

Decoding NCLEX-RN® and NCLEX-PN® pass rates: What recent trends mean for educators

Dinez “Dee” Swanson, DNP, MBA, RN
Elsevier Nursing Education Specialist

Julie Kelly, DNP, RN
Elsevier Nursing Education Specialist



ELSEVIER

Advancing human progress together

Why NCLEX pass rates matter

The NCLEX-RN and NCLEX-PN exams are critical milestones that determine readiness for safe, competent nursing practices. Pass rates are more than metrics; they reflect how effectively programs prepare students to think critically, apply knowledge, and demonstrate clinical judgment.

While it's not uncommon for NCLEX pass rates to fluctuate from year to year, these variations warrant careful monitoring and analysis. Recent trends in both RN and PN results have prompted educators to look beyond the numbers, examining how curriculum design, teaching strategies, and student engagement influence licensure outcomes.

Trend at a glance: NCLEX pass rates (2019–2024 + Q1 2025)

Year	NCLEX-RN pass rate	NCLEX-PN pass rate
2019	88.18%	85.63%
2020	86.57%	83.08%
2021	82.48%	79.60%
2022	79.90%	79.93%
2023	88.56%	86.67%
2024	91.2%	79.1%
Q1 2025	88.37%	85.9%

National Council of State Boards of Nursing (2025). NCLEX pass rates.

<https://www.ncsbn.org/exams/exam-statistics-and-publications/nclex-pass-rates.page>

Most recent drop:

In the first quarter of 2025, the NCLEX-RN first-time U.S.-educated pass rate declined to 88.37%, reflecting a 5.78-percentage-point decrease from 94.15% in the first quarter of 2024, and a 2.83-percentage-point drop from the 2024 annual average of 91.2%. In practical terms, this means that nearly six fewer candidates out of every hundred passed the exam on their first attempt compared to the same period last year. This downward shift underscores the ongoing need for proactive programmatic and student support to sustain licensure readiness. The implications extend beyond test outcomes; lower pass rates can delay licensure, reduce workforce readiness, and ultimately strain patient care capacity.

Consequently, nursing programs occupy a critical position in ensuring that graduates are competent and practice ready. Although early 2023 pass rates were modest, the notable improvement later in the year following the launch of the Next Generation NCLEX (NGN) may have given programs a false sense of security regarding ongoing student preparedness. To address these challenges, programs must prioritize the systematic integration of the NCSBN Clinical Judgment Measurement Model (CJMM) and provide repeated practice with NGN-style items. Such strategies are essential not only for improving pass rates but also for cultivating clinical judgment and critical thinking skills that underpin safe, effective nursing practices in contemporary healthcare environments.



Key trends and influencing factors



Stabilizing performance: Following the NGN launch in 2023, RN and PN pass rates began rebounding nationally.



NGN transition impact: Programs must support students in mastering new NGN item types (prioritization, matrix, drag-and-drop) and understand scoring changes (partial credit, 0/1 scoring). Regular CJMM-based practice is critical to build clinical judgment proficiency.



Student readiness: Academic preparation, clinical exposure, and access to resources influence outcomes.



Program design and curriculum alignment: Strong programs integrate NGN-style assessments, active learning, and consistent feedback.



External pressures: Workforce demands, pandemic-related disruptions, faculty workload, and turnover among faculty and program leadership continue to exert significant pressure on nursing programs.



Program administration perspective: Monitoring cohort analytics to assess institutional readiness, investing in faculty development, and strategically aligning simulation resources are critical to program-wide success. Equally important is the consistent enforcement of policies to maintain quality and accountability across the program.

Preparing students for class and the NCLEX

Active, application-based strategies can bridge classroom learning with licensure success.



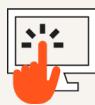
Scrambled/blended classroom:

Assign foundational content pre-class; focus in-class on prioritization, clinical judgment, and case analysis.



Incorporate NGN-style questions:

Use matrix, highlight, bowtie, and other NGN item types to normalize testing formats and reinforce CJMM concepts.



Simulate decision-making:

Integrate virtual patients, unfolding cases, or simulation labs to connect classroom concepts with bedside reasoning.



Make thinking visible:

Encourage students to verbalize rationales and reflection during activities and debriefs.



Promote self-directed readiness:

Guide students to set learning goals, use practice exams strategically, and seek feedback early.

Actionable steps for educators

1. Use data to drive decisions: Regularly review NCLEX-style assessment results and course analytics to identify gaps

2. Refresh curriculum: Ensure RN and PN programs emphasize clinical reasoning, communication, and patient safety, while aligning the curriculum closely with the NCLEX test plan to support licensure readiness and competency development.

3. Model active learning: Incorporate polls, think-pair-share, concept mapping, and case-based analysis in every class.

4. Leverage AI for student and faculty learning: Integrate artificial intelligence tools to support personalized learning, provide targeted feedback, and enhance instructional strategies, enabling both students and faculty to optimize clinical judgment, critical thinking, and overall educational outcomes.

5. Support faculty development: Train faculty in NGN item writing, simulation facilitation, and feedback strategies.

6. Strengthen student support: Provide structured remediation, mentoring, and test-taking workshops.

7. Institutional readiness: Monitor cohort analytics, invest in faculty development, and align simulation resources to maintain program quality.

8. Integrate CJMM and NGN practice: Provide repeated opportunities for students to work with NGN item types and clinical judgment scenarios to build proficiency.

Elsevier resources to support success



Simulation and practice: Simulation Learning System (SLS), Course-Based SimChart® for Nursing, and Shadow Health® Digital Clinical Experiences™ foster clinical judgment in RN and PN programs.



NCLEX prep tools: Adaptive quizzing, review modules, and question banks align with NGN standards.



Faculty development: Webinars, articles, and implementation guides promote active learning and assessment best practices.



Data dashboards: Monitor student progress and cohort performance for continuous improvement.



Benchmarking: Standardized exams (i.e., HESI®) identify gaps at the student, course, and program levels, enabling targeted interventions and data-driven strategies to enhance learning outcomes and support licensure readiness.

The 2025 decline in NCLEX pass rates serves as a wake-up call for nursing programs. Even historically strong programs cannot assume that previous levels of success will continue without intentional effort. Today's students learn differently, and traditional teaching methods are increasingly insufficient to meet the demands of modern nursing education. Sustained emphasis on NGN-aligned practices, instruction guided by the CJMM, and the integration of active learning strategies are essential, not only to maintain high NCLEX-RN and NCLEX-PN pass rates, but also to ensure that graduates are prepared for safe, competent clinical practice.

