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Surveys show factors in high school success

By: Claire Reynolds

Posted: 11/1/07

A larger class size does not negatively affect student performance in high school math and science classes, according to research conducted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The public schools with the best performance records in the fields of math and science had larger class sizes than the state average, said Jamie Story, an education policy analyst with the foundation.

Researchers from the foundation wrapped up their research project Wednesday after two years of conducting surveys and various research projects to determine possible methods for improving math and science proficiency in Texas high schools.

According to their research, the top performing public schools in the areas of math and science, called the "best practice high schools," pay their teachers more than the average Texas high school.

"Teacher quality is the largest in-school determinate in determining success," Story said at a briefing Wednesday at the foundation's headquarters. "If larger class size allows you to hire better teachers, that could actually help achievement," she said.

Two education policy analysts at the event briefed a list of recommendations to a small audience of media, textbook publishers and a state department official.

Almost all of these reform recommendations can be implemented by schools right now and don't require legislative mandates, Story said.

Brooke Terry, another education policy analyst, said another concern is that students who receive a high school diploma may not be ready for college.

"Last year, 35 percent of all freshmen at Texas public higher education institutions had to enroll in at least one remedial education course because they were unprepared for college-level work in math, reading or writing," she said.

Many middle-schoolers who take an advanced math or science course in eighth grade can skip taking those classes their senior year of high school. Counselors should encourage students to take these courses their senior year because it will be harder for them once they get to college if they do not, Terry said.

The foundation said there continues to be a shortage of math and science teachers in Texas, which often means out-of-field teachers are instructing courses in fields in which they are not specialized.

The analysts recommended that state lawmakers abolish the statewide minimum salary schedule in order to help the shortage problem.

They said school districts should reward excellent teachers and offer hiring bonuses and yearly shortage stipends to attract and retain teachers.

"If they are that excellent, let's pay them what they are worth," Story said. "The salary schedule does not allow for that."

The reformation of alternative teacher certification was also an important topic of discussion.

Terry said she recommends making it easier for qualified professionals with college degrees and plentiful industry experience to get a teaching certificate.

She said their research found that many retired professionals from math and science fields are interested in becoming teachers but often become less motivated because the process is difficult and expensive.

Their study of Texas public high schools, which took economic factors into consideration, also showed that the best practice high schools benchmark their students for the Texas Assessment Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test fewer than three times a year while average Texas public schools implement more than twice as much TAKS test benchmarking.

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