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# From Day One: Teacher Perspectives on their Preparation

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## Executive Summary

When it comes to raising student achievement, nothing at school matters more than the quality of the teacher in the classroom. Yet in Texas, where in 2014 nearly 200 preparation programs trained and certified roughly 20,000 teachers, we can't be sure how effective and prepared these teacher candidates actually were. Given the current landscape of student achievement across the state<sup>1</sup>, it is imperative to not only have a better understanding of teacher effectiveness upon entering the classroom, but also to monitor and improve preparation programs to ensure they are consistently producing high-performing teachers.

Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium (TEGAC), in collaboration with the Texas Teacher Preparation Collaborative, embarked upon a project to elevate teachers' voices in the ongoing conversation about the quality of teacher preparation in Texas. TEGAC sought out the perspectives of teachers who have been recognized for their excellence in the classroom and to understand their experiences during preparation and to leverage their reflections to recommend programmatic or policy changes regarding teacher preparation in Texas.

TNTP, a national nonprofit seeking to end educational inequality, was selected to conduct a series of focus groups over the summer of 2016. During that time, we solicited input from approximately 50 diverse teachers from six locations throughout Texas who have been recognized for their excellence in the classroom. We asked teachers about their experiences, level of preparedness, most and least effective structures and supports, and proposed policy or programmatic modifications, amongst many others. Their insights were illuminating and instructive.

## Key Findings

While the majority of participants agreed a novice teacher will face situations and challenges that they are not always equipped to handle during their first year, they acknowledged that there are experiences and structures included in their preparation that can better equip new teachers to navigate these challenges. Below are the five key findings that teachers told us would contribute to setting up them for success on Day One.

**Teacher candidates did not have a consistent or realistic sense of their readiness for the classroom.** When asked to reflect on how they knew they were ready to enter the classroom, the majority of teachers were unclear whether or how their preparation programs assessed their effectiveness prior entering the classroom. In fact, of the teachers who responded to this question, only 25 percent were able to clearly identify a metric or tool that was used to assess their effectiveness and preparedness to enter the classroom. Teachers did not receive explicit feedback from their program on their readiness to lead a classroom, nor were they aware of any tools or systems that their programs used to evaluate their preparedness.

**Teachers perceive very little to no alignment between expectations set by their preparation program and by the state or district.** Focus group participants shared that their districts' expectations were substantially different from the expectations of their teacher preparation programs. According to the teachers with whom we spoke, their preparation programs did not focus on the skills needed to drive student achievement, and classroom evaluations were inconsistent and informal. The content and focus of their preparation was often not aligned with districts that prioritized student learning outcomes and had evaluation systems that were formal and high-stakes. Thus, teachers often felt ill-equipped to assess student learning, adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students, and shift their focus to meet their employing district's expectations.

**Teachers believe that first-hand classroom experience, exposure to a variety of settings, and high-quality mentors were critical to their preparation.** Overwhelmingly, teachers feel they would have benefited from additional classroom experiences prior to becoming the teacher of record. Teachers cited their exposure to a variety of settings (school location/population (urban, rural, suburban), grade levels, student demographics, and teaching styles) and diverse groups of students as instrumental in their pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup> The average eighth grade score for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading exam was a 261 out of 500, with only five states scoring lower. Across the state, only 28 percent of eighth grade students scored at or above Proficiency in Reading.

finding their place in the classroom. These experiences, combined with rich relationships with effective mentors or co-teachers, who modeled best practices, and provided actionable feedback and support, were viewed as instrumental to their development.

**Teachers found their coursework did not prepare them to effectively teach rigorous, standards-aligned content nor to respond to the cultural needs of their students.** When asked whether their coursework was a good use of preparation time, average agreement ratings were a 4 on a scale of 1 to 10 for teachers who completed traditional or alternative preparation programs. Even when knowledgeable in a content area, teachers struggled to break the content down for students and ensure high levels of rigor. Teachers also felt their coursework left them ill-prepared to use the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

**Teachers identified a number of less tangible skills that are critical to teacher development, but most often left unaddressed by preparation programs.** Teachers identified a desire for continuous learning and finding their own “teacher voice” as skillsets that enabled them to find success in the classroom. Not only were these unaddressed by their preparation programs, but they were skills that became critical to improving their effectiveness in the classroom. Had these skills been prioritized earlier in their development, teachers could be better prepared for Day One.

## Recommendations

Teachers have clear opinions and perspectives on their teacher preparation experiences – what helped them the most and what could be improved to set them up for a successful start to their careers. Ultimately, all preparation programs would benefit from more immediate, short-term programmatic modifications that align to what teachers see as most useful. **Perhaps more notably is that teacher responses brought to light that, across all teacher preparation programs, regardless of the supports they received, there was little to no evidence of how ready they were for the classroom.** To respond to this need, there is work that can be done state-wide to better identify and monitor for the most critical levers in developing teachers. Below we outline three recommendations that will help us better understand, monitor, and eventually produce consistently effective teachers across the state.



**Ensure the bar for entry into the classroom assesses teacher candidate readiness.** The licensure criteria should include a performance screen to assess preparedness that is used consistently across programs.



**Ensure programs are producing effective teachers by holding them accountable to their outcomes.** The state should establish multiple-measure system of evaluation for preparation programs that aligns to student outcomes, while also better holding programs accountable to standards already in existence.



**Identify key preparation program levers—and modify policy accordingly.** The state should identify key levers for preparing teachers and adapt policy to encompass these levers.

## Conclusion

Regardless of the route they took, all of the teachers faced an incredibly steep learning curve when standing in front of their own classroom for the first time. Most were not told if they were ready for that responsibility, and they realized that the expectations of their new role were drastically different from those of their preparation program. The recommended policy changes focus on the desired outcomes reflected in the teachers’ stories, such as performance assessments to measure preparedness and a shift in the focus of preparation program accountability. We also recommend developing future policy by studying program outcomes to ensure a focus on high-leverage strategies that are grounded in evidence of impact on student learning. Together these policies can ensure that every new teacher is set up to support Texas students from day one.

