

Teacher Effectiveness in Texas

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Recommendations

- Emphasize Field Qualifications
- Encourage Alternative Certification
- Emphasize Teacher and Student Performance
- Reform Teacher Pay
- Empower Administrators to Improve their Schools

Executive Summary

A number of factors contribute to teaching excellence. While some, such as a student's parental support during their school years, cannot easily be affected by policymakers, others such as teacher effectiveness can.

Teacher effectiveness is acknowledged by many experts as "the most critical school-based factor contributing to student learning, especially for low-income and minority students."¹ However, how precisely to measure teacher effectiveness is subject to some debate, as a number of factors can influence the learning quality in a classroom on a day-to-day basis.

Part of the reason teacher effectiveness is so difficult to measure is the wide variety of external factors that can influence a teacher's classroom setting. For example, a teacher in a small school with few discipline problems may have an easier time getting his or her students to perform than a teacher working with a large, unruly student body. Therefore, approaches to measuring teacher effectiveness must be fitted to each particular situation, though there are measures that can be applied generally.

This paper will examine several metrics that have been proposed and/or are currently being employed to measure teaching excellence, and how those measures could be used most effectively in Texas.

What Does an Effective Teacher Look Like?

Research indicates that the best teachers are well prepared and excellent at engaging their students. While some aspects of effective teaching are inherent in people and beyond the purview of policy to develop, Texas lawmakers must understand what makes for effective teaching and, in turn, make sure that they are not enacting policies that will hinder educational excellence.

Strong Course Design

It should come as no surprise that the first step in effective teaching is effective course planning. With a growing body of research centered on how students learn most effectively, instructors have a strong resource pool to draw from when it comes time to plan their classes.

The benefits are numerous. Lesson planning allows teachers to visualize their lessons and improve engagement with students (more on that will be explained in the subsequent section). Additionally, teachers who plan their lessons well are able to assess precisely what tactics they have used in the past are effective in producing strong outcomes in their students.

However, preparation is just that: preparation. The classroom environment itself is the most important element in effective teaching.

Strong Student/Teacher Interaction

Strong student/teacher interaction is a vital element of effective teaching. K-12 education obviously covers a broad age range, and thus some things that might make, say, a strong high school or collegiate instructor would apply less to lower grade levels. Several elements of strong teaching, however, should be applicable at every level.

Clearly defined academic standards and student expectations give learners a mark to work for, and provide a back bone for the teacher's interaction with their students. These standards can also serve to motivate students, which is another key element in good student/teacher interaction. Students motivated to learn will do so more effectively, thus a good teacher should work to motivate their students when possible. Students should be encouraged to participate in the learning process as much as possible.

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Every classroom is different. Some teachers may find themselves faced with discipline problems or students with specific needs for their learning environment. However, what is clear is that effective teaching involves strong student/teacher interaction through good motivation, clear communication, and active student participation.²

Engagement

Research indicates that perhaps beyond any other one factor, a teacher who produces strong student engagement has the most positive, direct effect on education outcomes. Richard D. Jones, a Senior Consultant at the International Center for Leadership in Education, outlines a number of means by which a teacher can increase engagement from their students, most of which center on the concept of creating a learning environment students want to participate in. This can involve elements that are literally physical (Jones states that research shows a comfortable, welcoming classroom is more likely to produce engaged students), or a teacher's entire approach to dealing with what is likely a highly diverse student population:

Each student brings a unique set of characteristics to the classroom: different background knowledge, a unique learning style, a variety of interests, and varied parental support and expectations. To anticipate that each student will learn in the same way, at the same speed, and using the same material is an unrealistic expectation.³

Indeed, what Jones stresses above any other over-arching theme in his report is that teachers and schools must have the ability and willingness to tailor their education model to the needs of their specific students. This does not fall entirely on the educators themselves; as much is also a partial responsibility of the school's administrators, and even the students' parents.⁴ At no point does he suggest that state or federal government should prescribe a rule set by which teachers should teach effectively, and this is an important

consideration to take into account when considering education policy for Texas. If we are to expect excellence from our educators, we must allow them the ability to attain excellence without government constraining them.

Expectations

At the end of the day, the most telltale sign of an effective teacher are the learning outcomes they produce. That is to say, are their students achieving at a rate they should be? The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards produced a lengthy report on student achievement as a metric for effective teaching. The report is careful to acknowledge that there are many factors that can affect the way that students respond to a given teacher, and outlines a number of recommendations for measuring student outcomes. These involve making sure that standards for teacher effectiveness are clear on what the teacher was expected to deliver, take into account that a teacher's student body may be highly diverse, and provide evidence that teacher practice had a direct impact on student performance.⁵

Texas' newly implemented STAAR tests, which are replacing the previous Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) are designed to "be significantly more rigorous than previous tests and will measure a child's performance, as well as academic growth."⁶ While testing is not the only measure by which strong teaching is assessed, implementation of higher accountability standards with stronger growth metrics are a strong move at the state level to encourage quality teaching in Texas.

Encouraging Effective Teaching

Creating a Competitive Workplace

For effective teaching to flourish on a large scale, Texas must allow school districts to enact policies to encourage strong teaching. That means more flexible personnel laws so that administrators have the ability to incentivize the development of strong teaching, reward effective educators, as well as the ability to dismiss ineffective instructors.

In the traditional sense of the term, Texas does not have pure teacher tenure. What the state does offer are three types of teacher contracts: continuing contracts, term contracts, and probationary contracts. Continuing contracts are only offered by a very small percentage of school districts, but are the closest the state comes to actually offering tenure, as the contracts can only be voided by a teacher's retirement, resignation, or lawful dismissal.

Probationary contracts are generally given to teachers new to the profession, or in some cases teachers that are new to a school district. They carry many of the same rights and privileges of the other two types of contracts, but are given for a much shorter term and are designed to end with either the teacher's termination, or the granting of a term contract.

Term contracts are the most frequently granted brand of teacher contract in Texas. According to the Texas State Classroom Teachers Association, term contracts stretch for a certain amount of time, usually one to two years, although it is legal to grant longer term contracts than that, per the Texas Education Code.⁷ The nature of these contracts is what makes it so difficult to dismiss ineffective contract employees. When an administrator wishes to dismiss a teacher, they must first give substantial notice. There is then a lengthy appeals process for contract employees to go through if they wish to fight the dismissal. This all contributes to an inefficient environment when it comes to personnel decisions in public schools.

In a 2009 study, Brooke Dollens Terry of the Texas Public Policy Foundation noted the danger of long-term teacher contracts to the state's public education system:

Teacher tenure is a terrible policy for both students and teachers. In many states, including Texas, most teachers are given a teaching contract by a school district after just three years of teaching. These contracts can be for one year, three years, five years, ten years, indefinitely, or any other time frame as the school district sees it. Giving teachers multi-year contracts or continuing contracts can prevent administrators from managing personnel to suit the school's needs for that particular year. In practice, teacher contracts are similar to tenure in that the teachers are essentially guaranteed a job for the rest of their career as it is extremely rare not to renew a teacher's contract. Burdensome documentation requirements, red tape, local politics, and multiple levels of appeal make it next to impossible for principals and superintendents to dismiss a teacher for poor performance, incompetence, or misconduct in a timely manner.⁸

In addition to the problems with the practice of some districts in granting long-term contracts, state law also interferes with the ability of districts to make personnel decisions that lead to the best teachers being in the classroom.

Teacher compensation plays a strong roll in encouraging effective teaching. Specifically, teachers must be compensated in a manner that incentivizes strong performance, rather than compensated in a manner that only rewards longevity.

As a result of the difficulties in dismissing an underperforming teacher, a number of Texas school districts have extremely low dismissal rates. From 2001 to 2006, Arlington ISD dismissed two teachers, for a dismissal rate of 0.01 percent. Fort Worth ISD dismissed a total of four teachers during that same time span, for a dismissal rate of 0.02 percent. Cy-Fair, one of the state's largest school districts, dismissed one teacher from 2001 to 2006, for a dismissal rating of 0.004 percent.⁹

It should be noted that during the 82nd Texas Legislature, at the behest of the Texas Association of School Administrators and the Texas Association of School Boards, the Legislature made some adjustments to the teacher dismissal process in the form of SB 8. SB 8 allowed school districts to furlough teachers and reduce the contract termination notification period from 45 days prior to the end of the school year to 10 days prior to the end of the school year.¹⁰ The impact of these changes will be determined over the course of the next biennium, but Texas still has room to improve in the manner it runs the business side of its classrooms.

Teacher Compensation

Teacher compensation plays a strong roll in encouraging effective teaching. Specifically, teachers must be compensated in a manner that incentivizes strong performance, rather than compensated in a manner that only rewards longevity. In Texas, the latter is the more predominant model. State law mandates a "minimum salary schedule," and dictates that a teacher must be paid a threshold amount each year. This amount increases annually per the teacher's experience level. Since 1995, there have been 20 steps on Texas' salary education ladder, which essentially creates a minimum wage at which teachers and other contract employees must at least be compensated.¹¹

The idea behind merit pay is to move away from tenure or other forms of guaranteed employment as the central benefit of the teaching profession, and move toward a system where teachers have greater opportunity to have their own excellence rewarded.

The central problem with salary schedules is that they reward strong teachers and ineffective teachers identically. By creating such a wage scale, the state is creating a thoroughly non-competitive pay model for its districts to implement. Most ISDs in Texas actually pay comfortably above the minimum salary schedule set by the state, but still use their own scale that operates under the same general principle.

In his 2007 paper, “The Single Salary Schedule and Other Issues of Teacher Pay,” Eric Hanushek outlines a number of limitations that the practice of paying teachers based only on a “schedule” places on the profession, as well as the long-term impact such pay scales have had on teacher quality, perhaps most significantly that such pay scales limit teacher turnover:

Increasing compensation of all teachers would provide incentives for both high- and low-quality teachers to enter and remain in the profession and would cut down teacher turnover, but this also lessens the possibilities to bring in newer, and better, teachers.¹²

Hanushek also states that non-competitive pay scales have potentially led to a lowering of the quality of professionals that enter the teaching field, noting that such salary schedules seriously limit the earning potential of everyone in the profession. Further, these salary scales could have a potentially negative impact on student achievement, as there is no incentive for teachers to get their students to perform better in an environment that compensates them based purely on experience. Hanushek says that for teacher salary structures to be effective, this trend must be altered:

The key to an effective teacher salary program must be funding that follows those who improve student per-

formance. If the objective is improving student academic achievement, there is no substitute for policies that directly relate to student outcomes.¹³

An environment, then, where competition is encouraged is once again vital to teaching excellence. Teachers must be measured at least partially by the outcomes of their students, and their pay needs to be at least partially tied to that performance, rather than simply granting said teacher a raise every year, regardless of merit.

One means of increasing teacher effectiveness and accountability that has been debated, attempted, abandoned, and tried again in several states is paying teachers based on performance. The idea behind merit pay is to move away from tenure or other forms of guaranteed employment as the central benefit of the teaching profession, and move toward a system where teachers have greater opportunity to have their own excellence rewarded.

Texas’ D.A.T.E. (District Awards for Teaching Excellence) was the state’s most recent attempt to move away from compensating teachers based solely on the state’s minimum salary schedule. While the thought process behind the program was sound, it was entirely voluntary in nature, and not entirely efficient in the manner it distributed its funds:

At least 60 percent of the grant funds will be used to reward teachers and principals who positively impact student academic improvement, growth, and/or achievement. The remaining percent of funds may be used for other allowable activities including stipends and awards for identified teachers, principals, mentors, instructional coaches, and master teachers. In addition, these funds may be used for professional development, increasing local data capabilities to support instruction and accountability, and implementing elements of the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP).

The second half of the description highlights the fact that not all of the money for the program went toward rewarding excellent teaching. It is possible that this limited the long-term stability of the program, particularly given that independent studies showed the program to be extremely effective in a number of respects.

Matthew Springer, director for Vanderbilt University’s National Center for Performance Incentives, pointed out that not only did students in D.A.T.E. schools test at a higher level

through the first two years of the program's implementation, but teacher retention rates were much better at schools that participated in the program. His co-author, Lori Taylor, a professor at Texas A&M University, stated that "Teachers who received a D.A.T.E. award were much less likely to turn over than those who did not, and the size of the award received by a teacher was less important than the fact that the teacher received any award at all."

The greater retention rate likely stems at least partially from the fact that teachers participating in the program enjoyed the opportunity to earn merit pay: "Teachers in D.A.T.E. schools also held relatively positive views of the incentive pay plans operating in their schools. "More often than not, teachers believed the incentive pay plans were fair and the goals targeted by the plans were acceptable," Springer said.

What we should take from this, however, is not that Texas should reinstate D.A.T.E. itself. What the teachers are responding to is not the nature of the program itself, but the fundamental concept of being paid and rewarded based on excellence. Texas does not need a special program for this, but rather a salary structure in this state that is sufficiently flexible to compensate teachers based on their abilities in the classroom and the needs of the market, rather than duration in the profession, as previously stated.

Teacher Qualifications

The previous two sections of this paper have highlighted problems with both the retention practices and pay scales for public educators in Texas. However, to truly get the absolute best people into the teaching profession, we must examine how our hiring practices work. Getting the most effective teachers into the classroom starts with ensuring that we are bringing the most capable and qualified *individuals* into our classrooms. With this should come an adjustment of how we assess an individual as "qualified."

First of all, it bears mentioning that teacher certification, which Texas requires of all its professional educators, does not necessarily reflect on an individual's ability to instruct in front of a classroom. In her 2009 paper, "Shortchanging Our Kids: How Poor Teacher Quality & Failed Government Policies Harm Students," Brooke Dollens Terry noted that education researcher Kate Walsh points to a disconnect between certification and quality:

The theory that teacher certification leads to high quality teaching is based more on what we think ought

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to be true (shouldn't coursework in pedagogy and educational methods create better teachers? Shouldn't teachers have to go through education school, just as lawyers go to law school and doctors go to medical school?) than on controlled experimentation. It is a leap of faith taken without the benefit of supporting evidence. The evidence, it turns out, is astonishingly deficient.¹⁴

In other words, getting training as an educator might not be as valuable as a knowledge base in the pertinent instruction area. Certification processes can limit opportunities for such individuals. Thomas Fordham, in his report on acquiring strong teachers entitled, "The Teachers We Need and How to Get More of Them: A Manifesto," claimed that the best way to get the best individuals into the classroom was to widen the entryway into the profession:

"... regulatory strategy being pursued today to boost teacher quality is seriously flawed. Every additional requirement for prospective teachers—every additional pedagogical course, every new hoop or hurdle—will have a predictable and inexorable effect: it will limit the supply of teachers by narrowing the pipeline while having no bearing whatever on the quality or effectiveness of those in the pipeline ... a better solution to the teacher quality problem is to simplify the entry and hiring process. Get rid of most hoops and hurdles. Instead of requiring a long list of courses and degrees, test future teachers for their knowledge and skills. Allow principals to hire the teachers they need."

This is the best way to ensure that people with the maximum potential to be quality educators are in front of the classroom. For example, a former engineer who takes on teaching as a second career might prove to be an excellent math

SIDE BAR: “Race to the Top”

While Texas does not participate in Race to the Top, their role in the national conversation on teacher effectiveness is worth mentioning. The agenda below represents their vision of what states should be doing to get effective teachers into the classroom. Not all of these measures are necessarily good fits for Texas education, but their encouragement of alternative certification pathways is at least something of which Texas, as well as other states, should take note.

Race to the Top Draft Criteria: Effective Teachers and Leaders

<p>State Reform Conditions Criteria: A state’s past progress in creating conditions for reform (particularly routes in addition to institutions of higher education)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide alternative pathways into K-12 schools for teachers and principals
<p>Reform Plan Criteria: A state’s plans for future efforts to advance reform that take into account student growth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate teacher and principal effectiveness using multiple rating categories • Use this information when making decisions regarding evaluation, development, compensation, promotion, tenure and dismissal • Ensure an equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals in high-poverty schools and hard-to-staff subjects • Report the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs (based on the achievement of students taught by their graduates) • Provide effective support to teachers and principal

Note: The criteria above reflect the draft guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education in July 2009.

instructor, maybe even a stronger one than an individual who graduates with a degree in education. Naturally, there should still be some form of certification process to ensure that educators can at least demonstrate the ability to convey their knowledge to a classroom. However, that process should be made as easy as possible to encourage new, highly knowledgeable instructors to enter the profession. (*See Side-bar: “Race to the Top” above.*)

Where Texas Stands Today—and Where Texas Needs to Be

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) produces an annual report on state performance in quality teaching. The 2011 study did not show many positives for the Lone Star State; currently, Texas ranks 36th nationally in overall teacher quality. The report divides quality teaching into five key policy areas, and Texas has room to improve in all of them.

Delivering Effective Teachers

The first of the policy areas is entitled “Delivering Effective Teachers,” and one of their critiques stands directly in line

with non-competitive practices discussed earlier in this paper—the fact that Texas simply does not put enough emphasis on subject specific teacher preparation:

Although most secondary teachers must pass a content test to teach a core subject area, some secondary science and social studies teachers are not required to pass content tests for each discipline they intend to teach.¹⁵

It should be noted that reform in this policy area is more applicable to secondary level teachers; elementary and middle school educators obviously require a more generalized knowledge base in most cases, and may be less likely to have come from another professional background.

Recommendation: Emphasize Field Qualifications

Fundamentally, Texas’ teacher certification requirements place more emphasis on the process of getting certified to teach than they do upon making sure that, for example, a math teacher has a strong background in mathematics. The state should make two changes to its certification process:

- First, alter its certification requirements for new and in-experienced teachers to emphasize a demonstration of high level ability in the teacher's given area of focus.
- Second, for professionals with substantial experience in their field who are moving into the teaching profession, reduce certification requirements to expedite their placement in the classroom. Potential hassles of red tape should not be a deterrent for highly qualified individuals who are interested in taking their knowledge into the classroom.
- Annual evaluations for all teachers are not required.
- Tenure decisions are not connected to evidence of teacher effectiveness.
- Licensure advancement and renewal are not based on teacher effectiveness.
- Little school-level data are reported that can help support the equitable distribution of teacher talent.

Expanding Texas' Teacher Pool

The second area in which Texas needs to improve per NCTQ is in its teacher pool. In many respects, they rate this as an area of strength for Texas, particularly in regards to how easy it is for out of state teachers to become certified to teach in Texas. Their critiques center on the fact that Texas' routes to alternative teacher certification (certifying a teacher by a route other than going through the higher education system to become one) are "insufficiently selective" with the individuals they choose to prepare for the classroom.¹⁶ This is not a strong recommendation for Texas, as it would serve to increase barriers to entering the education system.

Recommendation: Encourage Alternative Certification

Though Texas already supplies means beyond the traditional route through the state's universities to becoming an educator, this is still an area in which the state could improve. Enacting policy that opens up the certification process as much as possible, including the encouragement of private provider participation in this arena, will enhance competition in the public education system. Doing as much will encourage all providers to produce highly qualified individuals who are ready to step into Texas classrooms as strong educators.

Identifying Effective Teachers

Many of the non-competitive practices covered earlier in this paper regarding how Texas compensates and retains teachers affect this arena. NCTQ has six critiques of Texas in this arena that has merit:

- The state data system does not have the capacity to provide evidence of teacher effectiveness.
- Objective evidence of student learning is not the preponderant criterion of teacher evaluations.
- Ineffective classroom performance is not grounds for dismissal, and tenured teachers who are dismissed have multiple opportunities to appeal.

Recommendation: Emphasize Teacher & Student Performance

Assuring that the state has a means for assessing teachers based on student performance must be handled carefully. Every student population is different, and an approach that emphasizes accountability for educators at the local level would be more effective and less expensive than one which relied on administration by the Texas Education Agency as a whole.

Retaining Effective Teachers

More than anything, this is where Texas must address the manner in which it compensates its teachers. The state's salary schedule is specifically critiqued here by NCTQ as a hindrance to the retention of quality teachers. However, they also point to the fact that Texas provides limited support and training to entry-level teachers, creating an environment in which there are, for many schools, few effective teachers to retain.

Recommendation: Reform Teacher Pay

Texas should eliminate the state minimum salary schedule and hold schools accountable for low-performing teachers. Districts should replace salary schedules and term contracts with decisions about pay and retention being based on teacher and student performance.

Ineffective Teachers

NCTQ has multiple critiques of Texas' educator exit policies, two of which are particularly troubling:

- The state could do more to make eligibility for dismissal a clear consequence of multiple unsatisfactory evaluations.
- Ineffective classroom performance is not grounds for dismissal, and tenured teachers who are dismissed have multiple opportunities to appeal.

These two critiques are particularly troubling. Though Texas has made some inroads in this area during the previous legislative session (SB 8, for example, reduced the notice a teacher must receive when their contract is being terminated from 45 days before the school year ends to 10 days before), there is still a lot of room to grow.¹⁷

Recommendation: Empower Administrators to Improve their Schools

Texas needs to make it easier for school districts to remove ineffective teachers from the classroom. The state does not allow for classic “teacher tenure,” and therefore does not face as severe a problem in this area as other states do.¹⁸ However, more empowerment at the local level, particularly of principals that see their teachers operate on a day-to-day basis, will allow for much greater flexibility in holding poor educators accountable for their performance. Allowing school districts greater ability in this area would not only be cost effective (the appeals process for a teacher once their contract is terminated is lengthy and expensive) than the current system, but would allow school districts to make room for new educators to get in front of the classroom, rather than simply retaining an ineffective one for several years due to force of habit.

Endnotes

¹ Achieve, “Teacher Effectiveness.”

² “Strong Student Teacher Interactions,” Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Georgia.

³ Richard D. Jones, “Strengthening Student Engagement,” International Center for Leadership in Education.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Student Learning, Student Achievement: How Do Teachers Measure Up?,” National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

⁶ Texas Education Agency, “STAAR To Replace TAKS” (26 Jan. 2010).

⁷ Texas State Teachers Association, “Rights Under Types of Contracts.”

⁸ Brooke Dollens Terry, “Short Changing Our Kids: How Poor Teacher Quality and Failed Government Policies Harm Students,” Texas Public Policy Foundation (Oct. 2009) 6.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Thanh Tan, “Sine Die Report: What Survived, What Died,” *The Texas Tribune* (26 June 2011)

¹¹ Supra Note 8, pg. 8.

¹² Eric Hanushek, “The Single Salary Schedule and Other Issues of Teacher Pay,” *Peabody Journal of Education* (Fall 2007) 581.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brooke Dollens Terry, “Short Changing Our Kids: How Poor Teacher Quality and Failed Government Policies Harm Students,” Texas Public Policy Foundation (Oct. 2009) 8-9.

¹⁵ “2011 State Policy Yearbook: Texas,” National Council on Teacher Quality (2011).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Senate Bill 8, 82nd Texas Legislature (2011).

¹⁸ Supra Note 15.

Conclusion

Getting more effective educators into Texas is a process that needs to start immediately. The first steps will need to take place in the Legislature; Texas has a number of policies in place that discourage competition in the state’s public education system and with the loss of competition, there is little incentive for teaching excellence. Once that occurs, local school districts must take it upon themselves to hold educators accountable to both their schools and students. This will require enough freedom from government regulation to, above all else, reward excellent teachers and remove ineffective ones from the system.

This may take some time. As this paper alludes to, identifying what makes a teacher excellent can be a difficult process, and any assessment that takes place should be careful to evenly account for every available metric that might be affecting a teacher’s performance. However, as it stands, Texas’ educator accountability system is nowhere near as strong as it should be. Among a number of other education initiatives for 2013, this one must be near the top of the Texas Legislature’s list. ★

