REDEE
Research for EDucator Equity & Excellence

Texas Districts of Innovation:

Unlicensed Teachers Hurt Student Math Achievement

James P. Van Overschelde, Ph.D., Christina Ellis, Ed.D.,
Florinda Nale, Ed.D., and Minda M. López, Ph.D.

The Texas District of Innovation (DOI) law passed in 2015 allows schools to hire unqualified and unlicensed people to teach Texas children. As of March 2024, 925 of 991 DOI school districts (93%) had adopted plans to hire unlicensed teachers. In 2023-24, 57% of all new teachers hired were unlicensed and, in rural and small-town schools, over 70% were unlicensed. We studied the impact of new *Unlicensed Instructors* have on student learning in math in Grades 7, 8, and 9. The effectiveness of *Unlicensed Instructors* was compared to (a) new Licensed Teachers who were prepared to teach secondary math, and (b) new *Licensed Interns* who are still learning to teach secondary math while teaching. Our results show that **Licensed Teachers were the most effective** of all new teachers of secondary math. **Unlicensed Instructors were the least effective** new teachers, reducing student learning by up to three months relative to the *Licensed Teachers*. *Licensed Interns* were more effective than *Unlicensed Instructors* in two of three math courses. *Unlicensed Instructors* also **quit teaching** after one year at significantly higher rates than the other teachers, which research shows further reduces student achievement and increases the cost of education for schools and taxpayers.

Introduction

In 2015, the Texas Legislature (84th Regular Session) authorized *Districts of Innovation* (DOI). The DOI law allows the 1,022 non-charter school districts to exempt themselves from almost all state education laws. As of March 2024, 925 (93%) of the 991 DOI-approved school districts had exempted themselves from the law that requires them to hire only trained, licensed, and qualified teachers. These districts can now employ unlicensed professionals like farmers or ranchers to teach agriculture classes, plumbers to teach plumbing classes, and marketing professors to teach business classes.

Unfortunately, many districts are not innovating as intended. They are instead hiring unlicensed people to teach English, math, science, and history. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas schools hired 32,782 new teachers with no prior teaching experience in 2023-24 and, of these, 57% were unlicensed to teach or had an emergency license (Texas Education Agency, 2024). This is a 500%+ increase compared to the year before DOI was passed when 11% of new teachers were unlicensed. As shown in Figure 1, 70%+ of new teachers hired by Small-Town and Rural schools are unlicensed to teach, whereas 50%+ were unlicensed in Urban and Suburban schools.

TEA data also show only 15% of new teachers in 2023-24 were fully trained and licensed to teach (down from 27% in 2014-15), and 15% were licensed interns enrolled in a teacher preparation program and learning to teach while teaching (down from 39%). These rates strongly imply that the DOI legislation is dramatically reducing the supply of trained and licensed teachers.

Figure 1. New Unlicensed Instructors Hired as Teachers by Texas Schools
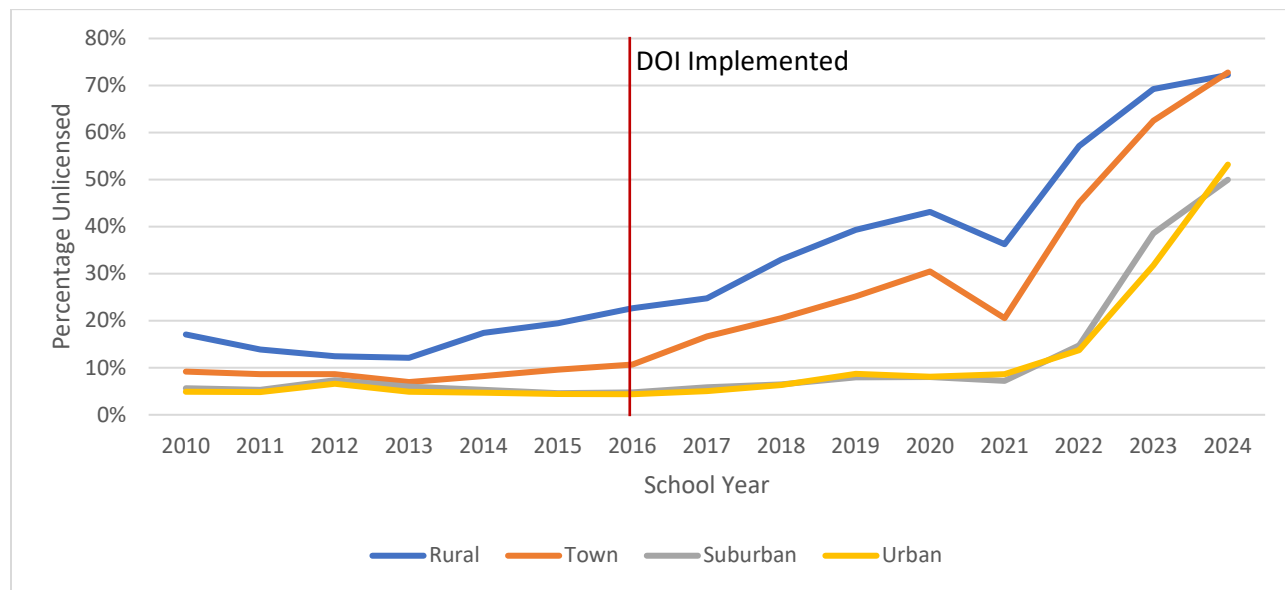
Source: Texas Education Agency, 2024

What did we do?

We calculated the academic growth experienced by over 381,000 students taught by almost 7,400 new teachers from three different groups: *Licensed Teachers* who were fully prepared to teach secondary math, *Licensed Interns* who were being prepared to teach secondary math, and *Unlicensed Instructors* who were not licensed to teach any subject. Changes in STAAR math scores from one year to the next were examined for students in math in Grades 7 and 8, and in Algebra I in Grades 8 and 9.

KEY FINDINGS

1. In Algebra I, *Licensed Teachers* were the most effective new teachers, whereas *Licensed Interns* and Unlicensed Instructors were equally least effective.
2. In Grade 8 Math, *Licensed Teachers* were the most effective new teachers, and *Licensed Interns* were significantly more effective than Unlicensed Instructors.
3. In Grade 7 Math, *Licensed Teachers* were the most effective new teachers, and *Licensed Interns* were marginally more effective than Unlicensed Instructors.
4. Unlicensed Instructors quit teaching after one year at significantly higher rates than *Licensed Teachers* and *Licensed Interns* across all three courses.

New Teacher Effectiveness

Figure 2 shows student learning rates relative to the state average learning rate. A score of 0% equals the state average growth rate and negative percentages mean students learned less than average. Students taught by *Unlicensed Instructors* learned significantly less than students taught by *Licensed Teachers*. Students taught by *Licensed Interns* experienced intermediate growth in math in Grades 7 and 8.

Figure 2. Rate of Learning by Students of First-Year Teachers Relative to State Average
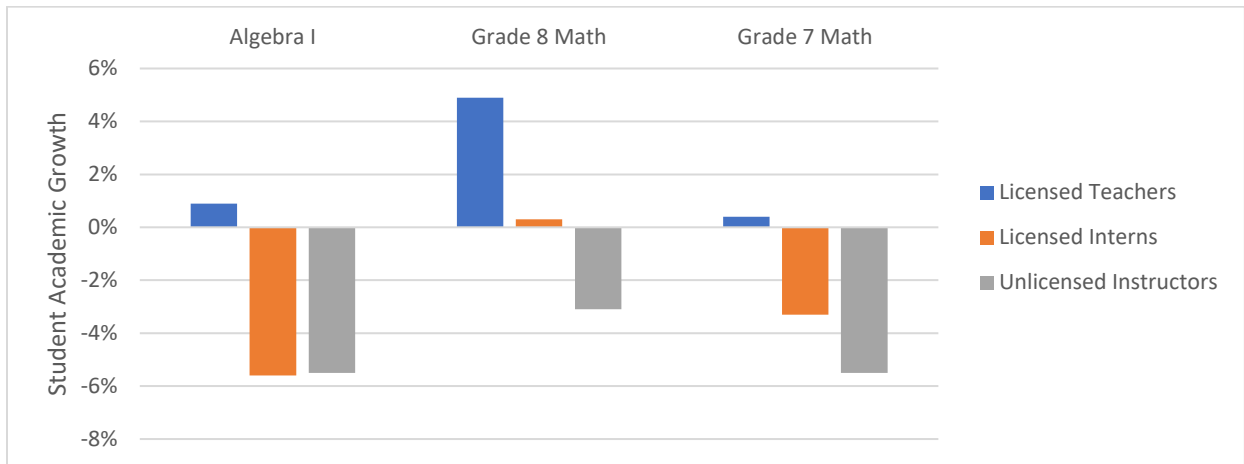
Teacher Persistence Rates

As shown in Figure 3, *Unlicensed Instructors* quit teaching after their first year at the highest rate of all new teachers, and *Licensed Teachers* persisted at significantly higher rates than *Licensed Interns*.

Figure 3. Percentage of New Teachers Persisting to Year 2
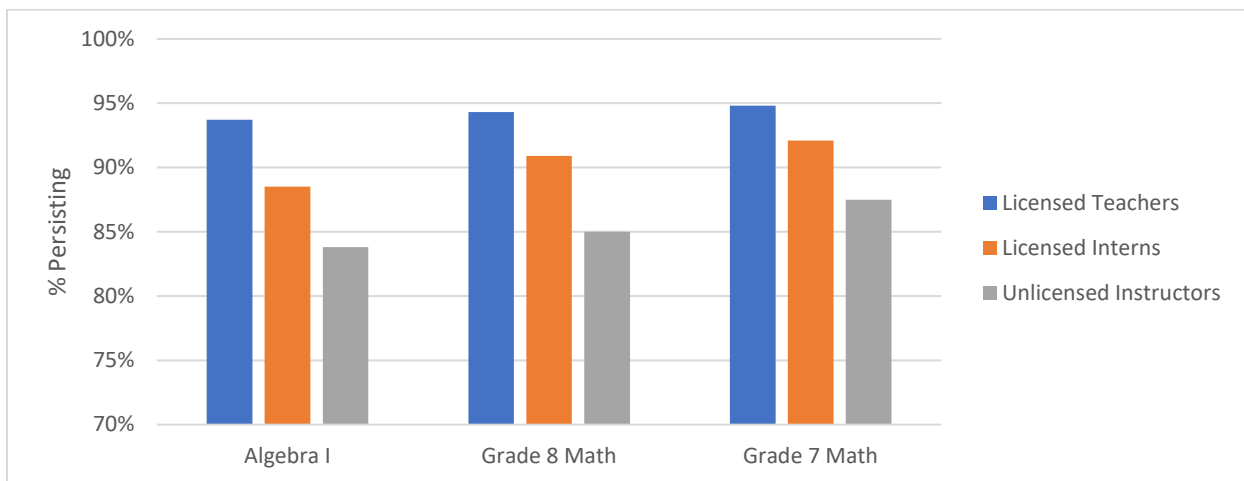
Implications for Policy and Practice

The DOI exemption from teacher licensure has created strong disincentives for people to become licensed teachers because people can be hired as teachers with no training and receive full pay and benefits like trained and licensed teachers.

To improve student learning, we recommend that principals (a) reduce the hiring of unlicensed instructors, (b) require unlicensed instructors to complete teacher preparation and licensure testing within 1-2 years, (c) pay unlicensed instructors a lower salary than paid to qualified and licensed teachers, and (d) provide professional learning tailored to teachers'

training and licensure. We also recommend that all districts be required to notify parents and guardians when their children are taught by unlicensed instructors, and that TEA allows parents to search the agency's teacher licensure database by school.

Acknowledgements

Research Team Bios

James P. Van Overschelde, Ph.D., is co-founder and co-executive director of the REDEE Center and associate professor of secondary education at Texas State University. His quantitative research focused on teacher preparation, teacher employment environments, and student achievement.

Christina Ellis, Ed.D., is chief executive officer of Consilium Education Services where she helps education organizations understand their problems, develop innovative solutions, and sustain these changes over time. Previously, she has served schools and universities as a teacher and administrator.

Geronima Florinda Nale, Ed.D., is a Senior Associate at Safal Partners where she supports research and program evaluations for education projects. Previously, she served K-12 public schools and prepared future teachers at Sam Houston State University with specialization in English as a Second Language (ESL).

Minda M. López, Ph.D., is co-founder and co-executive director of the REDEE Center and professor of literacy at Texas State University. Her mixed methods research focuses on language and literacy development, particularly in multilingual populations, as well as educator preparation, learning, and employment environments.

References

Van Overschelde, J. P., Ellis, C., Nale, G., & López, M. M. (2024). *Year-One readiness: Preservice clinical teaching programs results in most effective first-year teachers in secondary mathematics*. Manuscript under review.

Contact

James P. Van Overschelde, Ph.D. jimvano@txstate.edu

The Research for EDucator Equity and Excellence Center (REDEE, pronounced *Ready*) conducts quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research on teacher preparation, teacher employment, and student academic achievement. REDEE researchers also provide these services to education stakeholders.