



# How Beauty Schools Have Failed Us

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The Nail Extension Jaime Schrabek

## (Part 2)

*Last month I took a more critical look at beauty school education and based on my expert opinion, it does not hold up. Frequently cited as justification for reopening salons, our beauty school education deserves renewed scrutiny. In Part 2 I'll review the curriculum, particularly the requirements for health and safety, and discuss the merits of continuing education.*

When and how beauty schools, and not apprenticeship, became the point of entry and primary route to licensure can be discussed later. For now, let's accept that states authorize and mandate courses provided by postsecondary schools within their respective states. The exact laws vary, but here's a quick overview for California:

1. State law requires a valid license to perform beauty services for compensation.
2. Obtaining a license requires passing both a written and practical examination developed by the National Interstate Council of State Boards of Cosmetology (NIC).
3. Qualifications for the exam include completing a course from an approved beauty school and attaining the minimum age (17 years) and educa-

tional level (10th grade or the equivalent).

4. State law determines the length of the course: the minimum hours of technical instruction and practical training combined.
5. The regulatory agency establishes curriculum for each license type based on scope of practice.
6. Beauty schools must teach from textbooks approved by the NIC.
7. The licensing examination must be validated through the results of an occupational analysis, a study of what licensees actually do when they work.

*When planning any educational experience, no matter what the topic or grade level, it's common to start with the goal in mind.*

In the case of beauty schools, the most basic and quantifiable goal would be to prepare students to pass the licensing examination. Some argue that beauty schools do nothing more than "teach to the test," while others claim they do much more. Either way, before further discussion about the "quality" of instruction, let's address the quantity.

The number of hours for any beauty license may seem arbitrary, but 600 is the minimum require-



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ment for federal financial aid eligibility (600 hours and 15 weeks length). The hours for cosmetology licensure range from 1000-2300 depending on the state; nearly half the states require 1500 hours. California's 1600-hour cosmetology course equates to 40 standard work weeks (40 hours/week). Do students need 1600 hours to pass a 100-item, multiple-choice written exam administered on a computer and a practical exam performed on a mannequin head with "simulated" products?

Because beauty schools traditionally rely on time-based rather than competency-based curriculums, how do states arrive at a particular number of hours? That's a fair question few can answer ac-

ording to the *Examination of Cosmetology Licensing Issues*, a 2016 study produced by the American Institutes for Research.\* In a survey question posed to subject matter experts, "How was the number of curriculum hours decided upon for your state?", most were unable to answer. That's disturbing.

"There do not appear to be documented explanations for how each state assigns the total number of curriculum hours required (whether through a review of curricula, analysis of training effects on outcomes, or another approach), or whether the number is subject to periodic review and revision."

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*When even the experts can't offer any better explanation for the number of curriculum hours than "it's the law," that's not good enough.*

How do students spend their time? If this were an academic setting, we'd count contact hours and expect that for every contact hour, a student would have 2 hours of homework. However, there's no "home" work in beauty school when the only hours that count are on the school's clock.

In general, beauty schools categorize hours as either "theory" (participating in classroom instruction) or "practice" (performing services). But there's no such thing as a "theory" of cosmetology; there's descriptive/declarative knowledge (facts) and procedural knowledge (tasks). Both types can be delivered through direct, active instruction that students can apply through guided (under supervision) and independent practice.

*We need simple, accurate and consistent language to describe the process of training students for the beauty industry.*

Instead of promoting national standards, we're dealing with unexplainable variability among the

states. For its curriculums, California defines its own terms:

- **Technical instruction** - instruction by demonstration, lecture, classroom participation or examination.
- **Practical training** - the time it takes to perform a practical operation (actual performance by the student of a complete service on another person or on a mannequin).

And assigns hours to every topic, like in this overview of the 1600-hour **cosmetology course**:

- 1100 - Technical Instruction and Practical Training in Hair Dressing
- 200 - Technical Instruction in Health and Safety
- 100 - Technical Instruction and Practical Training in Esthetics
- 100 - Technical Instruction and Practical Training in Manicuring and Pedicuring

The **skin care course** (600 hours) and **nail care course** (400 hours) do not align with the cosmetology course, nor does California require that students be supervised when performing services.

Previous attempts to evaluate and revise licensing requirements have failed because the effort should determine what's effective and legally defensible, not work backwards from what's currently required.

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