



Research

Licensing teachers: a global policy lever for educational quality and professionalism

Dr Richard Churches, Rachael Fitzpatrick, Codie Chaudoin, Ella Page,
Catherine Lenahan, Grace Cox, and Marion Smallbones



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Dr Richard Churches,¹ Rachael Fitzpatrick,²
Codie Chaudoin,³ Ella Page,⁴ Catherine Lenahan,⁵
Grace Cox,⁶ and Marion Smallbones⁷

¹ Dr Richard Churches is global Director of Research at edt.

² Rachael Fitzpatrick is Head of Research at edt. Her doctoral research explores the education system in Vietnam.

³ Codie Chaudoin is an American educator with experience in a wide range of school leadership positions, including deployment by the US State Department in the Middle East. She is currently Vice Principal (Academics) at George Washington Academy in Casablanca.

⁴ Ella Page is a Senior Research Officer at edt. Her research interests include education system transformation with a focus on equity.

⁵ Catherine Lenahan is Senior Research Officer, Literacy at edt.

⁶ Grace Cox is a Research Officer at edt.

⁷ Marion Smallbones is Lead Adviser, Insights and Innovation at edt.

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Executive summary

Global teacher shortages and trends in retention threaten the achievement of sustainability in education (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024).

This ed report aims to contribute to that debate by examining teacher licensing practice across the world and the options available to policymakers.

Our report explores **teacher licensing as a global policy lever** capable of driving systemic improvements in education quality, equity, and professionalism. Alongside a global review, we include detailed case studies from ten jurisdictions – the United States, the United Kingdom, Ghana, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Singapore, Vietnam, Estonia, Finland, and South Africa.

Teacher licensing refers to the formal process through which individuals are authorised to teach, typically involving qualification verification, competency assessment, and, in some systems, ongoing renewal requirements. Though commonly overlooked in global reform discourse, licensing can serve as a potent mechanism to establish minimum standards, support professional development, and elevate the status of teaching – when designed and implemented as part of a coherent policy framework.



Key findings



- Types of licensing fall into three broad categories: centralised high-trust systems (e.g. Singapore, Finland), decentralised models (e.g. USA, UK), and emerging mixed systems (e.g. Ghana, Saudi Arabia) as countries begin to reform and develop their licensing processes.
- Effective licensing is rarely achieved in isolation. Its impact is contingent on alignment with teacher education, professional standards, career development pathways, and systemic support structures.
- Permanent licensing – prevalent in high-capacity systems – emphasises trust and professionalism, while renewable models focus on accountability and improvement. As evidence-informed practice become the norm, hybrid approaches that embed the requirement for ongoing learning may offer the greatest long-term benefits.
- Common implementation challenges include bureaucratic burden, equity barriers, and disconnection from school realities, particularly where licensing is imposed without systemic integration or teacher engagement.
- A three-dimensional model is proposed to help policymakers consider the levers they are using within teacher-licensing and their relative strength.

Policy recommendations for governments and education leaders include:

- customising licensing approaches to local context while learning from global examples
- positioning licensing as a tool for career-long development rather than a one-off credential
- establishing independent, credible oversight bodies to maintain trust and enforce standards
- designing licensing with equity and access at its core, particularly for under-served regions or teacher demographics
- ensuring integration of licensing with broader reform agendas in teacher education, curriculum, and school accountability
- embedding monitoring, feedback, and adaptability to refine licensing systems over time.

This report argues that licensing systems can encode how societies value teachers – either as trusted professionals or as functionaries. The most effective models elevate teaching through a blend of high standards, meaningful development, and coherent system design.

Introduction

Improving educational outcomes at scale remains a major challenge for governments worldwide. Among available interventions, policies targeting the education workforce are among the most effective.

As outlined in *Evidence-based policy levers for school improvement* (Churches, 2025), developing the workforce through national teacher standards, structured professional development, and licensing is key to driving systemic change. Of these, teacher licensing has received relatively little global attention, despite its potential to enhance quality, accountability, and equity.

This publication builds on our wider policymaker engagement (Churches, 2025; Churches and McAleavy, 2025) by reviewing policy options for using teacher licensing as a lever for improvement. As well as taking a global view, it analyses in depth licensing practices across ten diverse countries, selected to reflect a range of governance models, policy maturity, socio-economic contexts, and reform paths.

The USA and UK highlight decentralised and devolved systems, showing the impact of local

autonomy and varied national approaches. Qatar and Saudi Arabia represent fast-reforming systems where licensing supports national transformation. Ghana offers insight from a low-income country advancing professionalisation through standardised licensing. Singapore, Estonia, and Finland demonstrate coherent policy design, strong initial teacher education, and long-term investment in quality. Singapore ranks at the top of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Similarly, Finland's success in the past has been linked to its high-trust model and rigorous teacher preparation. Although results have been in decline in recent years, Vietnam presents a unique model of lifetime licensing with mandatory ongoing training. South Africa was included as a system facing transitional challenges. Together, these cases offer rich comparative insights.

What is teacher licensing?

Teacher licensing refers to the official authorisation to teach. While systems vary, its core aim is to ensure minimum competence, protect the public, and professionalise teaching.

Common elements include academic qualifications, assessed teaching skills (often against standards), supervised induction, and – in some systems – renewal tied to continuing professional development (CPD).

Licensing connects to many system components: teacher education, leadership, accountability, workforce planning, and professional culture. When well-integrated, it acts as a quality assurance tool, a driver of teacher growth, and a way to raise the profession's status. Poorly implemented, it risks becoming bureaucratic, harming trust and recruitment.

This report aims to guide policymakers exploring licensing reforms, offering a global view of current models. A simple three-dimensional framework is proposed to support system design.



Approach

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of teacher licensing within the wider fabric of education reform. It asks the following core research questions:

How is teacher licensing conceptualised and implemented across different education systems?

What are the intended and potential unintended outcomes of licensing reforms?

How does licensing interact with teacher professionalisation, workforce quality, and equity?

What lessons can be drawn from comparative practice, especially in relation to licensing as an evidence-based policy lever?

The analysis uses a realist policy framework (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), acknowledging that reforms work differently depending on context, implementation, and activated mechanisms. Following Churches (2025), effective licensing is seen not as a stand-alone intervention but as part of a coherent policy architecture – aligned with system goals, supporting ongoing improvement, and enabling rather than controlling.

In response to calls for more nuanced, context-sensitive policy learning (Spivack, Silberstein, and Hwa, 2023; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), this paper avoids a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, it explores a range of licensing strategies and how they can be adapted to diverse reform settings.

A comparative case study approach (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2006) was used, guided by international scoping and purposive sampling. The aim was to examine teacher licensing as a systemic policy lever, accounting for different mechanisms, philosophies, and contextual constraints.⁸

We conducted a global scoping review of teacher licensing systems across all UN member states and select territories. This broad mapping informed the creation of a three-dimensional typology model, capturing system features across three axes: (1) governance structure (centralised ↔ decentralised), (2) licensing model (permanent ↔ renewable), and (3) integration with career-long professional development.

From this analysis, ten case studies were purposively selected to reflect diverse global approaches by geography, income level, governance, and policy maturity. Those selected include high-performing systems (e.g. Singapore, Finland), rapidly reforming contexts (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Qatar), decentralised and federated models (e.g., USA⁹, UK¹⁰), and low- and middle-income countries with evolving regulatory frameworks (e.g. Ghana, Vietnam, South Africa). South Africa was specifically included to examine licensing reforms in a post-apartheid, middle-income context where professionalisation is being pursued amid longstanding equity and access challenges¹¹.

⁸. Countries for which information about teacher licensing was available to some degree: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Congo (Republic of the Congo), Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Estonia, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Gabon, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Latvia, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia (Federated States of), Moldova, Monaco, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nauru, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, North Korea (DPRK), North Macedonia, Norway, Oman, Pakistan, Palau, Palestine, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, San Marino, Sao Tome and Principe, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea (ROK), South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

⁹ Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming. We also looked at Washington DC.

¹⁰ England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

¹¹ Government policy changes frequently. While this study used the most up-to-date and verifiable sources available at the time of writing, some details may have been revised or superseded.

Individuals seeking to apply for teacher training or licensing in any jurisdiction should consult the relevant national authority for the most current information.

The importance of getting teacher licensing right

The *Global Report on Teachers* (UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024) identifies teacher shortages as one of the most urgent challenges in global education and calls for a transformation of the teaching profession. It emphasises the need for improved working conditions, competitive salaries, stronger professional development, and better career pathways to attract and retain qualified teachers. The report argues that these systemic reforms are essential to meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4 and ensuring quality education for all.

While the report does not explicitly address teacher licensing, there is growing evidence that well-designed licensing systems can support these goals. Clear, equitable, and standards-based licensing can help set professional benchmarks, strengthen teacher preparation, and improve public trust in the profession. When aligned with career progression and continuing development, licensing policies can contribute to workforce planning and elevate the status of teaching as a skilled, accountable profession.

Understanding teacher licensing as a policy lever

At the heart of this analysis lies the conceptualisation of effective teacher licensing not merely as a compliance mechanism, but as a purposeful policy lever – a structured instrument through which governments and regulatory authorities can influence teacher quality, professional conduct, and ultimately learner outcomes. Policy levers are, by definition, tools for change. They are the formal instruments through which policymakers seek to achieve specific improvements or manage system behaviour (OECD, 2015). However, the effectiveness of teacher licensing, as with any reform, depends on its alignment with other elements of the education system.

Licensing is, therefore, best understood in relation to complementary policies: standards for teacher education and certification, ongoing professional learning requirements, school evaluation and support mechanisms, and career pathway incentives. When licensing operates in concert with these elements, it can reinforce a culture of continuous improvement and accountability. Conversely, if implemented in a vacuum, licensing risks becoming a bureaucratic checkpoint rather than a catalyst for development. The perspective taken in this paper is informed by a realist evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), which emphasises that the impact of a policy lever like licensing will vary based on context (“for whom and in what circumstances” it works).

Comparative typologies of teacher licensing systems

Across the globe, teacher licensing systems vary significantly in structure, scope, and implementing authority. However, three broad typologies can be identified:

Centralised licensing systems

In systems such as Singapore, Finland, and South Korea, teacher licensing is tightly controlled by central government agencies or statutory professional bodies. These systems typically include rigorous entry requirements, standardised induction programmes, and structured pathways for career progression. They are also frequently associated with high levels of public trust in the profession and consistently strong student performance against international benchmarks.

Emerging and mixed-model systems

In many parts of the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, teacher licensing is undergoing active reform. Countries in these regions are increasingly introducing or formalising licensing regimes as part of wider efforts to improve workforce quality, support national development goals, and align with international education standards (UNESCO, 2020). These systems often adopt models inspired by established Western frameworks but adapted local workforce demographics and implementation capacity.

Decentralised and market-responsive systems

In contrast, countries like the USA and Canada operate decentralised models in which state or provincial authorities hold licensing powers. These systems often allow for multiple entry routes, including alternative and fast-track certification pathways. While such flexibility supports workforce diversity and responsiveness, it can also result in inconsistency of standards and variability in quality assurance mechanisms. For example, analyses have found that lowering entry barriers through alternative certification can expand teacher supply but may lead to uneven preparation quality (Boyd et al., 2006; 2009).

Key trends and policy rationales

Several major trends can be observed across the global landscape of teacher licensing:

Professional standards as anchors

Most licensing systems now include teaching standards that define the knowledge, skills, and values expected of teachers. These standards guide teacher education, evaluation, and career progression, reflecting a shift from qualifications to a competency-based view of readiness (OECD, 2025).

Movement toward performance-based

Interest in performance-based licensing is growing, using tools like portfolios, classroom observations, and structured assessments. In the USA, states have begun to use the Education Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), while others are testing video evaluations and extended induction assessments (Pecheone, Whittaker, and Klesch, 2017). Early evidence shows these methods, when well-executed, offer deeper insights into teaching competence than multiple-choice tests (Goldhaber, Liddle, and Theobald, 2022).

Linking licensing to career pathways

In high-performing systems, teacher licensing is increasingly tied to career progression frameworks, recognising stages like 'novice',

'proficient', and 'expert'. This supports tailored professional development and encourages ongoing growth. For example, Ontario links license status to regular performance appraisals and required professional development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022; Ontario College of Teachers, 2016). Singapore connects certification and advancement to structured evaluations and development milestones (Ministry of Education, Singapore, n.d.; National Center on Education and the Economy, n.d.). England takes a similar approach through its National Professional Qualifications, designed to create a continuous path from teacher training to leadership (McAleavy, 2021) – although participation beyond initial qualification is not compulsory.

Digitisation and technological innovation

Technological advances are streamlining credential tracking, license renewal, and CPD verification. Some jurisdictions now use digital platforms to manage licensing at scale, with innovations like blockchain-based credentialing to boost security and portability. For instance, a pilot project in Mexico used blockchain to securely store and verify teacher training certifications, showing how digital tools can modernise licensing systems (Franzoni, Cárdenas, and Almazán, 2019).

Challenges and critiques

Despite their potential benefits, licensing systems are not without criticism. Common challenges include:

Bureaucratic complexity

Overly rigid or complex processes can deter potential new entrants and burden schools with administrative demands.

Credential inflation

An excessive focus on formal qualifications may crowd out recognition of practical experience or pedagogical skill.

Weak enforcement

In some systems, licenses are issued as a one-time formality without rigorous monitoring or follow-up. This can limit the impact of licensing on actual teaching quality, as teachers may meet initial requirements but receive little support or accountability thereafter.

Equity and access

Licensing processes can inadvertently disadvantage certain groups of teachers – for example, candidates from minority backgrounds or those trained overseas – particularly where standardised tests are used without cultural adaptation (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber and Hansen, 2010). If not carefully designed, testing and credential evaluations may reduce diversity in the teacher workforce (Goldhaber and Hansen, 2010).

Implications for ‘system design’

No policy lever functions effectively in isolation. Teacher licensing must therefore be designed as part of a coherent policy framework, supported by well-aligned teacher education, school inspection, professional development, and data systems. Importantly, licensing should not be used solely to control entry into the profession but to signal professional trust, promote high standards, and build system capacity over time (Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

One critical dimension of this alignment is ensuring that licensing supports meaningful **teacher professional development (TPD)** throughout a teacher’s career. A licensing system that requires periodic renewal or advancement should **leverage what is known about effective TPD** so that meeting license requirements also means engaging in impactful learning. Research on teacher learning and professional growth has identified several core features of effective professional development that are essential considerations for any licensing regime aiming to improve practice rather than merely enforce rules.

Teacher professional development: global insights and principles

Decades of global research show that **TPD is most effective when it is sustained, collaborative, content-focused, and supports teacher agency.** Desimone (2009) identified key features of effective TPD: subject matter focus, active learning (e.g. observation, feedback, discussion), coherence with school goals, collective participation, and sufficient duration. **One-off workshops with no follow-up are far less likely to improve practice than sustained, collaborative learning tied to real classroom challenges** (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, 2017).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reviewed rigorous studies and highlighted similar elements: curriculum-focused pedagogy, active learning, collaboration in teacher communities, expert modelling and coaching, structured feedback, and sustained duration – often over months or years. These features help bridge the gap between new ideas and classroom implementation.

Crucially, **teachers must be active agents in their development.** Avalos (2011) notes that TPD is “about teachers learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice” (p. 10). This highlights the importance of teacher agency – giving teachers voice in identifying their needs and space to experiment. Empowering teachers increases buy-in and helps embed new practices. International reviews (Villegas-Reimers, 2003) also stress the role of informal learning, mentoring, peer networks, and teacher-driven growth alongside formal training.

The **true impact of TPD lies in changes to teaching practice and student outcomes.** Guskey (2002) argued that teachers typically change when they see evidence of improved student learning. This implies that for TPD (and any licensing requirements tied to it) to be effective, it must help teachers achieve real results. Licensing-linked TPD could, for instance, involve setting classroom goals and tracking student progress, creating a motivating feedback loop (Guskey, 2002).

Major syntheses reinforce these principles. An international review by Cordingley et al. (2015) found that well-designed, student-focused TPD supported by school leadership significantly improves student achievement. Kennedy (2016), analysing nearly 30 TPD studies, found that content-specific TPD tied to how students learn is more effective than generic training. She also noted that different TPD models reflect different theories of teacher learning and aligning them with what we know about motivation is key.

More recently, a model supported by the Education Endowment Foundation in the UK, based on a meta-analysis of 104 randomised controlled trials, **identified four essential elements of effective PD: developing teacher insights, setting goals, enhancing techniques, and refining practice** (Sims et al., 2022). Programmes with these components showed stronger impact on student achievement.

In short, research is clear: licensing systems that include ongoing professional learning should embed these proven features. Licensing should go beyond counting hours or courses and instead promote continuous, collaborative, practice-focused development – putting teachers in the driver’s seat. Done well, licensing becomes not just a gatekeeper, but a tool for raising teaching quality over time. At the same time, recent **innovations that have focused on creating a ‘golden thread’ from recruitment through to school and system leadership clearly show high levels of promise** (McAleavy, 2021).

The next sections explore how licensing is being implemented across diverse education systems to support an understanding of the global variety of approaches.



Case studies

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USA – decentralised diversity in a federated system

Entry to the profession

In the USA, entry into the teaching profession is governed at the state level, resulting in varied requirements across jurisdictions. Most states require a bachelor's degree, typically from a state-approved teacher preparation programme. These are offered by both traditional universities and non-traditional providers, including alternative route organisations such as Teach for America and online institutions. Some states also allow candidates without an education degree to enter teaching by completing a post-baccalaureate certification or a teaching residency model (Boyd et al., 2006). Licensure generally requires pedagogical coursework, student teaching, or clinical practice, and passage of state-mandated exams such as the Praxis series (Goldhaber and Hansen, 2010).

Licensing structure and mechanisms

The USA presents a complex case for teacher licensing due to its decentralised system. Each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and USA territories set their own standards, approve providers, and issue licenses. While this enables flexibility and responsiveness to local contexts, it also creates variability in licensing practices, with implications for equity, quality assurance, and system coherence.

Licensing is typically overseen by a state education department or independent professional standards board. Requirements for initial licensure commonly include completion of an approved preparation

programme, supervised practicum, background checks, passage of exams (e.g. Praxis), and demonstration of subject matter competence. The decentralised model reflects USA education policy's emphasis on localism.

The result is a plurality of pathways into teaching, including traditional university programmes and, in a minority of cases, alternative certification routes such as Teach for America, residency models, or state-specific fast-track programmes (Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000). This diversity has increased access but sparked debate about consistency and quality (Boyd et al., 2006). Mobility is another challenge – teachers relocating between states may face requalification due to differing requirements. However, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have laws or policies designed to ease license recognition for military spouses.

Licensing authority remains with state departments or boards. There is no national licensure, and criteria for obtaining and renewing a license differ significantly. Some states operate a single-tier system; others use multi-tiered structures (e.g. provisional, initial, and professional). Many now include performance-based assessments such as edTPA to evaluate readiness (Pechione, Whittaker, and Klesch, 2017). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) offers advanced certification, encouraged by several states. In Maryland, this is linked to incentives for master's-level accreditation. NBPTS certification requires renewal every five years. About 85% of USA states have renewable licensing systems, typically requiring

re-licensure every five years upon completion of professional development (Holmberg, 2021). Policies vary: a few states offer lifetime licenses after a period of service or advanced accreditation (e.g. Wisconsin and Missouri's Tier 4 license). Others, like New York, have transitioned from lifetime to renewable models, with New York ending permanent licenses in 2004.

It is important to distinguish between licensure and tenure. Licensing determines eligibility to teach in a state. Tenure, by contrast, is job protection granted by a school district after a probationary period (typically two to five years). Tenure means a teacher cannot be dismissed without just cause and due process. It does not guarantee a lifetime job but protects against arbitrary dismissal. Tenure applies to a specific district and role.

Outcomes and impact

The USA decentralised system has fostered innovation, local adaptability, and access through multiple entry routes, particularly for non-traditional candidates. However, it also results in a fragmented quality assurance landscape and restricted teacher mobility. Reciprocity agreements exist but often involve additional conditions (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Research shows high-poverty schools are more likely to employ teachers with emergency or provisional credentials, raising equity concerns (Goldhaber and Hansen, 2010). Some jurisdictions have introduced financial incentives to attract high-quality teachers to these schools.

As of 2025, around 31 states operate tiered licensure systems aligned with career development. These often include mentorship, advanced certification pathways, and evaluation-linked renewal. For example, Massachusetts requires 150 Professional Development Points (PDPs) every five years, aligned to district goals and approved by a supervisor. Minnesota's four-tier model

requires three years of successful teaching and positive evaluations to progress to Tier 4, which includes an indefinite license option and integrates licensure into career advancement.

In contrast, states like Florida and Arizona maintain basic renewal systems. Florida requires certificate renewal every five years through 120 in-service points (about 20 contact hours annually), without strong links to evaluation. Arizona mandates 15 hours of professional development per year, with limited oversight of content.

The result is wide variation in approach. In some states, licensure is a key lever for professionalisation and accountability; in others, it functions mainly as an administrative requirement with limited effect on teaching practice or outcomes.

Summary

The USA has a decentralised, state-led licensing system with multiple entry routes, varied standards, and renewal practices. This flexibility has enabled innovation but also led to inconsistent quality assurance and limited teacher mobility. Most states require a bachelor's degree, practicum, licensure exams, and increasingly use tiered systems and performance-based assessments.

Around 85% of states require license renewal every five years, often tied to professional development. Advanced credentials like NBPTS are optional but encouraged in some states. Tenure, separate from licensing, provides job protection after a probationary period.

The USA model illustrates how decentralisation can promote both innovation and fragmentation. The key challenge is to ensure flexibility does not undermine coherence or equitable access to high-quality teaching.

United Kingdom – devolution and divergence in teacher licensing

Entry to the profession

Entry into the teaching profession in the UK varies across the four devolved administrations – England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland ¹². In all four nations, aspiring teachers must typically hold a degree and complete an initial teacher education (ITE) programme. These programmes are usually delivered by higher education institutions or school-based providers and result in a professional qualification such as Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in England and Wales, registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), or a teaching certificate in Northern Ireland.

In England and Wales, ITE can be completed through university-led programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), or through school-led routes like School Direct or Teach First. Scotland mandates a one-year Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) following a degree, while Northern Ireland offers both PGCE and undergraduate routes at its universities (Department for Education, 2024; GTCS, 2021). In England it has become increasingly common for teachers to be training and have their QTS award by a school that is part of a Teaching School ¹³ Alliance that has a School Centred Initial Teacher Training Centre. In many cases the qualification can be achieved without any university education study, although a bachelor's degree remains an entry requirement.

One interesting innovation in some programmes in England has been the use of an assessment centre as part of teacher selection (Churches, Hutchinson, and Jones, 2009;

McConney, Price, and Woods-McConney, 2012; Churches et al., 2024).

There is some evidence that this may be able to predict some aspects of later practice (Churches et al., 2024), particularly where candidates are asked to teach a short lesson as part of the selection process.

Licensing mechanism

England presents a unique case within the UK. Since 2012, QTS, the recognised teaching credential, has been conferred by accredited ITE providers. There is no central registration body for teachers, and QTS does not require renewal. Instead, the Department for Education maintains certification record and a teacher number for each qualified teacher. Quality of provision is assessed by the country's school inspections body (the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)). Academy and free schools (schools with substantial freedoms) have been able to employ teachers without QTS. This has led to increased flexibility but also fragmentation in standards (Greany, 2015), although this policy is about to be reversed.

In contrast, in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, all state school teachers must register with a national teaching council: GTCS in Scotland, the Education Workforce Council (EWC) in Wales, and the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI). These bodies uphold professional standards, accredit ITE programmes, and investigate misconduct. Scotland also mandates a structured induction year through the Teacher Induction Scheme before full registration is granted.

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

In England, there is no requirement for re-licensing or formal CPD linked to maintaining QTS. However, initiatives such as the Early Career Framework (ECF) (compulsory after the award of QTS) and National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) (optional) provide structured professional learning, particularly in the early years of teaching (Department for Education, 2021; McAleavy, 2021).

Scotland, in contrast, has introduced a 'Professional Update' system, requiring teachers to confirm engagement in professional learning and reflection every five years to maintain registration. Wales and Northern Ireland require annual registration renewal, which includes a declaration of good standing, but expectations around CPD are less structured, though evolving (GTCS, 2019; EWC, 2022).

Outcomes and impact

The divergence within the UK reflects differing philosophies of teacher professionalism and accountability. England's deregulated model has increased flexibility in recruitment and innovation in training but has drawn criticism for undermining professional status and consistency. The absence of a licensing body means less oversight of ongoing teacher development and limited collective identity within the profession.

The devolved nations have retained more traditional professional models. Scotland, in particular, is often cited for its high standards and strong sense of teacher identity. Its structured licensing and CPD



framework have contributed to a coherent professional culture. However, this comes with bureaucratic demands and a degree of rigidity.

Student outcomes across the UK nations do not diverge markedly based on licensing approaches alone. England and Scotland both perform strongly on international assessments, suggesting that broader system factors – such as curriculum, funding, and leadership – play crucial roles. Nonetheless, teacher perception surveys suggest higher levels of professional trust and identity in Scotland and Wales than in England (Greany, 2015).

Summary

The UK case highlights the implications of governance structures for licensing policy. While England has embraced autonomy and deregulation, the other nations have maintained professional oversight and more formal registration. These contrasting approaches demonstrate that licensing systems shape not only the quality assurance mechanisms but also the culture and status of teaching. Effective models appear to balance professional accountability with support for development, as seen in Scotland's reflective renewal process.

¹² The UK is made up of four nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Although they are all part of the same country, each nation runs its own education system. This is because of a process called devolution, where the UK government has given power to each nation to make its own decisions in certain areas – education being one of the most important.

¹³ The Teaching Schools initiative mirrors the use of Teaching Hospitals in healthcare.

Ghana – raising teacher quality through licensing in a low-income context

Entry to the profession

In Ghana, entry into teaching requires completion of a diploma or bachelor's degree in education from an accredited institution, typically a College of Education or university. As part of recent reforms, all Colleges of Education have been upgraded to degree-awarding institutions affiliated with public universities, offering a four-year Bachelor of Education programme aligned with national teacher standards. After graduation and an induction year in schools, candidates must pass the Ghana Teacher Licensure Examination (GTLE) to qualify for employment by the Ghana Education Service (GES).

Licensing mechanism

Introduced in 2018, the GTLE is central to Ghana's teacher professionalisation reforms. The exam covers three areas: numeracy, literacy (English proficiency), and professional knowledge (pedagogy and ethics). Administered by the National Teaching Council (NTC), the exam must be passed to receive a professional teaching licence. In-service teachers already working before the GTLE's introduction were offered provisional licences and required to complete accredited CPD within a set period to obtain full licensure (GES, 2024).

Licences are valid for five years and must be renewed. Renewal depends on accumulating a minimum number of CPD points annually and undergoing performance appraisal by school leadership. Costs range from GH 150.00 to GH 450.00, depending on how many papers are sat and whether the candidate is new or renewing. NTC requires teachers to earn at least 20 CPD points per year through approved activities and charges a fee for renewal (NTC, 2023).

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

Ghana's system links licensing to professional development and appraisal. Teachers must participate in learning activities such as workshops, seminars, learning communities, and school-based training. The five-year renewal process is overseen by district education directorates and NTC, which manages a national CPD database.

This model marks a shift from qualification-based entry to ongoing development. School heads play a key role in confirming teacher performance through annual evaluations connected to licence renewal.

Outcomes and impact

The GTLE has increased public focus on teacher quality. Initial exam results revealed that about one-third of candidates failed on their first attempt, sparking national debate over pre-service preparation. Since then, interventions – including test-prep workshops, curriculum review, and coaching – have addressed these gaps.

As of 2024, NTC reports a national pass rate of 68%, with thousands of teachers now licensed. This has enhanced professional credibility and provided data to improve training programmes. Nonetheless, equity issues persist, particularly in rural areas with weaker training infrastructure.

Tracking CPD and managing license renewals have proven administratively demanding, especially in resource-constrained contexts. Still, Ghana's system represents a determined effort to align teacher entry, growth, and accountability within a national licensing framework.

Summary

Ghana shows that ambitious teacher reform is possible in low-income contexts with political commitment and planning. The GTLE and licensing regime offer national quality assurance, while annual CPD requirements foster sustained development. Transitional support for existing teachers has helped secure broad implementation.

The model offers key lessons for other developing countries: reforms should include capacity-building, local adaptation, and mechanisms for improvement. By tying licensing to both competence and growth, Ghana is framing teaching as a professional journey rather than a one-time credential.



Saudi Arabia – reforming teacher licensing for workforce professional standards

Entry to the profession

In Saudi Arabia, entry into teaching has traditionally required a bachelor's degree in education or a subject-specific field, followed by a postgraduate diploma in education. University-based teacher education is accredited by the Ministry of Education, and graduates have historically entered the profession through government hiring based on qualification equivalency and civil service criteria.

Under Vision 2030 reforms, initial teacher training is being restructured to meet international standards and national professional expectations. New teachers must now pass a standardised professional licensure exam before employment in public schools – a major shift from earlier qualification-based recruitment (Education and Training Evaluation Commission [ETEC], 2022).

Licensing mechanism

ETEC, the national quality assurance body, has introduced a comprehensive teacher licensing system under its professional standards framework. The process includes two components:

- General Professional Education Test (GAT-P): assesses pedagogical knowledge and teaching competencies
- Specialised Subject Knowledge Test: evaluates mastery of subject-specific content.

Both are administered by the National Centre for Assessment (Qiyas) under ETEC. Passing both is now mandatory for public school employment and is increasingly required for private sector teachers for equivalency and recognition.

The licence is structured in tiers – Practitioner, Advanced, and Expert – linked to experience, evaluations, and professional development, aligning licensing with career progression.

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

Full re-licensing policies are being phased in, with renewal required every five years. Teachers must:

- Accumulate CPD hours
- Achieve positive performance appraisals

ETEC is developing a national CPD framework to define credit-bearing activities and build partnerships with training providers. To move to higher licence tiers, teachers must demonstrate:

- classroom impact
- leadership contributions
- participation in approved CPD.

School principals and educational supervisors are responsible for supporting and verifying teachers' development (ETEC, 2023).

Outcomes and impact

Though in early stages, licensing reforms are already driving structural change. The introduction of high-stakes entry exams has led teacher education institutions to revise curricula for better alignment with assessed competencies. These reforms are standardising teacher quality and generating diagnostic data on system-wide gaps.

ETEC reports show early exams identified pedagogical weaknesses, prompting preparatory support programmes. Licensing also supports Vision 2030 goals to nationalise the workforce by ensuring Saudi teachers meet rigorous professional standards.

Challenges persist:

- scaling the system for a diverse workforce has required major investments in assessment, examiner training, and teacher support
- ensuring high standards while maintaining equitable access remains critical, particularly given regional training disparities.

Summary

Saudi Arabia's licensing reforms mark a systemic effort to professionalise teaching through standards, accountability, and career pathways. Licensing is now integrated with recruitment, evaluation, and national development strategies.

Mandatory exams and tiered licensing are reshaping pre-service training, establishing performance expectations, and incentivising continuous improvement. Long-term success depends on maintaining system coherence, supporting teacher preparation institutions, and ensuring equitable CPD and licensing access.



Qatar – Early adoption of licensing with implementation learning

Entry to the profession

In Qatar, initial entry into the teaching profession typically requires a bachelor's degree in education or a relevant subject discipline. Teacher education is provided by national institutions such as Qatar University's College of Education, as well as through overseas degrees recognised by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. For expatriate teachers, who constitute a significant portion of the workforce, qualifications must meet equivalency criteria established by the Ministry, and prior teaching experience is often required.

As part of the country's 'Education for a New Era' (EFNE) reform launched in the mid-2000s, Qatar sought to systematise entry requirements and professionalise teaching by introducing national standards and a formal licensing system.

Licensing mechanism

Qatar's teacher licensing initiative was introduced under the auspices of the Supreme Education Council (now the Ministry of Education and Higher Education), with implementation managed by the Education Institute. The licensing system established three professional tiers: Beginner Teacher, Competent Teacher, and Expert Teacher.

To be licensed, teachers were required to submit a portfolio of evidence demonstrating their competence against professional standards, undergo classroom observations, and participate in performance reviews. The licensing framework aimed to ensure that all teachers met minimum professional criteria, regardless of their national or educational background.

The model was influenced by Western certification schemes and integrated both performance-based and evidence-based components. Expatriate and national teachers were expected to meet the same standards, promoting consistency across Qatar's highly diverse education system.

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

While Qatar's licensing structure included provisions for tiered advancement and continuing professional development (CPD), in practice, the implementation of these elements faced considerable difficulties. CPD was expected to support license renewal and movement between levels, but structured CPD frameworks and clear requirements were not consistently operationalised.

Moreover, many teachers perceived the licensing process as burdensome and lacking clear value. Compliance-driven practices - such as the administrative burden of compiling portfolios - overshadowed the developmental intent of the policy. As a result, engagement levels varied widely, and many teachers, particularly expatriates, questioned the legitimacy and relevance of the system to their practice.

Outcomes and impact

While Qatar was one of the first countries in the Gulf to implement a licensing regime, studies have found that its effectiveness was hindered by inconsistent application, communication challenges, and limited teacher ownership. Romanowski and Amatullah (2016) reported that teachers often viewed the process as externally imposed, with minimal involvement of educators in design or standard setting. Furthermore, school leaders and ministry officials were often unprepared to conduct consistent evaluations or support professional growth based on licensing feedback.

Despite these setbacks, the licensing policy helped raise awareness of teacher quality issues and laid the groundwork for subsequent professional standards initiatives. The aspiration to create a unified, standards-driven profession remains influential in Qatar's education reforms, and there are ongoing efforts to reinvigorate teacher evaluation and development systems using lessons learned from the initial rollout.

Summary

Qatar's licensing experience offers a case study in early ambition met with practical implementation challenges. While the introduction of professional standards and licensing tiers was progressive and aligned with global trends, the lack of sustained system-wide support and teacher engagement undermined its long-term effectiveness.

Nonetheless, the Qatar case demonstrates the importance of adapting global models to local realities and involving teachers in reform processes. For other countries considering similar paths, Qatar provides valuable insights into how implementation, communication, and contextual fit are just as important as policy design.



Vietnam – centralised and decentralised balancing with subsidised teacher training

Entry to the profession

The Vietnam Education Law 2019 designates teacher training institutions as either pedagogical schools (teacher training colleges) or universities with educational management departments. Licensing responsibility lies with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and the Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, depending on education level. Both private and state-owned institutions operate in Vietnam, though state institutions receive recruitment and investment priority.

To attract more candidates into the profession, Vietnam enacted a tuition-free policy in 1998 for pre-service teachers. Under the 2019 Education Law, students enrolled in teacher training programmes are eligible for government support covering tuition and living expenses. However, those who do not enter the education sector or fail to complete the required service period within two years of graduation must repay the support received, within a timeframe not exceeding the length of the training programme.

Previously, teachers were hired on indefinite contracts. The Official and Public Employee Law Amendment 2019 introduced fixed-term contracts for those recruited after 1st July 2020, ranging from 12 to 60 months. Exemptions apply to officials transitioning to public employees and those working in areas with extremely difficult economic and social conditions, where job security is stronger.

Licensing mechanism

To become an accredited teacher, individuals must earn certification from a licensed institution. Requirements vary by level:

- Pre-school: A college degree in pedagogy (minimum two years of study).
- Primary to high school: A bachelor's degree or higher in teacher training (minimum four years).
- Subject shortage areas: A bachelor's degree in a relevant subject plus a certificate of pedagogical training.

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

While there is no re-licensing process, teachers must engage in ongoing professional development to maintain their positions. Those on fixed-term contracts must demonstrate continued eligibility under legal teaching standards for contract renewal. The 2019 Education Law outlines the following teacher standards:

1. Possess good character, ideology, and ethics.
2. Meet professional standards for the job.
3. Demonstrate the capacity to update and enhance skills.

4. Maintain health suitable to occupational demands. Teachers must complete 120 hours of in-service training annually, structured as follows (Circular 12/2019/TT-BGDĐT and Circular 17/2019/TT-BGDĐT):

- 40 hours: Content set by MOET.
- 40 hours: Formal training by the Bureau or Department of Education and Training, or MOET.
- 40 hours: Self-directed learning on new policies and guidelines.

Additionally, teachers must attend bi-weekly professional meetings at their schools and school cluster meetings involving three to four schools, organised by the Bureau of Education and Training (Circular 32/2020/TT-BGDĐT).

Outcomes and impact

The tuition-free training policy led to a teacher surplus for many years (Tin, 2018). More recently, media reports indicate that recruitment targets are not being met, largely due to low salaries (Vietnam.net, 2024).

Given the absence of re-licensing, professional development is essential. Although legally mandated, challenges persist: training content is often overly theoretical, follow-up is weak, enabling environments are lacking, and equity considerations are insufficient (Nguyen et al., 2013).

Despite these issues, the system continues to deliver strong educational outcomes. While Vietnam's average scores in OECD's PISA 2022 declined from 2018, the country outperformed the OECD average across all subjects. In mathematics, 72% of students

reached at least Level 2 proficiency (OECD average: 69%). In reading, 77% achieved Level 2 or higher (OECD average: 74%), and in science, 79% reached at least Level 2 (OECD average: 76%) (OECD, 2023).

Summary

In Vietnam, teacher training is conducted at licensed public and private pedagogical institutions, with state-run schools prioritised for investment and recruitment. A longstanding tuition-free policy was updated in 2019 to include financial support for tuition and living costs, repayable if graduates do not enter or remain in teaching within two years. Since 2020, new teachers are hired on fixed-term contracts, with exceptions for hardship areas.

Certification requirements vary by level, ranging from a two-year pedagogy degree for preschool to a four-year bachelor's for higher levels. In subject shortage areas, a relevant degree plus pedagogical certification is needed. Teachers are not re-licensed but must complete 120 hours of professional development annually, along with mandatory school and cluster-based meetings. Although there are challenges in training quality and implementation, Vietnam's system remains comparatively strong, with student performance consistently exceeding OECD averages.



Singapore – high trust, high standards, and global excellence

Entry to the profession

Entry into the teaching profession in Singapore is highly selective and centrally managed. Prospective teachers must hold at least a bachelor's degree, typically in a subject relevant to their intended teaching area. All pre-service teacher education is delivered through the National Institute of Education (NIE) at Nanyang Technological University, which serves as the sole provider of teacher training.

Candidates are sponsored and recruited by the Ministry of Education (MOE) prior to entering NIE, meaning that entry into training is already tied to employment outcomes. The system recruits from the top one-third of each academic cohort, a level of selectivity that contributes to the high baseline quality of teacher candidates (OECD, 2020). Upon completing the NIE programme, graduates undergo a Beginning Teachers' Induction Programme and are then appointed to schools by the MOE.

Licensing mechanism

Singapore does not operate a traditional licensure system with periodic renewal. Once teachers complete their training at NIE and pass all required assessments, they are certified by the MOE and considered permanently qualified to teach. Certification is not subject to formal re-licensing, reflecting the high level of trust placed in both initial training and the professional ethos of educators (Ministry of Education Singapore, n.d.).

However, this permanent certification is counterbalanced by rigorous support, appraisal, and development frameworks. Rather than relying on external licensing checkpoints, Singapore maintains teacher quality through a system of internal accountability, career progression, and structured professional learning.

Ongoing professional development and appraisal

All teachers in Singapore are entitled to at least 100 hours of professional development per year, funded by the MOE. Professional growth is guided by the Teacher Growth Model, which integrates individual development planning with institutional priorities (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2016). Teachers are regularly appraised through the Enhanced Performance Management System (EPMS), which includes goal setting, feedback from senior teachers and school leaders, and career discussions.

Singapore also operates a structured career progression framework known as the teaching career ladder, with three tracks: the Teaching Track, the Leadership Track, and the Specialist Track. Advancement along these paths is merit-based and tied to demonstrated impact on student learning, peer mentorship, or subject innovation (National Center on Education and the Economy, n.d.).

This model ensures that teacher development is continuous and tied to meaningful incentives, even without a formal license renewal requirement.

Outcomes and impact

Singapore's model has produced consistently outstanding educational outcomes. The country ranks at the top of international assessments, including the PISA. In the PISA 2022 results, Singapore was the top-performing country across reading, mathematics, and science, with its students significantly outperforming peers globally (OECD, 2023).

This success is widely attributed to its systemic alignment, including selective recruitment, high-quality training, strong professional development, and the alignment of accountability mechanisms with teacher growth rather than punishment (Schleicher, 2018).

Rather than relying on license renewal as a compliance tool, Singapore focuses on professionalism, support, and peer accountability, which has contributed to a high-status teaching profession and sustained system excellence.

Summary

Singapore exemplifies a high-trust, high-investment model of teacher professionalism. Its approach to teacher licensing is notable for what it does not include – no external license renewal process – and for what it does: an integrated system of rigorous preparation, continuous development, and structured career advancement. The model reinforces teacher quality not through bureaucratic regulation, but through professional culture, capability-building, and strategic human capital management. The country's top PISA performance offers compelling evidence of the model's effectiveness.



Estonia – rigorous entry, professional trust, and systemic coherence

Entry to the profession

Entry into the teaching profession in Estonia is structured around high academic standards and a competency-based framework. To become a fully qualified teacher, individuals must complete a master's degree (level 7 or 8 on the Estonian Qualifications Framework), typically in education or a subject-specific pedagogical programme. Initial teacher training takes place at accredited universities such as the University of Tartu and Tallinn University, which are responsible for ensuring alignment with national teacher professional standards (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

Pre-service training combines academic coursework with practicum experience, and all teacher education programmes must meet the quality criteria established by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA).

Licensing mechanism

Estonia does not have a separate teacher licensing authority. Instead, once the relevant university degree is completed, teachers are automatically eligible to enter the profession, subject to employment by a school. Certification is granted by universities and recognised by employers, functioning

effectively as a permanent authorisation to teach. There is no periodic re-licensing requirement. However, Estonia maintains a professional standards framework that defines what teachers should know and be able to do. The framework supports continuous learning and career development, even though it is not enforced through formal re-certification (Ministry of Education and Research Estonia, 2018).

Ongoing professional development and appraisal

While re-licensing is not mandatory, Estonia encourages teachers to engage in voluntary professional development. School leaders play a key role in setting expectations, and participation in professional learning is commonly tied to career progression and internal promotion.

Estonia has developed a multi-level professional qualifications framework, with teachers able to seek higher levels of recognition (e.g. senior or expert teacher status) through a portfolio-based application process and appraisal of practice. These higher qualifications are awarded by the Estonian Qualifications Authority and function as markers of expertise and advancement within the profession.

The culture is one of trust and autonomy, with teachers treated as professionals expected to engage in self-directed development. Professional learning opportunities are provided through universities, school networks, and national initiatives, often funded or supported by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Outcomes and impact

Estonia has received global recognition for its education system. In the PISA 2022 results, Estonia ranked among the top-performing countries in Europe, with students outperforming many OECD peers in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2023). These results have been achieved with modest spending per pupil, reflecting the system's efficiency and coherence (Schleicher, 2018).

Observers attribute Estonia's success to several key features: strong initial teacher education, a culture of evidence-informed practice, minimal bureaucracy, and high public trust in teachers. The lack of a formal license renewal process is not seen as a gap, because the system embeds continuous improvement into professional culture and institutional frameworks.

Estonia's approach reflects a belief that rigorous entry standards, combined with ongoing autonomy and support, are sufficient to maintain quality – without the need for repetitive certification cycles.

Summary

Estonia represents a European high-performance model grounded in high entry standards, professional autonomy, and voluntary development. Teachers are not re-licensed, but their professional growth is scaffolded through career stages, standards frameworks, and school-based leadership. The country's impressive PISA performance demonstrates that systemic trust, initial rigour, and non-bureaucratic support can drive excellence in teaching.



Finland – professional trust and rigorous initial education

Entry to the profession

Finland has been recognised as a highly successful education system, although in recent years its results in the PISA tests (OECD, 2023) have been in decline (reducing by 23 points in 2022, compared to 2018). Although Finland in 2022 was still 12 points higher than the mean score of pupils across the OECD. Central to Finland's model is a highly selective and academically rigorous pathway into the teaching profession.

To become a qualified teacher in Finland, individuals must complete a master's degree (MA or MSc) in education, which includes both research-oriented coursework and extensive practicum components. This requirement applies to all primary school teachers and lower secondary teachers. Teacher education is conducted exclusively at Finnish research universities, where programmes integrate pedagogical theory, subject content, and classroom practice, underpinned by a strong foundation in educational research (Sahlberg, 2015; OECD, 2019).

Licensing mechanism

Finland does not operate a formal teacher licensing system involving renewal or centralised examinations. Instead, the completion of a master's degree in teaching from an accredited university acts as a de facto permanent licence to teach. The professional teaching credential is granted at graduation and recognised by employers without the need for separate state licensure.

Certification is verified through degree documentation, and no formal re-licensing is required throughout a teacher's career (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

While Finland does not mandate continuing professional development (CPD) for licence renewal, ongoing learning is embedded in the culture of the profession. Schools and municipalities provide opportunities for in-service training, and teachers are encouraged to pursue CPD on a voluntary basis, often with public funding. Participation in CPD is also linked to career progression and school-level development planning (Sahlberg, 2011). Accountability is primarily exercised through school-based evaluation, peer collaboration, and trust-based governance – rather than through external inspections or relicensing procedures (Simola, 2005).

Teachers in Finland have considerable autonomy in curriculum interpretation and classroom decision-making, supported by collegial structures and a well-developed mentoring culture for novice teachers (Heikkinen et al, 2012). This high-trust environment is based on the assumption that rigorously trained professionals will act in the best interests of their students and the system.

Outcomes and international recognition

Although PISA results have been in decline in recent years, for a long time Finland's approach yielded higher than average outcomes. In successive PISA cycles, Finnish students have performed above the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science. In PISA 2022, Finland remained one of the top performers in Europe (OECD, 2023). The system's equity is also notable – Finland exhibits one of the narrowest performance gaps between schools and socioeconomic groups.

This success is frequently attributed to Finland's coherent policy design: a small number of high-quality teacher education institutions, universal commitment to equity, and a strong culture of continuous professional learning and reflective practice (Sahlberg, 2015). The absence of relicensing is not viewed as a policy gap but as a mark of professional status and systemic efficiency.

Summary

Finland represents a high-capacity, high-trust model of teacher professionalism. It relies on selective entry, intensive initial preparation, and a research-informed teaching culture, rather than licensing bureaucracy. Teachers are seen as researchers, collaborators, and self-directed learners. This approach illustrates that where initial training is of exceptional quality and professional norms are strong, permanent licensure can operate effectively without compromising quality or accountability.



South Africa – balancing regulation, equity, and legacy challenges in teacher licensing

Entry to the profession

In South Africa, entry into teaching requires completion of a recognised qualification – typically a four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) or a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) following a relevant undergraduate degree. All qualifications must be accredited by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

Once qualified, teachers must register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) before they are legally permitted to teach in public or independent schools. This mandatory registration includes a vetting process to verify professional standing and check criminal records. While technically distinct from international licensing models, SACE registration functions as de facto licensure.

Licensing mechanism

SACE is the statutory body responsible for maintaining ethical and professional standards in the profession. Registration occurs once, post-qualification, and requires academic transcripts, identity verification, a police clearance certificate, and payment of an initial fee plus an annual levy.

Unlike systems with formal re-licensing or career-linked tiers, SACE registration is permanent.

However, all registered educators must adhere to the SACE Code of Professional Ethics and engage in continuous professional development (CPD). SACE can suspend or revoke registration in cases of misconduct.

Ongoing professional development and re-licensing

While there is no re-licensing requirement, CPD is compulsory. Teachers must earn Professional Development Points (PDPs) by participating in approved learning across three domains:

- professional practice
- professional growth
- school-level engagement.

Educators must accumulate 150 PDPs over three years, with principals and district officials monitoring compliance. CPD delivery includes school-based sessions, provincial workshops, NGO-led programmes, and collaborations with higher education institutions. However, access and quality vary, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, limiting the system's overall impact.

Outcomes and impact

SACE's regulatory model has contributed to the professionalisation of teaching post-apartheid, providing ethical oversight and a baseline of accountability. Registration ensures most teachers in formal employment, particularly in urban areas, meet minimum qualification standards. It is also central to efforts to rebuild public trust in the profession.

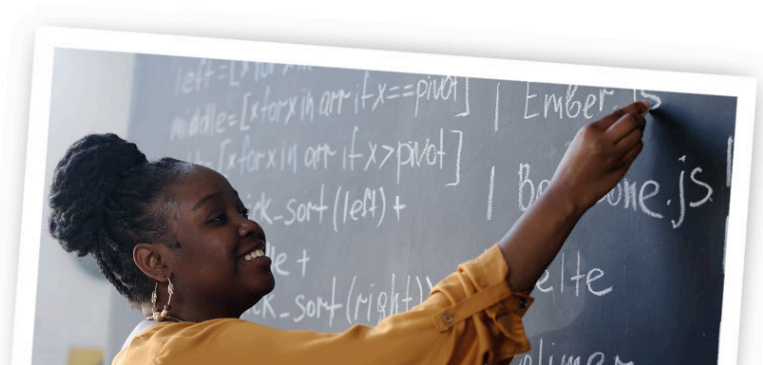
However, its impact is limited by systemic fragmentation and implementation challenges. CPD enforcement remains uneven, and access to high-quality, subject-specific development is restricted in provinces such as Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. Some unregistered teachers still work in schools, especially where resources are scarce. Gaps in coordination among government departments and professional bodies mean misconduct cases are not always reported to SACE. In some instances, educators found guilty of serious violations – such as sexual misconduct – have remained in the system (de Villiers, 2025).

Teacher unions, shaped by their historical role during apartheid, remain influential actors. While sometimes perceived as resistant to performance management and stricter accountability measures, unions have also played constructive roles in promoting teacher development. For reform to succeed, their inclusion in policy design and implementation is essential (Ehren and Hwa, 2025; Msila, 2022).

Although a tiered licensing model linked to career progression was envisioned in the National Framework for Teacher Education and Development (2007, revised 2011), implementation has stalled due to financial and institutional constraints. Current efforts include digitising SACE's systems, modernising CPD tracking, and piloting school-level support tools. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has also introduced initiatives such as the Teacher Appreciation and Support Programme (TASP) and the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework to better align policy with system needs.

Summary

South Africa's teacher licensing model, grounded in mandatory SACE registration, represents a middle-ground approach: it sets baseline ethical and entry requirements, while encouraging rather than enforcing ongoing development. Its success depends on improved CPD access, stronger accountability, and movement toward a career-linked licensing model as the system matures.



Permanent versus renewable licensing: balancing trust, accountability, and professional growth

One of the most debated aspects of teacher licensing is whether credentials should be **permanent or require periodic renewal**. This distinction is more than administrative—it reflects deeper beliefs about teaching and how best to ensure quality and development.

Permanent licensing, as in Singapore, Estonia, Finland, and England, is based on professional trust. It aligns teaching with fields like medicine or law, where credentials remain valid indefinitely if ethical standards and competence are maintained. In England, teachers gain lifetime licensure after achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), with no renewal requirement; accountability is managed through school-level performance systems (Department for Education, 2021; Greany, 2015). Singapore also grants permanent certification, underpinned by substantial professional development entitlements and strong institutional support (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2016; OECD, 2020). Estonia and similar systems rely on high entry standards and voluntary ongoing development, rather than formal relicensing. These approaches elevate professional status and reduce bureaucracy. In the USA, some states have introduced lifetime credentials to recognise long-serving, effective teachers (Holmberg, 2021).

By contrast, **renewable licensing systems** (common in the USA) prioritise accountability. Teachers must periodically demonstrate continued development, usually every three to seven years, through CPD, portfolio submissions, or exams (Holmberg, 2021; National Teaching Council, 2023). Ghana links annual CPD targets to a five-year renewal cycle.

Such systems often support broader reforms. In Ghana, licensing aligns with national efforts to raise teacher quality and professionalise the workforce. Linking renewal to demonstrated growth ensures teachers meet evolving expectations.

A third perspective is gaining ground, driven by the rapid expansion of education research. A growing evidence base – including randomised controlled trials (RCTs), neuroscience, and cognitive psychology – offers insights into pedagogy, feedback, assessment, and cognitive load (OECD, 2019; Higgins et al., 2022; Churches, Dommett, and Devonshire, 2017). Teachers now require not only strong initial preparation but regular opportunities to update practice based on new findings. For example, emerging research on memory formation, retrieval practice, and working memory has direct classroom implications.

Alongside this, national and international ‘what works’ clearinghouses increasingly synthesise RCT findings to inform decision-making and keep teachers up to date. Key examples include the Education Endowment Foundation in England, the USA’s What Works Clearinghouse, and Australia’s Evidence for Learning Toolkit. These organisations translate research into accessible guidance to support evidence-informed systems (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024; What Works Clearinghouse, 2023; Evidence for Learning, 2024).

In this context, **even currently effective permanent licensing models may require rethinking** – not by adding bureaucracy, but by embedding expectations for continuous engagement with evidence. Without research-aligned CPD or structured reflection, teachers risk falling behind as learning science evolves. This is not a call for universal relicensing but for reinterpreting permanence in a dynamic, evidence-rich profession.

Some systems already integrate these dual aims. Scotland’s General Teaching Council (GTCS) grants lifetime certification but requires a five-year professional update involving engagement with new knowledge and practice (GTCS, 2019). In the USA, some states link renewal to performance metrics or

advanced certification, positioning relicensing as a growth opportunity rather than an administrative task.

For policymakers, licensing models should align with national capacity, professional culture, and research orientation. High-capacity systems may not need regular relicensing but do need strong support for ongoing learning. Where teacher quality is inconsistent, renewal can strengthen accountability and signal reform seriousness.

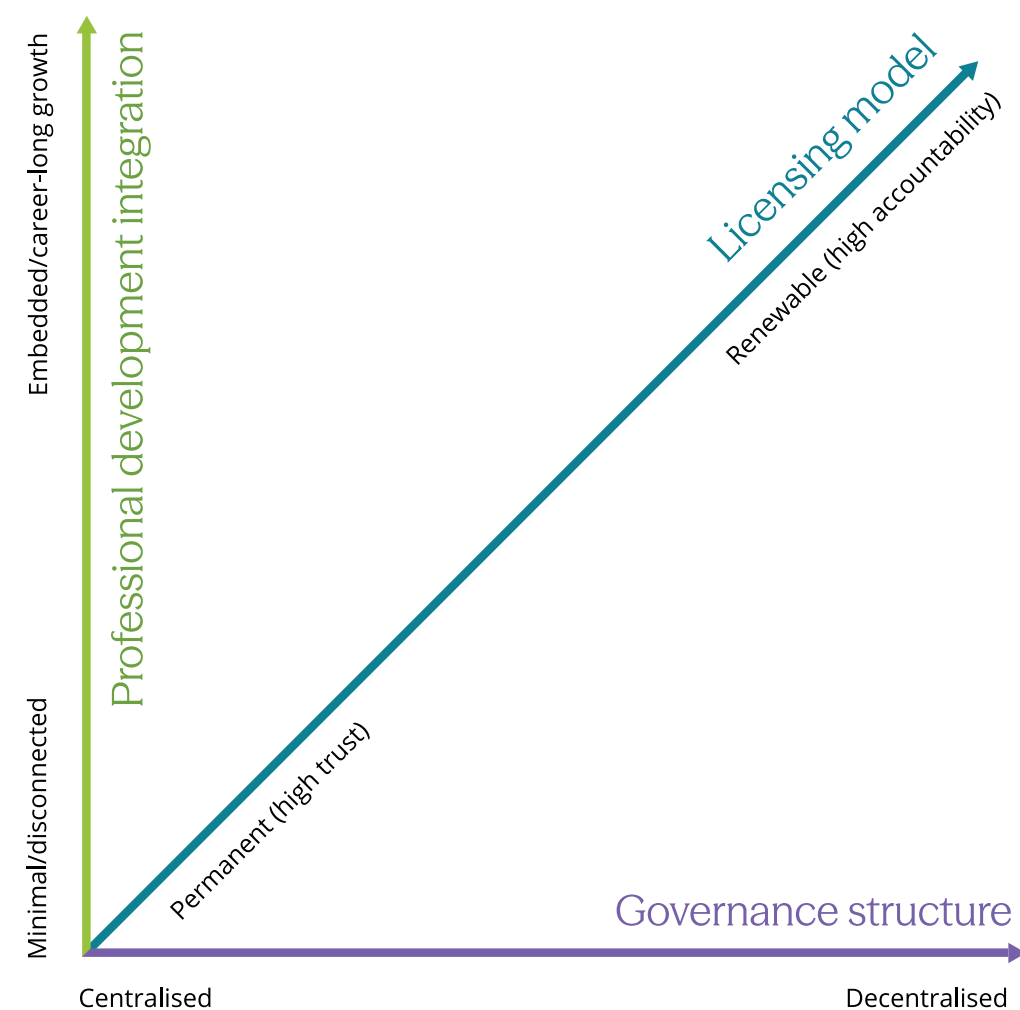
Ultimately, licensing systems reflect how societies value teachers. A permanent licence says: “You are a trusted professional, responsible for your growth.” A renewable one says: “Your standing must be continually demonstrated.” The most effective systems appear to combine both underpinned by investment in CPD, clear expectations, and alignment with the evolving science of teaching.

Conceptualising policy dimensions in teacher licensing reform

Based on the evidence in this review, one way for policymakers to conceptualise the main areas of decision-making in teacher licensing reform is to imagine three dimensions of possibility – interdependent dimensions, each of which reflects core aspects of education governance and professional development policy.

These dimensions can be visualised as a three-dimensional space, enabling stakeholders to map their current system and explore alternative configurations (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A model for understanding the dimensions of teacher licensing as a policy lever



1. Governance structure (X-axis): centralised ↔ decentralised

Reflects the degree of central control in licensing. Centralised models offer consistency, standardisation, and system-wide accountability. Decentralised models allow greater flexibility, local responsiveness, and innovation. The optimal balance depends on governance arrangements, system maturity, and values around autonomy.

2. Licensing model (Y-axis): permanent (high trust) ↔ renewable (high accountability)

Concerns whether licensure is a one-time credential or periodically renewed. Permanent models reflect trust and are typically granted after rigorous preparation, assuming self-directed development. Renewable models add external accountability – e.g. performance reviews or CPD – to ensure sustained competence. The right model depends on cultural norms, monitoring capacity, and intended links to career progression.

3. Professional development integration (Z-axis): minimal/disconnected ↔ embedded/career-long growth

Indicates how closely professional learning is tied to licensing and career structure. Where CPD is optional or disconnected, teacher quality may vary. Embedded systems treat CPD as structured, continuous, and strategic. Integration depends on commitment to improvement and available CPD infrastructure.

Balancing the dimensions

These dimensions are interdependent. A decentralised system may require stronger accountability; centralised models may more easily embed national CPD. Permanent licensing works best when paired with robust development, while renewable models suit contexts seeking measurable improvement. Coherence and local fit matter most – licensing design should reflect national priorities, not replicate other systems.

Policy implications and recommendations

Designing teacher licensing as an effective lever for professionalisation and systemic improvement requires a nuanced application of these comparative insights. The following key implications and recommendations are offered for policymakers and education leaders:

There is no one-size-fits-all solution

No single global model of teacher licensing works for all contexts. Effective systems reflect national values, constraints, and educational goals. Policymakers should study a range of models and tailor their licensing framework to local needs, rather than simply emulating another country's approach.

Licensing as ongoing development

Teacher licensing systems may need to evolve beyond one-time certification toward structures that support teachers' career-long professional growth. Particularly as new evidence emerges. Rather than a 'certificate for life', consider multi-tiered licensing (e.g. initial, proficient, advanced levels) and periodic renewal processes that require meaningful professional learning or demonstration of updated evidence of learning.

Ensure independent and credible oversight

An independent, credible regulatory body (e.g. a professional teaching council) can help sustain public trust and uphold teaching as a true profession. Even when government retains ultimate control, involving experienced educators in peer review or licensure decision-making (through boards or panels) strengthens legitimacy. For example, countries with robust teaching councils often see higher teacher buy-in to standards than those where all decisions are top-down. Establishing such bodies should be accompanied by capacity-building to enable them to function transparently and effectively.

Prioritise equity in design

Licensing requirements and processes must be designed with equity in mind, to avoid disadvantaging certain groups or regions. This means providing additional support (financial, academic, or mentoring) for candidates from under-resourced backgrounds, monitoring pass rates by sub-group and region, and adjusting policies that inadvertently perpetuate disparities. It also means ensuring that high-need schools can attract and retain licensed teachers – for instance, by offering incentives or establishing programmes (like special residency models) to channel well-prepared teachers into under-served areas.

Integrate licensing with broader reforms

Treat licensing reforms as part of a broader strategic plan for educational improvement. Align the introduction of licensing with reforms in teacher education (so new graduates are prepared for new requirements), curriculum and assessment changes (so teacher standards reflect what students are expected to learn), and investments in professional development. The cases show that isolated reforms have limited impact; it is the synergy that produces substantial change. A coherent reform package might involve, for example, launching new teacher standards, overhauling teacher education curricula, and introducing licensing and mentoring in the same multi-year period so each element reinforces the others.

Monitor, evaluate, and adapt

Implementing a licensing system is not a one-off task but an ongoing process. Systems should build in robust monitoring and evaluation – track how licensing is affecting teacher supply, teacher quality, and student outcomes. Solicit feedback from schools and teachers on unintended consequences or bureaucratic hurdles. Use this data to make iterative improvements. For instance, if an exam is too difficult in one domain, provide teachers with better training rather than simply lowering the standard; if the renewal process is too cumbersome, streamline it with technology. Adaptation and flexibility in policy implementation will help the system mature and gain acceptance.

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