

Effective from Day One: Teacher Perspectives on their Preparation

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Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Acknowledgements 2
- Introduction 3
 - Background 3
 - Overview of Process 3
 - Overview of Focus Group Participants..... 4
- Findings..... 6
 - Finding 1: Teacher candidates did not have a consistent or realistic sense of their readiness for the classroom..... 6
 - Finding 2: Teachers perceive very little to no alignment between expectations set by their preparation program and by the state or district..... 7
 - Finding 3: Teachers believe that first-hand classroom experience, exposure to a variety of settings, and high-quality mentors were critical to their preparation. 7
 - Finding 4: 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..... 8
 - Finding 5: Teachers identify a number of less tangible skills that are critical to teacher development, but most often left unaddressed by preparation programs..... 9
- Recommendations 11
 - Recommendation 1: Ensure the bar for entry into the classroom assesses whether teacher candidates are ready.... 11
 - Recommendation 2: Ensure programs are producing effective teachers by holding them accountable to existing standards and evaluating them on their outcomes..... 12
 - Recommendation 3: Identify key preparation program levers—and modify policy accordingly..... 13
- Conclusion 13
- References..... 15
- Appendix 16
 - Who We Are..... 16
 - Data Analysis 17
 - Survey Questions 17

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Introduction

Background

In 2015, Texas' public education system served over 5 million students. Of those, 59 percent were economically disadvantaged and 41 percent were English Language Learners.¹ 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.²

Clearly, Texas is not yet supporting all students to graduate high school ready for college or career. While there is no silver bullet to solving this challenge, ensuring every student has a high-quality teacher is a critical part of the equation. Again and again, research shows that teacher quality is the most powerful school-based factor in improving student achievement.³

Having teachers who are prepared to meet the needs of our students begins well before those teachers enter the classroom. In 2013-14, almost 200 Texas teacher preparation programs trained and certified just over 20,000 teachers.⁴ However, little is known about how prepared these new teachers were or felt they were to meet the diverse needs of students and improve student outcomes.

In an effort to better understand teacher preparedness, Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium (TEGAC), in collaboration with and to support the Texas Teacher Preparation Collaborative,⁵ embarked upon a project to elevate the teacher voice in the conversation about teacher preparation. TEGAC sought out the teacher perspective, with the goal of using these reflections to recommend programmatic or policy changes regarding teacher preparation in Texas, and elevating those conclusions to stakeholders who are positioned to make necessary changes at each of the programmatic, regulatory, and legislative levels.

TNTP⁶, a national nonprofit seeking to end educational inequality, was selected to support this work. In collaboration with our partners, one of the essential questions we sought to answer was how ready teachers believed they were when they first entered the classroom. By engaging teachers who have been recognized for their excellence in teaching, we wanted to learn if even great teachers felt set up for success from the start. Although we recognize the subjectivity of qualitative research, hearing directly from some of our state's great teachers provided a level of insight into the policies and structures that supported their early development and could be improved to ensure more teachers are set up for success on Day One.

Overview of Process

To understand the teacher perspective, TNTP solicited input from a sampling of teachers across the state who have been recognized for their excellence and who represent the diversity of Texas teachers. Primarily through focus groups and surveys, TNTP sought to understand how prepared teachers felt when they entered the classroom, what experiences they had in their preparation program, which of these structures and supports were most or least helpful, and generally what could have been done to better prepare them.

TNTP conducted focus groups in six different locations, speaking with 50 individuals. To ensure we connected with teachers who had exhibited excellence in the classroom, we asked principals and district officials from charter networks, private schools, and independent school districts in Dallas, Fort Worth, Amarillo, Rio Grande Valley,

¹ Texas Education Agency (TEA). 2015.

² National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). 2016.

³ Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain & Steven G. Rivkin. 2005.

⁴ Title II. 2015.

⁵ See appendix for additional information about the Teacher Prep Collaborative.

⁶ See appendix for additional information about TNTP.

Houston, and Austin to recommend teachers. Additionally, we targeted Teacher of the Year award winners. In all, over 700 teachers were recommended to participate in a focus group.

Nominated teachers were asked to complete a short pre-survey to share basic background information.⁷ The pre-survey helped us identify teachers who represented the diversity and backgrounds of teachers across the state. In addition to demographic questions, we also began asking questions and collecting data about the teachers' preparation experience, such as the frequency of observations and feedback they received, how accurate an understanding their observer had of their practice, how effective they felt their mentor teacher was, and what skills the overall program and specific components did or did not address.

Formal focus groups discussions took place throughout August and September of 2016. In total, TNTP offered seven scheduled focus groups in Dallas, Fort Worth, Amarillo, McAllen, Houston, and Austin. Each session was scheduled for one and a half hours. At these focus groups, we targeted the following types of questions:

- Overall Reflections (how prepared did you feel, what was most challenging and what was most helpful),
- Program Experiences (what experiences did you have and which were most/least helpful within the following components: coursework, field experience, feedback and observation, evaluation),
- Program Effectiveness (how was your effectiveness measured and by whom),
- Post Program Support (what has been the most valuable support you received).

Overview of Focus Group Participants

Currently, there are more than 300,000 teachers in Texas who reflect a variety of experience levels, preparation programs, and racial backgrounds. While we spoke to only 50 of those teachers, their diversity of backgrounds and experiences provided insights that reflect the diversity of teachers across the state.

Type of Preparation Program

About half of focus group participants completed a traditional preparation programs, while the other half completed an alternative program. This mirrors the statewide trends. In 2014, 51% of teacher preparation program completers did so through an alternative route program.⁸ Additionally, 80 percent of participants completed their program in Texas. Participants experienced 30 different types of programs and spent an average of 2.13 years in that program.

Years of Experience

The focus groups represent teachers of varying years of experience. Teacher experience ranged from as little as three years in the classroom to as many as 37 years in the classroom. On average, focus group participants have served as classroom teachers for more than 12 years. Similarly, teachers have an average of 11 years of experience statewide.⁹

Demographic Distribution

Over 50 percent of participants teach in the urban districts of Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, while approximately 40 percent are in suburban districts of Amarillo and Fort Worth and 10 percent in the rural Rio Grande Valley. Statewide, 49 percent of teachers teach in urban districts, 31 percent in suburban, and 20 percent in rural.¹⁰

Race/Ethnicity

Forty-eight percent of focus group participants were Caucasian, 29 percent African-American, 17 percent Hispanic and 6 percent Asian. Statewide, 61 percent of teachers are white, 9 percent are African-American, 25 percent are Hispanic, and 2 percent are Asian.¹¹

⁷ See Appendix for a copy of the survey questions.

⁸ Title II. 2015.

⁹ TEA. 2015.

¹⁰ TEA. 2015.

¹¹ TEA. 2015.

Findings Summary

1. Unclear understanding of readiness and effectiveness.

The effectiveness measures experienced by teachers were either nonexistent, or, at best, inconsistent across preparation programs.

2. Misalignment between expectations.

Teachers perceive very little to no alignment between their preparation program and expectations set by the state or district.

3. Preparedness and improvement: What helped.

Teachers believe that first-hand classroom experience, exposure to a variety of settings, and collaboration with peers were critical drivers of their preparedness and improvement during their preparation program or early years of teaching.

4. Coursework not targeting the most critical topics.

Teachers identify a number of shortcomings that kept coursework from preparing them as effectively as they should, including rigorous content and cultural intelligence.

5. Missed opportunities to target critical skills.

Teachers identify less tangible skills that are critical to teacher development, but most often left unaddressed by preparation programs—like becoming a continuous learner and developing your teacher voice.

Findings

Given their diverse backgrounds, it's not surprising that the participating teachers had a range of experiences in their preparation programs. However, a common theme throughout their reflections was that most teachers recalled feeling shock at the transition from their preparation programs and into their careers as teachers. Suddenly, they were responsible for knowing and meeting the needs of 30 or more students per class. As a lead teacher, these responsibilities went beyond the delivery of instruction; they included meeting students' physical needs, translating rigorous content to them, managing behavior, assessing progress and making modifications, among many other explicit or implicit duties. As an employee of a new workplace, they also faced challenges of navigating local school politics, knowing when and how to say yes or no to leadership and extracurricular responsibilities, engaging in parent relationships, and managing vast sums of unanticipated paperwork. One high school science teacher's experience was revealed in this statement, "...actually I [wasn't] sure how to engage my kids. I didn't know what a TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] was. I was shocked coming in. My mentor never had time to meet. [I didn't] know what I [was] doing and [didn't] have anyone to talk to."

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 that can better equip new teachers to navigate these challenges.

The teachers described a monumental gap between the expectations of teacher preparation programs and the expectations of classroom teachers to raise student achievement. Managing a classroom of students with diverse needs, engaging students at all levels in classroom content, accurately assessing student progress and making the appropriate instructional adjustments, while completing myriad administrative tasks requires more than most aspiring teachers are exposed to in teacher preparation courses and experience. The teachers to whom we spoke suggested several approaches for preparation programs to better support teacher candidates to be ready for their first day in the classroom. Below, we outline five findings that were most commonly addressed across the focus groups.

Finding 1: Teacher candidates did not have a consistent or realistic sense of their readiness for the classroom.

To understand how ready teachers believed they were when they first entered the classroom, we asked teachers to rate their preparedness on a scale of 1-10.¹² While their feelings of readiness varied, few respondents had evidence of their effectiveness upon completion of their preparation program. 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. Ultimately, most participating teachers shared that the question of whether they were ready to be a teacher was never answered for them. For most, the programs they completed did not support teachers to understand if they were effective and where they needed to improve before entering the classroom.

For those who could recall an evaluative measurement that was tied to readiness, most found that their evaluations were not relevant to their responsibilities once in the classroom. Some teachers recalled being evaluated with checklists ensuring task completion during their teacher preparation programs. Very few teachers were evaluated on their performance in the classroom or their impact on student achievement. In fact, when teachers were asked if they received "opportunities to review how effectively [they were] growing," teacher agreement averaged less than 3.5 on a 1-10 scale.¹³

"...As long as no one got hurt, I'd get my certification..."

¹² Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree).

¹³ Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree).

A Bilingual EC-6 teacher shared, “They trusted me with a classroom which was scary in many ways. They took a leap of faith that as long as no one got hurt, I’d get my certification. For lack of a better way to describe it, they were taking a lot of people like me in who had no experience. The supervising teacher came in like three times and checked off boxes. By November, I was told I was good to go. It wasn’t...very thorough.”

Finding 2: 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 of them were substantially different from the expectations of their teacher preparation programs – specifically concerning student learning outcomes and teacher evaluation.

Student Learning Outcomes: Several teachers stated that a main focus in districts is on student learning outcomes; however, this is not a main area of concentration during training and coursework. This gap in preparation resulted in teachers feeling ill-equipped to assess student learning and adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students. One teacher shared that “[f]ormative assessments were a real challenge for me; assessing [my students] daily; I wasn’t taught that.”

Teacher Evaluation: The teacher evaluation process also differed significantly from preparation programs to district classrooms. After being exposed to more informal, inconsistent evaluation processes during their preparation programs (see Finding 1), many teachers faced evaluation processes in their schools that were more formal and higher-stakes. As a result of this misalignment, teachers felt unprepared to make these shifts in focus and expectations.

Finding 3: Teachers believe that first-hand classroom experience, exposure to a variety of settings, and high-quality mentors were critical to their preparation.

While our focus group discussions touched on a wide variety of preparation experiences, the participating teachers frequently returned to the importance of meaningful field experience before becoming the teacher of record. Three themes emerged from their reflections: classroom experience supported them to make sense of and refine what they had learned during their course work; exposure to a variety of instructional settings benefited them; high-quality mentor relationships were rare but when they existed were invaluable.

Classroom Experience: Participating teachers consistently reported that they either benefitted firsthand or feel they could have benefitted from more hands-on classroom experiences prior to becoming the teacher of record. In fact, seventeen teachers mentioned authentic classroom experiences as their most helpful source of growth and development. More specifically, teachers said that even though working directly with students and sometimes owning the entire lesson or day of lessons was challenging, it helped them improve their practice more than any coursework that they completed. One teacher stated, “The field experience was six weeks during the summer...It was invaluable. I still had to redirect, plan lessons... The field experience and how to manage a classroom was definitely helpful.” Generally, the participating teachers identified that their field experiences were essential to applying what they learned in their coursework.

Exposure to Variety: Teachers reported that observing and working with students in a variety of settings helped them to better understand the unique needs of students and prepare them to meet these challenges more than teachers who only worked in one type of school. Therefore, teachers believed that being exposed to a variety of settings and diverse groups of students was instrumental as they pursued employment opportunities.¹⁴ An elementary reading

¹⁴ This variety of settings includes school location/population (urban, rural, suburban), grade levels, student demographics, and teaching styles.

teacher reported that her experiences included working in schools that served varying populations of students. She stated, "What was most helpful was seeing a lot of different types of classrooms. I visited classrooms, went to high performing and low performing, went to suburbs and then low income neighborhoods. That experience helped me find my true and authentic self." Another elementary teacher in a rural district stated, "Experience going into classrooms, observing other teachers [was the most helpful part of my preparation experience]...I was in 6 different classes. I did Pre-K, K, and a 4th grade classroom. That really gave me the knowledge of what I could do and what I couldn't do." Lastly, an elementary teacher in Amarillo shared the shortcomings of not having this exposure, "I student taught at a middle-income school then went on to teach at a low socio-economic school. I was not prepared at all for all of the problems. Kids didn't eat breakfast; they didn't have shoes. I wasn't prepared for that." Teachers agreed that having exposure to and experience in a variety of settings would be most helpful to their development.

High-Quality Mentors: Teachers who identified having a rich relationship with an effective mentor or co-teacher during their field experiences felt that relationship was beneficial towards their development. Specifically, teachers stated that they benefitted from receiving targeted, actionable feedback, observing best practices being modeled, and having a designated person they could reach out to for support. A high school science teacher shared that a pivotal moment in his teaching career was when his co-teacher observed his lesson and afterwards shared with him that he hadn't asked any questions during his lesson so he was unable to assess his student's mastery of the material.

"It's about growth. Where you are at and where we want you to be – how do we get you there? It's a dialogue that happens along the way."

While reflecting on that relationship with his co-teacher, the participant shared, "It's about growth. Where you are at and where we want you to be – how do we get you there? It's a dialogue that happens along the way. If you have a relationship with someone who is interested in your success, interested in seeing you become who you want to become as a teacher, that's where you'll go."

Although the majority of teachers felt mentor relationships *could* help new teachers, most did not feel they benefitted from relationships with mentors and co-teachers as much as they should have. Seventeen teachers explicitly called out a desire for more supervision, support, and/or feedback from their supervising teachers. One middle school social studies teacher summed up the experiences and perceptions of other focus group participants in this statement, "When you do your student teaching, you need someone who was going to be fostering and caring. I had to do 18 weeks of student teaching. On one hand, I had someone who was understanding. She'd take over now and again. During planning periods, she would cultivate and foster me. My other teacher, she'd grab her bag and go out the door and I was the primary teacher in the classroom, taking roll, teaching, discipline, etc." Another sixth grade English teacher described her memory, "I had a mentor, and when I found out who she was and went up to her, she was like 'nobody told me,' and went back to her work. I didn't know what to do. I sucked it up, went back to my room and cried." The sentiment of not having someone to learn from and look to for support was a common theme across all of the focus groups. Reflecting on her own student teaching experience, an elementary reading teacher shared, "I remember calling my mom and asking why am I doing this? [My co-teacher] taught me what I did not want to do. If that had been my only placement, I'm not sure if I would have followed through with teaching."

Finding 4: 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.

Standards-Aligned Content: Neither teachers who completed traditional or alternative programs felt that their coursework was a good use of their preparation time. Teacher responses averaged a 4 when they were asked if they Strongly Disagreed (1) or Strongly Agreed (10) with the statement that their coursework was a good use of their time. Specifically, several teachers commented that while they understood their specific content (typically because they had majored in it), they struggled to break it down for their students and ensure high levels of rigor in that specific content area. A teacher in the Rio Grande Valley revealed how she struggled with transferring knowledge to students, "I don't know how prepared I felt... [my own undergraduate degree] had been so long ago that I had to familiarize myself and do a lot of going back and refresh

"I don't know how prepared I felt... I had to do a lot of going back and refresh myself on the material."

myself on the material.” Teachers also entered the classroom unprepared to use the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and expressed that navigating the standards without much assistance was unnecessarily challenging during their first years in the classroom.

Cultural Intelligence: Teachers also pointed to the need to have more training on cultural awareness and competence. An AP English teacher pointed out the benefits of participating in cultural awareness experiences by sharing, “The [program I participated in] was designed to prepare middle class suburban teachers to work in inner city schools. There was quite a bit of cultural identification. This is not your classroom that you went to high school in. Being able to work in the summer school program with students who had been unsuccessful, take their summer school experience and turn it into something positive for them. And while it didn’t help me with my repeater freshman, it did help me with the idea that I need to believe in my kids before they can believe in themselves. I think the experience was more helpful vs. the book learning.”

Finding 5: Teachers identify a number of less tangible skills that are critical to teacher development, but most often left unaddressed by preparation programs.

Regardless of their route to certification or where they were located, we heard consistently that teachers did not feel prepared to meet the needs of all students. As an elementary teacher in Dallas stated, “They teach you the best-case scenario in college. The reality is that the schools that need the most help are the least funded and the least prepared. [...] You can’t teach that population of kids thinking you can just open up a book. That’s why we are failing. There are different needs and requirements.” As teachers reflected on skills that helped improve or develop them during their early, challenging years of teaching, three skillsets rose to the top as being critical but not adequately addressed during their teacher preparation.

Continuous Learning: In order to overcome lacking coursework, ineffective mentor teachers, or early days of teaching with little to no support, effective teachers had to grow their ability to seek and find answers more independently. They had to have a thirst for continued development, and the self-determination to find those opportunities and outlets on their own. Without this motivation, without the time, energy, and determination, the profession and the shortcomings in preparation can often be too challenging. One fourth grade teacher shared her experiences, “The program that I completed- they did touch on how to handle special populations. Other than that, it was really me researching on my own to differentiate my instruction to help that child and reach him. It’s really you doing it on the outside to prepare yourself.”

Authentic Teacher Voice: Teachers mentioned how critical it was to “find their teacher voice” or their own personal way or style of teaching. This would build their confidence and give them command of managing behavior and improving the effectiveness of other teaching practices. An elementary math and science teacher articulated this very well in this statement, “When that light clicked, when it was okay for me to be me, and not try to be like her or him, be like that person... I’m not her and that devalues all of my personal experiences. Finding my voice and bringing my experiences to the classroom... that almost needs to be a class.”

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Recommendations Summary



Ensure the criteria for teacher licensure accurately gauges teacher readiness.

The criteria for teachers to receive their license should include a performance screen that ensures teachers are prepared and is implemented consistently across all programs.



Better hold preparation programs accountable on both existing criteria and additional outcomes.

Teacher preparation programs should be better held to current expectations set forth by the existing policy. In addition, the Legislature should establish to law a more extensive preparation program evaluation system that is based on a defined set of standards and responsibilities.



Identify key preparation program levers—and modify policy accordingly.

The state should use the results of both the teacher readiness and program effectiveness standards to identify key levers in preparing teachers; and then adapt policy to reflect that which most closely aligns with high performance.

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, including:

- Working with district partner to ensure high quality mentors
- Increasing the number of observations during clinical practice and providing useful feedback,
- Utilizing an evaluation tool aligned to district expectations to monitor progress during preparation, or
- Updating coursework to include relevant courses on standards, rigorous content, or cultural intelligence.

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. Current policy requires effective mentors, relevant coursework, and specific hours of student teaching. Yet based on these teachers' perceptions, these requirements are not effectively reinforced, monitored, or gauged in their effectiveness. Therefore, we are left with little understanding of how effective the teachers or preparation programs are.

Thus, based on the participating teachers' input and in collaboration with the Texas Teacher Preparation Collaborative, we have identified strategies to support aspiring teachers and improve preparation. Although the participating teachers shared experiences that inform certain programmatic aspects of preparation, there is little empirical data to support the effectiveness of any one of their recommended preparation experiences. Therefore, in alignment with the Texas Teacher Preparation Collaborative's approach to its recommendations, we propose policy or programmatic changes that seek to identify, elevate, and evaluate components that most directly influence student achievement without recommending inputs that cannot be supported by evidence.¹⁵

Recommendation 1: Ensure the bar for entry into the classroom assesses whether teacher candidates are ready.

We repeatedly heard that teachers were uncertain whether they were ready for the classroom, yet teachers want to trust they are prepared to enter the classroom. Additionally, they want to be in schools where they are surrounded by effective teachers, particularly first-year teachers. Yet, in Texas, neither the current nor the proposed certification requirements include a performance assessment before teachers are in front of students.¹⁶ Rather, most teachers reported receiving certification in a way described by one of our elementary school participants, "It [receiving my certification] was completion. You completed your coursework, you had your observations, you completed the paperwork, you showed up to everything...If you met all of those requirements then you were certified. Quality wasn't a part of that."

Research shows that the best indicator of future performance is past performance.¹⁷ To ensure programs are producing candidates who are truly prepared to enter the classroom, we recommend that initial licensure be based on demonstrated performance and readiness for the classroom. More specifically, we recommend a performance screen with an assessment tool or rubric that will allow for consistency across all providers. Performance screens, such as the

¹⁵ While the Collaborative and the teachers' perspective independently generated these recommendations, they are in alignment with the recently released federal regulations governing teacher preparation. The final regulations for the Higher Education Act (HEA), which were released on October 12, 2016, emphasize outcomes-oriented measures of candidate readiness and program quality. 34 C.F.R. §§ 612.1-612.8; 686.1-686.43.

¹⁶ TAC. Ch. 229. 2014.

¹⁷ Gordon, R., Kane, T., & Staiger. D. 2006.

one developed in Massachusetts¹⁸ can consider components that are all research-based indicators of performance, such as observations, student performance data, student feedback, and demonstration of goal achievement. Additionally, it is critical that such a tool be designed, defined, and vetted in collaboration with stakeholders, aligned with the expectations of district partners, and approved by the state. Ultimately, if teacher candidates have demonstrated readiness for the classroom, they, their employers, and the students they serve will have increased confidence in their ability to immediately demonstrate effectiveness in their prospective role as lead teacher.¹⁹

Recommendation 2: Ensure programs are producing effective teachers by holding them accountable to existing standards and evaluating them on their outcomes.

Students will benefit from new teachers only when they are prepared and effective from day one. Yet currently, though suggested by Texas Administrative Code (TAC)²⁰, Texas has not implemented a system of looking across preparation programs and assessing the quality of the teachers on day one based on student outcomes. Therefore, the state is not yet set up to effectively monitor the quality of the teachers they are preparing in a way that will ensure improved student outcomes. To ensure programs are producing teacher candidates who are equipped to serve the diverse needs of Texas students, we recommend both better holding programs accountable to current standards and evaluating programs on their outcomes.

Hold programs accountable to current standards: Currently, the TAC calls for preparation programs to meet accountability standards tied to student outcomes such as “to the extent practicable, as valid data becomes available and performance standards are developed, the improvement in student achievement of students taught by beginning teachers for the first three years following certification,”²¹ yet there are no more directive or specific student achievement accountability measures. Additionally, given teachers’ varying experiences of coursework, student teaching, mentors, and observation/feedback, it is clear that these supports are implemented inconsistently. Though the TAC provides strict guidelines in identifying mentors, choosing coursework, and setting time and quality of classroom experiences, teacher experience shows that these rules are either insufficient or they are not always followed. For example, while preparation programs are charged with preparing their candidates to meet the Teacher Standards,²² there are no indicators to assess if candidates have met that bar as reflected in their classroom practice and/or correlating student outcomes. To ensure program quality, we can start with holding programs accountable to existing standards.

Evaluate programs on additional outcomes. In addition to increased fidelity through current standards that point to student outcomes, we also recommend the State consider additional outcome-based measures of program quality. A multiple-measure system of program evaluation will provide a holistic picture of teacher preparation program quality and prevent any one measure from carrying outsized weight in the system. Additional measures to consider include:

- Teacher and employer surveys
- Student perception surveys
- Benchmarks for teacher proficiency and growth against teaching standards (including attainment of an initial license based on the performance assessment)
- Benchmarks for teacher placement and retention.

¹⁸ Massachusetts Department of Education. 2016.

¹⁹Requiring a higher bar for entry into the profession is reinforced through the new federal requirements. The HEA regulations require all teacher preparation programs to be evaluated, among other requirements, against whether their teacher candidates complete the program with “content and pedagogical knowledge” and “quality clinical preparation,” who have met “rigorous exit requirements.” 34 C.F.R. § 612.5(a)(4).

²⁰ TAC. § 229.4(a)(3). 2014.

²¹ TAC. § 229.4(a)(3). 2014.

²² TAC. §149.1001. 2014.

To ensure programs are producing high quality teacher candidates, this system should result in the identification of high performing programs and systematic improvement to or closure of low performing programs. Such an evaluation system would support programs to recommend teacher candidates for certification and program completion who are ready to positively affect student outcomes at their school of employment.²³

“[You wouldn’t] go to the doctor or see a specialist who wasn’t trained. [Preparation programs] need higher expectations. When a student sees me, they should know... I am standing before them because I went through really rigorous training in order to earn standing before them – just as a doctor would or a lawyer. We have high expectation for them, it should be the same for teachers.

- Rio Grande Valley Teacher

Recommendation 3: Identify key preparation program levers—and modify policy accordingly

This report summarizes teacher-centered reflections regarding which teacher preparation supports most effectively prepare teachers for their classrooms. While some consistent themes emerged, there is no existing state-wide system to prove or disprove their theories on which levers are most critical in preparing teachers for service. With an outcomes-focused system in place as described above, the state can more strategically look across the state’s preparation programs and the readiness of new teachers, identify which programs are producing the highest quality, highest performing teachers, and further analyze which programmatic components are contributing to those high levels of preparedness. For example, the teacher voice we gathered had strong opinions about needing a more structured observation process and feedback system. With data from a more comprehensive study, Texas policymakers may feel more confident prescribing the specific number of observations and/or a length of time and/or a feedback tool that would all be most beneficial to improve teachers during their student teaching.

Once the state has a clear perspective on which programmatic components have best prepared teachers for teaching in the state of Texas, policy can then be reviewed and modified to ensure its expectations align to those high leverage components. The intent is not to create policy barriers that hinder innovation, but rather to spur innovation for those programs that consistently produce high-performing teachers. Therefore, we also recommend that policymakers consider incentivizing innovation by waiving unnecessary requirements for those programs that qualify so long as they continue to meet a high bar of quality.

Conclusion

Through our discussions with dozens of teachers across the state, teachers shared a wide range of preparation experiences. While no one teacher had the same story, they shared a common experience: the shock of standing in front of their own classroom for the first time. Most recalled that they weren’t told if they were ready for that responsibility or not. And, once in the classroom they discovered that the expectations of their employers were different from their preparation programs. The most valuable aspect of preparation was their field experience, but even that could be improved. And, preparation programs spent too much time on coursework that was not relevant

²³ These outcomes-oriented measures of program quality are in alignment with the recently released federal regulations governing teacher preparation. The new federal rules will require all programs with at least 25 teacher candidates to be evaluated annually against student learning outcomes, employment outcomes, teacher and employer surveys as well as other program characteristics like national accreditation or whether the program’s candidates complete the program with content and pedagogical knowledge, quality clinical preparation and have met rigorous exit requirements. 34 C.F.R. § 612.5(a).

to their practice and not enough on the “intangibles” of what makes a great teacher, like the drive to continuously improve.

We deeply value the perspectives of these dedicated educators, and yet we recognize the limitations of developing policy and programmatic design on anecdotal experiences. For those reasons, we recommend the immediate policy changes focus on the desired outcomes reflected in our teachers’ stories. Things like a performance assessment before entering the classroom as a teacher of record will give new teachers added confidence that they have a solid grasp on their practice and are ready to positively influence students. Likewise, shifting the focus of teacher preparation program accountability to the evidence of success will ensure that programs are designed to support new teachers. Finally, developing future policy by studying licensure and program outcomes will ensure future policy is focused on high-leverage strategies and grounded in evidence.

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Appendix

Who We Are

TNTP

For almost two decades, TNTP has been a leader in teacher development. A national nonprofit founded by teachers, we help school systems end educational inequality and achieve their goals for students. We work at every level of the public education system to attract and train talented teachers and school leaders, ensure rigorous and engaging classrooms, and create environments that prioritize great teaching and accelerate student learning. Since 1997, we have recruited or trained nearly 50,000 teachers for low income schools across the country. Over that time, TNTP has evolved into a full-service human capital consulting practice whose services include policy advising and community engagement, among others. At our heart we remain partners to school systems, working side-by-side with them to solve their most pressing challenges.

In addition to working nationally, TNTP has deep roots in Texas. TNTP has operated programs or partnered with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in Texas since 2001. During that time, we have prepared more than 1,500 teachers for high-need schools and subjects in Texas. We currently work in or have recently concluded work in Austin, Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth. Much of our work in these regions has focused on teacher pipeline and development challenges. To support TNTP's extensive work in Texas, TNTP has nearly two dozen full-time staff who live and/or work in Texas.

TNTP has an unparalleled understanding of the teacher preparation landscape locally and nationally, which allows us to frame the challenges facing Texas teachers and preparers within the national context. At the same time, we recognize that we do not have all the answers. Educator feedback directly informs the improvement of our own programs, like Fast Start, as well as our policy positions. In our experience, we have found bringing educators to the table during policy discussions can significantly improve not just the policy on paper but also strengthens the implementation and support from the people living out the day-to-day implementation of those policies. ("Bringing Stakeholders to the Policy Table").

Teacher Prep Collaborative

During 2016, Educate Texas convened the **Texas Teacher Preparation Collaborative** with stakeholders committed to improving teacher preparation so that teachers are fully equipped with the knowledge and skills they need to lead Texas students and provide Texas students a 21st century education. The Collaborative provided a platform for practitioners and policy makers to focus on teacher preparation and highlight best practices and policies that Texas can adopt to make real change for current and future Texas teachers.

The Collaborative was chaired by Jim Nelson, former Texas Commissioner of Education, and comprised of Deans from Texas Colleges of Education, leaders of Alternative Certification Programs, teachers, principals, superintendents, and teacher preparation advocates and practitioners. The Collaborative was tasked with:

- Examining the best practices and policies in higher education and at the district, state, national levels;
- Reviewing research on effective teacher preparation practices;
- Sharing positive changes that some teacher preparation programs have made; and
- Making practical recommendations that can be implemented for both the policy and practice of teacher preparation.

The Collaborative created a suite of policy recommendations that may be implemented by the legislature, state agencies, school districts, institutions of higher education, and alternative certification programs. The Collaborative met with experts in teacher preparation and reviewed national and state data, best practices, and policies aimed at increasing effective teaching. After the year long process the Collaborative determined recommendations focused on improving outcomes for teacher preparation programs and ultimately Texas students and teachers. Improving teacher

preparation is critical in any state's commitment to ensuring students are thriving with teachers that know their craft, connect with their students, inspire learning and provide the foundations for tomorrow's future.

Data Analysis

To best understand the perspectives and needs of focus group participants, transcriptions from focus group sessions as well as results from a pre-survey were analyzed.

Analysis of Transcriptions

Transcribed notes from all focus group sessions were first combined and linked to the appropriate questions. Notes were then assigned themes based on key components and underlying messages that the participants conveyed. Once themes were assigned to each participant's response for a particular item, counts were tabulated to see which themes permeated throughout the group. Responses were also examined to determine whether perceptions differed for teachers from specific districts and with different levels of teaching experience. To paint a clear picture of teachers' experiences and the challenges that they faced, direct quotes were aligned to key themes and findings. Although demographic information was provided for each quote to show that the perceptions represented teachers across content areas and grade levels, names were excluded to protect the identities of the focus group participants.

Analysis of Pre-Survey Results

Pre-surveys were utilized to gather additional demographic data on focus group students and to assess their perceptions of their preparation experiences and supports. An example of a pre-survey item is, "My teacher preparation program prepared me to be effective in the classroom in my first year of teaching". Teachers were asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale of 1-10. Descriptive statistics were then calculated and examined using SPSS software to identify group averages. Additionally, crosstabs were created in SPSS to see if experiences differed across districts or between teachers with demographic differences.

Survey Questions

Background Information

- Name
- Age
- Ethnicity

Program Experience

- What type of teacher prep program did you complete?
- In what subjects are you certified to teach?
- How did you determine what certification to pursue?
- Are you still teaching under your original teaching certificate or did you change / add certifications?
- What was the duration of your teacher preparation program?
- Approximately how much time did you spend practicing teaching in a classroom throughout your teacher preparation program prior to starting your first year of teaching?
- Approximately how often were you able to practice teaching outside of the live classroom environment throughout your teacher preparation program?
- From the following list, please check all the areas where you feel you were NOT prepared to perform well in your first year of teaching (Design effective lessons using the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), engage students in learning, effectively manage student behavior, use a variety of questioning techniques, analyze student learning data to adjust my instruction, differentiate instruction for the variety of learning needs in my classroom, clearly explain the content of the primary subject I taught that year, increase the rigor of my instruction, understand the cultural needs of the specific community and student populations I taught)

- From the following list, please check all the areas where you feel you WERE prepared to perform well in your first year of teaching (Design effective lessons using the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), engage students in learning, effectively manage student behavior, use a variety of questioning techniques, analyze student learning data to adjust my instruction, differentiate instruction for the variety of learning needs in my classroom, clearly explain the content of the primary subject I taught that year, increase the rigor of my instruction, understand the cultural needs of the specific community and student populations I taught)
- All prep programs in Texas require 3 formal observations with separate interactive conferences to discuss the observation, 30 hours of field experience (experience with teaching prior to stepping into the classroom – tutoring, watching a classroom, watching videos, etc.) and 300 hours of coursework. Did you know that these were requirements?
- Did you receive the aforementioned experiences from your program?
- Did you experience the following during your teacher preparation? (Formal or informal observations, coaching, theory-based training/coursework, skill-based training/coursework, student teaching/residency in a classroom setting, mentor teacher support)

Observations and Feedback

- If you received observations, how many formal observations did you receive during your teacher preparation?
- How many informal observations did you receive during your teacher preparation?
- Did you receive feedback after each observation?
- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
 - o My formal evaluator had an accurate understanding of my strengths and development areas.
 - o My formal evaluator was able to direct me to development opportunities aligned with my needs.
 - o My formal evaluator communicated my instructional practice strengths and weaknesses to me.
 - o In your FIRST year of teaching, did you work with a mentor teacher (i.e., person assigned to provide you support during your first year of teaching) who was assigned by your school or district?

Mentor Teacher

- How frequently did you work with your mentor teacher during your first year of teaching?
- My mentor teacher was assigned to multiple schools/assigned only to my school.
- Has your mentor teacher ever instructed students in the same subject area as yours?
- To what extent did your mentor teacher improve your teaching in your first year of teaching?

Professional Development

- Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:
 - o The majority of the professional development I received from my teacher preparation program:
 - Was tailored to my specific needs or development areas
 - Was ongoing with follow-up opportunities to review how effectively I am growing and receive additional support.
 - Drove lasting changes in my student learning outcomes.
 - Drove lasting improvements to my instructional practice.
 - Was targeted to support my specific teaching context (content area, the needs of students in my classroom)
 - Provided me with new skills I am able to immediately use in my own classroom.
 - Was driven by data.
 - o My teacher preparation program included sufficient classroom practice opportunities for me to master the basic skills I needed to be a teacher.
 - o My teacher preparation program prepared me to be effective in the classroom in my first year of teaching.