

September 20, 2022

To: The Texas House Committees on Public Education & Higher Education

Re: Pandemic effect on teacher workforce

Chairman Dutton, Chairman Murphy and members of the Committees,

My name is Brandon Jenkins. Thank you for allowing me to share my story. I currently work at Galena Park ISD as a SPED Resource Instructional Aide at Dr. Shirley J Williamson Elementary, the same school I attended as a child. I am also entering my final semester in the Teacher Education Program at the University of Houston Downtown, majoring in EC-6 instruction with a focus on ESL. I represent the College of Public Service as the Student Government Associations Legislative lead and serve as a fellow of the Call Me Mister program and Summer House Institute, which provide platforms for men of color in education.

As a product of many educators, I had an early connection to the teaching profession and was motivated to become a teacher as early as middle school. As cliché as it sounds, I knew at an early age that I wanted to change the world, and I knew I could do that by impacting youth academically and socially. My goal is to make a true impact with youth and will do that for however long it takes. I plan to not only stay in education for years to come but to find new ways we can elevate it.

I started my journey into the education sector through Galena Park ISD's "HomeGrown" program, which provided district graduates a gateway into the teaching profession. I was invited to join this program through our high school's career center, and I did so primarily because of the financial opportunity that does not come easy to most high school graduates. Not only was I being paid well but I was gaining experience doing something I had a true passion for. I was able to observe and learn from veteran teachers, attain the necessary skills to advance, and solidify my passion for the profession.

Although I was not classified as the teacher of record, this program showed me that I was a teacher the minute I stepped into the building and belonged there. I dealt with discipline, graded assignments, and even had lunch duty. After a year as a participant of the HomeGrown program, I was offered a full-time position as an instructional aide for special education.

While working full-time for the district, I also attended San Jacinto Community College, primarily because it was the most affordable option to take the first step in my studies. Although I was making a steady income working for the district I knew it was not enough to sustain me at a 4-year university. The college also offered precise course planning that ensured all of my credits would transfer and be accounted for. Most students face the problem that once they transfer not all of their credits are applicable, forcing them to spend another semester or two to complete their required courses.

After completing my associate's degree, I transferred to the University of Houston Downtown entering their Teacher Education Program. The highlight of my college career has been working with our college dean to innovate new ways of recruiting and retaining students. These projects

include creating social spaces, especially during the pandemic, that provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty and peers and feel a sense of belonging that ultimately increases student recruitment and retention.

As I look ahead to the final year of my program, I will need to pass 5 certification exams and complete my clinical teaching requirements. To feel as prepared as possible to be a certified teacher, I want the opportunity to practice the core elements of instruction, such as lesson planning and differentiating for diverse learners. During this practice, quality feedback would also help me improve and feel ready to serve as teacher of record next year.

I am ecstatic that my program is partnering with school districts to ensure more candidates benefit from paid residency experiences. This gives students financial stability during their clinical studies while allowing districts to identify, develop and hire talented candidates swiftly. Unfortunately, despite my years of experience and employment as a paraprofessional on campus, I won't benefit from this paid opportunity; instead, I will need to resign from my position or take a leave of absence to satisfy my student teaching requirements.

Finally, while I haven't taken all of my certification exams yet, I am uncertain whether my coursework has fully prepared me to pass them and whether the tests will actually give me the feedback I want. And, while it may not seem like a lot of money to some, I will need to pay more than \$600 for these exams - assuming I pass all of them on the first try. This cost has a concrete impact on students from low-income backgrounds and can delay or even prevent them from earning their certification.

Reflecting on my own journey to become a Texas teacher, here are three recommendations I respectfully ask you to consider:

1. Support smooth pathways to certification for educational aides and paraprofessionals by valuing their credentials and work-based learning. For example, prior years of experience or current employment should transfer credit or align with certification requirements.
2. Incentivize school districts to develop and sustain Grow Your Own programs that include pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship models. For example, the state could adjust funding for Education & Training programs or expand its GYO grant program.
3. Incentivize high-quality preparation programs by making them more accessible and affordable for candidates. This could include targeted financial aid for residencies or reimbursement for certification exams.

Thank you for listening and I welcome any questions you might have.

Sincerely,
Brandon Jenkins