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

“Fixing No Child Left Behind: Supporting Teachers and School Leaders”

February 6, 2015

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 “Fixing No Child Left Behind: Supporting Teachers and School Leaders.”

Teacher quality and effectiveness has been a cornerstone of ATPE’s advocacy program from our earliest days, and we have submitted comments to Congress 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 quality of teaching in our schools. Our efforts have included commissioning research on measures of teacher quality, the relationship between teacher quality and student achievement and school improvement, and the distribution of teacher quality 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 quality. ATPE supports language in the draft ESEA reauthorization legislation, “Every Child Ready for College or Career Act of 2015,” that gives states more authority in their development of teacher quality but maintains language ensuring states require educators to adhere to state licensing standards. **ATPE believes federal law should accommodate and support states’ development of policy in the following areas, which we believe would improve the teaching profession:**

Mentoring

Mentoring should 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. In Texas, it has been estimated that half of our teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching,

¹ Read more about our research at <http://www.atpe.org/en/Advocacy/Issues/Teacher-Quality#ATPE-studies>

and teacher turnover costs the state half a billion dollars each year. ATPE has advocated for a comprehensive, state-funded mentoring program that would be mandatory for new teachers in Texas. Although some LEAs in Texas have mentoring programs, there is no state statutory requirement for all new teachers to be mentored. Texas laws and regulations certainly recommend mentoring, and state lawmakers often assume that school districts or educator preparation programs will voluntarily bear the cost of providing mentors for novice teachers. However, our experience in Texas reveals that localizing the decision to prioritize or not to prioritize spending on mentoring programs has been an ineffective approach, particularly in a climate where education funds are scarce and needs are increasing.

ATPE believes it is imperative for states to prioritize resources to implement comprehensive mentoring programs, which can produce long-term savings following a minimal upfront investment. The need 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 dedicated funding to offset the costs of providing release time and schedule accommodations for novice teachers and their mentors. Funds should be allocated for evaluation of any taxpayer-funded mentoring program, including longitudinal studies of participating teachers to examine their retention rates and the growth in the achievement of students they taught. 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 sustaining long-term funding.

Educator Evaluation

Recent discussions about reauthorizing the ESEA have emphasized reforming educator evaluations. ATPE believes the intense focus of the reform discussions on tying evaluations to measures of student growth, including standardized test scores, is misguided. We believe it causes the observational and interactive aspects of an evaluation, which we know to be of utmost importance based on our members' input, to be overlooked. Regardless of their experience level or their subject or grade level taught, teachers want and need frequent observations by multiple appraisers with face-to-face coaching interactions and direct, ongoing, timely feedback to help them quickly improve their practice in meaningful ways. Of course, financial investments are necessary to create opportunities for such interactions to occur throughout the school year, and policymakers too often abandon that highly effective approach to evaluation in favor of cheaper alternatives, such as focusing on formulaic growth measures and more "objective" data that can be run through computers and matrixes.

As in other states, Texas has faced pressure from proponents of value-added modeling (VAM), most recently as a piece of the Obama Administration's waiver process, to create a state-imposed 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 a new evaluation system. Texas has experimented with VAM in the past, but such experiments have failed as effective tools for measuring and making high-stakes personnel decisions about 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 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. We hope that any changes at the federal level related to teacher evaluation will serve to promote state and local innovations and investments in personal, interactive, formative evaluations that will achieve real results.

Measuring teacher performance is important, but evaluation is merely one element in the broad spectrum of teaching. ATPE supports evaluation systems that are locally developed and are designed to 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. These include rigorous educator preparation and certification; mentoring and induction of novice teachers; ongoing professional development and support of teachers; and stable, competitive compensation and benefits, including retirement benefits.

Recruitment and Training of Educators

ATPE strongly supports initiatives to encourage more selective recruitment of educators by setting high standards for educator preparation and certification. Educator preparation and certification standards must be adopted at the state level to 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 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 learners, 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.

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.

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.

Teacher Quality Measures

Teacher characteristics and qualifications are useful measures of teacher quality that should no longer be ignored. Critics argue that effectiveness of teachers must be measured exclusively through outcomes rather than through inputs. We disagree. 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.

Our studies revealed that teacher quality, measured by factors such as experience level, was much lower in high-poverty, high-minority, and low-performing schools and also lower in the areas of math and science. ATPE's research also supported many experts' belief that novice teachers (those with fewer than three years of experience) are substantially less effective than teachers with more experience. In our most recent 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 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 and supported in the assignments they've been given.

Schools with the highest need 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; to the contrary, state and federal accountability laws typically demand more frequent staffing changes at low-performing schools that contribute to their poor teacher retention rates. As a result, 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.

Accountability for Teacher Quality

In addition to analyzing the quality characteristics of our schools' educators, states and LEAs should be held accountable for their teacher quality. Specifically, all taxpayer-funded schools 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 additional 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 on the distribution of teacher quality, which can be a valuable tool in improving the teaching profession but has been largely ignored.

Compensation

Long-term compensation plans for educators 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. In addition to minimum salaries, 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 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 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.

Policymakers must also 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.

Professional Development

Finally, ATPE supports incentives for quality professional development programs for all school personnel. Such programs should be 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 utilizing technology; 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; identifying and helping students with mental health needs, including those at risk for suicide; and promoting cultural awareness. We also support flexibility. Texas teachers are required to complete a minimum number of continuing education hours for renewal of their teaching certificates. There have been proposals to limit teachers' flexibility in choosing how to fulfill this requirement, such as requiring teachers to select only continuing education courses that are directly linked to the subject they currently teach. Although we recognize the need for educators to use professional development opportunities as a tool for improving the skills critical to their current job assignments, ATPE believes this type of limitation would have the unintended consequence of discouraging teachers from pursuing additional certifications or taking courses to become "Highly Qualified" in additional subjects. For example, a social studies teacher might be disinclined to work toward becoming a math teacher if she were unable to count her math coursework toward the continuing education requirements.

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