, the Praxis test yields much higher pass rates than the PRE, and thus, it may have been a better bargain for Michigan education students. But for now, Michigan students will continue to pay Pearson, the world's largest, most profitable educational corporation, until they pass the PRE, or more likely, they are too discouraged or too broke to continue trying.

If Michigan continues to use a test that results in the de facto segregation of our colleges of education, that accelerates our teacher shortages, and that fleeces our education students, we will soon be regarded as a state that is unfriendly to the teaching profession. This at a time when the recovering economy has created teaching positions across the state (MDE Data, 2016) and when urban school districts in particular are hungry for early-career teachers. According to Detroit Public School officials, the district expects 350 vacancies next year (Cwiek, 2016). The PRE may soon push the district to hire candidates from states with a more just, less injurious certification process.

One such state may be Missouri, which uses a Pearson-created test that mirrors the PRE, but whose state teacher preparation institutions are currently allowed to set their own cut scores. Amid the great push toward national standards—the educational reform movement that Pearson catalyzed and profited enormously from—one Missouri university allows students to pass the Writing portion of the basic skills test with a score of 167, while another demands a 220, a difference of nearly 25 percent (MoGEA, 2016). This bewildering inconsistency continues in Indiana, which uses another Pearson basic skills test called the CASA. The content areas tested by the CASA and the PRE are the same—Reading, Writing, and Math—and their formats are nearly identical. But teacher candidates in Indiana pass all areas of the test at significantly higher rates than their neighbors in Michigan. It is clear that state-to-state, the certification process is not equitable or standardized. Michigan would-be teachers seem to have a particularly arduous road, and the largest obstacle is undoubtedly the PRE Writing subtest.

Why the Writing Subtest is Wrong

While the overall pass rates on the PRE have been low, it is the Writing subtest that has proven most vexing for teacher candidates across Michigan. State averages show just how difficult this portion has been: the Reading subtest has a 77 percent pass rate; Mathematics, 42 percent; and Writing, a distant and dismal 27 percent (MDE Data, 2016). As Writing subtest repeaters know all too well, this portion of the test contains 42 multiple choice questions on paragraph development, grammar, mechanics, as well as two constructed response questions. The first constructed response asks test takers to write a 300-400 word analytical argument based on a dataset such as a graph or chart. The second requires them to write a 200-300 word explanatory constructed response to an open-ended writing prompt, usually on a universal topic such as leadership or democracy.

The two constructed responses, which constitute 50 percent of the Writing subtest score, demand timed writing on unfamiliar subjects, with no opportunity for revision. There is well-established research critiquing this kind of test writing. In his large-scale study of state writing tests, for example, George Hillocks (2002) argues that such tests demand formulaic responses, neglect the writing process, promote superficial thinking, and result in inconsistent scores. Most critically for Hillocks, the mandated use of standardized writing assessment in K-12 schools significantly alters curriculum and writing instruction, as teachers feel compelled to teach to the test. In light of the inherent difficulties of timed test writing, the SAT recently made the essay portion of its test optional, leading many colleges to drop the essay as an entrance requirement. Likewise, the current ACT has an optional essay portion that many universities no longer require. Counter to these national trends, however, the PRE actually increased the number of timed writing responses, from one to two, when it replaced the Basic Skills exam in 2013.

Even so, the constructed response portion of the Writing subtest is not the most difficult element for teacher candidates. At my university, students were comparatively successful on the two responses, with 57 percent of 2014-2015 test takers passing the analytical argument and 61 percent passing the explanatory essay. Comparatively successful, that is, when their scores are cast into relief against pass rates on the multiple-choice grammar section. Here, student performance dropped steeply, with 55 percent passing the category *Conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics*; 44 percent passing *Effective sentence and paragraph formation*, and 21 percent

passing *Development, organization, focus, and cohesion* (GVSU Data, 2016). The 42 multiple choice questions that cover these categories, it should be noted, comprise 50 percent of the overall Writing subtest score.

Why do teacher candidates perform poorly on questions that focus on grammar, mechanics, usage, and paragraph development? One answer readily supplied by cultural critics is that students today do not know “proper” grammar. In such formulations, new communication technologies are often the culprits, and more than one English teacher has griped at the appearance of an emoji in a formal writing assignment. But data from the PRE call this criticism into question. Of those students who failed the Writing subtest at my university, 25 percent actually received passing scores on their written constructed responses (GVSU Data, 2016). Tellingly, the rubric that assesses the constructed responses includes *Grammar and conventions* as one of its five evaluative components. In other words, one in four test takers use grammatical conventions correctly within the context of their own writing, but cannot pass the isolated grammar questions of the multiple choice section. This inconsistency illustrates what research on grammar instruction has long proven: that grammar is best understood in the context of actual writing and not in isolation. By extension, performance on a multiple choice grammar exam does not reflect actual understanding and correct use of conventions.

A closer examination of the content and form of the multiple choice section makes this point clear. The following example is taken from the PRE study guide for the Writing subtest. The test taker is provided a short passage—the study guide example features a biographical blurb on Dr. Patricia Bath—followed by three or four multiple choice questions. The passage contains several correct sentences and the following “incorrect” sentence: “This pioneering, volunteer-based approach that she developed to bring eye-care services to underserved populations *have* [my emphasis] had a positive effect on the lives of countless people.” The final question on the Dr. Bath passage reads:

3. “Which of the following parts should be edited to correct an error in subject-verb agreement?”
 - A. Part 4
 - B. Part 5
 - C. Part 6
 - D. Part 7

Setting aside the jarring nomenclature (no writer has ever called a sentence a *part*), we are left with the faulty idea that editing writing involves discriminating between three

error-free sentences and one incorrect sentence. One can hardly imagine a copyeditor saying to herself, “I know one of these sentences has an error in subject-verb agreement. If I only knew which one!” An even more absurd scenario ensues if we consider how this question was developed. Presumably, the sentence was once correct and was made incorrect for the purpose of the test. Thus the original sentence was “This pioneering, volunteer-based approach that she developed to bring eye-care services to underserved populations *has* [my emphasis] had a positive effect on the lives of countless people.” This sentence was then changed to introduce a subject/verb agreement error. In a process unlike anything that writers actually do, the test taker is supposed to identify this manipulation and return the *part* to its original, correct version.

And on it goes for 42 multiple choice questions. Many questions are concerned with paragraph development, organization, focus, and cohesion—the category that test takers fail most egregiously, according to the data. These questions require the same kind of artificial processes as the grammar questions. Among other maneuvers, test takers must insert missing transitions, identify wandering sentences, pick the best of four sentences to add emphasis to a paragraph, and most subjectively, reorder sentences within and across paragraphs. None of these machinations are true to the way writers revise paragraphs. If actual writing and PRE writing do bear a resemblance, it is only the distant kinship that exists between cooking a meal at home and dropping fries into a grease vat at McDonalds.

It is no surprise, then, that while 91 percent of Math majors at my university pass the Math subtest of the PRE, only 36 percent of English majors pass the Writing subtest (GVSU Data, 2016). Writing is the special province of English departments, whose instructors, it seems safe to speculate, spend more time teaching writing than professors of other academic disciplines, with the exception of faculty in stand-alone Writing departments. Writing is not a teachable major in Michigan, so no Writing majors take the PRE. If they did, they would likely not achieve pass rates comparable to Math majors on the Math subtest: the gap between what PRE Writing measures and what the academic discipline teaches is simply too great to overcome. Conversely, Math majors excel on PRE Math because its form and content reflect what the discipline practices, at least in its introductory courses.

There is one final way in which the PRE, and especially its most daunting component, the Writing subtest, damages

Michigan colleges of education. Across the state, universities and colleges are scrambling to develop test preparation resources and strategies, all aimed at helping students pass the test. Some institutions are even revising curriculum in the hopes of raising PRE scores. For example, the college of education at Western Michigan University has developed three single-credit courses that focus, respectively, on the three PRE subtests. Other curricular changes are taking place within English departments, which seem to bear the burden for low PRE Writing scores. The English department at Central Michigan, for instance, has introduced a new 200-level grammar course; Lake Superior State has repositioned its Grammar and Language course to give students an earlier treatment of the subject. At my university and many others, faculty in the English department offer writing review sessions multiple times per semester.

All of these efforts cost universities time and money. And the genuflections of our universities reveal just how much power Pearson has to drive teacher education in Michigan. Pearson spent big money to gain this influence: according to a recent study conducted by the Center for Media and Democracy, the company spent 3.5 million in lobbying state legislatures between 2009 and 2014. The same report finds that Pearson has often been accused of bid-rigging, as it has landed lucrative state testing contracts without facing any competition from other testing companies (CMD, 2015). That the future of Michigan teachers depends entirely on a multibillion-dollar corporation with a powerful political lobby should raise ethical concerns, to put it lightly.

Moreover, the curricular revisions already enacted by universities in response to the PRE are harbingers of future instruction keyed to high-stakes standardized assessments, not just in secondary schools, as Hillocks (2002) observed, but also in higher education. If grammar in isolation is the *modus operandi* of PRE Writing, university teacher educators will feel pressured—by departments, colleges of education, administrators, state officials, and accrediting bodies—to teach grammar prescriptively, despite the decades of research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of this approach (Hillocks, 1996). If scores on constructed responses are weak, college of education professors may be compelled to devote class time to teaching the kind of canned, formulaic essays the test rewards. Hillocks’ warning seems appropriate here: high-stakes writing assessments “impose not only a format but a way of thinking that eliminates the need for critical thought” (2002, p. 136).

Why None of This Might Matter

Ironically, all of the handwringing over the PRE—including my own—is unfolding even as the fate of the test is uncertain. Indeed, the next six months will likely determine the future of the PRE in Michigan. In upcoming months, the Michigan Department of Education will seek a new test provider for the basic skills and subject area certification exams. The first step in this process is to issue a new Request For Proposals (RFP), a solicitation of bids from testing vendors. To develop the RFP, which will be posted in September 2016, the MDE invited classroom teachers and professors to put forth recommendations, a kind of wish list of features that the new tests might contain. I attended a meeting dedicated to this purpose in late April of 2016. With support from MDE personnel, stakeholders at the meeting discussed six central ideas: measurement construct, scoring, reporting, and data; administration options; equal access and accommodations; customer service and disaster recovery; and resources and support.

Encouragingly, there was widespread consensus among K-12 teachers, education and content area professors, and school administrators that the PRE is a deeply flawed and fundamentally unfair means to assess potential teacher candidates. In addition to the arguments already presented here, we cited a range of issues, including the paucity of test results data available to test takers, the disparate fee structures and time restrictions between computer-based and paper-based tests; the slow turnover of results; the oppressive and non-inclusive testing environments; the lack of campus testing centers and consequent transportation costs for students; the cost of the practice exams; and the uncertainty surrounding the commercial use of private data. Perhaps most significantly, the participants at the meeting wanted any future testing company to demonstrate a commitment to increasing the diversity of colleges of education. The wish list may go unfulfilled and the complaints unaddressed, but there can be little doubt that teacher educators and teachers are raising serious concerns. Bill Warren, a history professor at Western Michigan University, put it most succinctly: “The PRE has decimated our program.”

One intriguing proposal on the table is to eliminate the PRE altogether, replacing it with the College Board’s SAT, which is already administered in high schools as part of the Michigan Merit Curriculum. This proposal, supported by State Superintendent Brian Whiston (Letter to MCEE, March 30, 2016), has several advantages. To begin, Michigan

teacher candidates would use their high school SAT scores to meet the basic skills requirement currently mandated by state law. The MDE is currently examining SAT data to establish potential cut scores for this scenario. Another advantage is that the Michigan budget provides the SAT free of charge for high school students, though a dispute in the current legislature threatens to defund the test. Using the SAT as an entrance exam would also neatly align K-12 learning standards with teacher education in Michigan, resulting in what Whiston calls a “cohesive P-20 system that we have begun to envision in Michigan” (Letter to MCEE, March 30, 2016). The SAT has also paired with Khan Academy to supply free test preparation materials. Moreover, students would know in advance whether they had the scores to enter teacher preparation programs, eliminating the problem of students getting stuck on the PRE after investing time and money into a teaching career. Finally, the move to the SAT would better satisfy our accrediting body, CAEP, which requires that teacher preparation programs measure their candidates according to “performance on nationally normed ability/achievement assessments such as ACT, SAT, or GRE” (CAEP, 2013). The PRE is noticeably absent from this list.

The SAT is not a perfect test, and it should be noted that David Coleman, the current president of College Board, is one of the original architects of the Common Core. Like Pearson and ETS, moreover, the College Board is a profit-driven enterprise with a well-funded political lobby. But whether the SAT is ultimately adopted, or whether this option vanishes when new bids from Educational Testing Services and Pearson roll in this fall, what is most important to remember is that the correlation between teacher testing and teacher quality is still unclear (Angrista & Guryanb, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2013). Summarizing decades of research on this relationship, Darling-Hammond writes,

Although most states require a battery of paper and pencil tests to enter teacher education or for an initial license (usually tests of basic skills, subject matter knowledge, and/or pedagogical knowledge), these have generally proven to be rather poor predictors of teachers’ eventual success in the classroom. (p.146)

As Darling-Hammond recognizes, successful teachers in Michigan today do not owe their expertise to high test scores on certification exams. Nor will future teachers credit the PRE with helping them engage reluctant learners or design lessons with colleagues. If the PRE is mentioned at all, it will likely be by those who were driven from teaching by its strictures, and that would be a shame.

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A note on select data sources: GVSU data is provided by Jeffrey Rollins, Grand Valley State University College of Education. MDE data is provided by Sean Kottke, Michigan Department of Education.

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