



Policy Analysis: The Rise and Fall of Missouri's Performance Assessments of Student Teachers

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KEY POINTS

Missouri's education policy landscape includes the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), colleges and universities, over 500 school districts, and advocacy groups statewide. Together, these policy actors influence and shape the policies and procedures that impact Missouri schools and students. Balancing the relationships between these actors is essential for creating and maintaining effective policy initiatives in Missouri. When these policy actors are desynchronized, policy implementation may suffer as was true for the Missouri Performance Assessment of Student Teachers (MoPTA) - a high-stakes performance assessment of student teaching.

This policy brief chronicles the birth, adoption, and expiration of MoPTA and the educational policy dynamics that prevented the stable adoption of the assessment. We summarize our complete analysis which finds that MoPTA serves as an illustrative study for how teacher education policy delivery is formed and implemented within a network of interdependent actors.^{1,2} This analysis identifies logistical problems born from political culture valuing district autonomy. We find that divergent rationales for supporting high-stakes performance assessments, along with widespread concerns about the rigor and scoring of MoPTA, led to its abandonment. We suggest repairing and bridging communication between statewide actors for successful future policy implementation.

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 4

July 2021

Inside this issue:

What is MoPTA?	1
Logistical Problems	2
Divergent Rationales	2
Implications	2
Conclusions	3

What is MoPTA?

High-stakes performance assessments of student teaching are a relatively recent development in the landscape of teacher education policy.³ Initially spawning from the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act placed a new emphasis on teacher quality and asked states to demonstrate the quality of their teacher workforce.⁴ Following this, Missouri created performance assessments aligned to state-level educator evaluation systems or teacher education or educator standards. As determined by state educational objectives, these performance assessments included proficiency tasks on a teacher's knowledge, skills, and competencies. However, unlike other states, Missouri abandoned performance assessments as a licensure requirement and measure of program quality shortly after adoption. Consequently, the six-year lifespan of MoPTA serves as an intrinsic case study within the context of a multi-state policy consensus that values high-stakes performance assessments as a way to inform teacher licensure and teacher quality. The table below offers an abbreviated chronological history of MoPTA from conception to eventual expiration.

Spring 2013	DESE developed MoPTA.
Fall 2013	MoPTA pre-pilot with selected institutions.
Spring 2014	MoPTA piloted and field-tested across the state.
May 2014	DESE communicated that MoPTA implementation would be delayed to create a new assessment that would satisfy state policy actors and teacher programs.
January 2015	DESE communicated to teacher education programs that piloting the new assessment will occur between January and April 2015 in response to the significant issue that videotaping teachers posed.
September 2015	DESE communicated to teacher education programs that MoPTA will launch in fall 2015.
March 2018	DESE communicated to teacher education programs that they would no longer require passing scores on MoPTA to achieve certification status after September 1, 2018, rendering MoPTA effectively expired.

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Logistical Problems

Missouri prioritizes local control over education; thus, many Missouri districts opt not to allow videotaping in the classroom (citing privacy concerns). However, this inconsistency across districts created logistical problems during teacher observations as the MoPTA required videotaping of teachers to assess teacher performance. Without the ability to videotape classrooms in certain districts, teacher education programs (such as the University of Missouri – Columbia) scrambled to figure out which districts would allow videotaping candidates, even partnering with local districts to curate local lists of school district policies absent statewide support. Other programs decided to restrict the options available to candidates and implement the non-video option for all candidates.⁵

Logistical problems became more complex when it came time to score assessments on the MoPTA. Early in 2015, the Missouri Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (MACTE) raised concerns about the original plan for Educational Training Services (ETS) to hire Missouri educators to score the MoPTA without considering what subject area these teachers were certified to teach.⁶ In response, ETS promised that the MoPTA would be scored by teachers in the areas that matched candidates' certification areas. This change required ETS to expand the scorer pool beyond Missouri, which created delays in reporting scores to candidates, especially in smaller certification areas such as Spanish or Art.

Consequently, when several local school districts raised objections over the use of MoPTA in their classrooms by not allowing teacher education programs to record lessons in their schools, an alternative fourth task was produced, which ultimately made the assessment and its rationale unreliable, invalid, and untenable for all of the actors within the policy network.

Divergent Rationales

Our findings suggest that the divergent rationales to establish teacher quality supplied by different policy actors from around Missouri resulted in an unclear policy (in MoPTA) that did not successfully accomplish the goals of high-stakes teacher assessment for quality control. Ultimately, DESE could not reconcile these state education actors' concerns, leading to the rise and fall of the high-stakes performance assessments of student teaching. Without a central focus for MoPTA, the policy network could not work together, creating an unstable policy environment.

For example, according to DESE, the MoPTA was an opportunity to “measure an educator candidate’s ability to apply what he or she has learned to real teaching environments with K-12 students.”⁷ Though a logical step in the state’s attempts to address teacher quality, without a clear focus, competing rationales created a vacuum of student-teacher accountability until MoPTA eventually collapsed, unable to be coordinated for all actors.

DESE’s rationale for high-stakes assessments was not directly related to PK-12 learners but instead focused on understanding teacher candidates’ development. DESE framed MoPTA as a tool to provide “a deeper and more complete view of a teacher candidate’s performance

and growth throughout the student teaching experience.”⁸ Opportunities for “collaborative learning with cooperating teachers” and the promotion of “reflective practice” were justifications for a high-stakes performance assessment.⁹

These distinct rationales advanced by DESE for MoPTA not only created confusion between the principal stakeholders of a high-stakes performance assessment but also led to conflict. Most notably, the “accountability” and “candidate growth” rationales impeded the seamless adoption of MoPTA for teacher education programs. The source of this conflict was the competing rationales that existed between teacher education programs and DESE.

Implications

Missouri’s short experience with a high-stakes performance assessment policy illustrates that a policy network without cooperation or leadership to address logistical issues, divergent rationales, and operating across autonomous districts creates an unstable policy environment. As such, the policy evolution of MoPTA in Missouri offers distinct lessons to the Missouri policy community at large on how to reconcile future policy roadblocks to implement successful policies.

DESE has the opportunity to find common ground among various actors, including ETS, schools, and teacher education programs. During the lifespan of MoPTA, frequently, conflict arose between different sets of actors. Without DESE to level a field of compromise and coordination, there could be no alignment across divergent rationales, complicating the impetus and purpose of MoPTA.

School districts leveraged against the MoPTA through the assertion of local control. When faced with a teacher education policy that did not match its objectives, local school districts rejected the implementation of the policy. The local control-based objection to the video recording portion of MoPTA by school districts was the inflection point that led to the abandonment of the MoPTA as a high-stakes performance assessment. For the majority of school districts in the United States where local control is valued, the exertion of local control can empower school districts to leverage more meaningful teacher education policies.^{10,11}

Differences between districts created logistical problems over the validity, reliability, and assessment construction, which led to the abandonment of MoPTA. Although teacher education programs raised many issues, DESE mostly ignored these issues.

A more effective route for change would be to create a “flex net” among policy actors in which school districts within a network work together to accomplish a common agenda.¹² Teacher education programs and state-level organizations could also invest in pooling together resources among other policy network actors that are also pursuing a common outcome.

Conclusions

Missouri's decision to abandon its high-stakes teacher assessments policy resulted from policy network interactions, not merely a state education agency realizing the error of their ways. Understanding how these interactions occurred is essential, not only in high-stakes performance assessment policies but also for future reforms and policies that teacher education programs will experience.

Our analysis of the evolution of the MoPTA from development to abandonment exemplifies how state education agencies can resolve a conflict between state actors, how school districts can leverage local control to shape teacher education policy, and how teacher education programs can work to create networks of resistance. These lessons, we believe, are not only illustrative for teacher education programs embedded within state-level policy networks where high-stakes performance assessments currently exist but also for future work within these networks.

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