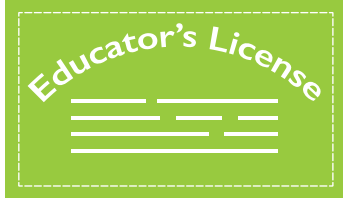


Great Teachers are Made

Teacher Views on the Need for Teacher Preparation Reform:



TEACH
+PLUS



Introduction

The Teach Plus Policy Fellows – a diverse group of teachers from many schools and districts – are deeply invested in the success of their students. Over the past five months, those of us in Washington D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and California have studied policy and advocacy while continuing to teach full time. We have brought our expertise as classroom teachers to our work with policymakers as we advocated for policies that would ensure that teachers and students can thrive. We analyzed results of a nationwide survey of teachers about their experiences with teacher preparation and researched best practices and academic findings from across the country. We believe that the current teacher preparation system fails prospective teachers as it in many cases failed us. And we have recommendations to fix that. This policy brief presents findings from a Teach Plus national flash poll and argues that we must raise the bar for entry into teaching in conjunction with aligning coursework and clinical experiences with today’s realities of teaching. This will help our states, and others, better prepare teachers so they can be successful in their classrooms from day one.

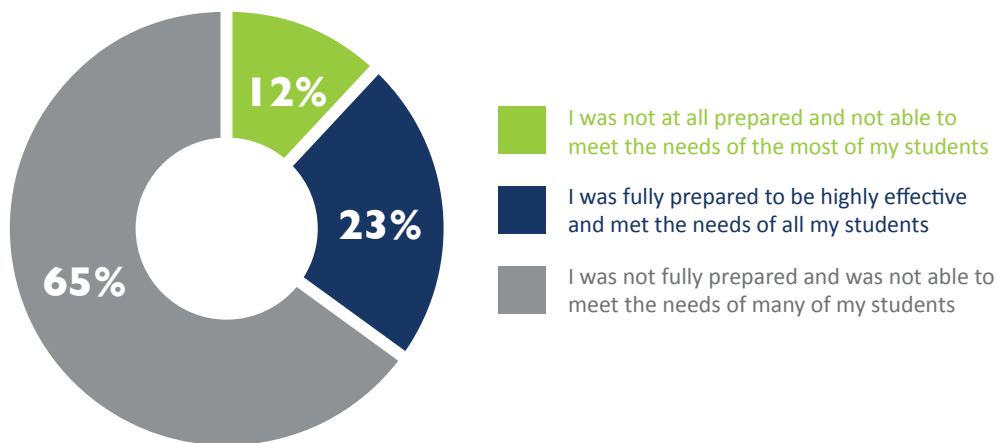
The Problem

Today, a student is far more likely to be taught by a first-year teacher. This change in the teaching profession has profound consequences for students, particularly students of color and those who are from low-income families.¹ The impact is compounded by the high turnover in urban schools, which means that students will often have 1st or 2nd year teachers year after year. As Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows in the DC Metro Area and Los Angeles, CA, we work alongside these new teachers in our schools every day. Unfortunately, many of our new colleagues come to the classroom ill-prepared to meet the demands of teaching and help their students meet their academic potential. Their experiences often mirror our own memories of our first years in the classroom, when we were unprepared to succeed with our students. We are not alone. In a recent Teach Plus poll, an astonishing 77% of teachers responded that their preparation program left them unprepared to meet the demands of the classroom and the needs of all or many of their students. Research consistently affirms the profound impact of effective teachers on students, particularly low-income students and students of color.² As teachers in urban schools, we know that our students cannot afford one year of ineffective teaching. Our experiences give us a unique perspective on what teacher preparation programs need to do to ensure more teachers enter the classroom ready on day one to help their students succeed.

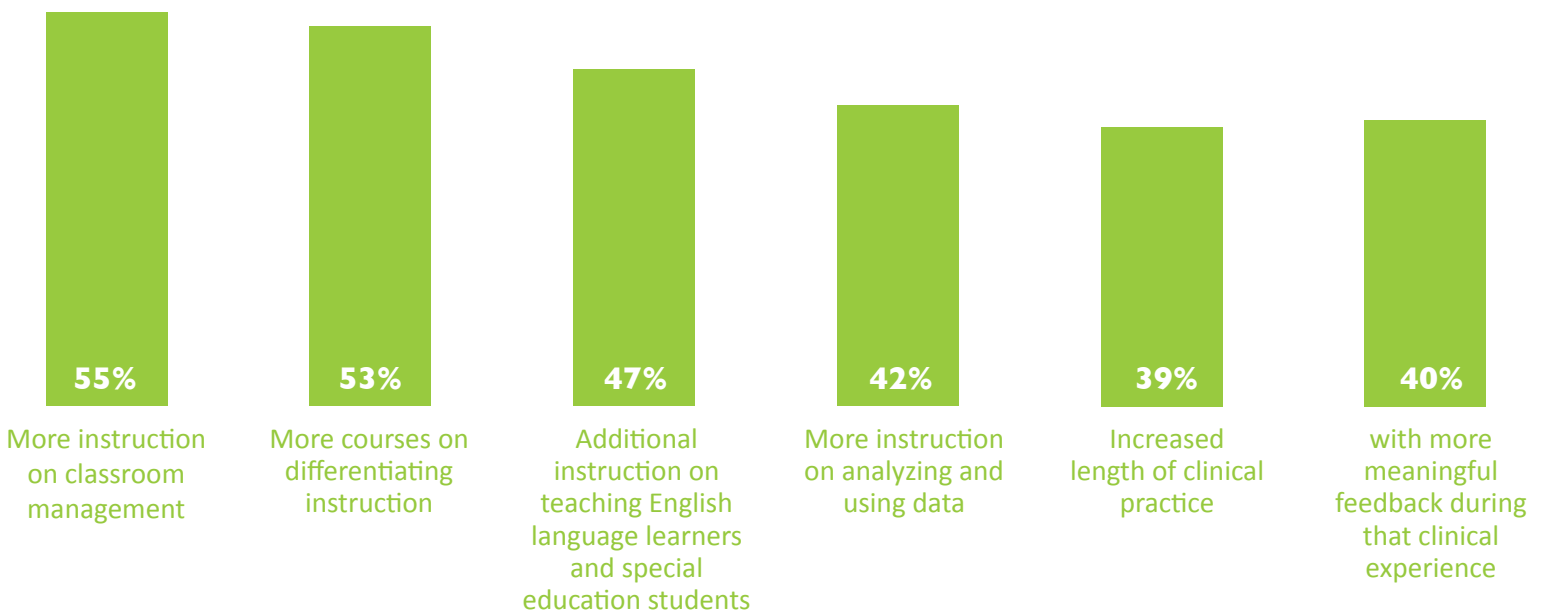
Teacher Views on Preparation

In October of 2014, Teach Plus conducted a flash poll to better understand the perspectives of teachers on teacher preparation. Over 1,000 teachers from 34 states and the District of Columbia responded. The poll consisted of five multiple choice questions and the opportunity for open comments (see appendix).

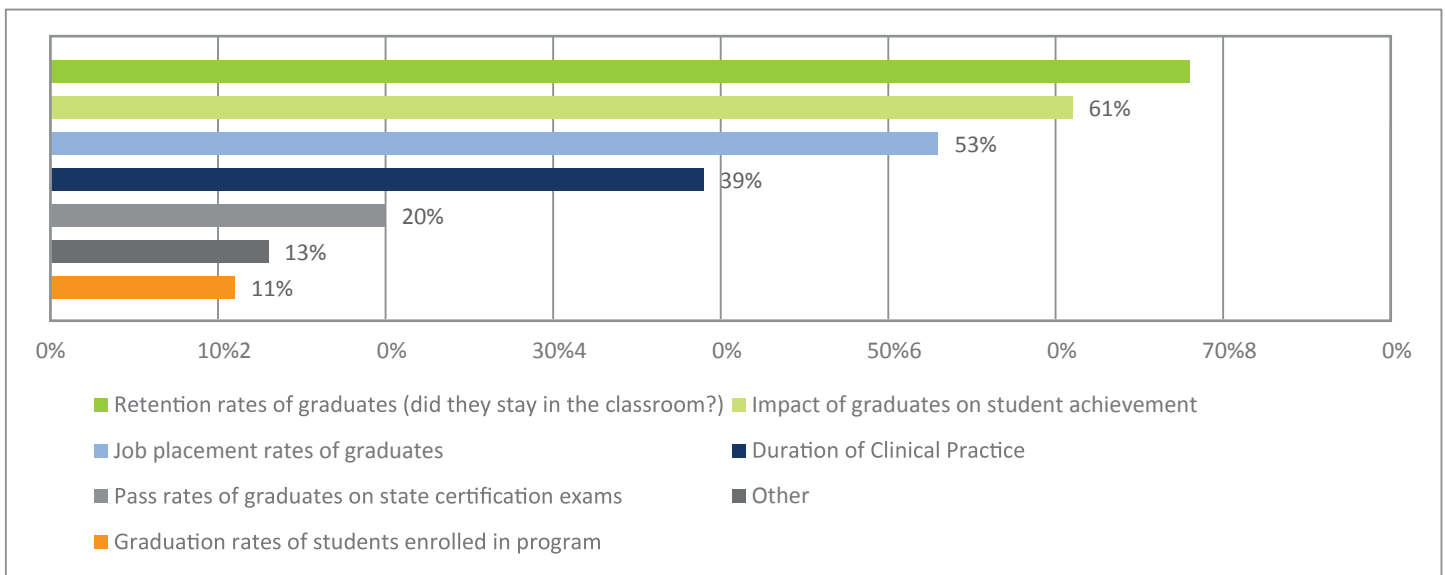
The poll showed that teachers generally felt unprepared for their first year in the classroom. Sixty-five percent of teachers said they were “not fully prepared” and “not able to meet the needs of many of their students.” Twelve percent of teachers felt that they were “not at all prepared” and “not able to meet the needs of most of their students.”



The poll asked teachers to share factors that would have made their teacher preparation program stronger in readying them for the demands of the classroom. The leading responses were as follows:



Teachers responding to the poll also cited the need for better information about programs so they could make more informed decisions about which program to attend. Specifically, they cited the need for stronger, outcome-based measures to help them make this decision. When asked which factors would have been most useful, respondents overwhelmingly chose factors that reported outcomes for the programs.



We are encouraged that the U.S. Department of Education seeks to start holding teacher preparation programs accountable by denying TEACH Grants to low-performing or at-risk teacher programs. We support these regulations, which would illuminate strengths and weaknesses within existing programs, so that prospective students researching teacher preparation programs can make the most informed decisions about their training options. We believe that by requiring states to track outcome data on teacher preparation program graduates, and use that data in their rating of programs, the regulations ensure states and teacher preparation programs have meaningful data like impact on student growth and placement rates, and could be a catalyst for change. However, how that data is used to change curriculum and practice is still discretionary, so long as the program is not rated low-performing and the state removes its approval or financial support of the program, the changes that our teachers – and their students – need might not be implemented.

Over 300 teachers went beyond the multiple choice questions and provided additional information, primarily around three topics: clinical practice, preparation program curriculum, and mentorships – both during the clinical practice and during the first few years in the classroom.

A teacher from Tennessee wrote: *“There definitely needs to be a much greater emphasis placed on clinical practice. I was fortunate to have an extended student teacher assignment, even though it was not well supervised.”* A teacher from California shared:

“My teacher prep program was wonderful except for my cooperating teacher, who had burnt out as a classroom teacher and who ended up leaving the profession the year after we worked together. I learned wonderful things in theory from my teacher prep classes, but none of it in practice. I’ve had to learn on my own in the classroom during the past three years and undo the bad practices I picked up during my student teaching year. Luckily, I’ve had many colleagues and mentors at my school now who have helped me. If I could make one change about my teacher prep program, I would make sure that the cooperating teachers were fully vetted as expert, inspiring master teachers.”

Teachers also commented on the rigor of entry and exit standards and post-preparation support. One teacher responded that *“I am also very concerned at the low bar set by most teacher certification exams, which I don’t feel assessed any more than my theoretical knowledge.”*

A teacher from Indiana commented,

“I believe the requirements for teacher preparation programs are incredibly low. Programs/states should consider raising the minimum scores on Praxis I or equivalent tests to enter teacher preparation programs. Similarly, passing scores on Praxis II tests are too low.”

The results of the Teach Plus poll mirror the evidence collected over the last decade about teacher prep.³ In their Teacher Prep Review 2014, the National Council on Teacher Quality ranked 1,612 teacher preparation programs and found that 53 percent of the programs (848 out of 1,612) were at the lowest level in terms of performance, meaning they earned less than 50 points on a 125 point scale.⁴ It is time for us to rethink how we are preparing prospective teachers to be ready for their future classrooms.

Recommendations for Improving Teacher Preparation Programs

As teachers who have taken a variety of routes into the profession, most of us think with regret of students from our first years in the classroom whom we wish we had known how to reach. Based on our experiences, we believe the following steps will significantly improve teacher preparation.

Licensure

Recommendation: Set a high bar for entry into the teaching profession

The current process for gaining entry into the profession does not adequately assess the preparedness of aspiring teachers for the day-to-day challenges of teaching. Current licensure exams are too easy to pass because they neither assess enough of the content knowledge that teachers need to be able to teach nor require prospective teachers to demonstrate the ability to effectively manage a classroom, teach to key standards, or impact student learning. We believe stronger, more comprehensive tests that fully assess a prospective teacher's knowledge of the standards to which s/he will be teaching must be developed. As we transition to Common Core and other standards aligned to college and career readiness, we must increase the rigor of the tests used to determine licensure. These assessments should include a section focused on content knowledge aligned to the appropriate grade level (early childhood, elementary, secondary) and a section devoted to topics such as data analysis, planning in response to data, and responding to common classroom scenarios, both behavioral and academic.

Current State of Licensure Exams

Until new tests are developed, states should increase the "passing score" on Praxis exams and other licensure tests. The pass rates for licensure exams are often set at a low threshold. According to "Creating a Consistent and Rigorous Teacher Licensure Process", the majority of states set the bar for passing teacher certification exams at the 16th percentile. The paper further reports that passing scores on the same test often vary from state to state and that some states set their passing scores below the average score.⁵ We recommend that all states increase their passing score to at least 80% proficiency on the Praxis or equivalent content tests.

Recommendation: Require teacher preparation programs to sponsor their candidates for licensure.

As part of the licensure application process, teachers should be “sponsored” by a representative from their teacher preparation program (whether university-based or an alternative program) who has observed the candidate’s pre-service teaching. This sponsor would certify that a prospective teacher can apply management and instructional strategies and practices to effectively lead classroom instruction. Programs would be required to report the number of candidates they sponsor, and the percentage of candidates who successfully obtain licensure. By linking preparation programs directly to the teachers they produce, we hope to increase the quality and relevance of program coursework. Further, potential candidates would have access to important information about the success of alumni before choosing particular teacher prep programs.

Clinical Experience

Five years ago, Imani was a 14-year old with a severe reading disability, and with only five weeks of clinical practice under my belt, I didn’t know how to meet her instructional needs. I didn’t have enough practice or experience to know how to engage Imani in meaningful reading instruction — to identify her weaknesses, to use data to help me adjust my instruction, to hone in on her exact needs. Now Imani is a 20-year old, sixth-year high school student who has many of the same reading difficulties she did five years ago. But five years of practice and experience means I’m not the same teacher. Imani’s literacy skills are growing now because I’ve had lots of practice teaching students similar to her. Though she still faces incredible challenges, my lack of teaching ability is not one of them. Imagine where she’d be if I had been prepared to teach her in my first year on the job.

-Brianna Copley, High School Special Education Teacher, DC Metro Teaching Policy Fellow

Recommendation: Provide teaching candidates with a longer, more intensive clinical experience

Teachers generally agree there is nothing that better prepares a teacher than the opportunity to work in real classrooms. These opportunities should expose teachers to the full range of responsibilities required of a classroom teacher. Unfortunately, many teachers do not get adequate time in the classroom to experience and understand the responsibilities they will face as teachers, nor do they learn how to address challenges that may arise.

Despite research that shows that teachers who participate in intensive residency experiences are retained at higher rates,⁶ according to Educating School Teachers, 76% of teachers only had a semester of less or student teaching.⁷ A more intensive clinical experience should begin with observing the classrooms of highly-effective, experienced teachers with gradual movement to full classroom responsibilities such as planning, instructing, assessing, managing behavior, meeting with parents, and collaborating with colleagues — under the tutelage of a skilled mentor teacher who has received formal training in how to coach pre-service teachers.

Recommendation: Ensure prospective teachers' clinical experiences are guided by effective, experienced teachers.

One of the most critical components of the clinical experience is access to current practicing teachers who are effective and can provide rich feedback and mentorship. This was one of the most frequently mentioned ideas in the open response data in our flash poll. Having a strong mentor is important to teachers' professional growth. In fact, over 500 teachers in the flash poll identified mentor teachers as more impactful on their professional growth than their prep program since their entry into the classroom. As the first mentor that teacher candidates encounter, supervising/cooperating

The most applicable part of my program was working side-by-side, in the trenches, with a mentor teacher for a full school year. Seeing how they responded to challenges, reflected and fixed mistakes, set up systems & structures in their room made all the difference. The gradual release from observation, to small group instruction and finally whole-class teaching was critical.

— Teacher flash poll respondent from Washington, D.C.

teachers should have multiple years of effective or higher ratings on the districts' evaluation system. At a minimum, these mentors should have at least three years of classroom experience because it is essential to be surrounded by instructional leaders who are comfortable in the classroom. And the research shows that on average, the biggest gains in effectiveness for teachers are in the first two to three of their career.⁸ Experienced teachers can empathize with the challenges of being a new teacher and offer the support and guidance that will enable their mentee to develop strong instructional practices and professional skill sets. Some teaching skills, such as resiliency and reflectiveness, are learned over time, and are best modeled by an experienced, effective teacher.

Recommendation: Tightly align clinical experience with program coursework.

Prospective teacher's clinical experience and coursework should be closely aligned. Flash poll respondents were clear that learning theory without the opportunity to apply it was not useful in helping them prepare for their first classroom. This aligns with findings from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Raising the Bar, in which 77% of AFT members said that aligning curricula with field experiences would improve teacher preparedness.⁹ To meet this need, we propose a practicum cycle that consists of a learning theory and/or best practice, planning a lesson using this theory or best practice, implementing it in the classroom, and reflecting

I spent almost an entire semester of my graduate program learning methods and best practices to teach struggling readers. Part of the coursework entailed reading and analyzing reports and recommendations from prominent sociologists and researchers. The second part of the coursework was based deeply in data – identifying appropriate reading assessments and analyzing (both real and invented) student data to establish groups and targeted skills. In and of itself, the assigned readings and writing assignments were useful in getting me to think about methodology, but that wasn't sufficient to prepare me to actually institute these methodologies with a group of students. Thankfully, my preparation program closely aligned this coursework with my clinical experience. Alongside my cohort members, I was tasked with creating and implementing a reading intervention program that met daily with a group of six second-graders who were significantly below grade level. Our course meetings then became more of professional development than just instruction – we used our professor and resources to look at the data from our intervention groups and track whether the methods of reading instruction that we were implementing were successful.

— Raquel Maya, 2nd grade dual language teacher, DC Teaching Policy Fellow

on this learning experience in a small cohort of fellow educators, led by an experienced, effective coach or professor. One of our cohort members shared with us an example of what this looks like when done well. Alignment of coursework and clinical experience can be further accomplished by ensuring strong connections between teacher preparation programs and the districts where placement schools are located. Currently, hundreds of schools across the country participate in hosting teacher preparation candidates at a Professional Development School (PDS).¹⁰ There school leaders, teacher candidates, mentor teachers, and preparation program faculty work together to ensure that both the schools and programs are putting student achievement first through interwoven coursework and meaningful experiences. At programs such as Marymount University's Masters of Elementary, the university works with their candidates, PDS schools and participating districts to fill positions with those graduates already invested in the mission and vision of their schools. Through partnerships, these school districts and schools can provide the feedback necessary to ensure that the clinical experience is preparing teachers to be effective in their first years of teaching.

Recommendation: Prioritize opportunities for collaboration as key components of the clinical experience.

Flash poll data shows that apprentice teachers need to observe and participate in teacher collaboration so they become accustomed to the beneficial process of working side-by-side with colleagues to create instructional materials and to reflect on student data. It is noteworthy that practicing teachers see their grade/content level colleagues as essential to their professional growth. In fact, two-thirds of the teachers polled indicated that grade level/content colleagues were more impactful on their professional growth than their preparation program. Collaboration early and often in a teacher's career will model the larger communal efforts and ethos of a school. To share best practices with each other best serves the students. Moreover, collaboration during clinical practice will demonstrate to young, eager teachers that it is most sustainable to share resources and work together.

Coursework

“You better watch out for Marvin. He’s a handful.” These were the first words that were spoken to me by one of my fellow teachers on my first day as a first-grade teacher. Although I was warned about behavioral issues concerning many of my students, I felt I was prepared to create a structured, organized, and positive classroom environment thanks to my teacher prep program. As part of my curriculum, I had both ample classroom management instruction, as well as numerous opportunities to practice the strategies that I learned through clinical experience. As a first year teacher, I understood how important it was to be proactive in addressing behavioral concerns rather than reactive. For Marvin, math materials labeled with a picture and words helped him find what he needed, even though he could not read. Songs used for transition times helped him, as well as the other students, move between activities without prompting. Stickers on the floor to designate positions in line helped Marvin maintain the personal space he desired while avoiding conflicts with his peers. Without the focused and research-based classroom management instruction I received in my teacher preparation program, I would have spent much of my first year dealing with student behavior issues like Marvin’s, rather than focused on instruction. — Lauryn England, 3rd grade teacher, LA Teaching Policy Fellow

Recommendation: Align coursework with the real demands of teaching

Teachers consistently reported in the open response that their preparation program coursework was too theoretical and lacked strong ties to the day-to-day work they experienced once they were in their classrooms. We believe a strong, rigorous and comprehensive program should offer coursework in the following seven areas.

- All teachers need a strong foundation in how to teach students to read. Future teachers, both elementary and secondary, need to understand the continuum of literacy, diagnose student's individual and collective literacy needs, and choose from an array of research-proven strategies and curricula.
- Students deserve to be taught by skilled, prepared and well-informed educators with expertise in their content area, especially at the secondary level.
- Teacher education programs need to incorporate the explicit teaching of research-proven classroom management strategies. Open response comments indicated that classroom management is a significant obstacle for first-year teachers. Additionally, 55% of respondents said their prep programs would have been stronger with more instruction on classroom management.
- Cultural proficiency should be taught in teacher education programs to better prepare teachers for the demands of working with diverse youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Teacher preparation candidates should receive explicit instruction in time management skills to effectively manage collaborating with colleagues, the demands of serving on committees, documentation, grading and preparing for the teacher evaluation cycle, etc.
- Teacher preparation programs should also train candidates in 1) socio-emotional development in youth and 2) strategies used by counselors and social workers to address students' needs, de-escalate situations, counsel students, and refer them to appropriate medical services when necessary.
- As the number of students with special needs in the general education classroom continues to rise, and as full-inclusion programs (where students with disabilities are served entirely within the general education setting) are continually adopted across the nation, first-year teachers must be prepared to not only meet the needs of a general education population, but that of a population with various disabilities and special education needs that they must serve.

Conclusion

In recent years, the call for transforming teacher preparation has gained traction. From the adoption of new accreditation standards by Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) to the recently-released regulations from the U.S. Department of Education, there is momentum for addressing the poor state of teacher preparation. But these actions alone will not be enough to ensure that every novice teacher enters the teaching profession prepared to meet the needs of their students. To make further progress towards this goal, we need to strengthen preparation program curriculum, improve clinical practice, and make the bar for entry into the profession rigorous and based on teachers' content knowledge and ability to deliver great instruction. Taking these steps will bring us closer to making sure every first year teacher is equipped to succeed from their first days in the classroom.

Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows, 2014-2015

DC Metro

Clare Berke, Benjamin Banneker Academic High School, DC Public Schools

Margaret Brennan, Francis Scott Key Middle School, Montgomery County Public Schools

Nathaniel Cole, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School

Brianna Copley, Anacostia Senior High School, DC Public Schools

Melissa Davis, J.E.B. Stuart High School, Fairfax County Public Schools

Jessica Greer, Truesdell Education Campus, DC Public Schools

Matthew Kennedy, Eastern Senior High School, DC Public Schools

Raquel Maya, Powell Elementary School, DC Public Schools

Kyle Morean, Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School

Kate O'Connor, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School

Felicia Reynolds, Marie Reed Elementary, DC Public Schools

Ashley Smith, Lakeland Elementary/Middle School #12, Baltimore City Public Schools

Los Angeles

Rebecca Burton, Alliance College-Ready Public Schools

Julija Zubac, Alain LeRoy Locke College Prep Academy, GreenDot Public Schools

Lisa Blackwell, John H. Francis Polytechnic High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Lauryn England, 99th Street Elementary, Los Angeles Unified School District

Anne Yi, Southeast Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Chris Hoffman, Manual Arts High School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Ruth Luevanos, Pacoima Middle School, Los Angeles Unified School District

Candace Crawford, Executive Director, Teach Plus D.C.

Jonathan Ortega, Program Policy Lead, Teach Plus Los Angeles

Appendix

Teacher Preparation Flash Poll Questions

Administered October 2014

1. In what state do you teach?

2. How effective would you rate yourself as a teacher during your first year of teaching?

I was fully prepared to be highly effective and met the needs of all my students.

I was not fully prepared and was not able to meet the needs of many of my students.

I was not at all prepared and not able to meet the needs of most of my students.

3. How would you rate your teacher preparation program in equipping you for the realities of teaching?

Extremely well - my prep program taught me everything I needed to know to be successful as a teacher

Moderately well – my prep program taught me most of what I needed to know to be successful as a teacher

Somewhat well – my prep program was mediocre in teaching me what I needed to know to be successful as a teacher

Not at all – my prep program did not teach me much of what I needed to know to be successful as a teacher

4. As you have spent more time in the classroom, have any of the following been more impactful on your professional growth and success than your prep program? (Check all that apply.)

Mentor teacher

Formal induction program

Strong principal or AP

Department of grade-level team leaders

Grade or content level colleagues

Formal professional development

District-level instructional support

Other

5. Of the list below, please check all of the factors that would have made your teacher preparation program stronger in readying you for the demands of the classroom.

More content related instruction

More courses on differentiating instruction

More instruction on classroom management

More instruction on teaching ELL and special education students

Increased length of clinical practice

More meaningful feedback during clinical practice

More instruction analyzing and using data

More instruction on lesson planning and curriculum design

Increased instruction on teaching literacy

Increased instruction in using standards based planning

Other

6. Please check the top 3 factors that would be most useful in deciding which preparation program to attend.

Graduation rates of students enrolled in the program

Pass rates of graduates on state certification exams

Job placement rates of graduates

Retention rates of graduates (did they stay in the classroom?)

Impact of graduates on student achievement

Duration of clinical practice

Other

7. Is there anything else you want to share with us regarding your views on teacher preparation?

End Notes

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 11. See <http://www.ncate.org/Accreditation/AllAccreditationResources/ProfessionalDevelopmentSchools/PDSStandards/tabid/499/Default.aspx>

