



Written Testimony to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

“Teacher Preparation: Ensuring a Quality Teacher in Every Classroom” March 31, 2014

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) is the preeminent educator association in Texas and makes a positive difference in the lives of educators and schoolchildren. ATPE is a member-owned, member-governed professional association with more than 100,000 members, making it the leading educator association in Texas and the largest independent association for public school educators in the nation. We appreciate this opportunity to share our input in response to your recent hearing entitled “Teacher Preparation: Ensuring a Quality Teacher in Every Classroom.”

Teacher quality and preparation has been a cornerstone of ATPE’s advocacy program from our earliest days, and we have submitted comments to the Committee on related topics in the past. We have actively sought out data to identify our state’s greatest needs in this area and have worked to develop policy recommendations to improve the teacher preparation programs in Texas and the quality of teaching in our schools. Our efforts have included commissioning research on measures of teacher quality, how teacher quality relates to student achievement and school improvement and how teacher quality is distributed throughout our state.¹

Considering that high-quality teachers can positively affect student achievement and that teacher quality is not equitably distributed in our schools despite the ESEA mandate, it is crucial that policymakers at the state and national levels undertake a close examination of factors related to teacher preparation, and how that preparation and continued efforts can improve the training, recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers. **Thus, ATPE offers the following policy recommendations, which we believe would improve the teaching profession—from the education of teachers to the retention of teachers.**

Preparation, recruitment and certification efforts to ensure highly qualified teachers.

First, **educator preparation and certification standards** adopted at the state level must ensure that teachers are appropriately trained to handle the rigors of the classroom and provide a quality education for their students while also helping to reduce costly teacher turnover. Teachers who have completed the training that leads to certification are more effective than those who have

¹ Read more about our research at www.atpe.org/Advocacy/Issues/teacherqualitystudy.asp.

not. High standards help ensure that prospective teachers acquire the background knowledge required to be successful in the classroom. This includes both knowledge of the subject matter to be taught and how to teach that content to a wide range of students, along with the ability to manage a classroom, design and implement instruction, and work skillfully with students, parents and other professionals. The same standards should be applicable to charter school teachers, which is not currently the case in Texas.

State and federal policymakers should consider offering financial incentives to entice educator preparation programs to produce teachers who can fill shortage areas and reward those programs that succeed. Policymakers should also consider requiring closely supervised field experience for all teachers. Whether it is done through student teaching conducted in fulfillment of a traditional university-based teacher preparation program or as a component of an alternative certification route, field experience plays a valuable role in preparing teachers for the realities of a classroom, including the diverse settings teachers often face today.

Further, ATPE supports initiatives to encourage **more selective recruitment of educators**. All educator preparation programs—whether based in traditional university settings or provided through alternative means—must be held to minimum standards for admission, such as GPA requirements and proof of content knowledge. Perhaps as important as compensation, making the education profession more selective would raise the prestige of teaching and entice more of our most talented youth to pursue education as a career. Unfortunately, Texas is not a role model for the nation in this area. Our admission standards fall well below national averages and beneath the thresholds recommended by researchers. Additionally, several of the countries demonstrating the most international success in student achievement have imposed much more highly selective entrance requirements for their teachers than seen throughout much of the United States.

Mentoring of new teachers should also be prioritized, as it has been proven to be one of the most efficient mechanisms to increase the effectiveness of beginning teachers in a way that translates to improvements in student achievement data and teacher retention rates. ATPE has advocated for a comprehensive, state-funded mentoring program that would be mandatory for new teachers in Texas. Although some local education agencies (LEAs) in Texas have mentoring programs, there is no state statutory requirement for all new teachers to be mentored.

The need for mentoring programs is even more critical in struggling schools, where mentoring would help improve the distribution of teacher quality across high-poverty, high-minority and low-performing schools. To be most effective, mentoring programs should set limits on the workload of mentors and provide them with training and a portable mentor certification. Policymakers should consider creating more specialized mentor training and certification standards for teachers of special populations, such as students with disabilities or with limited English proficiency. Educator preparation programs should share in the responsibility for mentoring. Novice teachers should observe classes taught by their mentors and share planning time with them. Mentors should receive stipends and earn continuing professional education credits. LEAs should be awarded funding to offset the costs of providing release time and schedule accommodations for novice teachers and their mentors.

Finally, ATPE has supported in Texas the development of a statewide campaign designed to increase the prestige of the teaching profession. Unfortunately, our research shows that many

prospective teachers do not view the teaching profession as prestigious, and we believe that a campaign to counter this would help to improve the supply of qualified entrants into the profession.

Compensation initiatives and support programs to foster retention of high quality teachers.

As mentioned above, **mentoring** can also be a crucial element of teacher retention. In Texas, it has been estimated that half of our teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, and teacher turnover costs the state an estimated half a billion dollars each year. ATPE hopes that the federal government will prioritize resources to help states implement comprehensive mentoring programs, which can produce long-term savings following a minimal upfront investment. Funds should be allocated for evaluation of any taxpayer-funded mentoring program, including longitudinal studies of participating teachers, to examine teacher retention rates and growth in student achievement. Evaluations should include surveys of teachers who receive mentoring, teachers who serve as mentors, and administrators in the schools employing those teachers and mentors. Program evaluations should also offer recommendations for expansion and how to sustain long-term funding for the mentoring initiatives.

Long-term, stable **compensation** plans also benefit teacher retention (as well as recruitment). The plans should provide predictable and meaningful salary increases that encourage our best and brightest to enter the education profession and then remain in the field. ATPE has worked to maintain a state minimum salary schedule To help Texas teachers earn wages that are competitive with teacher salaries in other states and pay in other professions for which the educators would be qualified, ATPE has worked to maintain a state minimum salary schedule, which establishes a statutory compensation floor that increases over time and gives LEAs flexibility to offer differentiated pay above the state minimums.

ATPE supports differentiated pay for educators who undertake advanced training, advanced coursework or degrees, or other professional duties outside their normal instructional activities. We generally support incentive pay plans except when student test scores are used as the primary determining factor for a teacher's compensation. We believe incentive pay programs must be designed in an equitable and fair manner as determined by local educators on a per-campus basis. They should be used to encourage highly qualified teachers and administrators to go to work in hard-to-staff schools; reward teachers who take on campus leadership roles or model best practices to foster parental involvement; reduce class sizes or student-teacher ratios; and assist campuses facing sanctions under state or federal accountability systems.

Incentivizing quality **professional development** programs for all school personnel is another key area of support for teachers. Such programs should be flexible, easily accessible and available to teachers at no cost. Our members consistently tell us that they want and need professional development covering a broad range of topics, such as using technology for educational purposes; understanding education laws; individualizing instruction and educating special populations (especially students with disabilities who are increasingly mainstreamed and taught by educators not specifically certified in special education); improving classroom discipline; ensuring school safety; and promoting cultural awareness.

Finally, policymakers must take a closer look at **working conditions** in our nation's schools because they have a major impact on educator effectiveness and retention. ATPE believes state and/or national surveys would be fruitful and has advocated for these to be funded and undertaken. Our efforts contributed to the passage of state legislation in 2013 that requires Texas to conduct a statewide survey of teaching and learning conditions, the first of which is scheduled to take place over the next two months. Policymakers should work to ensure that data received from such surveys is used to improve working conditions and the equitable distribution of teachers.

Construction of evaluation and accountability systems to ensure high quality teachers.

Measuring teacher performance is an important topic, but **evaluation is merely one element in the broad spectrum of teaching**. ATPE supports evaluation systems that will help identify teachers who are struggling and that will provide timely, meaningful feedback to all teachers.² To be truly useful, though, evaluation systems must work in conjunction with other comprehensive initiatives to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, such as the many examples outlined above.

As in other states, Texas has faced intense pressure from proponents of value-added modeling (VAM) to create a state method of measuring student growth from one school year to the next using standardized test scores and performance targets and to incorporate such methodology into new teacher and principal evaluation systems. This pressure includes, most recently, the U.S. Department of Education's requirement that Texas revise its evaluation systems in such a manner as a condition of its receipt of a waiver of certain ESEA accountability requirements. Texas has experimented with VAM models in the past, but such experiments have not been found to be effective tools for measuring teachers. Influenced by a number of recent, reputable studies, ATPE is highly skeptical of the ability of VAM to isolate and estimate the effects of individual teachers when there are so many outside influences from non-educational factors that cannot be controlled by teachers, as well as limitations to standardized testing and access to sufficient longitudinal data. Furthermore, we know that approximately 70 percent of our teachers teach a subject or grade level that is not tested through state standardized tests. This makes the use of VAM for employment-related decisions inherently unfair.

But teacher effectiveness should not be measured exclusively through outcomes; inputs are important measures as well. Teacher characteristics and qualifications are useful **measures of teacher quality** that should no longer be ignored. Although it's difficult to come up with a simple definition of what constitutes an effective teacher, ATPE has learned through our research that there is a positive association between measures of teacher quality and student achievement on state standardized tests, and that certain characteristics of high-quality teachers translate to higher levels of student achievement.

In our most recent teacher quality study, the researcher developed an index that could be used to measure the quality of the educator workforce at each school using factors such as the teachers' experience level, the quality of the preparation and training they had received, and whether they

² Also important is the evaluation of administrators; ATPE supports the creation of evaluation standards that include a survey of campus teachers and staff members regarding the professional performance of campus administrators.

were teaching the subjects they were trained to teach or being assigned outside their field. Not surprisingly, our poorest schools and those with the highest minority populations scored much lower on teacher quality indexes than their wealthier, low-minority counterparts.

This is not to suggest that educators in schools with a lower score on a teacher quality index are bad educators. Primarily, they are inexperienced and might not have been trained for the assignments they've been given. Schools with the highest need and students who are struggling to keep up or catch up with their peers need the most experienced teachers to help them move forward, but the opposite usually occurs, as schools tend to assign brand-new teachers to some of the most challenging classrooms. That tendency, coupled with high teacher turnover, keeps low-performing schools at the lower end of the teacher quality index.

Retention of experienced teachers and principals at a school over several years promotes growth in student achievement. Regrettably, our accountability systems are not designed to foster longevity, and we end up with a revolving door at schools with the highest numbers of poor and minority students. ATPE believes we must correct our course on accountability by paying as much attention to the characteristics of our teaching workforce as we do to the results they produce. This is yet another reason why state working conditions surveys have so much value, as they provide a method of tracking critical factors such as teacher experience level on each campus and provide the necessary data to make adjustments where needed.

ATPE also believes **states and LEAs should be held accountable for their teacher quality**. Specifically, they should be required to assign fully certified educators to teach within their certification areas. ATPE has urged lawmakers to incorporate teacher quality measures into our accountability systems in such a way that would not penalize schools that are struggling but instead highlight their needs and funnel resources to assist them. Our goal is to require schools to work toward an educator quality target that consists of fully certified teachers being assigned to teach the subjects in which they are certified with a high level of teacher retention.

An educator quality assessment should be structured in a manner that measures both absolute compliance and progress toward compliance, with a requirement that LEAs out of compliance submit an educator quality improvement plan. Such improvement plans would allow the state to analyze the reasons for out-of-field assignments and direct resources where they are needed to address those situations. For instance, if a district had teaching vacancies because its compensation range was not competitive with neighboring districts, the state could work with that district to secure or redirect incentive funds to boost compensation or offer signing bonuses to attract the teachers needed for those positions. Such interventions might also include the assignment of technical assistance teams to help an LEA improve the quality of its workforce. An educator quality assessment could also be used to examine other factors, such as the duration of the principal's employment at a campus.

ATPE has also advocated for annual reporting at state and national levels on the distribution of teacher quality, which can be a valuable tool in improving the teaching profession but has been largely ignored.

We appreciate this opportunity to share our input on strengthening the teaching profession. For additional information, please contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or government@atpe.org.