

## California moves closer to eliminating, replacing reading instruction test that has blocked thousands from teaching credential

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JANUARY 23, 2020 | DIANA LAMBERT

**T**he California reading instruction test is a major hurdle for many aspiring teachers across the state.

So much so that about one-third who take the test fail the first time, according to state data of the five-year period between 2012 and 2017. The poor performance is prompting action by the state: The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing is assembling a panel to recommend alternatives to the [Reading Instruction Competence Assessment](#), or RICA, while state legislators are considering a [bill](#) that would replace it.

The test, which is generally taken after a teacher candidate has completed a bachelor's degree and is enrolled in a teacher preparation program, must be passed before they can earn a credential to teach elementary school and special education.

“In the 18 months I have been on this commission I don't think I've heard a kind word about this RICA test,” Commissioner Kathleen Allavie said. “This test is not serving us well at this time. This is the most important thing I think we need our teachers to do — teaching students to read.”

Critics say the test is outdated and racially biased while supporters of the current version argue it ensures prospective teachers understand how to teach reading based on phonics.

The RICA is just one of the up to six tests teachers in training must pass to earn a credential. About 40 percent give up because they fail to pass one or more of the [required tests](#) at various steps to getting their credential, according to [data](#) from the [California Commission on Teacher Credentialing](#). For prospective math or science teachers, that number climbs to 50 percent.

The high failure rate on the tests makes it difficult for the state to make a dent in its persistent teacher shortage. Some 24,000 new teachers were needed in California classrooms in the 2017-18 school year, according to the Learning Policy Institute report written as part of the [Getting Down to Facts](#) research initiative. But only about 16,000 received teaching credentials.

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing is looking to reform all the tests and assessments that teachers have to take to enter the profession. The effort is meant to update the tests to reflect current state academic standards, as well as to ease the teacher shortage by reducing obstacles to earning a credential.

“All assessments are reviewed periodically to ensure that they remain valid and reliable,” said Sasha Horwitz, commission spokesman. “As new standards are adopted by the State Board of Education, the assessments that teacher candidates are required to pass are updated. With the changes over the past 10 years, beginning with Common Core, the Next Generation Science Standards, inclusion of the focus on the whole child, as only a few examples, it is prudent to review how prospective teachers are assessed to ensure that all new teachers have the knowledge and skills required to be effective.”

At the same time, the commission is considering updates to the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment, state legislators are considering [Senate Bill 614](#). If passed, it would eliminate the test and replace it with a basic writing skills test on an exam these teachers are already required to pass — the California Subject Examinations for Teachers: Multiple Subjects.

The commission has not taken a formal position on the bill, Horwitz said.

Plans to change or eliminate the RICA have ignited a debate over what a new exam or replacement coursework would assess and whether it will be adequate to ensure all California teachers are prepared to teach children to read and to assess, assimilate and analyze information.

Tobie Meyer, state director of [Decoding Dyslexia CA](#), a grassroots organization started to raise awareness about dyslexia and education, said the problem lies with teacher preparation programs that don't prepare teachers to adequately teach reading and literacy.

“The CTC should be addressing why new teachers are having a difficult time in passing the RICA, not lowering our expectations for teachers by eliminating the RICA or minimizing the important focus on these foundational reading skills,” she wrote in a letter to the credentialing commission. “Lowering the bar to make passing rates higher only masks the underlying problem.”

Alonzo Collins has spent more than six years teaching English in China, Switzerland and France because he can't pass all the tests required to earn a California teaching credential, including the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment.

He says he is a popular teacher, sought out by families looking for a tutor to teach their children English in preparation for attendance at an international university.

Collins, 52, would just like to be rid of the RICA. He failed it twice, despite finishing his teacher preparation and earning a master's degree in education, before packing up and moving to China in 2013. He accepted a job as an English teacher overseas in order to earn money to pay off his school loans, he said.

Collins had quit a career in marketing to return to school to become a teacher. He graduated from Antioch University in Los Angeles in 2010.

Despite his current schedule that includes teaching English to students on both sides of the Switzerland-France border, Collins recently took the RICA again at a testing center in Paris. He failed again.

Collins has decided to give up on the test.

"I have spent money on books, online tutors and, of course, college tuition that I need to pay back," said Collins by phone from his home in Geneva. "As of today, I have nothing to show for it. It is really sad and hurtful to have people, who have a desire to become teachers, take a test like this."

"I always wanted to be a teacher," he said. "I love school and I loved learning."

After hearing that the RICA is likely to be revised or replaced with coursework, Collins said he would be willing to try to pass it again. It would help him avoid taking a year of classes to earn a credential in the state of Washington, where he plans to move this year and where a California credential is transferable.

The RICA consists of 70 multiple choice items, four essay questions and requires test takers to answer questions based on a case study of a student. A Video Performance Examination is an alternative, although passage rates are considerably lower. Candidates must submit a video demonstrating them instructing an entire class, another showing small-group instruction and a third demonstrating individual instruction.

Although would-be teachers can take the test multiple times, each attempt costs about \$200.

Alesia Fuller, 56, has completed a special education teaching credential program and holds a child development program director permit and a 30-day substitute teaching permit from the state of California. She is working as a substitute teacher in Riverside County schools. Substitutes are required to have a bachelor's degree, pass a basic skills test and complete a background check.

But Fuller can't earn her teaching credential because she can't pass one last test — the RICA. Fuller took the written test first and failed, then tried the video performance assessment twice, failing again. She can't

understand what she is doing wrong and complains the testing company offers little feedback to help her improve.

“How can I have failed this and have been an educator for 20 years?” she asked.

Fuller said teachers who fail the test are generally just bad test takers, not bad teachers. She hopes the credentialing commission and state legislators will consider replacing the test with coursework.

The credentialing commission discussed [three options](#) for replacing the RICA proposed by its staff at the November meeting. The first is an assessment aligned with the state’s [English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework](#) that would vary depending on whether the individual was trying to earn a multiple subject or special education credential.

Single-subject credential candidates are not currently required to pass the RICA, but the board could opt to include them in the testing requirement, according to the proposal. Staff also proposed allowing candidates who do not pass one or more parts of the test to complete approved courses instead of retaking the test.

The second option, and the one that garnered the most support at the meeting, was to replace the test with coursework that includes assignments and exercises that can be used to assess students’ knowledge of reading instruction and literacy.

The third option would be to include questions that assess reading and literacy in the Teaching Performance Assessments, which all teaching candidates seeking multiple subject and single subject credentials must pass.

The commission asked its staff to assemble a working group of experts to study the test and to offer recommendations about its elimination or replacement.

## Comments

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I had the most difficult time passing the RICA. I finally just passed it November 2019, after 5 written exams and 2 video assessments, and almost three years wasted without a permanent position. I am now an Education Specialist (special education teacher) with my credential focus for students with Moderate to Severe disabilities. I lost my dream job of teaching an Autism Specific class due to not passing the RICA by one point! It was ...

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▶ **Dawn**

2 days ago



Improve the test; don't eliminate it! This is yet another example of the public school system spouting "quality," "best practices," "evidenced based" and the other misnomers to fool parents into believing California Dept of Ed actually wants children to succeed. They don't, the purpose is to restrict school choice, parental rights, and then force all children into this single-minded institution. Horrible! [Read More](#)

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**LUZ ESTELA LUJAN**

2 days ago



I'm an elementary school teacher from Arizona. I was trying to obtain a job in California, but CBEST writing section also is an obstacle to obtain a teaching certification there. They must revised the CBEST test as well. I personally believed that all this is about money, and Pearson (agency in charge to assess the tests) takes advantage of this situation.

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▶ **Starla A. Reynolds**

3 days ago



This is my story ... nevertheless, my story is one of many: One of the major problems I have with the RICA is not the fact that I need to take the test to be recommended for credentialing but the fact that I have not received any training specific to the requirements of the RICA in order to pass said RICA. I have a BA in Secondary Education with endorsements in English Language Arts and Theatre ... [Read More](#)

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**Mary Ellen**

5 days ago



“Critics say the test is...racially biased...”

Could someone give examples of the racial bias of the test?

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▶ **Shauna**

3 days ago



Most questions are vague and even a proficient native English speaker is guessing between the two best options but if a question such as 1. While performing the breast stroke a person relies on \_\_\_\_ to propel themselves? A. Velocity B. Buoyancy C. Thrust D. Friction Now imagine you don't know how to swim and wouldn't know the breast stroke if it splashed in front of you. It had nothing to do with vocabulary proficiency. It has to do with being ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Marvi**

5 days ago



It is clear to me our California colleges of education are falling short and doing a disservice to their prospective teachers. The current English Language Arts (ELA) Framework clearly states, "Teachers use what they know about their students to design lessons and learning experiences that, from the outset, are appropriate for all students in the setting." (p. 95) How in the world are teachers who have clearly not learned the science of reading to a ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Marvi**

5 days ago



After reading the 3 proposed options proposed Curriculum Commission staff at the November meeting, I have serious concerns. The current focus of the RICA is on Foundational Skills; one proposal is to revise the test. Staff suggests that, consistent with the five-theme literacy approach promoted by the current ELA/ELD Framework, all five literacy themes should be considered and appropriately assessed at the program level and in any statewide assessments developed in the future. The five broad ... [Read More](#)

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**Minnie Alsof**

5 days ago



There is, of course, another important variable that should be taken into account before deciding to eliminate or replace the test: test students who have been taught reading by credentialed and un-credentialed teachers, and see what, if any, the difference is.

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▶ **SD Parent**

6 days ago



Allowing a person who cannot pass a proficiency test to teach would be like allowing a student who cannot pass a proficiency test to graduate high school. Oh, wait, the state eliminated the CAHSEE, and now, based on the 2018 CAASPP, 34% of last year's high school seniors didn't meet standards in ELA and 69% didn't meet standards in Math. So should the state get rid of the CAASPP, too? Actually, the CAASPP results ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **L. Carbajal**

6 days ago



I am a retired educator: 17 yrs teaching, 18 yrs elementary/jr. high principal. I lost many fine teachers because they were unable to pass CSET and RICA. Elementary teachers are the hardest hit. I suggest dump the CBEST and implement a combination of Option 2 and 3. Furthermore, recruit the hundreds of teachers who left the profession back into classrooms. Many of them excelled in the profession. I refer to those teachers as the ones ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Kathleen Garcia-Horlor**

6 days ago



Now I understand why new teachers have difficulty teaching reading. If this test is based on phonics, there's the rub. Yes, one needs to know the phonics base of teaching reading. What's left out is the phonology bases

of speaking/reading. The proper way to correct/adjust the teaching of reading for the student to get from here to there on the reading road. To know when it can't be fixed and different intervention is ... [Read More](#)

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**Barbara Stoff** 

6 days ago

As an ESOL teacher I returned to school to get two additional degrees in teaching my students how to read. When reading is the most important subject in school, I can't believe you are thinking of lowering your standards.

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**Elizabeth F. Bennett** 

3 days ago

Here, here, Barbara!

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▶ **Kathy** 

6 days ago

For anyone that has not taken any of the teacher prep tests, you have no idea what you are talking about. I have taken and passed all of them but the RICA. I will attempt it this summer. None of these tests are clear. That is the problem. The questions are vague and confusing while the answers require you to choose the best answer. This means that all of most of the answers have some ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Lynn** 

6 days ago

People are stating this RICA "weeds out the incompetent ones," but what about the competent ones? Where's their pay? Instead of paying the "competent ones" a living wage, you then give an excuse that "teachers are just glorified babysitters" and "how hard can the job be?" Arguing for higher pay for teachers wouldn't fit into your narrative. Sad when retail workers and janitors are receiving higher wages than a teacher with a 4 year degree ... [Read More](#)

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**Linda Diamond**  

6 days ago

The passing failure rate is due to inadequate preparation of teachers by the schools of education. Throwing out a test because of low passing rates probably means throw out the Bar exam for lawyers since many do not pass, the Medical exam for doctors and even more similar the state's SBAC test since so many students do poorly. Really? Throwing out a good test because folks have not learned the content? This is madness. Teach the content.

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**Ken** 

7 days ago

As a teacher who has passed the RICA many years ago, I totally support them looking at other options for teachers to prove that they can teach. I know that some students have difficulties taking tests. They know the material but have difficulty on regular tests proving it.

The same thing goes for adults that are teachers.

I have worked with some great teachers that had incredible difficulties taking tests. Some had to leave teaching because they could not pass.

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▶ **Carrie**

7 days ago



For those keyboard warrior commenters that state "has blocked thousands of INCOMPETENTS from teaching credential" and "Let's stop making excuses for folks who can't pass minimal competency tests and instead improve the rigor of our tests so we are assured that our teachers are truly prepared to teach fundamental topics like Reading," have never stepped foot in education. Teachers have already proven their worth with Pearson tests like CBEST, CSET, 4 TPAs and over ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Dr. Bill Conrad**

6 days ago



When you cannot adequately rebut the argument, you resort to ad hominem attacks. For the record, I was an award winning middle school and high school science teacher in Illinois, I have spent many hours successfully within classrooms both as a teacher, coach, and coordinator. I know of what I speak. The facts speak for themselves. When over half of the third graders in California cannot read by the end of the year ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Dr. Bill Conrad**

7 days ago



More than half of 3rd graders in California are unable to read at the end of the year as measured by the 2019-2020 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP). Maybe we should consider eliminating this assessment as the kids do not seem to be doing well on it. Raging against the thermometers is all the rage these days especially when we get results we don't like! Actually the scientists who design ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **el**

6 days ago



As the person who posted a practice test item, I welcome the opportunity to learn more about the purpose and value of this test. While it was cherry-picked as an item that seemed problematic, it was cherry-picked from the first 5 test questions, and the style of it is not rare on the practice test. If the practice test is significantly different from the actual test, this could point to another reason that test-takers struggle ... [Read More](#)

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▶ **Zeev Wurman**

7 days ago



Methinks the headline missed a word: "has blocked thousands of INCOMPETENTS from teaching credential." Reminds me of the infamous 6th-7th grade-level CBEST that was attacked because some incompetent teachers



couldn't pass it after multiple tries. If California wants to increase its number of teachers, it should increase college enrollment thresholds and improve college expectations. Instead it does just the opposite, so why it surprises anyone that now it wants to remove it dumb-down this test too? Back-to-Future California ... ..

[Read More](#)

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**Bruce William Smith** 

7 days ago



It saddens me that I have to agree with Zeev and most of the others. The key word in his comment is “too”: California’s legislature and state board have already shown their incompetence by establishing the Common Core academic standards, whose retarded learning pace renders ineffective the Next Generation Science Standards aligned to them, so the lowering of its teaching qualification standards is perfectly consistent with this state government’s disastrous K-12 record.

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**Carrie**

7 days ago



6-7th grade CBEST? Lol. You have no clue what you are talking about. CBEST covers material from kindergarten *through* 12th grade. The only “incompetence” that I am seeing is the dribble you just wrote.

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**Suzanne Coutchie, MA (education)**

7 days ago



Teacher candidates will pass the tests if you teach them the necessary information. Change the preparation and you will produce qualified teachers. *Do not eliminate quality standards* for our teachers.

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▶ **Jo Anne McClelland**

7 days ago



Seriously? People can't pass it so let's eliminate it? Why doesn't the state do something about the issues in schools so we can attract qualified people who can pass a reading instruction exam? The "dumbing" down of teacher requirements is just going to lead to less effective classroom instruction. Don't get me started about the CBEST, which all candidates have to pass to receive a credential It is tests at ... [Read More](#)

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**Megan Potente**

7 days ago



Legislators should not eliminate the RICA! The most important job of schools is to teach children to read. All teachers need to be prepared to do this job and need to have an understanding of foundational reading skills. We need a closer examination of teacher preparation programs if candidates are having difficulty passing the test. Lowering the bar is *not* the answer

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**Bill smith**

7 days ago



I think this is excellent! The test is outdated.

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**Angela Crowther**

7 days ago



Yes, let us just “dumb-down” the test so more unqualified people will be eligible to become teachers. While the state is at it; let them get rid of the CBEST as well. Putting the burden of weeding out unqualified, ill-prepared, and out-of-state reject applicants through school site administrators’ evaluation processes. There was a reason, we have stringent credential standards.

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**Gregory Lin Lipford**

1 week ago



That’s what we want? More teachers who can’t pass a test? Test-taking skills are not unrelated to teaching skill. Let’s consider why the profession is not drawing more competent applicants, but let’s not lower the standards. That’s not the lesson we teach students in class.

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▶ **el**

1 week ago



I'm not trained as an educator, so that likely is reflected in my comment here, but I recommend anyone who thinks the RICA is important to sit down and take the practice test that is provided [http://www.ctcexams.nesinc.com/content/docs/RICA\\_Practice\\_Test.pdf](http://www.ctcexams.nesinc.com/content/docs/RICA_Practice_Test.pdf) . I can certainly see how smart, capable people might not choose the correct answer ... and more to the point, I can see how people with actual experience teaching might not agree with the One True Correct Answer. ... [Read More](#)