

Drawing on their work at the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, Dr. Mary Vixie Sandy, Adam Ebrahim, and Dr. Juliet Wahleitner join Dr. Brent Duckor and Dr. Carrie Holmberg to examine how generative AI is reshaping teacher preparation, performance assessment, professional licensure, and the future of the teaching profession itself.

When Robots Talk to Robots: California’s Credentialing Leaders Grapple With AI and Teacher Performance Assessment

A synopsis of the August 19 webinar, “Can AI in Education Make a Difference in Teacher Performance Assessment and Licensure?”

Can artificial intelligence strengthen — or quietly hollow out — the way California prepares and licenses its teachers? That was the animating question behind an August 19 webinar hosted by Brent Duckor and Carrie Holmberg, who convened three of the state’s top credentialing officials for an hourlong conversation that ranged from Deweyan philosophy to microbrewed beer. The guests were Dr. Mary Vixie Sandy, executive director of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CCTC); Adam Ebrahim, the commission’s chief deputy executive director; and Dr. Juliet Wahleitner, director of the commission’s Division of Research, Evaluation and Assessment. Together they worked through five questions about AI’s role in teacher preparation, with particular attention to the Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) and the Teacher Performance Assessments (TPAs) that anchor California’s licensure system.

An Emerging, Unfinished Question

Duckor and Holmberg opened by grounding the discussion in their center’s commitment to “deeper learning” and “ambitious teaching” — habits of mind like critical thinking, collaboration, and productive struggle that they see as under threat, or possibly under transformation, in an AI-saturated world.

Sandy was candid that the commission has “not gotten to the bottom of” what its role should be. She returned repeatedly to the idea of the “instructional core” — the relationship among teachers, students, and content — as the touchstone that should guide any standards work,

AI-related or not. Ebrahim framed the challenge in terms of critical evaluation: teachers may increasingly use AI to draft lesson plans, but doing so well requires the same deep conceptual knowledge the TPEs are meant to build, so that candidates can judge whether an AI's output is actually sound.

Duckor pushed the panel toward the regulatory dimension, asking what statutory authority the commission actually holds over AI use. Ebrahim's answer doubled as the conversation's thesis: the commission has no such authority, and probably shouldn't seek it directly. Instead, its job is to protect "the sanctity and value" of the human relationship between teacher and student — to keep classrooms from becoming, as he put it, spaces where students and teachers merely "mediate ChatGPT from both sides."

Rewriting the TPEs — and Rethinking What a TPA Even Measures

The second question turned to how TPE-aligned preparation should guide responsible AI use, particularly within the TPAs themselves. Wahleitner described a recent commission effort, prompted by Senate Bill 1263, to reconsider the TPA in light of generative AI. The process began, she said, with an instinct to police AI use — to catch candidates who might simply prompt a chatbot and submit its output. But the conversation evolved into something more fundamental: a reexamination of what the TPA is actually supposed to measure. If a candidate's writing can be produced by a machine, is the assessment really testing readiness to teach, or is it functioning — inadvertently — as a writing test?

That reframing led Sandy to propose reviving something closer to a portfolio defense: an oral, dialogic component in which candidates would sit down with faculty and mentor teachers to explain their planning choices in real time. It's a model with deep roots — Dr. Sandy invoked the "plan, teach, assess, reflect, apply" cycle that has anchored the California Standards for the Teaching Profession since the 1990s, and Duckor noted the echo of portfolio-defense practices from nationally recognized schools like Central Park East Secondary (Darling-Hammond, 1997), where he once taught high school in New York City. Sandy summed up the stakes plainly: for years, "your writing is a signal of your thinking," but that assumption "may not be your writing anymore."

Preserving Productive Struggle

The panel's most philosophically dense stretch came around the third question — how to design AI-assisted learning experiences that preserve productive struggle and critical thinking. Dr. Sandy offered a personal example: AI can draft an opening paragraph in 90 seconds, work that ordinarily forces a writer to think through argument and structure. The risk, she argued, is mistaking that shortcut for the thinking itself. Her proposed remedy was to push teachers and candidates toward metacognition — asking AI good questions, then treating its answers as a

starting point for analysis rather than a finished product, including interrogating the sources and possible biases behind an AI’s response.

Adam Ebrahim and Dr. Wahleitner extended the point toward developmental readiness, drawing on years of research into teacher learning progressions. A novice teacher, they argued, doesn’t yet have the pedagogical content knowledge to judge whether an AI’s suggestion is sound; an experienced teacher does. That asymmetry, Holmberg added, means foundational knowledge has to be built without AI before it can be safely built with it — a point Wahleitner connected to early-childhood and elementary settings, where the panel wondered aloud whether AI belongs in the classroom at all. Ebrahim went further, invoking his own family’s background in Waldorf education to suggest that some learning — especially for young children — might be better served by “notebooks and colored pencils” than by any screen.

Equity, Access, and the Question of Authenticity

The fourth question — about equity and access — drew some of the panel’s most pointed reflection. Dr. Wahleitner noted that access to AI tools, and to instruction in using them well, is not evenly distributed among candidates, a concern raised earlier at a commission-hosted forum in March. Duckor saw a genuine opportunity here: positioned correctly, AI could function as a “critical friend” in dialogue with a candidate, helping surface considerations — accommodations for a dual-identified English learner, say — that a candidate without access to informal professional mentorship might otherwise miss. But he was equally clear about the risk: if that dialogic function is replaced rather than supplemented by AI, the technology could just as easily widen gaps as close them.

Dr. Sandy pushed the conversation toward the reliability of the tools themselves, noting that large language models are often built to please the user, which is its own kind of bias worth teaching candidates to recognize. Duckor and Holmberg described interviews with more than 60 California teachers conducted for a forthcoming book, [AI and Deeper Learning](#) with Harvard Education Press from which they drew a recurring theme: authenticity. If performance assessment has long been valued precisely because it is authentic — a claim associated with scholars like Linda Darling-Hammond and Frank Adamson (2014)— then AI complicates that premise by obscuring the provenance and educative nature of a candidate’s work.

Opportunity, Backlash, and the Case for the Artisanal

The final question asked panelists to weigh AI’s opportunities against its risks for preparation programs more broadly. Duckor offered an optimistic frame: mass-market, “generic” AI use might paradoxically fuel demand for more artisanal, human-centered teaching, much as the rise of large breweries spurred a craft-beer movement. Wahleitner agreed but tempered the optimism with her own family’s experience — her children’s Fresno Unified classrooms have recently

scaled back tablet use, a small but telling data point in what she called a “two steps forward, one step back” moment for the field.

Holmberg closed on a note of guarded hope, describing AI as a potential “stepping stool to far deeper thinking,” provided educators stay disciplined about using the time it saves for more demanding cognitive work rather than less.

A Field Still Finding Its Footing

What emerged over the hour was less a set of answers than a shared vocabulary for an unresolved problem. All three CCTC leaders agreed that the commission’s core lever is standard-setting rather than direct regulation, that the TPA’s structure needs rethinking in light of what AI makes trivially easy to produce, and that any responsible integration of AI into teacher preparation depends on sequencing — building foundational, human-to-human capacities before introducing AI-assisted shortcuts. As Dr. Sandy put it, the field is in the midst of “a paradigm shift,” one whose contours — around equity, authenticity, and the developmental needs of novice teachers — the commission, its preparation programs, and the profession at large are only beginning to map.

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