



Texas Classroom
Teachers Association

PO Box 1489 | Austin, Texas 78767 | tcta.org
888-879-8282 | 512-477-9415 | Fax: 512-469-9527

Testimony to the Texas Commission on Virtual Education
By Holly Eaton, Director of Professional Development and Advocacy
Texas Classroom Teachers Association
July 27, 2022

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with invited testimony on teacher preparation, professional development, and support for the virtual environment.

I would like to start by making a distinction between teacher preparation and teacher professional development. Whereas teacher preparation has to do with the training that teacher candidates undergo prior to acquiring a standard teaching certificate, professional development is the professional learning that occurs once someone has entered the teaching profession and is actively teaching. Although I'll be remarking on both, I'll be spending most of my time on professional development.

Professional Development

Honing one's craft through mechanisms such as continued professional learning and development is one of the hallmarks of a profession. When one thinks about professional learning, one thinks about a professional seeking out learning opportunities that are tightly connected to the core knowledge and skills of his/her work. In the context of an educator, for example, this might look like learning opportunities that the educator determines are relevant and meaningful to their own instruction, their classrooms and their students.

However, by virtue of being employed in school settings with school-aged children, educators are also subject to a number of trainings that are more related to **that** fact than to their actual classrooms and instruction, such as food allergy training, seizure recognition training, and test administration training. Although these are important due to the nature of being a school district employee, the number of these kinds of required trainings has grown consistently through the years, to the point where less and less time is left for teachers to pursue the kind of professional learning that would have the most impact on their instruction and their classrooms.

Additionally, teacher discontent with the nature and design of professional development they are subject to by their school districts ranks high on the list of factors that cause teachers to consider leaving the profession, as evidenced by numerous representative surveys of teachers on their working conditions.

In recognition of this issue, the Lt. Governor's office convened a Teacher Workforce Workgroup during the 2019-2020 interim to review existing teacher training and

make recommendations to the legislature regarding reducing and/or eliminating any of these requirements. The Workgroup, comprising a broad array of education groups, met over the course of nine months to establish a slimmer, more meaningful set of teacher professional development requirements, and published its report in November 2020.

The resulting recommendations became the basis for Senate Bill 1267, carried by Sen. Royce West and Rep. J.M. Lozano last session, and signed into law on June 18, 2021. SB 1267 eliminated the requirement for annual training in certain topics, eliminated a number of duplicative training topics, consolidated scattered requirements for math and literacy training, and created a Clearinghouse that would house best practices and industry recommendations regarding frequency for all educator training topics. The bill provides for school districts to annually review the Clearinghouse in adopting local professional development policies.

While SB 1267 did much to right-size the number of state-required trainings and professional development for educators, a substantial state-required training program for educators, Teacher Reading Academies, came down from another piece of legislation. The requirement for K-3 teachers to complete the 80 to 120-hour Reading Academies started right before the pandemic and continued throughout. While no one could have predicted this, the timing of the requirement was most unfortunate, given the added workload that teachers experienced during the pandemic as they learned whole new modes of teaching; coped with the physical and mental health effects of the pandemic on themselves, their families, and their students; and juggled ever-changing health protocols within their school systems. Additionally, the decentralized design of the program, in which local school districts were primarily responsible for ensuring that the Reading Academy content was available to their teachers, resulted in vastly differing experiences for teachers, many of whom were required to complete the programs on their own time with little or no compensation. The addition of this training requirement at such a time became the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back for many teachers.

Likely this is not news to you, but I say it to set the backdrop for my recommendations regarding professional development for the virtual environment.

- Any kind of state-level professional development program for teachers in the virtual environment should not be a mandate. Especially given the experience with the Reading Academies, it is extremely important that there not be yet another training requirement from the state.
- One of the foundational aspects of a high-quality professional development system is one in which teachers, as professionals, self-select the professional development that they determine, in their professional opinions, to be of most value. Accordingly, participation in any state-level professional development program must be completely voluntary on the part of teachers,

- and if administered through school districts, the districts must provide evidence that the professional development was not required.
- Careful thought should be given to the design of any such program, so that high-quality offerings are provided at little or no cost, and are easily accessible and available to teachers.
 - It should be required that teachers who participate in such a program are compensated for their time. Again, this was a key lesson learned from the Reading Academies.

If the goal is to ensure that a sufficient number of teachers acquire the knowledge and skills to teach successfully in a virtual environment, it may be that incentivizing participation could be considered.

One approach to incentivizing participation could include some sort of recognition of the acquisition by teachers of a discreet skill or competency related to virtual instruction, like the award of a microcredential to the teacher. For those unfamiliar, microcredentials are akin to a digital “badge” awarded to a teacher that essentially attests to the fact that the teacher has acquired a discreet skill or competency. In fact, we already have provisions in the Texas Education Code requiring the State Board of Education to propose rules establishing a program to issue micro-credentials in fields of study related to an educator’s certification class, which came from HB 2424, passed by the legislature in 2019. However, HB 2424 was only required to be implemented if the legislature appropriated money specifically for that purpose, which it did not, and the program was never implemented.

Regardless, if some sort of state-level microcredential program for professional development related to virtual instruction was in place, it should be structured to be as agile and uncomplicated as possible. This means, for example, that there should be no requirement for something as involved as a performance assessment by the teacher acquiring it. This avoids making it a cumbersome, expensive process, but also demonstrates trust in a profession which we all know is in an extremely fragile state at this juncture.

In addition, any such program must include a well -designed coaching and support system to help teachers be able to successfully apply what they learn. This is an essential component of any new acquired learning.

Building on this, another powerful approach to incentivizing participation could be the award of additional compensation, in the form of increased salary or a bonus, for those teachers acquiring these microcredentials. One potential avenue of funding for such an approach might be the Technology Allotment, for example.

Teacher candidate preparation

As for the topic of teacher candidate preparation, we do have laws in place requiring educator preparation programs to provide training in instruction in digital learning, virtual learning, and virtual instruction, including a digital literacy evaluation followed by a prescribed digital learning curriculum. (TEC Section 21.044). If there are concerns about unevenness of preparation across programs for this requirement, this might be an area in which the State Board for Educator Certification could set some required program standards.

Support in the virtual environment

I would like to set out a number of recommendations for the systemic factors that are needed for success in virtual instruction. You likely have heard some of these in testimony from witnesses in prior hearings, but they're worth repeating. Where available, I've listed examples of entities that are engaging in these practices.

- First, there must be internet access and devices available in students' homes;
- The district must also have enabling tools, like learning management systems, for managing remote communications with parents and students.
- There must be a quality and easy to use virtual education curriculum, and platform with formative assessment tools and performance tracking;
- There needs to be dedicated school district technology staff to support virtual instruction (*Dallas ISD testimony to Virtual Commission that the district built a coaching model to support teachers, students and parents, March 30, 2022; Edgewood ISD presentation at 2021 TASA Midwinter conference that the district created an entire instructional technology team and coaches*).
- There also needs to be dedicated instructional staff solely for virtual instruction, with no requirement for teachers to teach in-person and virtually at the same time (*Commissioner Morath testimony to Virtual Commission, Feb. 23, 2022*).
- The decision to provide virtual instruction should be an entirely voluntary choice for teachers.
- Class sizes for virtual instruction must be manageable (*Remarks to Virtual Commission from Beaumont Regional Education Service Center 5: similar to what we want in physical classroom to ensure quality, March 30, 2022*).
- There must be sufficient time allotted for teacher planning/preparation as well as for one-on-one check-ins with students, as well as for the virtual teachers and the on-site teacher or instructional aide (if this is the format) to provide feedback, engage in training and work with each other. Additionally, the on-site instructional aide or personalized learning teacher must be high-level with the appropriate knowledge and skills to perform their role.

(Remarks to Virtual Commission from Beaumont Regional Education Service Center 5, March 30, 2022; Edgewood ISD presentation at 2021 TASA Midwinter conference; Testimony to Virtual Commission from DISD virtual teacher, March 30, 2022).

Best Practices

Aside from these systemic factors, there are a number of best practices I would like to highlight:

Reducing administrative burden on teachers:

Given the inherent added difficulties in tracking and verifying attendance in a virtual environment, some districts have engaged in efforts to reduce this burden on teachers; for example, Aldine ISD was highlighted in a TEA Asynchronous Attendance tracking plan webinar for writing a custom code for Schoology's School Analytics Export Report – in which the report was run and corresponding files downloaded twice per day. Teachers were trained on creating unique check-in assignments made available daily to further assure teachers that students were logging into the system.

Additionally, the system generated automatic reminders to parents when students were absent, saving teachers from having to perform that task. (*TEA Asynchronous Attendance Plan/Tracking Overview webinar, Oct. 13, 2021*).

Identifying and developing teachers best suited for virtual instruction:

Edgewood ISD developed “Learner profiles” for each of their students. Results for each student were grouped under four key categories, including one called “teacher factors.” The results under the “teacher factor” category enabled the district to determine which teachers were better at engaging students during remote learning, and what attributes they had that they could leverage. Additionally, Edgewood ISD surveyed their teachers regarding their capacity/skills for virtual instruction. Based on teachers’ survey results, Edgewood grouped teachers according to their self-identified capacity/skills for virtual instruction: Highly proficient with blended learning (e-Learning Teacher Tier 1); Highly proficient with online learning (e-Learning Teacher Tier 2); Highly proficient in classroom instruction (On-site or Direct Support teacher - these were teachers who might not feel comfortable with technology, but were effective in classroom with their teaching practice); and Proficient with individualized student content support (Personalized Learning teacher –provided both on-site individualized support and online tutoring). Personalized Learning teachers were on-site to help implement lessons plans prepared by the teacher of record for the class. (*Edgewood ISD presentation TASA Midwinter conference, Jan. 26, 2021*).

Professional Development Best Practices:

When the pandemic first began, Edgewood ISD added a number of technology professional development offerings to its online professional development “choice

board” for teachers. These courses were foundational to teacher success in teaching online. Teachers who completed these courses were awarded a microcredential, publicly signifying that they had acquired this specialized knowledge and skills. Edgewood based the design of the courses on the four groups of teachers they identified via teacher self-surveys and the Learner Profiles. Seventy percent of teachers identified themselves as in the “Early Technology” or “Developing Technology” stage. Accordingly, the district designed their professional development offerings to “meet teachers where they were” and then scaffolded courses to take them to a higher level. The district offered a number of “foundational” level courses, as well as “accomplished” and “distinguished” level courses.

The district required all teachers new to Edgewood to complete these courses to ensure they had foundational skills and from there the teachers could level up to accomplished and then distinguished.

Most of the courses were asynchronous/self-paced. They were also content/grade-level specific in response to teacher feedback on surveys regularly administered by the district. The teacher survey results were consistently used by district staff in refining their professional development offerings. *(Edgewood ISD presentation TASA Midwinter conference, Jan. 26, 2021).*

This concludes my testimony, and again, I thank you for allowing me to share my thoughts with you on these topics.