Retooling Teacher Preparation in West Virginia

West Virginia’s public schools have long struggled with student achievement levels in reading and math at levels significantly below the national average and with poverty-based achievement gaps within the state. Perhaps nowhere has the problem been as persistent as in reading, in which the state failed to show gains during the 20 years it has been measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress.1 As a member of the West Virginia Board of Education, serving as president, I felt it was incumbent on myself and the other board members to address this issue.

Therefore, to respond to this challenge, West Virginia decided to focus first on improving teacher preparation and certification in reading. In 2013, West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin directed the state to “establish actionable and measurable evidence of teacher preparation effectiveness with an emphasis on reading instruction.” In response, the West Virginia State Board of Education created the West Virginia Higher...
Education—High Quality Educator Stakeholder Committee. The committee comprised preK-12 practitioners and leaders, representatives of educator preparation programs, members of the West Virginia Board of Education, and representatives from the West Virginia Department of Education.

The committee’s charge was to create a plan with an aggressive timetable for carrying out the governor’s directive. Governor Tomblin articulated a number of goals for educators that they plan needed to address:

- admission to a nationally accredited educator preparation program;
- varied and increasingly robust clinical experiences;
- performance assessments in clinical practice throughout educator preparation, including challenging standards for candidate continuation or exit from programs of study;
- successful passage of a state certification system that uses multiple assessments to determine and measure a candidate’s knowledge, skills, dispositions, and ability to impact student learning;
- demonstration of subject-matter competence through extended content course requirements and a subject-matter degree where relevant;
- professional development—supported by institutions of higher education in collaboration with regional education service agencies, local schools, and school districts—that leads to regular certification and continuing certification, as well as national board certification;
- a rigorous, periodic evaluation system to assess the practice of certified teachers based on student performance, to offer incentives to successful educators and assistance to struggling educators, and to lead to dismissal of ineffective educators where warranted; and
- a statewide data system that tracks candidate performance, education preparation provider effectiveness, and educator effectiveness.2

Embracing Change

In instituting bold action on teacher preparation, the first obstacle to overcome was the perception of higher education leaders that the state board and the state education agency were doing something to them rather than with them and for the benefit of West Virginia’s students. It was critical to include representatives from the state’s colleges and universities at the start. In May 2013, the High Quality Educator Committee convened a focus group with representatives from the state board, the West Virginia Department of Education, the WV Higher Education Policy Commission, higher education deans, a county superintendent, and practitioners. A resulting document outlined next steps for all constituencies.

The second obstacle the committee needed to address was the potential financial impact on colleges and universities. More rigorous preparation and certification of teachers posed the real risk of declining enrollment in the state’s teacher preparation programs, often considered a “cash cow” of their colleges and universities.

State board member Lloyd Jackson, representatives from the education department, and I met with the presidents of all private and public institutions to discuss the impact of this reform on their institutions. They had already heard about the potential impacts of these reforms from the deans and department chairs who participated in the first stages of our collaboration, but it was important that they have an opportunity to hear directly from the board and the department. Once higher education institutions accepted this challenge—and realized that both entities were committed to providing support to help them make the changes—the groundwork for collaboration was set.

Lastly, the state needed to consider policy revisions aligned with the committee’s recommendations, including adoption of the new accreditation standards set in 2013 by the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP). Faculty and higher education leadership have provided feedback during all stages of the processes, including policy revision.

In September 2013, the larger stakeholder committee formed a steering committee to identify detailed recommendations and action items. The resulting white paper, shared with the state board in December 2013, also included metrics and/or benchmarks, timelines for completion, the person or entity responsible for each action,
and a fiscal note for each. The board approved policy revisions incorporating these recommendations in October 2014.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations reflected the perspectives and analyses of a cross section of educators and education policy leaders from a range of experiences, professional knowledge bases, and the full gamut of institutional backgrounds. They examined a range of ideas and professional critiques from national organizations such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, CAEP, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the National Council on Teacher Quality; and the National Governors’ Association. In addition, they examined models used in states such as North Carolina, Maryland, and Kentucky to enhance the quality of educators and the rigor of preparation programs.

Their recommendations included the following:

- **Strengthen admission criteria.** In alignment with CAEP standards, West Virginia set the GPA requirement to 3.0 or better and required stepwise increases in performance on admissions tests between now and 2020.

- **Establish and enforce high standards for candidate program matriculation and completion.** These standards were to include clearly articulated program phases and benchmark criteria. Colleges had to develop new structures for ongoing assessments of teacher candidates, and the state board set new requirements for a reading Praxis II exam before all candidates’ first field experience.

- **Establish strong partnerships between preK-12 and higher education institutions.** These partnerships are crucial in identifying, setting new requirements for, and rewarding school-based clinical educators to work with teacher candidates in collaborative settings.

- **Use of employment and professional practice data to approve and improve educator preparation programs.** Action items include instituting surveys of West Virginia graduates who become practicing educators, rethinking professional development models, and creating a database of aggregated graduate performance data.

- **Review, identify and enact state-level supports.** Such supports include funding incentives for programs that meet and exceed state standards and tuition credits and loans for candidates in high-need programs that subsequently teach in West Virginia.

**Next Steps**

The first phase of reform has been aggressive. Whereas under the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education standards only state public institutions were involved, all West Virginia institutions of higher education are transitioning to CAEP accreditation requirements. In order to meet these requirements, most of the changes spelled out in the reform recommendations must be in place by fall 2016. Several of the changes, including those for new reading and elementary content assessments, are already in effect. In the early statewide meetings that followed, the institutions focused at first on the negative aspects of the change: lower student enrollment in teacher preparation programs, more rigorous coursework, and a more comprehensive teacher performance assessment. However, the climate and culture became more positive and open with the institution of a pilot program supported by national assessment groups, the department, the state board, and higher education institutions.

West Virginia’s higher education institutions are implementing these new assessments in spring 2015 and fall 2015. The state education agency will make further recommendations to the state board based on analysis of assessment data, which is expected by fall 2016.

As mentioned earlier, West Virginia is also piloting two teacher performance assessments (TPA) in each of six institutions of higher education through the end of 2015 to determine whether either should be a requirement for program completion or licensure. It is hoped that a TPA—whether based on Pearson’s or ETS’s—will provide a better measure of candidates’ performance and their impact on student learning. Data from the pilot will be analyzed in spring 2016.

This year, West Virginia education policymakers also began to focus on revising leadership standards, which will have consequences for leadership preparation programs as well. As we
of a degree of protection at the policy level, but more than that, the ability to grow people.

**Are there ways your teacher prep program helped prepare you?**

My program taught me I was ready to engage in a lifetime of figuring it out. I felt ready to struggle, and that’s a really important characteristic. Understanding the importance of professional networks was important. I spent a lot of time in classrooms prior to student teaching—something like 300 hours—and that part of my experience was formative. It comes back to whether a program has formalized mentorship or internship; it is incredibly important to have people who help you understand the classroom. We still largely do it in isolation. If it weren’t for video, we would see far fewer classrooms.

**Describe your best professional development experience and what makes it so valuable.**

The most beneficial professional learning helps teachers to reframe what they know and to think more carefully about their practice. It helps them determine ways in which they can be a learner, too. When I’m [teaching teachers] the most beneficial things are not when I explain steps of a strategy but when I ask them to be metacognitive about their experience and work to transfer that. Establishing problems of practice becomes really important. They want to investigate what’s not going well. On the other side of professional learning, a few experiences had a huge impact on me as a teacher. They were rigorous, and they involved student work. I had to discern where my learners were and how I was going to get them from one point to the next. I oftentimes tell people that I’m more afraid of my mediocrity than of my mistakes.

**What can we do to better prepare teachers to be leaders?**

Connecting them with other teacher leaders is important. Teachers need to be told that what they’re doing is special because a lot of teachers really don’t know it. It speaks to the isolation we experience in the profession. Making sure that teachers get out of that isolation is crucial to leadership.

**Lessons for State Boards**

Although it is too early to judge the impact of these reforms on teacher quality in West Virginia, much less the impact on student outcomes, it is possible to draw early lessons from efforts to reset the course for teacher preparation in my state.

**Commitment from the top provides an unmatched opportunity for state action.** The governor’s call to increase literacy and reading by third grade, combined with national research and trend data on student literacy, created a sense of urgency that brought constituencies to the table around a common goal.

**Buy-in is important.** Representation from all higher education institutions in the state was reflected in all stakeholder groups and steering committees, with multiple opportunities to provide feedback. Efforts to collaborate paid off. Colleges and universities willingly participated in the TPA pilot and have requested more opportunities for their students to participate TPA after the pilot is completed.

**National organizations provide important support.** West Virginia relied on them for meeting facilitation, research, resources for planning and implementation, survey development and data analysis, as well as grant funding from NASBE and the Benedum Foundation.

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1National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Education Progress (2013). In 2013, 27 percent of West Virginia fourth grade students tested at or above proficient, compared with the national average of 34 percent.
