



Written Testimony Regarding Cost Drivers and Cost Efficiencies

Submitted to the Select Committee on School Finance Weights, Allotments & Adjustments

April 22, 2010

Creating an optimal learning environment for all Texans in the public education system from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade should be the state's top education goal. The development, recruitment and retention of the nation's highest quality educator work force is the state's most effective and efficient means of accomplishing this goal. As such, educational policy decisions including the structure of the school finance system should be aligned to accomplish this priority. In addition to supporting a fully funded state and federal public education system for every student, ATPE recommends that the state base its school finance system on financial accountability measures and specifically allocate state and local funds for mandates that enhance the learning environment, effective program weights for special populations and all grade levels and competitive educator compensation and benefits.

Programs that ATPE strongly supports include the following:

- **A State-Mandated Comprehensive Induction Program**
- **Class Size Limits**
- **Minimum Salary Schedules**
- **State-Regulated Educator Certification**
- **Meaningful Paperwork Reduction**
- **Contracts and Due Process**

Each of these programs contributes to the development, recruitment or retention of high-quality educators and the creation of an optimal learning environment; many also provide, or could provide if implemented, cost savings and efficiencies. The current contract laws, for example, offer stability for educators, campus administrators and students while minimizing the burdens of costly employment litigation for districts. Strong certification standards ensure that beginning practitioners have been 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. Similarly, a statewide comprehensive induction program could not only help ramp up teacher quality among new educators but also help the state avoid the approximately \$500 million per year lost to teacher turnover. A strong minimum salary schedule provides predictable and meaningful salary increases that help encourage potential educators to enter and then remain in the field. Improving both policies and systems to reduce redundancy of data collection and enhance content delivery and accessibility will not only help teachers better manage the education of their individual students but also give them more time to focus on instructional content. Small class sizes not only allow for individualization within the class room, but they also reduce discipline problems that are cited as a major factor in teacher turnover. Please use the following pages as a resource to learn more about each of these important issues or contact ATPE Government Relations at government@atpe.org or 800-777-ATPE (2873) for additional information.



Using Comprehensive Induction Programs Can Reduce Costs and Improve Educational Outcomes

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Mentoring and induction programs are highly effective education-profession recruitment and retention tools that can produce long-term savings following a minimal up-front investment. ATPE supports mandatory state-funded and research-based mentoring and induction programs for beginning educators. ATPE has long recommended that the state compensate mentors and give them sufficient training and resources in order for them to be successful. Research indicates that comprehensive, rigorous induction programs can reduce educator turnover, increase teacher effectiveness and eventually increase student achievement. ATPE believes that the state should expand its efforts to encourage and fund district- and campus- based induction programs for both beginning teachers and those moving to a new subject area or grade level.

- ***It has been estimated that teacher turnover costs the state and school districts more than \$500 million per year.*** By investing in quality induction programs, the state and local school districts stand to save a substantial portion of the yearly education budget through reduced turnover.
- ***Effective induction programs have been proven to reduce teacher turnover and increase student achievement.*** National research has found that comprehensive induction programs are an effective way to increase educator retention and, ultimately, student achievement.
- ***Texas already has a model for state-funded educator induction programs.*** At the state level, Texas began experimenting with mentoring and induction programs with the Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS), a three year pilot program funded through a federal grant. Formal State Board for Educator Certification administration of the program ceased when federal funding ran out and the state failed to fund the program; however, some districts still use TxBESS as a model for local mentoring and induction plans. Texas' Beginning Teacher Induction and Mentoring (BTIM) program was created in 2006. The 2009 evaluation of the program found that participating districts experienced increases in beginning teacher retention by as much as 30 percent. Although BTIM has proven to be successful at increasing teacher retention in some districts, policy reforms may be necessary to maximize the program's effectiveness and increase district participation.



The Benefits of Small Class Size

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Since 1984, state law has imposed a class-size limit of 22:1 in grades K–4, far above what many education experts consider to be an optimal class size of 15:1. Recently, limits on class size have become one of the examples most oft cited by districts of over-burdensome state regulation. However, in light of the considerable flexibility that districts already have with regard to the class-size limit, the arguments that class-size limits are overly burdensome simply do not hold water. The law currently provides a process by which districts can obtain a waiver from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) if extenuating circumstances prevent a campus from complying with the limit. The waiver process is relatively simple; a one page form must be sent to TEA and notification of the waiver must be sent to the parents of students in the affected class. According to reports, TEA has never denied a request for a class-size waiver. ATPE supports reduced class sizes and caseload limitations that are mandated and enforced by the state for all grade levels and instructional settings to allow for optimal learning environments. ATPE also recommends that the state limit abuse of class-size waivers and require full public disclosure of requests for such waivers.

- ***Allowing class size to be averaged on the campus level would effectively stop a typical student from benefiting from class-size reduction.*** Under such a plan, small specialized classes, such as those in IDEA and gifted and talented programs, would be used to offset dramatic increases in the size of traditional classes. Due to the effect of these specialized classes, traditional classes could far exceed current class-size limitations while schools still maintained a campus class-size average of 22 students per teacher.
- ***The benefits of small class size have been well documented and have a lasting effect.*** Research shows that smaller classes benefit all students, regardless of race, location or socioeconomic background, and benefit minority and high poverty students at a greater rate than their peers, helping to eliminate the achievement gap. Studies have shown that students who benefited from smaller classes in early grades were 37-percent less likely to drop out of high school than students in larger classes; 16 percent more of them completed high school on schedule; 36 percent more received an honors diploma; and many were more likely to have taken the ACT or SAT exams. Thus, while class-size limits may require the commitment of additional staffing, they are an investment that pays off.
- ***In addition to research, there is compelling anecdotal evidence supporting the benefits of smaller classes.*** Increased instructional time and individualized attention have been hallmarks of the charter movement. Recently a panel of charter operators testifying before the Senate Education Committee on Best Practices unanimously espoused the benefits of small class size in response to a question on what made their campuses successful. Though not required by state law, many of these campus-level decision makers have chosen to place student learning above cost cutting by maintaining class sizes close to the 15:1 optimal ratio.



Minimum Salary Schedule

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ATPE supports a career compensation and benefits package for all certified, licensed and contracted public school employees that mandates competitive salaries that are equal to or greater than the national average and competitive with private industry. ATPE believes that maintaining a minimum salary schedule is a critical factor in attaining wages for Texas educators that are competitive when compared to teacher salaries in other states and the wages paid in other professions. ATPE also believes that the state salary schedule should provide for step increases over a 30-year period to recognize longevity in the profession. It is not difficult to find veteran educators who have taught for more than 20 years and have reached the top of the current salary schedule. It is a much more rare for an educator to remain in the classroom for more than 30 years. Providing predictable and meaningful salary increases over the entirety of most teachers' careers not only encourages the most experienced educators to stay in the profession but also provides an incentive for prospective educators to enter the profession.

- ***Abandoning the minimum salary schedule would cost the state approximately \$260 million.*** Under the state compensation system for public schools, the state pays for a portion of the contributions going into the Teacher Retirement System (TRS) fund. However, under the current system, the state is only responsible for matching educator contributions for the portion of the educator's salary mandated by the minimum salary schedule. Required contributions on salaries above the minimum salary schedule must be covered by the district. If the state were to abandon the minimum salary schedule, the responsibility for making contributions to TRS for the portion of salaries currently covered by school districts would by default shift to the state, resulting in a yearly cost of approximately \$260 million.
- ***Removing or allowing exemptions to the minimum salary schedule decreases the state's ability to attract and retain quality educators.*** Competitive salary structures are a major determining factor for prospective employees. The minimum salary schedule sets a floor for professional educators' salaries; breaking through that floor would have an eventual effect of lowering average teacher salaries and moving us farther away from reaching the national average. There are approximately 250,000 certified teachers in Texas who are not currently teaching. A primary reason many of these teachers have abandoned the profession is the lack of a long-term competitive compensation structure that compares with the other professions these educators are qualified for.



Educator Certification is a Strong Indicator of Overall Quality

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State law requires school districts to hire certified educators. ATPE supports a state certification process that ensures educators are appropriately trained and certified exclusively by the state. Educator certification candidates need comprehensive pedagogical training, including training on classroom and discipline management, child and adolescent psychology, and methods, along with mandatory coursework in the areas of reading, special education, gifted and talented, ESL and computer literacy education. Teacher preparation programs should be standardized to include policies and practices designed to ensure that new teachers receive adequate mentoring and support. ATPE commends the Legislature and the State Board for Educator Certification for the steps taken in recent years to mandate minimum requirements and increased accountability for educator preparation programs. Nevertheless, strong preparation is not enough; it is essential that we ensure that all students are taught by someone who is certified in that particular field. ATPE believes the state should require districts, through the state accountability system, to assign all certified educators to teach in their certification areas. ATPE also believes the state should require administrators to have at least five years of classroom teaching experience. Any attempts to weaken our state's certification requirements would be harmful to students and might result in non-compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act's Highly Qualified Teacher provisions.

- ***Teachers who have completed the training that leads to certification are more effective than those who have not.*** Current state certification 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 content to be taught and knowledge of how to teach that content to a wide range of learners, as well as the ability to manage a classroom, design and implement instruction, and work skillfully with students, parents and other professionals. Those who hold full certification have been shown to be more effective than other teachers in stimulating student achievement gains in both reading and mathematics over a multi-year period.
- ***Linking teacher shortages to certification is a misconception.*** Removing or reducing certification standards would not make it easier for Texas public schools to recruit and retain teachers. In 2008, SBEC issued initial teaching certificates to 30,124 individuals. There are approximately 250,000 certified teachers in Texas that are not currently teaching. Teacher shortages in Texas reflect the difficulty in retaining, not hiring, qualified educators. Research has shown that nearly half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Our studies and our members have continuously given three reasons for the retention problem: lack of administrative support, student discipline problems and inadequate compensation. If the Legislature is interested in alleviating the teacher shortage, the solution lies in addressing those three issues, *not* in lowering certification standards.



Creating Efficiencies in Paperwork and Reporting Allows for Additional Instructional Time

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With the implementation each year of new education reforms, advances in technology, the availability of an increasing amount of data to drive decisions and evolving accountability systems, educators have seen a steady climb in reporting requirements and other paperwork burdens. ATPE supports meaningful efforts to monitor and control such burdens. These efforts should include eliminating any redundant paperwork requirements that result in inefficiencies, such as requiring the same information to be logged two or more times for different reports or requiring the same information to be logged in both physical and electronic formats.

- ***Excessive paperwork requirements take time away from instructional preparation.*** An educator's work day does not end when her students leave for the day. It is common for a dedicated teacher to arrive at work at 7:30 a.m. and not leave until after 6 p.m; they also often take additional work home. Much of the time spent by educators after students leave the school is spent preparing for the next day's instruction and completing non-instructional paperwork. While paperwork and documentation are a necessary evil, over the last 10 years the state and federal accountability systems' ever-increasing call for student level data has added many hours of time spent on non-instructional paperwork requirements. This steady increase in non-instructional paperwork has decreased the amount of time available to spend on instructional preparation.
- ***Too often the promised efficiencies of technology have not been realized.*** More and more, teachers are being required to file paperwork and enter the same data electronically. Teachers are told that computer data systems will not only provide them with more and better information on the students they were tasked with educating, but also that the systems will reduce the amount of time spent on paperwork. Unfortunately, these benefits have often failed to materialize. Data is often stored too disparately and in non-user-friendly systems. Additionally, many educators have found themselves in the position of having to create both physical copies and electronic versions of the same paperwork, which instead of decreasing the amount of time spent on non-instructional paperwork has dramatically increased the amount of time required for data entry. Some educators are even forced to perform district-mandated computer-related tasks at home because of inadequate technological resources at school.



Contract Rights Benefit Educators, Districts and Students and Minimize Costly Litigation

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There is a common misconception that school districts could save money by simply eliminating educator contracts. ATPE believes the opposite to be true. Not only do contracts benefit educators and their students, but they also provide school districts with a certain level of insulation against costly lawsuits. Accordingly, ATPE supports maintaining current educator contract laws and due process laws regarding teacher assignment, transfer, hiring and dismissal, including requirements for independent hearing examiners.

- ***Contract rights exist to ensure continuity in the classroom.*** One of the roles of a contract is to prevent educators from resigning in the middle of a school year without good cause. Educators risk harsh penalties for contract abandonment, including being sanctioned by the State Board for Educator Certification. Without contracts, the disruptions caused by mid-year resignations and job changes would be highly detrimental to students' learning.
- ***Diminishing teachers' contract rights would result in a substantial increase in costly employment litigation against school districts.*** The current system offers an effective administrative process for dispute resolution. If that system is restructured in such a manner that teachers lose all hope of getting a fair hearing, then more teachers will pursue the alternative of litigation. The majority of school-related wrongful termination claims would end up on crowded court dockets and in protracted Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) proceedings. Districts would be compelled to hire more attorneys, deal with costly and extensive document production, and risk involvement in extremely lengthy cases. An inevitable consequence of this increase in litigation is that liability insurance premiums would rise. Additionally, with such a high risk of costly litigation, every adverse employment action would be subject to intense scrutiny, making it harder for administrators to manage and staff our schools. Contracts benefit both the educator and the school district.
- ***The current nonrenewal process is quick and efficient.*** The nonrenewal process places no additional administrative burdens on school administrators. Since nonrenewal of contracts is based upon incidents that occur during the school year, the teacher's performance should be documented in mandatory appraisals. Nonrenewal requires no more paperwork and investigation than what the principal would already have undertaken in determining whether to renew the teacher's contract in the first place. Proposed nonrenewal notices are sent to teachers February–April, and if all the statutory timelines are followed, nonrenewal hearings can be completed by late May or the first week of June. Thus, a final board vote can occur before school is even out for the year. Ironically, it is often the school district that voluntarily waives the statutory timelines and prolongs the process.
- ***Existing contract laws do not make it unreasonably difficult to remove bad teachers.*** Term contracts, which cover most educators, can be non-renewed for virtually any reason, as long as the district's cited reason is not specifically illegal. In this sense, the nonrenewal standards are no higher

than the standards for termination of at-will employees. It is absolutely possible to get rid of a low-performing teacher.

- ***Diminishing teachers' contract rights does not correlate to improved student instruction.*** The suggestion that Texas' classrooms are widely staffed by bad teachers has not been backed up by statistics. Subsequent to the adoption of rigorous accountability standards, both the number of schools exemplary and recognized ratings, as well as overall TAKS passage rates, have risen consistently. Surely these numbers have some correlation to the quality of instruction under the current system.