

Enhancing Teacher Quality through Improved Policy

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Texas public schools have a student population of over 5 million of which more than 60% are classified as economically disadvantaged. Of the 8500+ campuses in the state, over 7,000 are designated by the U S Department of Education as having a high concentration of low-income families. We know from a deep body of research that teaching quality influences student success. Preparing and retaining a strong supply of highly effective teachers, then, is one of Texas' most critical public workforce issues. The quality and effectiveness of public school teachers profoundly influences the academic, civic and social development of the state's burgeoning student population, and it can be argued that cultivation of a competent and caring teacher workforce for Texas schools is a linchpin for economic prosperity and a high standard of living for all Texans.

Currently, students seeking secondary or all-level certification in university settings are limited in the hours allowed for their pedagogical preparation due to Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and State Board for Educator Certification requirements. Current laws and requirements for Secondary and/or All-Level Initial Teacher Certification require that degree programs have the following characteristics.:

REQUIREMENT:	AGENCY	LAW/REGULATION:
<p>General Requirements</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No More than 120 semester credit hours of coursework 2. 42-48 SCH of core curriculum courses 3. 18 SCH of education coursework or 24 SCH if field based, including student teaching 4. Either an academic discipline major or an interdisciplinary major EPP shall provide 300 clock hours of coursework and/or training. Minimum of 30 clock-hours of field experience (15 which may be electronic), and 80 clock-hours of coursework and training. 	<p>State Board for Educator Certification and Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board</p>	<p>Multiple</p>
<p>Reading Requirements</p> <p>Minimum of 3 SCH of upper-division coursework in reading for 8-12 and EC-12 programs</p>	<p>State Board for Educator Certification</p>	<p>TAC 228.30-(b)(1)</p>
<p>Instruction, detection and education of students with dyslexia</p>		<p>Multiple</p>
<p>Instruction in detection of students with mental health, substance abuse, and youth suicide prevention</p>		<p>TEC 21.044(c-1)</p>
<p>Code of ethics and standard practices for educators</p>	<p>State Board for Educator Certification</p>	<p>TAC Chapter 247</p>
<p>The skills and competencies in the Texas teacher standards which include: a) instructional planning and delivery; b) knowledge of students and student learning; c) content knowledge and expertise; d) learning environments; e) data-driven practice; and f) professional practices and responsibilities.</p>	<p>Texas Education Agency</p>	<p>TAC Chapter 149</p>

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Additionally, educator preparation programs are expected to teach:

1. the skills that educators are required to possess, the responsibilities that educators are required to accept, and the high expectations for students in the state;
2. the effect of supply and demand forces on the educator workforce in the state;
3. the importance of building strong classroom management skills; and
4. the framework in this state for teacher and principal evaluations.

Translating State Requirements to Degree Reality

As one considers the importance of well-prepared educators in Texas, the research articulating features of exemplary teacher education programs must be correlated with educator preparation requirements for Texas. As several have summarized the crucial nature of high quality teachers as a factor of student success and learning, researchers seek to understand characteristics of effective teacher preparation programs to identify a common set of empirically-substantiated features. Importantly, research suggests that well-defined standards with respect to needed content and pedagogical knowledge as well as in licensing requirements have association with a variety of positive program participant outcomes. Critically, successful programs also have a coherence that forms a common vision to guide curriculum and practice. Thus, effective preparation programs include strong and integrated opportunities to understand children, learning, teaching, content, and how to teach content. As it relates to university-based STEM teacher educator programs, Ruggirello and Balcerzak conclude in their study of one such program that the challenges of STEM teaching demand that institutions apply “a new model of teaching and learning derived from a collaboration across multiple stakeholders, embedded in day-to-day instructional lives of teachers, and designed to address the challenges of progressing toward authentic STEM teaching”.

While findings are mixed at the level of detailed implementation, in particular length of experience, research nonetheless consistently identifies the essential nature of a quality clinical experience as part of the teacher preparation program. As described by Darling-Hammond (2007), such efforts are importantly enhanced when novice teachers are given opportunities to take coursework concurrent with fieldwork. Good programs additionally provide opportunities to confront negative or stereotyped beliefs about children and learning. Finally establishing and maintaining productive relationships with schools has been empirically identified as essential.

What can be done?

When examining the research on features of exemplary educator preparation curricula and intersecting these findings with the Texas requirements for students in university programs seeking secondary or all-level certification areas, it is clear that there are improvements that need to be made. A major area of concern is the limited time in which university prepared students seeking secondary and all-level certifications have to develop pedagogical knowledge. Currently, in order to cover the full curriculum, programs require up to 139 hours. In the context of the more typical 120 hour degree, this discourages secondary preparation in the states 4-year colleges and universities. This impacts areas where there are state-wide shortages, such as in STEM fields, Spanish, and Special Education. The following points provide potential strategies for addressing the concerns related to the university-based preparation of secondary and all-level teachers in Texas.

- Help legislatures understand and use research that documents the amount of material and the amount of time (coursework) available to gain proficiency in all areas related to effective teaching.
- Promote integrated models of teacher education in which core, content, and education courses are designed to support meaningful incorporation of content knowledge with pedagogical knowledge. In particular, for prospective teachers, upper division courses could be co-constructed by education and content faculty that combine deep mastery of subject area content, knowledge about how learners master the content, and evidence-based pedagogical practice. These collaborations would allow transformation within a true four year program.

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- Request that Secondary and All-Level students have the opportunity to engage in sufficient coursework enabling students to gain expertise in the subject area along with gaining needed pedagogical knowledge. In the memo from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency from Oct. 1994, it was stated that these programs must not require more than 139 SCH for both the degree and initial teacher certification. As described above, we believe that every effort should be made to leverage opportunities to create meaningful educational opportunities within the more typical four-year degree plan, but in cases where needed, we would ask that secondary and all level students have this opportunity to take up to 139 credits without penalties that might include increased tuition rates, decrease or discontinuation of aid support, etc.
 - Provide secondary and all-level students an opportunity to count well-supported teaching opportunities emphasizing good pedagogical practice at the university (e.g., working in labs/tutoring centers in lower-division courses) within their academic area as a method of earning credit in their academic major. This would allow students to gain experience in teaching the content with learners similar to secondary students.

The students in Texas deserve teachers so well prepared from their teacher education programs that they make an immediate and positive impact on student learning. There is significant work to be done for this to happen and only by careful examination can we not only mend but transform Texas' teacher education system.

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