

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY,
AND SECONDARY EDUCATION JOINTLY WITH THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND
WORKFORCE TRAINING**

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Hearing on “Exploring Efforts to Strengthen the Teaching
Profession.”

Witness Testimony: Christina Hall, Urban Teacher Center

Chairman Rokita and Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Members Carolyn McCarthy and Ruben Hinojosa, and esteemed Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak with you about what research and experience shows is the single most important in-school factor impacting student outcomes: the quality of the teacher each student is assigned each year, or what we at the Urban Teacher Center have come to call the “teacher lottery.”

My name is Christina Hall, and I am a co-founder and co-director of Urban Teacher Center, a nonprofit that partners with urban schools and districts to prepare new teachers who are guaranteed to be effective from day one.

Four years ago, Jennifer Green and I set out with a big vision: We’d design a teacher preparation program from the ground up that would provide a great teacher, every time, for our nation’s hardest-to-staff schools. We understood the importance of preparing diverse teachers, equipped to meet the learning needs of every child and committed to staying in the profession long enough to have a real impact. We’d learned from pioneering programs in urban teacher preparation and felt ready to push to the next level. Despite recent innovations in teacher education, many high-need schools still struggle to fill positions, and they face a gamble with each hire: while some new teachers get great results, others are woefully unequipped to help students learn at high levels. We believe that schools deserve a guarantee that every teacher they hire is able to significantly improve student outcomes and that the responsibility for making that guarantee should be on us, teacher educators.

We’ve had tremendous success in our first four years of operation. We currently have 231 teachers-in-training working in almost 150 schools in Baltimore and D.C., with incoming classes growing every year in response to growing demand. We expect to expand to more cities in the next few years. Program satisfaction remains high: 100% of our teacher residents report that UTC training has given them the knowledge and skills needed to be an

effective teacher, and nearly 90% of our school partners returned for school year 2013-14—a real testament to our program’s value, as school leaders must dedicate scarce resources to bring UTC teachers, and related supports, into their schools. Best of all, we can already see that our teachers are getting results: Last year, 79% of our first-year teachers had equal or better student learning results than their second-year peers.

Our mission is to dramatically improve student performance in our partner schools while serving as an example of what is possible in teacher education for the nation. Today, I’d like to speak with you about what UTC has learned that it takes to guarantee a great teacher every time. Such a bold promise is both essential and possible, but it requires a fundamental rethinking of how we partner with schools, how we deliver curriculum (and the role higher education plays in that process), and how and to whom we grant teacher certification.

UTC’s Unique, Multi-Year Approach: Let me begin by offering more context about how we’ve structured our program. We recruit aspiring teachers who commit to working in our partner schools for four years. That’s right: four years. They spend the first 13 months (two summers, plus a full school year) working side-by-side with experienced teachers in host classrooms, while taking graduate-level courses designed by UTC that are tied to their work with students in real classrooms. Residents, as we call our first-year participants, must meet a high bar in their coursework and clinical practice, and at the end of year one, those who meet our rigorous requirements move on to become “fellows.” Fellows take on salaried, full-time teaching positions in partner schools, while they take coursework and receive intensive coaching support from our clinical faculty. At the end of year two, those who meet our bar earn a dual masters’ degree in special education and their content area. After three years, we grant certification to only those who’ve met a high bar in their coursework, in classroom observations, and in raising student learning outcomes.

The model is intensive and requires significant commitments from host schools, our faculty and higher education partner, and from the aspiring teachers themselves.

Schools as a training ground and a customer: One way we are different from other teacher preparation programs is that we treat the public schools where our teachers serve as customers. We partner with district and charter schools that want to grow their own talent. They pay a sizeable fee for each resident or fellow and agree to provide the residency and teaching classroom placements that serve as the teaching and learning labs where UTC develops its teachers. In return, we promise them that our teachers will get results with students and help them leverage school-wide transformation by serving as teacher leaders and a positive professional influence on the school community.

Nikki Stewart, Chief Academic Officer at Excel Public Charter School in D.C., is among the school leaders who’ve come to view UTC as a critical part of their human capital strategy. She says: *“Because of the preparation and evaluation they receive, UTC teachers are not like other first-year teachers. With UTC, I have a pipeline of effective teachers into my school who immediately add more value.”*

One mile from here there are two schools that illustrate how school partnerships like ours can be a powerful lever for change. Both of these public schools serve the same

demographics in the same neighborhood, Ward 8, but one school, a charter, is high performing while the other, a traditional district school, has been deemed underperforming. The district superintendent asked the charter operators to enter into a new kind of partnership, working with the district to operate the underperforming school and extend effective practices to more neighborhood children. The charter operator has tapped UTC to help it get ready. This year, Urban Teacher Center is training and supporting 13 residents and teachers in the high-performing school. These teachers-in-training are being immersed in the best practices of this high-performing charter while participating in UTC's intensive and rigorous clinical program. Next year, a team of five to seven of these teachers will move to the school down the street, where they will help to launch its transformation.

UTC's transformation strategy with partner districts is similar to the role we play in schools. We aim to become a supplier of excellent teachers to the neediest 75% of schools in a district by placing teams of teachers, who have demonstrated their effectiveness and who are committed to teach for multiple years, in each school, where they tip the performance of the whole school, thereby tipping the performance of the entire district.

A partnership model like ours requires significant commitments from schools and districts, but they are willing to make these commitments because they understand that working with UTC can be a critical piece of a human capital strategy that turns around whole schools and districts.

A teacher education curriculum built from the ground up: Too often, teacher education programs take a "little of this, little of that" approach to curriculum but do little to help teacher candidates integrate new knowledge or connect it to classroom practice. They grant a masters degree along with recommendation for certification upon graduation, with no way of tracking how their graduates perform in actual classrooms or using that data to inform their program.

When we set out to build our preparation program, we knew that holding a masters degree in teaching is not a proxy for effectiveness, but because of the prevailing compensation systems that tie pay to coursework and degrees, offering an M.Ed had to be a component of our program. We considered applying to become our own institute of higher education, but an onerous and often irrelevant process kept us from seriously considering it. (Just as an example, applications asked about the physical size of the library and focused more on the PhD status of professors than evidence of their success in the classroom.) Instead, we set out to find an existing institution that shared our vision and would be willing to rethink curriculum from the ground up. We looked for a higher education partner that would embrace broader criteria for hiring clinical faculty, embark on creating a wholly new program, and accept responsibility for master's conferral while releasing approval for certification recommendations to UTC. We spoke with almost a dozen colleges and universities and eventually found Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Lesley agreed to take the leap with us. Together, we cracked open the traditional course sequence, working with content experts from around the country to build a modular curriculum that emphasizes five areas of effective classroom practice and provides real-time opportunities for new teachers to implement what they are learning in the classroom

under the expert supervision of a coach. Importantly, UTC identifies its own course faculty (who are all experienced classroom teachers) to be hired by Lesley and mentored by professors there. We also reserve the right to make recommendations for state licensing according to our own high standard of effectiveness.

Here are just a few unique features of our curriculum model:

- Residents get more than *1,400 hours of real-time experience* in four different classroom settings, all before becoming teachers in their own classroom.
- Every successful candidate earns a dual license and masters' degree in their subject area and special education, equipping them to meet the range of student needs in typical urban classrooms.
- Every participant receives sustained, on-the-job coaching, including regular classroom observations, over the first four years of their career. These coaches are frequently the same people who teach their courses.

A high bar at every stage: UTC holds the highest bar for teacher certification in the country, and not every teacher who begins our program gets certified. Even with intensive support, not every promising candidate develops the qualities of a great urban teacher. We believe it's better that we incur the cost of that discovery than our children.

We begin by recruiting diverse, high-achieving, results-oriented individuals who are ready to commit four years to teaching in our partner schools. Only 25% of applicants are accepted into the program, and only 77% of our residents go on to become teachers of record. Of the 23% who do not make it to their own classrooms, 40% are voluntary departures; some candidates realize within the first year that a career in urban teaching is not what they thought it would be, or that they are simply not ready. Others don't meet our rigorous expectations for coursework, classroom practice, and professionalism.

Importantly, UTC's attrition is strategic, intentional, and minimizes disruptions to student learning. We're proud to say we have had almost zero attrition during the school year in three years in D.C. and only two instances in three years in Baltimore. That is an extraordinary rate for new teachers in these challenging districts.

Breaking the link between earning a degree and earning certification: Participants who meet our bar for classroom practice and coursework earn a dual master's degree after two years. Certification takes longer. We have broken the link between the master's degree and certification; one does not automatically result in the other. We only approve teachers for certification—thereby placing them on track to become permanent teachers with tenure—after they've proven their effectiveness through student learning outcomes and observable classroom practice. It takes time for new teachers to consolidate their practice and establish a track record of effectiveness, so we've created a three-year performance review process, with a tracking system to identify and support participants who are not on the path toward effectiveness.

It's an intensive process and complex (involving multiple measures), but our logic is simple: We believe the best way to guarantee that new teachers will be effective is to show that they have been effective already. Participants must meet increasing expectations in classroom observations. We also expect them to produce significant growth in student

learning; they are expected to improve student performance on our nationally normed assessments by an average of one year for a year of instruction across their first two years to earn certification. We had the good fortune to learn from the evaluation challenges of other teacher-preparation programs and decided to launch our training program in just three subject areas where we had reliable assessments to measure student growth.

We'd like to see all teacher education programs include classroom performance and student learning outcomes in their certification recommendation process. With the stakes so high for students, there is really no excuse for certifying teachers unless we know they are capable of teaching effectively.

Policy Recommendations

Teacher quality is the single most important in-school factor that determines student outcomes. In our experience, at least 3 challenges must be addressed in order to ensure a great teacher, every time, for every student. We would encourage policy leaders at all levels to focus on:

1. Broadening access to existing federal dollars

- Open up the routing of funds intended for K-12 school systems by allowing districts to partner with institutions of higher education *and* innovative organizations that commit to transparent data and reporting outcomes. Opening up access with quality control safeguards will result in stronger partnerships for K-12 school systems to improve teacher preparation.

2. Encouraging environments at the state level that are more hospitable to alternative certification providers.

- One of Urban Teacher Center's innovations is that we've broken the link between earning a master's degree and earning certification to teach. In order to foster more innovation in all teacher markets, encourage states to permit alternative certification providers to enter the teacher preparation market with consistent expectations and data and outcome reporting for all teacher preparation entities that will transparently show which entities are best serving the K-12 market. The best legislation will support and not encumber existing innovation while simultaneously encouraging new innovation.

3. Spotlighting what works. Because we haven't any time to waste, innovation and practice across the sector should be accompanied by an assessment of what works and what doesn't. The federal government can be a valuable resource in evaluating and providing information on effective practice, partnership models and design to inform the entire education sector and to eliminate duplication of efforts across states.

UTC's innovative model ensures that districts only get teachers who have demonstrated effectiveness in the classroom. The principals who hire teachers—and the children they teach—deserve assurance that a teacher will be effective. It's a promise we can make. We'd like to see all teacher-preparation programs make a similar commitment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about Urban Teacher Center's model. I look forward to fielding questions on the important topic of teacher quality.