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“Educating our Educators: How Federal Policy Can Better Support Teachers and School
Leaders”

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Chairman Sablan, Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Allen, Ranking Member Smucker, and members of the committee: good morning to you all. I am pleased to be here to discuss the importance of high-quality teacher preparation programs and how Congress can support them under reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

I am proud to serve as Dean of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education. What attracted me to and excited me about VCU is its commitment to research and community engagement along with its position as an urban serving university. With a Carnegie classification as *Research I*, which signifies a university with very high research activity, and Carnegie classification of *Community Engaged*, indicating VCU's institutional mission and commitment to collaboration between the institution and the larger community, we are committed to addressing the most pressing issues facing our region and nation. We educate 31,000 students from all 50 states and students from around the world. We are a comprehensive university with a large health system and boast an economic impact of over \$6 billion on the Commonwealth of Virginia.

I'm proud to say that the VCU School of Education is ranked #20 for best graduate schools of education, #11 best public graduate school of education, and #3 for best online program by U.S. News & World Report. The School of Education has approximately 700 masters and doctoral students with approximately 250 being trained to be teachers and professional school counselors in our K-12 schools. We will significantly increase this number of educators and their preparation for hard-to-staff schools over the next few years.

In addition to our strong teacher preparation programs, the School of Education is a leader in research. Within VCU, we are second only to the School of Medicine in external research funding, with approximately \$27 million from federal, state and local sources. These funds support important research and demonstration projects including:

- Richmond Teacher Residency Program, discussed below;
- Best in CLASS, a classroom-based intervention funded by the Institute of Education Sciences designed to provide teachers with effective strategies for working with children who have emotional and behavioral difficulties.
- Project KSR, funded by the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education, an early childhood special education master's training program designed to prepare fully credentialed early intervention and early childhood special educators.

Our research and externally funded work is community engaged in nature and is also a driving force for the work done in our seven centers and institutes, which take our research and learning to the "real world" where it's needed most. I am very proud of the work done by our faculty, staff and students.

While our teacher preparation programs are nationally recognized, we know we have more to do to increase the number of individuals we prepare, especially for high-needs and hard-to-staff schools, and we need to strengthen how we prepare teachers to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse K-12 student population.

Recommendations to Improve Teacher Preparation

Dr. Martin Haberman, of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education and founder of The Haberman Educational Foundation, said, “Completing a traditional program of teacher education as preparation for working in [urban, high-needs schools] is like preparing to swim the English Channel by doing laps in the university pool.” The data is clear that our hardest to staff and poorest performing schools are those with high concentrations of minority students and students living in multigenerational poverty.

At VCU, we are working hard to:

- Integrate culturally responsive pedagogy and practice into our coursework so that our teacher candidates can better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse K-12 student population;
- Ensure that our teacher candidates have a deep understanding of poverty, privilege, racism, and the associated contextual stressors and trauma;
- Provide a strong focus on content and general teaching pedagogy; and
- Incorporate intensive, integrated and critically reflective implicit bias training that allows teacher candidates to self-examine their own attitudes.

Teachers who better understand the broader cultural context and who possess strong content knowledge and culturally responsive pedagogy are more effective and successful in the classroom. High quality and culturally responsive teachers also serve as better role models for underrepresented minority students who might be interested in going into education. I firmly believe that minority students are not going to choose a profession where they have not seen themselves reflected in their teachers. Teachers who do not have an opportunity to explore their own implicit bias often unwittingly say things that marginalize and stereotype minority students—what today we have come to understand as micro/macro aggression. The result: a deeper cultural/racial divide in our schools that negatively impacts minority student achievement. Not everyone wants the challenge of swimming the English Channel and not every high-needs school is the English Channel. However, we must do our best to find those who are up for the challenge and better prepare them for success in all schools with all children.

To improve teacher preparation, I offer the following recommendations:

1. Provide earlier and extended opportunities for teacher candidates to be in schools.
 2. Prepare candidates for the realities of today’s classrooms, especially in high-needs and low-performing schools.
 3. Focus not only on teacher recruitment and preparation, but also on teacher retention.
 4. Expand pathways to teaching: teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities need to provide multiple pathways for individuals to become teachers.
1. **Provide earlier and extended opportunities for teacher candidates to be in schools:** Research from residency models and initiatives from around the country demonstrate the value of getting teacher candidates in classrooms early. Unfortunately, this experience often comes at the end of teacher preparation programs—and some

candidates even discover that they are not well suited to be educators. For this reason, early and extended opportunities for teacher candidates to work with students are essential to not only ensure that they have chosen the right career, but also to ensure that they are well-prepared.

Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR): We are completing our fifth year of funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) Grant Program that helps support our Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR) Program, an intensive school-based, year-long teacher preparation program. RTR began as a partnership between VCU and Richmond Public Schools (RPS) to recruit, prepare, support, and retain highly effective teachers and teacher leaders who are committed to the students of RPS for the long term. With new federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education’s Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant program, we have now expanded into the lowest-performing school system in Virginia and two suburban school systems with pockets of concentrated poverty. In the next two years, we also plan to expand RTR into rural schools that face many of the same challenges in attracting and retaining highly effective teachers.

VCU recognizes that even the best traditional teacher preparation programs have fallen short in adequately preparing individuals for high-needs, low performing schools. Urban teachers must be prepared in the context within which they will teach. While traditional teacher preparation was not fully preparing individuals for urban and high-needs classrooms, neither were alternate routes because research shows that preparation does matter. Teachers who are unprepared in curriculum, teaching methods, child development, and with no student teaching experience leave at twice the rate of teachers who have had this training (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

RTR is a “third way” of preparing teachers for hard-to-staff, underperforming schools that combines the best of traditional and alternative route programs, ensuring that outstanding candidates are well-prepared to make a positive impact on student learning on their very first day as teachers of record. Learning to teach is a complex task that requires intensive school-based experiences in which individuals have a chance to combine the theory of effective teaching in high-needs schools with extensive opportunities to practice under the tutelage of effective veteran teachers and highly trained mentors. RTR provides this in multiple ways:

- Master's level coursework (culminating in a master’s or post-baccalaureate degree) designed to ensure that residents are well-prepared for high-needs classrooms.
- A year-long residency in a high-needs school co-teaching alongside a carefully selected and trained master/mentor teacher, integrating theory and practice and making it more likely that RTR graduates will remain in our hard-to-staff schools and will be effective teachers.
- Post-residency support from a highly-trained, content-specific career coach for the first two years of the RTR graduate’s teaching career.

Measuring RTR’s Impact

- **Increasing Teacher Retention:** The RTR retention rate for first-year teachers was 34 percentage points higher than the comparable group of non-RTR-prepared first year teachers (96.4% vs. 62.4%) in 2017-2018.
- **Diversifying the Teacher Workforce:** The percent of RTR residents of color far exceeds most traditional teacher prep programs. Among our newest and largest cohort, 42% identify as underrepresented minorities. In Virginia, approximately 13% of our teachers are underrepresented minorities. Nationally, 25% of those enrolled in teacher preparation programs were individuals of color.
- **Raising Student Achievement:** Preliminary findings from an ongoing study indicate that elementary students (grades 2-5) of RTR graduates are making faster gains in reading and mathematics on curriculum-based measures compared to students of non-RTR elementary teachers. These findings are especially encouraging because the RTR elementary teachers were assigned to lower performing students than the non-RTR teachers.
- **Leveraging the Federal Investment:** Best and promising practices developed from RTR are informing how we recruit and prepare educators in our traditional teacher preparation program at VCU. I cannot stress enough how critical the TQP funding has been to launching RTR and providing us resources to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the program—as well as helping us leverage this investment to grow the program. In addition to the one-to-one funding match required under TQP, the Virginia General Assembly is now providing funding to support a \$22,000 stipend for residents. Our local school district partners are now paying for the mentor stipends, costs of training the mentors and providing ongoing professional development to enhance their coaching skills, and the cost of the career coaches who support RTR graduates for their first two years as teachers of record. Without this federal investment, we would not have secured state and local funding to help sustain the program after the TQP and SEED funding ends.

Substitute Teaching the VCU Way: Substitute Teaching the VCU Way launched last year. It recruits VCU students across majors, provides them a one-day substitute teaching “boot camp” and then deploys them to the surrounding school districts. In the first year, we recruited, trained and deployed 40 substitute teachers. This program has provided some immediate relief to our school district partners with respect to providing substitute teachers, an often under-recognized challenge in our hardest to staff schools. The program is also a way to recruit VCU students who might not have considered teaching as a career and to afford our current teacher candidates early classroom engagement with diverse student populations with the added benefit of providing an opportunity to make some additional money.

2. **Prepare candidates for the realities of today’s classrooms, especially in high-needs and low-performing schools.**

My second recommendation and passion for ensuring that teacher candidates are well prepared for the realities of today’s high-needs classrooms come from my professional experience. Before my position at VCU, my training as a counseling psychologist and my over 25 years of work experience in higher education has spanned university-level

student affairs and campus life, university counseling centers and counselor education. My research examines and addresses individual and family stress, stability and economic mobility with mostly underrepresented minority populations through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Additionally, I have been fortunate to receive over \$15 million in federal funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF), mostly under the Federal Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood Initiative (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage>), to support four major multi-year research and demonstration grants. My work with those living in multigenerational poverty contributes to my professional and personal commitment for educational professionals to better understand the intersection of poverty and economic immobility, the myriad of insecurities (e.g. housing, food, safety) and associated stressors, and their impact on educational attainment in children and family well-being.

Attention to these intersections is critical. Without recognizing and responding to the context of students' lives, particularly those who are generationally poor and underrepresented minority populations living in urban and rural environments, we can't address the factors that impact student engagement, teaching and learning, and parental engagement. At VCU we take this responsibility seriously.

Innovative Teacher Pipeline (ITP): The Innovative Teacher Pipeline (ITP), being launched this fall at VCU, will utilize best and promising practices from RTR, using its methodologies to recruit, screen and select students interested in teaching in urban and high-needs schools. The students will participate in Substitute Teaching the VCU Way to afford them experience and exposure in the classroom. To augment the strong content and pedagogy that exists in our programs, they will participate in additional curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities to better understand poverty and resulting contextual stressors, privilege, racism, diversity, equity and inclusion. They will receive training in culturally responsive pedagogy and practice, preparing them to be more culturally responsive teachers of diverse learners. Underpinning this experience will be in-depth and ongoing critically reflective implicit bias training. Finally, they will participate in professional development with other educators in urban and high-needs schools for two years after graduation as a way of supporting their transition to teachers of record in hard-to-staff schools.

3. **Focus not only on teacher recruitment and preparation, but also on teacher retention:** America's public schools are hemorrhaging teachers, especially in urban districts that often are forced to hire unqualified, unprepared, provisionally licensed teachers. Even more disturbing is evidence that the most effective beginning teachers are the first to leave. A study of four urban districts found that nearly one-third of highly effective teachers left within two years, and almost half left within five (TNTP, 2012). Hardest hit are schools that serve low-income and minority students, forcing school districts that can least afford it to spend millions of dollars each year on recruitment and retention.

This churning of teachers not only affects the stability of schools, it also negatively impacts students, impeding student achievement and school reform efforts. A study of 850,000 fourth and fifth graders in New York City found that teacher turnover had a significant negative impact on student achievement in math and English, especially in high-minority and low-achieving schools. Furthermore, the turnover had a negative impact on students throughout the school (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

These statistics are what led to our inclusion of two years of support for all RTR graduates from a highly-trained career coach. The importance this kind of induction support and its effectiveness in RTR has led to our commitment to **Alumni Induction Support** in which VCU will provide two years of professional development and support for our graduates who teach in Title I schools.

In addition, our TQP-funded longitudinal study on RTR and two local studies on teacher morale and teacher retention have identified key factors that lead to high rates of teacher turnover and key factors that contribute to teacher retention.

All evidence points to the critical importance of strong school leaders to teacher retention. Good teachers will not stay in a school with a weak leader. To that end, we are working with an RTR graduate and his principal to design a residency program for principals who want to serve in high-needs schools. We believe that by building a pipeline of highly-skilled principals who have the capacity to initiate and sustain improvement for schools serving students in low-performing urban and rural communities, we can positively impact teacher retention and outcomes for students.

4. **Expand pathways to teaching:** Teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities need to provide multiple pathways for individuals to become teachers to meet the needs of their communities. This is critical to addressing teacher shortages. In addition to our traditional Master of Teaching programs in Elementary and Secondary Education and our traditional Master of Education for Special Education, we have developed pathways for others who may not have known they wanted to become teachers until later in life. RTR provides one of those pathways.

Another is our new **VCU Pathways to Teaching: Career Switcher**. This is an accelerated educator preparation program that will move prospective teachers into the classroom early, as a full-time teacher earning a salary, while working with experienced teachers and university education faculty. The mission of this program is to equip and support second career professionals for the transition to teach in urban and high-needs schools. This program is distinctive in its focus on (a) recruitment and admission of highly qualified candidates; (b) a curriculum with strong pedagogical principles based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), culturally responsive pedagogy, integrated implicit bias training throughout and with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion; (c) engagement of the community as a vital partner; (d) Virginia Department of Education competency-based exit requirements that ensure teachers are equipped to be successful in urban and high-needs classrooms; and (e) the VCU Induction Mentor Program providing support during their first two years of teaching.

VCU also has a robust online program for provisionally licensed special education teachers that enables them to become fully licensed and fully prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities. We are currently working with the Virginia Department of Education to expand this program to include instructional aides who want to become teachers.

Virginia recently passed legislation allowing colleges and schools of education to offer undergraduate bachelor's degrees in education towards teacher licensure. This is critically important, considering the additional cost of obtaining a master's degree, subpar teacher salaries, and the need for stronger opportunities for colleges and schools of education to more innovatively prepare educators from their freshman year of college. Starting in the fall, the School of Education will launch five new bachelor's of science in education degree programs focused on early childhood, elementary school, secondary education with a concentration in engineering education, health and physical education, and special education. Woven throughout the new programs will be strategies that have been shown to be effective in addressing the needs of students with a variety of learning challenges, including those who live in poverty, students with disabilities, students who have experienced trauma, students who are English-language learners, and students who are racial, cultural or gender diverse.

Conclusion

At the VCU School of Education, we take seriously our responsibility to help address the most pressing issues affecting our community and its children. Immediate and innovative action is required to address the challenges in high-needs and low-performing schools. The challenges faced by many of our school children and in many of our schools are not average and will not be met with average efforts. We need to be bold and aspirational in our desires and efforts to address these challenges.

The research is clear. The quality of the teachers in our schools is the most important school-based factor in student achievement. With the changing demographics of our nation—Virginia public schools are now over 50% minority—we can no longer ignore the inequities that exist in providing well-prepared, effective teachers for all students.

I'd like to close with a quote from the late John Stanford, a retired army general and the Superintendent of Seattle Public Schools, who often reminded his community that –“The victory is in the classroom.” The preparation of teachers who are able to meet the needs of all students is critical to the continued success and prosperity of our nation and to our democracy.

We believe that through the innovative work of the VCU School of Education and its partners we are helping to secure the future and to achieve this victory by preparing effective, dedicated teachers who can lift up our communities from inside the classroom.