

**A Survey on Deaf Teacher Licensure Accessibility by State:
Accommodations, Pathways, Perceptions, and Recommendations**

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Abstract

Although research highlights the benefits of Deaf teachers for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) students and calls for Deaf teacher recruitment, conversations about Deaf teacher accessibility and barriers to licensure remain commonplace. Despite a small sample survey around Deaf teacher candidate perceptions of licensure exam accessibility and recommendations, a gap in the literature exists on the current status of accommodations and alternative pathways available in the United States. Further, perceptions of administrators in deaf education regarding bias and recommendations for accessibility in teacher licensure have not been explored. Using a framework of sociocultural, social capital, and constructivist theories, a literature review around accommodations, testing practices, and a survey of administrators at schools for the Deaf in 36 states was conducted. 94% of administrators reported perceptions of barriers for qualified Deaf teacher candidates, 75% perceived exam bias as a factor, offered numerous recommendations, detailed available accommodations in each state, and outlined two novel alternatives to licensure exams: a portfolio and a performance-based assessment.

Benefits of Deaf Teachers

Students greatly benefit from having teachers like them in terms of race or lived experience (Grissom, 2020; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). Similarly, DHH students benefit from having access to DHH educators and role models in the areas of social, emotional, academic, linguistic, and identity development (Watkins et al., 1998; Yoshinaga-Itano, 2004; Swanswick, 2017; Wheatley, 2017; Beatty, 2019, Cawthon et al., 2016;). Deaf students have identified a preference for Deaf teachers and role models who are like them (Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Beatty 2019; Murray, et al., 2020). Deaf children with Deaf parents have comparable development to hearing peers (Wheatley, 2017), but 90-95% of DHH students are born to hearing parents (Swanswick, 2017). An international study found Deaf early intervention providers served as critical language models and connected parents to resources they needed (Gale, et al., 2021). Deaf, native-language users are uniquely

qualified and provide fundamental benefits that build a strong foundation, setting students up for success. The many benefits call for the recruitment of more DHH teachers in deaf education.

Shortage of Teachers in Deaf Education

90% of DHH students are served in mainstream settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), with limited access to Deaf role models. While quality interpreters offer great service, they do not satisfy DHH student needs for Deaf role models and peers (Murray, et al., 2020; De Meulder & Hualand, 2021). With DHH students all across each state, more teachers are needed. The shortage of teachers in deaf education (Meyer, 2021), and further the shortage of Deaf teachers and Deaf teachers of Color (Ausbrooks, et al., 2012), is documented and supports the exploration of options and potential barriers in access to the teaching field. The lack of accommodations for DHH individuals in teacher training

(Danielsson & Leeson, 2017) can translate to barriers in licensure and employment.

Springboard Study

Rust (2007) conducted a small sample survey of Deaf candidates taking teacher exams. Participants felt the exams were not a valid assessment for Deaf candidates as the exams were designed for native English speakers. Recommendations included ASL, extended time, and the use of an alternative tool to evaluate Deaf teacher readiness. Participants identified the value, social capital, and expertise Deaf teachers bring to the classroom not measured in an exam. Rust (2007) initiated this study due to disparate exam passage rates for Deaf candidates, a gap in research on the effectiveness of ASL accommodations, and to explore teacher candidates' perceptions. Rust's research serves as a springboard to this study which analyzes, available accommodations, alternative pathways, perceptions, and recommendations for Deaf teacher certification nationwide.

Validity of Teacher Licensure Exams

Standardized teacher licensure exams, gaining traction in the early-mid 1900s (Painter, 2021), are intended to demonstrate evidence of how effective a teacher will be in the classroom, evaluating content knowledge, pedagogy, effective teaching strategies, and more. While each state has its own authority to determine how teachers are licensed, all include exams, mainly from two primary test vendors: Educational Testing Service and Pearson Education, Inc. Portfolios are also widely used in teacher preparation and are often required for initial licensure.

When measuring predictive validity indicators for teacher candidates, a study found neither standardized exams nor portfolios correlated to teaching effectiveness (Henry, et al., 2013). Some studies have shown no correlation between exams and teacher evaluations (Wehrs, 2018) or student-teacher summative evaluations (Borden-King, et al., 2020). Other studies have indicated

portions of tests correlate to teacher effectiveness (Reddy, et al., 2013), while the predictability is less strong for White teachers than for teachers of Color (Cowan, et al., 2020). However, such correlations have been found in a multi-faceted performance-based assessment (consisting of student surveys, teaching observations, a growth plan, state teaching standards alignment) (Chen, 2019) and a structured administrative interview protocol (Gimbert & Chesley, 2009). Some components of EdTPA (a common portfolio) were predictive of some areas of student performance while disproportionately failing Hispanic candidates (Goldhaber, et al., 2017). In this study and in Zhou (2018), the authors found mixed results and could not definitively say, overall, that the portfolio assessment was predictive of teacher effectiveness.

The mixed ability for exams to predict educator effectiveness for hearing teachers is magnified by the unique culture, language, and learning needs of Deaf children and their teachers. A constructivist lens calls into question the one-size-fits-all educator assessments that primarily evaluate the content, pedagogy, and strategies directed toward hearing students.

Accommodations

Accommodations are commonplace for students in classrooms but largely excluded from state licensure examinations for DHH individuals. The goal of accommodations is not to reduce expectations, but to enhance the ability to effectively measure a person's content knowledge by testing students in an equitable way in light of individual needs (Lovett, 2021). For DHH individuals, accommodations are intended to improve access and test validity, particularly in evaluating content knowledge as opposed to fluency in the nuances of a second language. .

Interpreting test content in ASL has led to higher scores on math exams at elementary, middle, and high school levels for DHH students (Higgins et al., 2016). More research

is needed on accommodation effectiveness and assignment decision-making for English Learners and students with Disabilities (Liu et al., 2020; Cawthon, 2010; Rogers, 2017) and on the validity of the assessments with the accommodations (Rios et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2019; Abedi et al., 2020).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act has informed some state policies around student accommodations and waivers of some exams. Some waivers were not found to be a valid accommodation regarding reading skills for students with dyslexia (James & Hannah, 2018). Masinter (2020) discussed the implications of *Ramsay v. National Board of Medical Examiners*, ordering compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act for professional organizations in their exams. While the adult plaintiff was not deaf, nor an exhaustive list of accommodations described, there may be implications for accommodations for Deaf individuals taking teacher exams. The process of developing fairness in testing for students has largely excluded the perspectives of students who are testing (Woods et al., 2019). They assert the ethics of assessments must include the test-takers perspectives and needs.

Bias

Assessment bias and disparate passage rates for minority candidates are well studied (Gates, 2019), leaving test-takers to characterize such exams as inhibitive, stressful, contrary to quality teaching practices, and rooted in expectations of a singular race or background (Souto-Manning, 2019). Understanding the Deaf community as a cultural and linguistic minority (Higgins & Lieberman, 2016) highlights the parallels to the aforementioned diverse candidates. Many reading exams incorporate a predominant number of phonics-based questions (Pearson Education, Inc., n.d.), key to reading development for children with auditory access. However, many DHH students do not have access to this approach and other specialized

teaching strategies are implemented to teach reading, like the use of sign language phonology (Holmer et al., 2016; Findings from Gallaudet..., 2016). Therefore, phonics-based exams may inhibit qualified Deaf teachers from becoming licensed to teach DHH students due to content that is neither accessible nor a measure of effective teaching for many Deaf students.

Flexibility

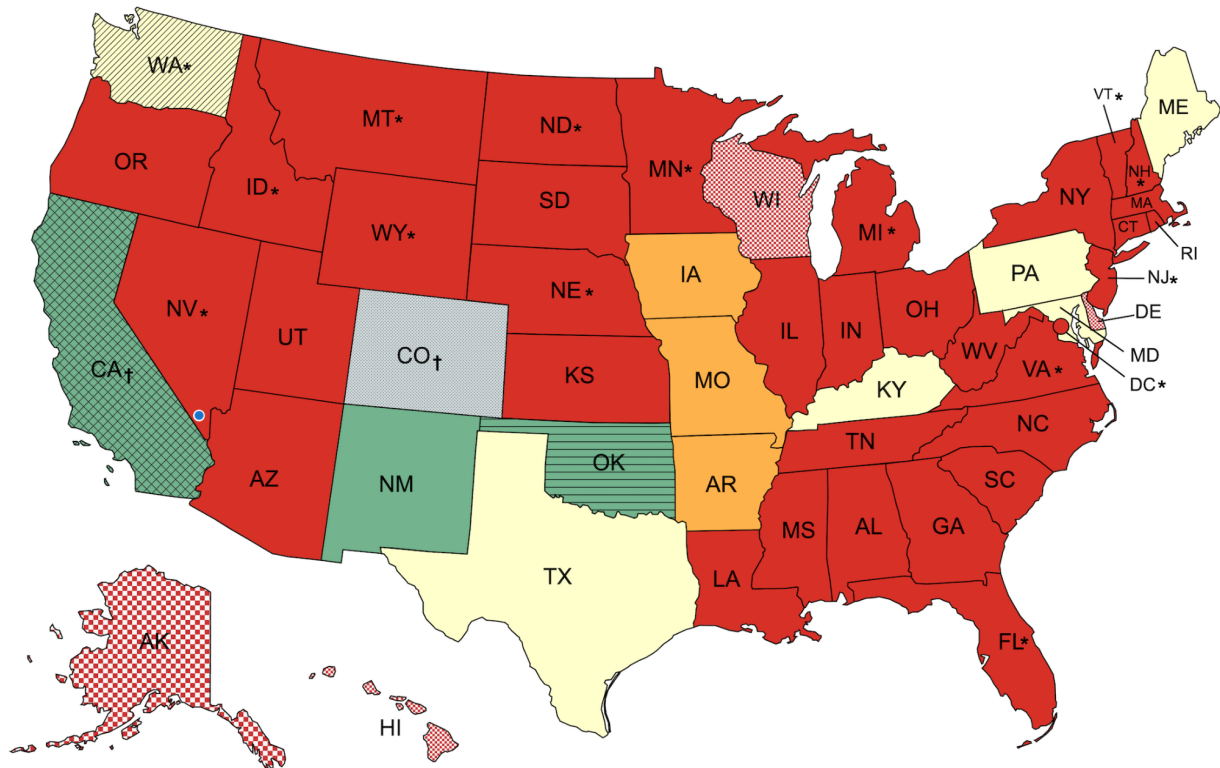
During the Coronavirus-19 pandemic and major teacher shortages, states created flexibility in teacher licensure requirements. Pennsylvania allowed teachers to teach even if they did not take or pass a licensure exam (Senate Passes Bill to..., 2020). Outside of COVID-19, many states started alternative licensure pathways but with limited flexibility around exam requirements. Ireland provided a sign language assessment in lieu of a spoken language assessment (Matthews, 2017), New Mexico initiated a portfolio (School Personnel Act, 2013), and Oklahoma started a performance-based assessment (Teacher Certification, 2021) for Deaf teacher candidates. However, little is known about the broad status of accommodations and alternative pathways for DHH candidates or clear descriptions of the processes used with the alternative pathways.

Methods and Sample

An electronic survey was distributed to administrators at currently operating schools for the Deaf throughout the 50 United States and the District of Columbia. Follow-up emails, phone, videophone, and Zoom calls were used to make at least eight attempts for each location. Schools from 36 states participated, a representative sample of 72% of states. For states without a response or school, website searches, phone calls, and emails were exchanged with testing services (Educational Testing Service and Pearson Education, Inc.) to identify relevant information for a fuller picture of the status of accommodations in the United States.

Results

Figure 1: Reported Allowable Accommodations for Teacher Licensure Exam Candidates Who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing in 2021 *Note: A more accessible table found in Appendix A.



“Minimal Accommodations” is defined as limited to extended time, sign language interpreter for communication with test center staff or directions only, and possible separate testing space.










LEGEND			
	Reported as “None”. ETS Publication Indicates Minimal Accommodations		Standard Accommodations; Interpreter for Full Exam; Scribe for Writing; Alternative Licensure for Performance-Based Assessment in Lieu of Exams
	Minimal Accommodations		Minimal Accommodations; Preliminary License: On-the-Job Proficiency in Lieu of Exams
	Minimal Accommodations: Alternative Licensure Option (Exams Still Required)		No Exam for Specialist of Deaf/Hard of Hearing
	Minimal Accommodations; Test or Test Portion Waived	*	No Response; Data Sourced from Test Vendors ETS and Pearson VUE
	Minimal Accommodations; Case-by-Case (includes ASL Interpreter for Full Exam)	†	Minimal Accommodations reported, but state code/department of education data used.
	Minimal Accommodations; Portfolio in Lieu of Exams		

Figure 1 synthesizes survey responses by state available accommodations and pathways for Deaf teacher candidates. While the vast majority of states only provide minimal accommodations (extended time, interpreter for communication with staff only, or separate testing space), some states offer extended licensure periods, waiver of some exams, ASL interpreting, and scribes for all questions and answer choices, and two alternative pathways: a portfolio and a performance-based assessment. To better inform the perceived effects of the current available accommodations and pathways on DHH teacher candidates, administrators responded to questions of experience and perceptions of bias. 94% of administrators surveyed stated they had had otherwise qualified DHH teachers who they felt had the skills/qualifications to perform the job, but who could not pass the educator licensure exams. 75% of participants felt bias in these exams inhibited otherwise well-qualified candidates from obtaining licensure.

QUALIFICATION ≠ EXAMS

94%

of administrators surveyed stated they have had **qualified Deaf/HH** teachers who they felt had the skills/qualifications to perform the job, but who **could not pass** the educator licensure exam(s).

BIAS IN EXAMS

75%

of administrators surveyed felt **bias** in state licensure exams inhibited otherwise well qualified Deaf/HH candidates access to licensure.

Performance-Based Assessment Interview

In April 2021, Oklahoma's House Bill 2329 was signed, an amendment aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of the state's evaluation of DHH teachers. As Dr. Sharon Baker, an administrator at the Oklahoma School for the Deaf, explained, this allows the State Board of Education to exempt (through

substitution with a performance-based assessment) Deaf individuals whose primary language and teaching environment are ASL, from certification examinations. The candidates must provide audiological documentation, demonstrate ASL fluency and content-area competency, and be assigned a mentor teacher of the DHH. This one-year assessment includes a review committee comprised of a mentor, school administrator, and peer educator. This committee reviews a teacher-created portfolio which includes transcripts, unit plans, lesson plans, video-recorded lessons, evidence from mentor collaboration, leadership roles, professional development logs, Classroom Management ratings, and classroom observations, all of which align to state and national teaching standards. At the conclusion of the year, the committee convenes to determine if the candidate meets licensure requirements. If the committee agrees, they recommend the candidate to the State Board of Education for standard licensure. This process focuses on seeing the teacher in action and with various assessments to determine effectiveness in the first year.

Preliminary License to License Pathway

Since 1993, California has provided pre-lingually Deaf candidates who completed all licensure application requirements, except for licensure exams, a two-year preliminary license for teaching DHH students (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2016). These candidates must be sponsored by an employing agency. Upon the completion of the two-year preliminary license, a three-person panel, consisting of an administrator, a parent of a DHH child, and a teacher of the Deaf, review the Deaf teacher's on-the-job proficiency and then can recommend the educator for the traditional, clear license, limited to serving DHH students.

License by Degree Pathway

Any Colorado teacher candidate who has completed an approved program and

master's degree in deaf education or the equivalent is eligible for licensure to serve as a teacher of the DHH (Special Education Specialist: Deaf and Hard of Hearing ages 0-21). No licensure exams are required for this license field (Colorado State Board of Education, 2019).

Portfolio Interview

In 2009, New Mexico also instituted a portfolio as an optional method of licensure for DHH teachers in NM Stat § 22-10A-11.2 (School Personnel Act, 2013). Dr. Jennifer Herbold, the superintendent of the New Mexico School for the Deaf, explained all DHH persons who have graduated from an approved program with a bachelor's degree in education are granted the option, in lieu of licensure exams, to develop a licensure portfolio to demonstrate readiness for a standard initial license. This portfolio is intended to be a precursor to employment (within 60 days of hire) and focused on the teacher preparation program content (content knowledge, pedagogy, lesson/unit plans, and how the teacher would respond to scenarios, teaching contexts, and concepts). New Mexico's portfolio review committee includes a teacher of DHH students, a sign language interpreter, a school administrator, a parent of a DHH student, a DHH teacher, and others deemed appropriate by the department. One limitation of this portfolio is the inhibition of those who have degrees in other fields (i.e., ASL, sports science, Deaf studies), which could be rich sources for foreign language, Physical Education, or other class electives.

Recommendations to Improve Accessibility

Exam Accommodations

1. **American Sign Language:** Some respondents explained that interpreting and the scribe would allow for content knowledge to be assessed as opposed to performance in navigating the nuance of a second language. Essentially, a science test should measure science

content knowledge and pedagogy, not English fluency.

- a. **ASL interpreting:** Recorded for the test and certified and qualified live interpreters for the entirety of the exam, which would include test questions, answer choices, and directions. One of 47 responses stated English literacy exams should exclude an interpreter.
 - b. **Scribe:** Candidates could respond to written components in ASL via interpreter and scribe.
2. **Closed Captions:** Embedded on videos, as opposed to a transcribed text
 3. **Extended/expanded Licensure options:** Recommended to allow DHH candidates additional time to complete exams
 4. **Waivers/Exemptions:** Omit or waive exams or portions, particularly those with phonics, auditory, or music-related questions. Even with interpreting, some exams exhibit bias and nuance beyond the point of being made accessible. Differing qualifying scores due to grammar differences for DHH candidates responding in a second language (English) were suggested by some.
 5. **Tutoring:** Offered in some states and recommended for others

Revision of Examinations

Multiple respondents indicated Deaf reviewers should evaluate exam questions to identify and remove bias. Some respondents suggested three areas of revision of exams for teachers of DHH children: 1) remove biased questions that support a focus on outdated research in language development, 2) shift the current heavy focus on special education legislation and focus on DHH student pedagogy, and 3) add an ASL fluency exam. Many states were noted as not having ASL

proficiency requirements for certification in DHH education.

Ease of Accommodation Requests

Exam accommodation requests take 1-6 weeks or longer to process (Pearson Education Inc., 2021; Educational Testing Service, 2021). Respondents noted times need to be faster in order to make exams more accessible and transparent. Stress, complex, and lengthy accommodation requests add barriers to equity in test-taking. The researcher noted it was hard to ascertain what accommodations would be allowed without going through the application process. Testing center publications and participants reported different information in four states. While accommodations are individualized, each state should publicly publish allowable and prohibited accommodations for transparency.

Conclusion

The results of this study present a clear consensus in the field that barriers exist that inhibit otherwise well-qualified Deaf candidates in their attainment of teacher licensure. Bias is acknowledged as one potentially primary component of this. Each state determines its own licensure processes and the accommodations, programs, and requirements therein. This study was able to identify some novel practices intended to provide authentic, rigorous, and a promising performance-based assessment that may offer greater evidence of validity in evaluating the readiness of Deaf teacher candidates for the classroom. Further, it identified a host of accommodations necessary to improve access for qualified Deaf teacher candidates who have the potential to reduce the gap in representation, soften the teacher shortage, and add robust benefits to DHH students nationwide. It is critical that state departments and boards of education, legislators, and schools consider how to use these findings to propel necessary change in the field.

Limitations

Some states did not respond or have schools to contact. However, 72% of states were represented, and testing center communications filled gaps in information. The study focused on a representative from each state (or a consolidated response for each state) to provide clarity and responses were based on participants' perceptions and experiences. This survey did not identify the Deaf or hearing status of respondents, which may or may not have influenced the results.

Areas for Future Research

One administrator referenced the ability to identify gaps in knowledge and skills of candidates during teacher interviews. Protocols could be investigated as a future alternative tool. If states implement authentic performance-based evaluations in lieu of examinations, annual teacher evaluations of Deaf teachers could be compared between those who completed exams and those who completed performance-based assessments. Case study research could measure the relative student achievement, comparing the impact of a Deaf teacher who is traditionally licensed and alternatively licensed to evaluate the program. Lastly, the licensure exam passage rate could be studied to compare Deaf teacher candidates, other culturally and linguistically diverse teacher candidates, and hearing white teacher candidates.

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participants who shared perspectives within this study.

About the Author

Anthony Coy-Gonzalez is a teacher at the Ohio School for the Deaf and the 2021 Ohio Teacher of the Year. Over the years, he has seen the power of connecting DHH students to Deaf educators, role models, and community members. Incredible Deaf colleagues, alumni, and community inspired this project and a passion for expanding the Deaf teacher pipeline in deaf education. He earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in Elementary and Deaf Education from Flagler College, principal certification through the University of Dayton, and is currently pursuing a doctorate in education through Walden University.

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APPENDIX A

Title: Reported Allowable Accommodations for Teacher Licensure Exam Candidates Who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing in 2021

“Minimal Accommodations” is defined as limited to extended time, sign language interpreter for communication with test center staff or directions only, and possible separate testing space.

*No Response; Data Sourced from Test Vendors ETS and Pearson VUE

† Minimal Accommodations reported, but state code/department of education data used.

Checkered Red and White	Reported as “None”. ETS Publication Indicates Minimal Accommodations	Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Wisconsin
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Red	Minimal Accommodations	Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida*, Georgia, Idaho*, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan*, Minnesota*, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana*, Nebraska*, Nevada*, New Hampshire*, New Jersey*, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota*, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont*, Virginia*, Washington, D.C.*, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming*
Orange	Minimal Accommodations: Alternative Licensure Option (Exams Still Required)	Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri
Yellow	Minimal Accommodations; Test or Test Portion Waived	Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Texas
Yellow with Black Diagonal Lines	Minimal Accommodations; Case- by-Case (includes ASL Interpreter for Full Exam)	Washington*
Green	Minimal Accommodations; Portfolio in Lieu of Exams	New Mexico
Green with Horizontal Black Lines	Standard Accommodations; Interpreter for Full Exam; Scribe for Writing; Alternative Licensure for Performance-Based Assessment in Lieu of Exams	Oklahoma
Green with Checkered Black Lines	Minimal Accommodations; Preliminary License: On-the-Job Proficiency in Lieu of Exams	California†
Gray with Black Dots	No Exam for Specialist of Deaf/Hard of Hearing	Colorado†