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# 3G

## Information/Action

### *Educator Preparation Committee*

### **Ongoing and Planned Improvements for Commission-Approved Examinations**

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**Executive Summary:** This agenda item presents an overview of ongoing changes, areas of need, and planned improvements for Commission-approved examinations. This item is intended to provide the Commission with clear information regarding the maintenance of approved examinations and create an opportunity for Commissioners to share feedback to support improvements.

**Recommended Action:** Direct staff to (1) initiate a coordinated plan to replace the CBEST, CTCL, CPACE, and CSET with a modern, integrated licensure examinations system; and (2) concurrently, conduct research and feasibility analyses and return with recommendations to expand the Subject Matter Requirement (SMR) framework, including updated SMR structure, transcript-based tools, and modular verification options.

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### **Strategic Plan Goal**

#### ***Continuous Improvement***

- **Goal 7.** The Commission's work is grounded in research, informed by the voices of practitioners and communities of interests, and supports continuous improvement in educator preparation and licensure.
  - Q. Use data to inform Commission and staff decision-making and continuous improvement

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## Ongoing and Planned Improvements for Commission-Approved Examinations

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### Introduction

California's educator licensure system uses multiple examinations as options for candidates to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to enter the profession. Developed and administered by the Commission, these examinations are grounded in statute and serve as gateways into roles ranging from teachers and administrators to specialists authorized to serve multilingual learners. Each has a specific purpose but together function as an interconnected system that supports public confidence in educator quality and alignment with state standards.

Over the past decade, legislative and regulatory changes have expanded pathways for meeting licensure requirements through coursework, degrees, or integrated undergraduate program models. As these options grow, Commission-administered examinations have shifted from the primary method of demonstrating readiness to one of several. This shift warrants a deliberate review of each exam's validity, utility, and role in maintaining coherence across the licensure system.

Commission-approved examinations are designed to be valid, reliable, and aligned to the knowledge and skills expected of educators and students under California's adopted standards. They undergo expert review, bias analysis, and differential item functioning analysis to help ensure fairness and technical soundness. Despite these safeguards, differences in outcomes among candidate groups persist.

Persistent disparities in passing rates by race and ethnicity point to structural barriers that must be addressed. Removing unnecessary obstacles while maintaining high expectations will require a system that offers multiple, coherent ways to demonstrate required competencies, grounded in standards, responsive to workforce needs, and consistent across pathways. Updating examinations to align with current standards and adopting a modular format would allow components to be revised as standards change and integrate with other Commission-approved options such as coursework, degree programs, and performance assessments. The goal is not to replace one set of exams with another, but to create a system that supports valid combinations of demonstration.

The following section provides a structured review of the Commission's examinations currently in use. Each is examined in relation to its statutory purpose, candidate usage trends, performance and equity data, and potential for modernization within a more flexible, standards-aligned competency system.

## Background

The Commission administers several distinct examinations that fulfill specific statutory requirements for educator licensure. These include examinations of basic skills, subject matter knowledge, bilingual instruction, and administrative readiness. Each examination is designed for a particular credential purpose and aligned to relevant standards or performance expectations. This section presents a profile of each exam, including legal authority, candidate participation, passing rate data, and a subgroup outcomes analysis. Staff also identify where redesign or replacement may be warranted based on exam performance, alignment, or system role.

## Section 1: Commission-Approved Examinations

### California Basic Educational Skills Test

The California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) is required by Education Code sections 44252 and 44252.5 as one option for meeting the state’s Basic Skills Requirement. It assesses proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics, with content generally aligned to high school level academic standards. The Commission is responsible for ensuring the exam remains valid, reliable, and appropriate for its intended use as a measure of foundational skills needed for entry into the profession. The CBEST has long served as a key tool for verifying basic competencies for individuals entering teaching and other credentialed roles.

*Table 1. CBEST All Three Sections – First-Time and Cumulative Passing Rates, 2019-24*

Testing Year	First-Time N Completed	First-Time N Passed	First-Time % Passed	Cumulative N Completed	Cumulative N Passed	Cumulative % Passed
2019-24	79,988	51,773	64.7	79,988	63,384	79.2
2019-20	22,990	14,975	65.1	22,990	18,765	81.6
2020-21	21,089	13,554	64.3	21,089	16,850	79.9
2021-22	13,525	9,110	67.4	13,525	10,950	81
2022-23	12,945	8,130	62.8	12,945	9,967	77
2023-24	9,439	6,004	63.6	9,439	6,852	72.6

Subgroup performance data show persistent differences. In 2023-24, 78 percent of White candidates passed all three sections cumulatively, compared to 50 percent of African American candidates. These gaps have remained consistent over time, often exceeding 20 percentage points. While the CBEST has undergone technical review and content alignment, the disparities continue. The continued presence of these differences, despite quality controls, suggests a fresh look at the instrument and its place within the broader set of options to demonstrate foundational skills is warranted.

Statutory changes in recent years have altered how candidates can meet the Basic Skills Requirement. Under current law, qualifying coursework or a bachelor's degree may be used in lieu of the exam. As a result, CBEST usage has declined sharply. Pass rates have remained stable, but the candidate population is now smaller and more self-selecting. These changes

have shifted the exam’s role from a default entry point to one option used under more limited conditions.

Given these shifts in statute, usage, and candidate access, the Commission may wish to explore replacing the CBEST with an updated examination that reflects current expectations for foundational skills and takes advantage of advances in technology to improve accessibility, delivery, and modularity. Such an assessment could be developed as a custom instrument or selected from an existing off-the-shelf option, provided it meets California’s standards and integrates effectively with other approved pathways for meeting the Basic Skills Requirement.

**Recommendation**

Explore replacement of the CBEST with a custom-built or off-the-shelf assessment that aligns with updated standards for educator preparation and functions within a multi-pathway framework for verifying basic skills.

**California Teacher of English Learners (CTEL) Examination**

The California Teacher of English Learners (CTEL) Examination is authorized by Education Code section 44253.5 as one option for earning the English Learner Authorization. It measures proficiency in language development, assessment and instruction, and culture and inclusion, with each subtest aligned to California’s English Language Development (ELD) standards and related instructional practices. Statute directs the Commission to develop, maintain, and administer the CTEL, ensuring that it remains valid, reliable, and appropriate for its intended use. Within the licensure system, the CTEL is a key means of verifying that educators possess the competencies required to provide effective instruction to multilingual learners.

*Table 2. CTEL – First-Time and Cumulative Passing Rates, 2019-24*

Testing Year	First-Time N Tried (All 3 Subtests)	First-Time N Passed (All 3 Subtests)	First-Time % Passed (All 3 Subtests)	Cumulative N Tried (All 3 Subtests)	Cumulative N Passed (All 3 Subtests)	Cumulative % Passed (All 3 Subtests)
2019–24	6348	2789	43.9	6348	4288	67.5
2019–20	1223	575	47.0	1223	925	75.6
2020–21	1259	633	50.3	1259	984	78.2
2021–22	1146	510	44.5	1146	829	72.3
2022–23	1442	599	41.5	1442	954	66.2
2023–24	1278	472	36.9	1278	596	46.6

In 2023-24, only 36.9 percent of first-time candidates passed all three CTEL subtests in a single attempt, compared to a cumulative pass rate of 46.6 percent over time. Performance also varies significantly by candidate-reported ethnicity. Cumulative pass rates range from 44.4 percent for African American candidates to 79.2 percent for Asian American candidates and 74.5 percent for White candidates. These gaps have persisted across multiple years. Because many CTEL test-takers already hold a preliminary credential and require the CTEL to earn their bilingual authorization to expand their assignments, low pass rates could be a limiting factor for

authorized bilingual teacher supply. This impact is amplified when candidates must retake multiple subtests over time, increasing both cost and delay.

These results, combined with the fact that the CTEL has not undergone a comprehensive review in recent years, indicate the likely need for a full redevelopment. Statutory language requires the Commission to develop, maintain, and administer the CTEL, which means replacement with an off-the-shelf assessment is not an option without legislative change. Moving to a custom-developed replacement would allow for updated content that reflects current ELD standards, technology-enabled delivery, and improved alignment with the needs of California’s diverse multi-lingual learner population. It would also provide an opportunity to address persistent subgroup performance gaps while maintaining high expectations for educator competence.

**Recommendation**

Replace the CTEL with a custom-developed assessment that reflects updated ELD standards, uses technology-enabled design, and aligns with the English Learner Authorization within a multi-pathway framework.

**California Preliminary Administrative Credential Examination**

The California Preliminary Administrative Credential Examination (CPACE) is authorized by Education Code section 44270.5 as one option for earning a preliminary administrative services credential in lieu of completing a Commission-approved administrator preparation program. Statute requires that the exam measure the knowledge and skills necessary for effective entry-level administrative practice, align with California’s Administrator Performance Expectations, and remain valid, reliable, and appropriate for its intended use. As a complete substitute for a preparation program, the CPACE is intended to require a commensurate demonstration of competency across the range of skills expected of new administrators.

*Table 3. CPACE Annual (2023-24) and Cumulative Passing Rates*

<b>Subtest</b>	<b>Annual N Completed</b>	<b>Annual N Passed</b>	<b>Annual % Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Completed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative % Passed</b>
Content	2072	1247	60.2	9444	7052	74.7
Performance	2233	340	15.2	7773	2737	35.2
Both	2190	334	15.3	7654	2705	35.3

Annual CPACE passing rates in 2023-24 varied substantially by subtest. The Content subtest had a 60.2 percent annual pass rate, compared to 15.2 percent for the Performance subtest. This pattern is consistent with cumulative results, where the Content subtest pass rate was 74.7 percent and the Performance subtest pass rate was 35.2 percent. The combined annual pass rate for both subtests attempted in 2023-24 was only 15.3 percent. While this pass rate is low, it is important to note that examinees within this cohort have not had as many opportunities to pass the exam as those in previous cohorts reflected in the cumulative results.

By candidate-reported ethnicity, annual pass rates for 2023-24 ranged from 6.3 percent (Native American) to 40.0 percent (Asian Indian) on the combined exam. White candidates passed at

17.0 percent, African American/Black candidates at 6.9 percent, and Mexican American/Chicano and Latino candidates at 11.5 percent and 10.2 percent respectively. Cumulative combined pass rates show similar patterns, ranging from 21.6 percent (Native American) to 51.6 percent (Asian Indian).

The consistent gap between Content and Performance subtest outcomes, combined with persistent subgroup differences, indicates that the Performance subtest is the primary determinant of overall pass rates. Current outcomes raise questions about whether the design, scoring, and candidate supports for the Performance subtest are appropriately calibrated to measure the applied leadership skills expected of entry-level administrators while remaining accessible to all qualified candidates.

**Recommendation**

Replace the examination with a Commission-developed assessment that reflects updated Administrator Performance Expectations, set to be revised in 2026, and ensures a commensurate demonstration of leadership competencies within a multi-pathway licensure framework.

**Early Completion Option (ECO) Examinations**

The Early Completion Option (ECO), authorized in Education Code section 44468, provides an accelerated route to a preliminary teaching credential for intern candidates who meet specific eligibility criteria. This pathway allows candidates to bypass most of the coursework in a Commission-approved teacher preparation program by demonstrating competency through a set of Commission-approved assessments, in addition to meeting all statutory requirements.

*Table 4. NES: Assessment of Professional Knowledge (Elementary and Secondary) 2013-2024*

<b>Annual N Completed</b>	<b>2023-24 N Passed</b>	<b>2023-24 % Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Completed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative % Passed</b>
588	534	91	6,583	6,056	92

Annual and cumulative passing rates for ECO exams are high across most reported ethnic groups, with cumulative rates exceeding 80 percent for nearly all groups. Because the ECO serves a relatively small number of candidates each year, subgroup results can fluctuate from year to year, particularly for groups with very small Ns. The ECO pathway serves a targeted population and plays a role in meeting workforce needs, particularly in high-demand credential areas. Ensuring that the ECO exam remains aligned to California’s professional expectations, while also monitoring subgroup performance, will help maintain the pathway’s integrity and accessibility.

The Commission has already adopted examinations for the ECO for Multiple Subject and Single Subject Intern Credential candidates. However, no examinations have yet been adopted for the Education Specialist credentials or the PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist Instruction

credential. Adopting appropriate examinations for these credential areas is necessary to ensure that the ECO pathway is available equitably across credential types.

**Recommendation**

Identify and adopt appropriate examinations to support equitable ECO access for Education Specialist and PK-3 Early Childhood Education Specialist credential areas where no assessment is currently in place.

**California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET)**

The California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET) verify that candidates have the subject matter knowledge needed for the credential they are seeking. The CSET series covers multiple subject areas and is intended to align directly with California’s K-12 academic content standards. Education Code section 44259(b)(5)(B)(i) requires that subject matter standards and examinations are aligned with the academic content and performance standards for pupils adopted by the State Board of Education. The Commission is responsible for adopting, maintaining, and administering these examinations so that they remain valid, reliable, and appropriate for their intended use, ensuring that credentialed educators have the necessary expertise to teach California students to the state’s adopted standards.

*Table 5. CSET (All Subject Areas) Annual (2023-24) and Cumulative Passing Rates*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Annual N Completed</b>	<b>Annual N Passed</b>	<b>Annual % Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Completed</b>	<b>Cumulative N Passed</b>	<b>Cumulative % Passed</b>
All Examinees	12,434	7372	59.3	474,412	384,316	81.0

CSET usage has declined in recent years as legislative changes have expanded pathways for meeting the Subject Matter Requirement through coursework or a qualifying degree. In 2019-20, more than 36,000 subtests were completed; by 2023-24, that number had dropped to under 20,000. While the exam still serves a substantial number of candidates, the profile of examinees is now more self-selecting, often including those without access to coursework-based options or seeking additional authorizations.

The CSET had an overall annual passing rate of 59.3 percent in 2023-24, with a cumulative passing rate of 81.0 percent across all years and all subject areas. Passing rates varied significantly by candidate-reported ethnicity, with African American candidates at 37.3 percent annually and 65.2 percent cumulatively, Hispanic or Latino candidates at 49.3 percent annually and 75.9 percent cumulatively, and White candidates at 68.1 percent annually and 84.2 percent cumulatively. These disparities have persisted over time, despite bias reviews and differential item functioning analyses intended to limit construct-irrelevant factors.

While test forms and items have been refreshed periodically, the underlying design, domains, and scoring architecture of the CSET reflect an earlier standards environment. Given changes in statute, declining usage, and persistent disparities in outcomes, a redevelopment is advisable. Because Education Code section 44259(b)(5)(B)(i) requires the Commission to ensure subject

matter examinations are aligned with California’s adopted K-12 content standards, any replacement of the CSET would need to custom-developed or heavily adapted to meet this requirement.

Such a development should follow a modular design so that discrete content areas can be updated as standards evolve, and it should be built to interoperate with other approved pathways for meeting the Subject Matter Requirement. This approach would allow the Commission to integrate CSET results with coursework and degree-based options, creating a coherent and flexible system for verifying subject matter competence.

### **Recommendation**

Replace the examinations with a modernized, modular assessment that reflects updated standards for educator preparation, aligns with the Subject Matter Requirement, and functions within a multi-pathway framework for verifying subject matter competence.

## **Section 2: Expanding Options to Meet the Subject Matter Requirement**

Education Code section 44259(b)(5) requires that all candidates for a preliminary teaching credential demonstrate subject matter competence in the content area of their credential. This requirement is grounded in the principle that every student deserves a teacher with deep knowledge of the subject they teach. Historically, most candidates met the SMR by passing the CSET or completing a Commission-approved subject matter program. Recent statutory changes, including Assembly Bill 130 (Chap. 44, Stats. 2021), expanded the pathways available to candidates by allowing the use of qualifying coursework or academic degrees to meet this requirement.

These expanded options reflect a broader policy shift toward increasing flexibility and access in teacher credentialing, while maintaining a strong commitment to content knowledge and instructional readiness. At the same time, the complexity of the existing SMRs, the structure of the CSET, and the variability in how coursework is reviewed across institutions have created challenges for candidates and preparation programs. This presents an opportunity to modernize and clarify the SMR framework in ways that uphold rigor, reduce unnecessary barriers, and promote equitable access to the profession.

Commission staff have identified several areas for exploration that could strengthen the subject matter verification system.

### **Expanding the Use of Degree Majors**

Under current law, candidates who hold a bachelor's degree in a subject closely aligned to their intended credential area may satisfy the SMR without additional coursework or examinations. However, the list of approved degree majors is narrow, limited to those allowable by statute, and may exclude well-prepared candidates with relevant but not identical degrees. Expanding the list of accepted majors could simplify the verification process and make the system more accessible without lowering expectations. This approach could also reduce the burden on

programs and candidates by decreasing the number of cases that require detailed transcript review.

Any expansion of the list of qualifying degree majors would require an amendment to the Education Code. Staff could explore the feasibility and implications of such a change, including how it could be implemented while maintaining alignment to adopted content standards. This option may be particularly valuable in high-need subject areas where workforce shortages intersect with high candidate attrition during the admissions process. Additional analysis will be needed to determine which degree areas provide sufficient content alignment to meet the intent of the SMR.

### **Streamline SMR Domains for Transcript Review**

One area for exploration is the simplification of SMR language to better support transcript review. The current SMRs were originally designed to inform exam development and often include a large number of knowledge areas, domains, and sub-domains. In practice, this structure makes it difficult for candidates to self-assess their eligibility and for program staff to evaluate transcripts consistently. Staff are considering whether revised domain definitions, written in clearer and more integrated language, could improve transparency and support more consistent implementation across institutions.

If domain language is revised, there may also be opportunities to identify overlap with existing curricular frameworks such as the California General Education Transfer Curriculum (CalGETC). In particular, areas of alignment could be highlighted so that coursework completed as part of a general education pathway could also satisfy portions of the SMR. This approach may reduce duplication of coursework and provide candidates with greater clarity about how to meet expectations. Staff are also exploring the potential development of a shared reference bank of California Community College courses that align with specific domains, which could support both institutional decision-making and candidate planning.

### **Revising the Overall SMR Structure**

In addition to clarifying individual domain language, staff are exploring whether the overall structure of the SMRs should be reconsidered. The current format often mirrors the organization of K–12 content standards, which may not translate well to transcript-based review. A revised SMR framework could shift toward transferable knowledge domains that are easier to evaluate across a variety of course titles and institutional contexts. This change could also support future development of tools and resources to assist with implementation.

Staff are considering whether Subject Matter Advisory Panels composed of practicing educators and subject matter experts could be convened to lead this work. These panels would define the essential knowledge for beginning teachers and ensure alignment to the content expectations of California classrooms. Panel composition would prioritize individuals with demonstrated expertise in the content area and a clear understanding of beginning teacher expectations. This structure could serve as the foundation for revisions to the CSET and other components of subject matter verification.

### **Exploring the Feasibility of a Transcript Analysis Tool**

Another area under consideration is the use of artificial intelligence or other technologies to support transcript evaluation. A tool of this kind could compare course titles and descriptions against SMR specifications, identify potential matches or gaps, and provide a preliminary determination for review by program staff. If feasible, such a tool could help reduce inconsistencies in transcript review, improve transparency for candidates, and ease administrative burden on institutions.

Staff are examining whether this kind of tool could be developed and maintained outside of state systems, potentially through a public-private partnership or philanthropic investment. The tool would need to be carefully designed to ensure accuracy, avoid unintended bias, and provide clear justification for any determinations. If viable, this approach could be piloted alongside existing manual review processes before being scaled more broadly. Additional legal and technical considerations would need to be addressed to ensure appropriate data use and security.

### **Exploring Credit-Bearing Micro-Certifications Aligned to SMRs**

Staff are also considering whether credit-bearing micro-certifications aligned to SMR domains could be developed through partnerships with higher education providers. Given that community college coursework can already be applied toward SMR fulfillment pursuant to Education Code section 44259(b)(5)(A)(iii), these institutions could be well-positioned to offer modular certifications that help candidates complete any unmet portions of the SMR. If aligned to a revised domain structure, such certifications could offer a clear, affordable, and portable way to demonstrate content knowledge across institutions.

Such an approach could expand options for candidates at different stages of preparation, as well as for credentialed teachers seeking to add new authorizations. For prospective candidates, micro-certifications could provide a targeted way to address specific SMR domains in advance of or during a preparation program. For current educators, they could create a focused route to meeting subject matter requirements for additional content areas. If feasible, this pathway could complement revised coursework guidance and modular CSET options within a coherent, candidate-centered system.

### **Staff Recommendation**

#### *Recommendation: 1—Licensure Examinations*

Undertake a coordinated initiative to replace the CBEST, CTEL, CPACE, and CSET with a coherent, integrated system of licensure examinations. This system should:

- Ensure updated standards alignment to educator preparation expectations and State Board-adopted academic content standards
- Use enhanced technologies to improve accessibility, scoring, data integration, and reporting
- Employ modular designs so individual knowledge or skill domains can be updated independently, integrated with coursework or degree-based pathways, and adapted to evolving standards

- Support consistency, fairness, and equity across all pathways for meeting statutory requirements
- Provide greater flexibility for equitable candidate outcomes through interoperability with coursework, performance assessments, and other approved options

If supported, staff would initiate research immediately and return to the Commission with a phased research, engagement, procurement, development, and implementation plan at the October 2025 Commission meeting. The plan would be harmonized with SB 1263 implementation activities and include options to support the Early Completion Option for the PK-3 and Education Specialist credentials.

*Recommendation 2—Subject Matter Requirement*

Conduct feasibility analyses and bring back recommendations to modernize the subject matter verification framework, with particular attention to:

- Clarifying and simplifying SMR domain language to support transcript review
- Expanding the list of degree majors that may meet the SMR
- Revising the overall structure of the SMRs to reflect transferable knowledge domains
- Exploring the use of transcript analysis tools to improve consistency and transparency
- Identifying opportunities to partner with community colleges to develop credit-bearing micro-certifications aligned to SMRs

These analyses should be conducted in coordination with stakeholders and education partners. Staff will return to the Commission with findings with updates as part of other examination items, beginning in October 2025.

**Next Steps**

If adopted, staff will proceed with implementation and analysis as outlined.