Testimony before the Texas Senate Committee on Education

by Emily Sass, Policy Analyst

Chairman Taylor and Members:

My name is Emily Sass, and I am the K-12 education policy analyst for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. It's a pleasure to be here with you today.

This interim charge is animated by a noble goal: by eliminating unnecessary regulations, to free schools, districts, and teachers to pursue new solutions and operate more efficiently. A commonly suggested solution to the problem of increasing mandates simply says that more money is needed to implement them. This might be a solid plan if all mandates produced nothing but excellent results with no adverse side effects and if money were infinite. Since neither of those statements are true, however, the best solution is to routinely reassess and streamline the state's priorities in regulating education and to evaluate mandates in light of those priorities. It is very easy to add one small tweak and justify it as creating a minimal burden. But multiple small tweaks added every session in perpetuity can quickly result in a serious burden on staff, resources, and time.

As a member of the mandate relief workgroup and chair of the subgroup on teacher quality, I have appreciated the chance to discuss mandates on education with a wide range of stakeholders. Many people think of district-level regulations when education mandates are mentioned. Schools, teachers, educator preparation programs, and (most importantly) students are also affected. Two recommendations came out of the subgroup on teacher quality:

1. To consolidate four virtually identical grant programs into one, and
2. To combine and clarify reporting requirements for educator preparation programs.

The first would save several pages of code and allow funding flexibility in offering teacher stipends for hard-to-staff subjects; the second should ensure that information is reported in a more streamlined, productive way. Both items had their original mention in the TEA Strategic Plan.

These changes are only the beginning of what could be done. Another mandate that has outlived its use and had a dubious impact on teacher quality is the minimum salary schedule. Admitted to be almost entirely obsolete in practice, it still sets the standard for how teachers are paid in Texas, a stairstepped system that bases teacher compensation increases on years of experience and degrees attained. Research has consistently shown that years of teaching experience, beyond the first few, and advanced degrees held by teachers bear no correlation with the actual value that teachers bring to a classroom. According to Dr. Lori Taylor of the Bush School at Texas A&M, there have been over 100 studies examining whether a master's degree makes a difference in academic performance; "only nine … say anything positive at all."

It is possible that mandating this system of teacher pay is even hurting the quality of the profession.

According to McKinsey and Company, 23 percent of new teachers were in the top third of their college classes, compared to 100 percent in high-performing nations such as Finland, South Korea, and Singapore. The percentage of college freshmen intending to major in education has hovered between 5 and 4 percent in the past few years. Among students in the top third of their classes not going into education, the top two statements about

teaching they did not agree with were "If I were to do well in this job, it would be rewarded financially," and "This job pays appropriately for the skills and effort I would bring."

I was one of the 23 percent, and a plus-one to the 4 percent. I was a National Merit Scholar and graduated *summa cum laude*; I had planned on teaching since I was 7 years old, pretending to teach a musical instrument I didn't even know how to play to a "classroom" of my younger sister and stuffed animals. I was ambitious and passionate about helping children learn. But a few years out of college, I switched careers. There were several reasons I did so, but one defining moment for me was looking at a computer screen as I sat on the couch researching teacher pay and realizing that, no matter how I performed and no matter how hard I worked, I would only get paid what a chart said I was supposed to get paid. My future was written for me.

Mandates should have a proven track record of minimizing harm without creating a barrier to innovation and improvement in order to stand. The minimum pay schedule system likely breaks both goals. Dr. Michael McShane wrote recently, "Removing unnecessary regulations is not evil. Promulgating useless regulations is not good." I look forward to continuing to assist however possible in your task of removing unnecessary regulations. ✮

Emily Sass is the K-12 policy analyst with TPPF's Center for Innovation in Education. Before coming to the Foundation, Emily was on Senator Ted Cruz's state staff as deputy regional director for North Texas, serving as the senator's liaison on all policy topics to a 14-county region. She has previously worked as staff in the Texas House of Representatives and on multiple campaigns.

A trained classical musician and former teacher, Emily holds a bachelor of arts in music from Thomas Edison State University. She has also volunteered as elected leadership for Patriot Academy, a national conference in conservative policy and leadership for high school, college, and graduate students, helping expand the program across the country.

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