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February 10, 2021

The Honorable Filemon Vela
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Vela,

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas public educators since 1980. ATPE is the leading educator association in Texas, with approximately 100,000 members statewide, including over 2,600 members in your congressional district. We write to share ATPE's positions on several federal education policy issues important to Texas public educators and students.

Additional COVID-19 Relief:

Texas school districts have largely had students back on campus since the beginning of this school year, and they continue to experience unprecedented costs associated with the safe return of students to the classroom. ATPE strongly supports additional money for K-12 in the next COVID-19 relief package that districts can use with flexibility to meet their unique circumstances. Eligible expenditures should include efforts to maintain safe, sanitized spaces in which students and staff can socially distance; initiatives to provide PPE for all teachers and staff; and any other necessary measures to safely reopen schools to more students. FEMA disaster funds should also be eligible for reimbursement for COVID-related expenses not otherwise covered. Additionally, federal funds should be provided to extend and mandate paid sick and family medical leave that expired in 2020. This leave is vital as it helps prevent job loss for school employees who contract COVID, are forced to quarantine, or are caring for immune-compromised loved ones.

Testing Waivers:

The ATPE House of Delegates adopted a resolution in 2020 calling for the cancellation of state standardized tests, including the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), for the 2020-21 school year. ATPE and other associations urge the state and federal government to reconsider testing mandates in light of the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. We take this position because we know the high-stakes nature of mandated standardized testing places additional unnecessary pressure on our students, parents, and educators at a time when they already face such difficult circumstances. A growing chorus of educators, parents, and elected officials have opposed standardized testing this year. Testing relief was a cornerstone of many candidates' education platforms in last year's elections, and several elected school boards have also passed resolutions calling for suspension of testing in 2020-21. Despite the increasing backlash, Texas officials cling to a rigid plan for continuing the tests this spring. We urge Congress and the Biden administration to offer waivers of federal testing requirements and are asking Gov. Greg Abbott to provide relief in the same manner as spring 2020 when the pandemic first disrupted the educational environment.

Title I Formula Funding:

ATPE strongly supports additional federal funding for public education, which should flow through the Title I formula intended to target limited federal education funding for schoolwide initiatives to raise achievement among low-income students. ATPE strongly opposed the previous administration's efforts to create pilot voucher programs and syphon off critical COVID-19 relief money for private schools based on population instead of through the Title I formula.

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Funding for Teacher Preparation Programs:

ATPE recognizes it is a disservice to both educators and students when ill-prepared teachers are placed in the 21st-century classroom and expected to achieve excellence. Educator training held to high expectations and standards plays a vital role in ensuring every student has access to a well-prepared teacher. It also has a lasting impact on retaining those educators in the classroom. ATPE's advocacy on these issues is based on the strong, evidence-backed belief that all educator certification candidates deserve strong training and support prior to holding responsibility for student learning and success. As Congress considers reauthorizing the Higher Education Act (HEA), we ask that you support additional funding for teacher preparation programs.

Initiatives such as the Teacher Quality Enhancement program, TEACH grants, and loan forgiveness programs specific to educators are important HEA Title II programs that help attract strongly qualified candidates into the profession, prepare educators in programs that are held to high standards of training, and retain well-qualified and experienced teachers in the classrooms with students who need them most. Research consistently shows that access to a high-quality teacher is the most important in-school factor leading to a student's success. Programs like these are a vital piece of the overall landscape supporting student success in the classroom, and the federal government should maintain its valuable role, especially in these challenging times for recruiting and retaining classroom educators.

Social Security Reform:

ATPE continues to advocate for reform to Social Security laws that reduce the benefits of public educators and other public servants who are also eligible for a government pension, such as the Teacher Retirement System (TRS) retirement benefit for Texas educators. Legislation has already been introduced in the 117th Congress—HR82 by Rep Rodney Davis (R-OH)—to fully repeal both the Government Pension Offset (GPO), which affects spousal and widow(er) benefits, and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP), which reduces individual Social Security benefits of those who also have earned a government pension. Although we recognize that full repeal of both offsets is very costly to the Social Security trust fund and unlikely at this time, we urge you to co-sponsor this legislation, as well as legislation that would repeal the WEP, replace it with a more equitable proportional formula, and provide relief to retirees who have already had their benefits reduced due to the WEP. Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX) and Rep. Richard Neal (D-MA) each introduced WEP repeal and replace bills in the 116th Congress (HR3934 and HR4540, respectively), and we anticipate this legislation will be reintroduced in the 117th Congress. We urge you to co-sponsor both bills and urge a bipartisan compromise that can pass into law this year, bringing much-needed relief to current and future retired teachers and other public servants in Texas.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of ATPE's positions on these key federal education policy issues. Please use ATPE as a resource, and should you have any questions, please reach out to our federal governmental relations consultant David Pore at dpore@hslawmail.com.

Sincerely,



Shannon J. Holmes, Ed.D.
Executive Director