

May 13, 2014

The Honorable Jimmie Don Aycock
Texas House of Representatives
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768

Dear Chairman Aycock:

Thank you for your continued leadership and for holding a public hearing this week to discuss the critical issue of teacher quality. Better support for our current classroom educators while also attracting our best and brightest to the teaching profession are critical elements to improving the education our students receive. I believe teacher quality is the most significant school-based factor to the outcomes our students achieve. As it relates to greater instruction and enhanced learning, this will certainly be among the most important hearings your committee conducts.

Michele Moore, Texas Education Agency (TEA) associate commissioner for educator leadership and quality, will be providing detailed information about our work around teacher evaluation at your hearing this week. Before the hearing, I wanted to provide you and the members of the committee with some additional background and to address some of the concerns I have heard.

For several years, the TEA has been engaged in efforts to develop a new teacher evaluation system to provide more meaningful feedback to our classroom teachers. Beginning in the 2014-2015 school year, TEA will pilot a new evaluation system, the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). Once fully implemented, T-TESS will replace the existing Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS), which has been in place since 1997, is currently used by 86 percent of districts in the state and, quite frankly, has outlived its usefulness in providing our teachers any valuable feedback.

Some have raised concerns about Texas redesigning our evaluation system to receive a waiver from certain provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. While it is true that a new teacher evaluation system was a key component in securing an NCLB waiver, that is not the reason for redesigning the evaluation system.

Work to develop a new evaluation system was underway well before Texas applied for a waiver and would have continued regardless of the opportunity to receive the waiver. I directed my staff to develop a new evaluation system because a quality teacher evaluation system is critical to providing teachers actionable feedback to improve their classroom instruction and thus, student learning. PDAS places insufficient emphasis on student learning, and it has stigmatized what should be a formative process. I chose to pursue the federal waiver in response to requests from superintendents statewide and because it dovetailed with work the agency was already undertaking. In short, I did not choose to redesign our teacher evaluation system to receive a federal waiver.

Page 2
May 13, 2014

I have heard a number of individuals claim that I lack the legal authority to develop a teacher evaluation system that includes the performance of teachers' students as a component. Current law (Texas Education Code, Section 21.351) requires the commissioner of education to adopt a recommended teacher appraisal process, and one of the two required criteria for the system is "the performance of teachers' students." Current law requires districts to use either the evaluation system developed by the commissioner or another developed locally. By developing and piloting a teacher evaluation system that is completely voluntary for local districts, I have simply followed current law.

It is fair to note that the state's ability to maintain the current NCLB waiver will likely depend on whether the Legislature requires all districts in the state to use the evaluation system that the agency has developed or a local option that matches or exceeds its requirements – including the requirement that student growth count as 20 percent of the total evaluation. I cannot and will not try to require all districts to adopt the state system or one that exceeds its requirements without legislative action. The United States Department of Education (USDE) issued guidance last week suggesting that they would be more flexible about the timelines regarding teacher evaluations, but it remains unclear how USDE might treat Texas.

Finally, some have raised objections to using student test performance as a factor in the evaluation system saying that the value-add measure TEA is using in the pilot is flawed and that test results should not be a consideration. First, the value-add measure that will make up 20 percent of the total evaluation will apply to fewer than 25 percent of teachers who teach in a tested grade and subject, and for whom the measure is available. The value-add measure is a growth expectation that compares a student's actual growth with the growth he or she would be expected to show when compared to students with a similar academic performance. Student growth scores will be added together to provide a growth value for each teacher.

Measuring progress rather than just one-time achievement and comparing students to similar students rather than to simply passing or failing is a more appropriate and fair way to evaluate the teacher's impact on his or her students' performance. Additionally, having an objective measure provides a safeguard against any possible bias in the more subjective elements of the evaluation.

Local districts will have the flexibility to select other options (such as student learning objectives, portfolios or district-level pre- and post-tests) for teachers in non-tested grades or subjects, or for those educators for whom value-add scores cannot be calculated.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some background information. Your discussion and consideration is critically important for the future of the state. I look forward to working with you to ensure you have the best information possible to move Texas forward.

Sincerely,

Michael Williams
Commissioner of Education

cc: Members of the House Public Education Committee