

*Testimony to the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education and
the House Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment*

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Chairman Sablan, Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Members Allen and Smucker, and members of the subcommittees, I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the Higher Education Act and its role in preparing the next generation of classroom teachers and school leaders. It is my hope that in offering Louisiana's story, I can provide an example of how states can lead efforts at improvement, making full use of the tools and support Congress has provided.

Louisiana Believes

I have been blessed to serve as state superintendent of education for nearly eight years. The plan our state has developed and implemented in those years, called Louisiana Believes, is predicated on one essential belief: that the children of Louisiana are as smart and as capable as any children in America, and that they have been given by God gifts no lesser than those given to any child on this earth.

Louisiana Believes has five pillars, all modeled on policies essential to the nation's and world's highest achieving education systems.

We have brought together child care, Head Start, public pre-kindergarten, and nonpublic pre-kindergarten into one, unified system of early childhood care and education.

We have aligned learning standards, curriculum, assessment, and professional development in every school system, providing teachers a clear sense of what they are responsible for teaching.

We have provided high school graduates a pathway to a funded next step in education and a good first job, by expanding early college courses, by revitalizing the career and technical system, and by becoming the first state in the nation to require that all graduates choose affirmatively whether or not to apply for financial aid.

We have focused relentlessly on the needs of students stuck in persistently struggling schools through comprehensive improvement efforts such as the restoration of New Orleans schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

And, as I will discuss today, we have placed educator preparation where it most belongs, in the classroom, on the job. College seniors aspiring to be teachers in Louisiana now experience yearlong residencies under the tutelage of full-time mentor educators singularly dedicated to the resident's development, so that every graduate of our colleges of education is validated as an effective teacher before his or her first day of full employment.

As a consequence of these reforms, more students graduated high school this year than in any year in the state's history. More students than ever before also earned early college credits and high-wage industry certifications. More than ever before achieved eligibility for the state's college scholarship program. In fact, nearly 80 percent of all seniors completed federal financial aid forms this year, indicating an aspiration to pursue postsecondary education, tops in the nation. And a record number of graduates this year enrolled in college following graduation. Louisiana is a better educated state than at any point in the state's history.

Our state has implemented Louisiana Believes in partnership with the federal government at every turn, and we have utilized the tools Congress has given us to develop a plan by and for the state of Louisiana. Among those tools is Title II of the Higher Education Act, the goals of which are laudable. However, it remains the case that educator preparation and support in America is, on the whole, badly in need of improvement, and that Title II in its present form is not a profound contributor to a better system of preparation for the next generation.

I'll turn now to the story of our state's efforts to improve the way we support aspiring teachers and administrators.

Believe and Prepare

Too often our national teacher quality conversation has been focused solely on the full-time teachers, already on the job. We question whether they are effective or ineffective for the children they serve. But in our state, we have come to think that if a teacher is ineffective at his job after four years of preparation for the job in a college of education, funded by state and federal tax dollars, it should not be, “Shame on him.” It should be, “Shame on us.” We owe it to teachers and to their students to prepare them in a professional manner and to declare them effective before they take a full-time job as a classroom teacher.

There is voluminous evidence that high-quality mentoring for aspiring teachers prior to them entering the classroom, over the course of an entire school year, can be a powerful driver of effective teaching. Recent research shows us that aspiring teachers who prepare for the job alongside mentors who have a proven track record of student success demonstrate classroom performance akin to teachers with two more years of experience. With high quality preparation, we can end the tragic phenomenon of the hapless first year teacher.

However, research tells us there is wide variation in the quality of educator preparation programs. In Louisiana, our Board of Regents has published data for years indicating that some programs’ graduates go on to lead their students to significant academic progress, while others’ graduates struggle persistently.

Setting out to achieve greater effectiveness at preparing teachers, in 2014, Louisiana surveyed its teachers, the programs that prepared them, and the schools and districts that hire and support them, in order to gather feedback on teacher preparation experiences and how they could be improved. More than 6,000 educators responded, and the results were humbling: educators overwhelmingly said they were not prepared to teach in their first years in the classroom, and that they wished they would have had more time to practice actually teaching under the tutelage of a highly educated mentor educator prior to their first day alone in the classroom.

Louisiana soon after launched *Believe and Prepare*, a nationally-recognized initiative that provided the state's most innovative school systems and colleges with grants and support to develop residency models in which aspiring teachers gain a full year of practice as college seniors under a certified mentor. *Believe and Prepare* began with seven school systems and seven preparation providers, most of them colleges of education. In 2015, the program grew to more than 20 school systems and more than 15 preparation providers, and in 2016, to over 30 school systems and over 20 preparation providers. In 2017, after years of hard work, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education codified the Believe and Prepare model into state regulation, requiring all aspiring teachers in all universities to experience a full-year residency under a state-certified mentor.

The board's actions were important not only because the state would now educate, certify, and validate the quality of mentors, but also because, by virtue of their status as state-certified mentors, mentors in Louisiana are now 40 percent of the way toward obtaining a certificate to be a school leader. This initiative has thus not only changed our approach to mentoring teachers but also to developing the pool of future school leaders. To date, more than 1,600 Louisiana educators have completed or are currently participating in mentor education.

Mentors and residents in Louisiana are paid roles, and federal funding has been critical to this project. In particular, Title II of the Every Student Succeeds Act has proven invaluable to the support of both mentors and residents. Revisions to Title II of the Higher Education Act could further support the Believe and Prepare model, enabling our state and others to use Work Study and Teacher Quality Partnership grants to support comprehensive visions for improving educator preparation.

Alternative Certification

When discussing teacher preparation efforts, the conversation often centers on traditional baccalaureate programs run by colleges of education. But both universities and private

organizations operate alternative certification models that expedite the transition into the classroom for mid-career professionals and non-education majors. There are many outstanding alternative certification programs; I am proud to have been recruited by Teach For America, for example. TNTP, which certifies TFA corps members in Louisiana, ranks among the most effective preparation programs in our state year after year. However, teacher candidates in some alternative certification programs receive little to no practice and mentoring during their transition to the classroom. In turn, they are more likely to leave the profession sooner than their peers. And the effect of this falls disproportionately on students in low-income and rural communities.

Alternative certification provided by universities and other organizations must be a part of the teacher preparation discussion. Eight rural school systems in Louisiana that rely heavily on alternative certification programs are piloting cost-effective models of yearlong mentorship for these certification candidates. In the first year of the pilot, the amount of time alternative certification candidates spent with a mentor radically increased. These pilots included co-teaching and mentoring for, on average, one period per day, every day, during the entire school year, a practice we hope soon will be expanded statewide.

Again, we funded these pilot programs using a variety of state and federal funds, including a federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant. As with our undergraduate residency programs, the Teacher Quality Partnership grant program authorized in Title II of the Higher Education Act would have been a beneficial funding source, but it has been tailored to small district-provider partnerships rather than large-scale, statewide improvement efforts.

Accountability

The complement to developing and supporting better preparation programs in any state is defining what programs must achieve and ensuring there is a system for identifying both positive performance and evident challenges.

In order to develop such an accountability system, in 2016, Louisiana convened a nationally respected task force, led by the dean of the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education and Human Development, Dr. Robert Pianta. The task force developed a system of measurement, reporting, and rating for both traditional and alternative certification programs, as well as a plan to phase in the measures and reports over five years, rigorously studying each measure.

The Louisiana Teacher Preparation Quality Rating System identifies programs’ strengths and weaknesses, forming a summative rating of quality based on three domains: “Preparation Program Experience,” as measured by an on-site review conducted by outside experts; “Meeting Educator Workforce Needs,” as measured by the percentage of candidates placed in high-need rural and urban schools and the number of program completers in high-need certification areas; and “Teacher Quality,” as measured by the learning outcomes of students taught by program completers. The rating system has been piloted for two years, and official performance reports will be publicly released in 2020.

Accountability is an essential part of teacher preparation program improvement, and data play an important role in that. We developed this system in the absence of requirements or guidance from Congress. In its next iteration, the Higher Education Act should strike an appropriate balance between usable data that focuses programs on quality without dictating the exact terms of accountability in every state. Revisions to Title II of the Higher Education Act should streamline and simplify data reporting requirements, focusing states on identifying a limited set of measures that shed light on programs’ effectiveness.

Early Childhood Education

While everything I have discussed so far relates to Louisiana’s K-12 educator workforce, it’s important that teacher preparation in the early childhood setting not go undiscussed. Since 2012, Louisiana has enacted sweeping changes in early childhood education. We built one unified system across Head Start, child care, and pre-k, and we established a framework for teaching excellence

shared among these programs. We adopted the CLASS observation system and now conduct visits twice per year to each publicly funded classroom in the state, providing meaningful feedback to educators. We further publish public performance profiles based on these observations for each early childhood center, with details on how well sites are caring for and teaching young children each year.

None of this is meaningful, however, in the absence of legitimate expectations for teacher preparation and skill. Prior to these reforms, child care teachers in Louisiana were only required to be 18 years of age and did not even need to hold a high school diploma. Today, every early childhood teacher in Louisiana, including each child care teacher, is required to have a Child Development Associate certificate, or CDA, earned through an approved preparation program and funded through a novel system of tax credits that support families, teachers, and early childhood centers alike.

Conclusion

Louisiana is far from having achieved the education system its students and citizens deserve. But we are proud of the improvements we have set in motion and of the accomplishments of our students. We are also proud to have pioneered a system of educator preparation that takes its cues from the world's most effective school systems. Our teachers and their students deserve it.

Fortunately, other states have made important strides in this direction as well, frequently supported by the Council of Chief State School Officers and Chiefs for Change. The Higher Education Act can best support such ambitions through requiring honest and clear reporting of the facts and through providing funds that incentivize plans for system-wide improvement. I appreciate greatly the opportunity to share Louisiana's story and look forward to today's discussion.

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