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Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education
Room 121, House Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

College of Education

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Dear Dr. Kirwan:

The College of Education at Towson University wish to thank you for the opportunity to share our responses and suggestions to the current Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education recommendations, particularly those from Workgroup 2 focused on High Quality Teachers and Leaders. Together, our faculty have carefully reviewed and discussed the recommendations. Overall, we wish to start by acknowledging the priorities of the Commission that we see as central to the work that we do in supporting teachers to understand the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms. We are pleased to see the commission's focus on the social emotional learning of children in schools; the emphasis on teachers' ability to accurately assess student learning and design instruction which meets the needs of their individual students; and the attention to expanding early childhood education options which we believe will have the potential to provide greater intervention opportunities for those who may be at risk upon entering school.

In what follows, you will find a synthesis of feedback from faculty across our College related to the Working Group 2 recommendations.

***Element 2g:** Develop career ladders for teachers and school leaders comparable in design to the career ladders found in Singapore and Shanghai, with respect to standards for advancement and relationship to the system for compensating teachers and school Leaders.*

- 1. Critical Shortage of Teachers:** Currently and historically, we have experienced a critical shortage of teachers in the state of Maryland. As currently written, the proposed *Maryland Career Ladder for Educators* compels teachers to pursue National Board Certification (NBC) in the licensure area that they originally sought as part of their initial preparation. Presently, advanced degrees provide the primary vehicle for school districts within the state to encourage their current educators to pursue additional preparation and licensure in areas of critical need. Cohort programs provided through university-district partnerships are the manner by which districts seek to build their capacities in critical shortage areas, both to meet the achievement needs of their students and also to ensure that they are following the federal requirements. For example, school districts with a lack of qualified special educators to implement Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements, if unattended to, may negatively impact the funding provided to the state of Maryland.

The proposed career ladder does not incentivize today's teachers to pursue work with students in our most vulnerable populations or to seek certification in an area that would provide them with the specific knowledge to serve groups like children with complex disabilities such as students with autism spectrum disorder; students who are English learners; or those with reading difficulties. In fact, the proposed single path toward NBC means that educators seeking this additional expertise would have to undergo more work than other educators (i.e. NBC + graduate level coursework), and given the current recommendations, there is no consideration for how funds would be allocated to support or reward these additional efforts.

We would like to see a pathway in the career ladder that incentivizes teachers in years four through ten, to pursue work with at-risk populations of students. For example, we would suggest a system which provides greater flexibility in allowing teachers to pursue either the (a) NBC, or (b) an advanced degree leading to additional certification in a critical shortage area.

2. **Impact of National Board Certification on the Preparation of High-Quality Leaders:** While NBC work incorporates self-study of content on a variety of important instructional topics and interactions with colleagues in the NBC program, there does not appear to be an opportunity for individual teachers to interact *in-depth* with experts concerning the complex cultural and instructional issues that they are facing in their schools. This in-depth coaching from knowledgeable faculty members is an integral part of an advanced degree program.

According to the proposed career ladder, assistant principals are required to achieve either NBC or an APC. These two routes do not seem to develop the same skill set. The systematic study of leadership, as an art and a science in itself, is not a part of the NBC certificate process. Leadership has long been recognized as a multi-disciplinary field of study in itself that incorporates a distinct body of knowledge that goes beyond understanding and demonstrating effective teaching as it is approached in NBC. Promoting challenging and engaging instructional practice is certainly a part of instructional leadership as taught in an advanced degree program, but there is so much more that licensed principals and assistant principals need to know. These are described in more detail in the NELP (National Educational Leadership Preparation) standards.

Again, we suggest that the state offer both an NBC and an advanced degree pathway, allowing teachers to select the option that best meets their individual professional goals. Acknowledge the importance of building expertise and leadership skills by requiring high standards for graduate level coursework. We have a history of developing school leaders who excel in the field and this is due to the close collaboration our preparation programs have with school partners to co-develop rigorous program experiences and assessments.

3. **The Accessibility of Evidence-Based Practices and Research-Based Interventions to Maryland Teachers:** The primary role of university faculty who conduct and are consumers of educational research is to make the results of this research accessible to today's teachers. Through this role, university faculty translate this information to school-based administrators and practicing teachers and support them in applying this research in their schools and classrooms. This base of research is also the mechanism by which we work with individuals in related degrees (i.e. curriculum and instruction) to make certain that instructional materials designed for Maryland's students are informed by our most recent knowledge about the impact on learning outcomes. Without graduate level coursework, we do not have a systemic vehicle for informing Maryland's teachers of this growing and changing evidence base. Furthermore, our strong partnerships with teachers and schools provide a foundation for our research into best practices, ensuring that research efforts in higher education are tied to current needs and issues within the school system and that teachers pursuing graduate coursework, through participation in these conversations, become thoughtful consumers and generators of research throughout their continual development as practitioners.

We ask that the Commission acknowledge the importance of making this evidence-base available to teachers by supporting teachers' choice to pursue advanced knowledge and growth through graduate coursework. We acknowledge and support the need for relevant, high-quality graduate level coursework. Towson University has a history of developing graduate degree programs in conjunction with our school district partners, and we do so because this at the core of our values as a teaching institution. We recommend that there be a requirement that every graduate level program for teachers in Maryland be established following a comprehensive needs assessment of the district and through a team of university and school-based partners. Each team should then develop a scope and sequence with accompanying coursework that includes evidence-based practices as well as an emphasis on how this knowledge can be immediately applied in classrooms to improve learning outcomes for students.

4. **Accountability and Rigor in Advanced Degree Programs:** Based on our understanding, some of the current criticisms of graduate education for teachers is that programs may not include the same forms of performance-based criteria included in NBC. We also recognize that a supervised internship is required of master's degree programs, but only when teachers are pursuing that area for initial certification.

We would recommend that Workgroup 2 consider keeping the advanced degree requirement, but require that every graduate degree include performance-based measures of that candidate, either through a supervised internship or activities that are aligned with the metrics used to evaluate teacher performance in NBC. Overall, the education faculty recognizes the performance of teachers as a critical component in our effectiveness of

providing continuing education and we are interested in sustained conversations around this recommendation.

We agree that there should be an incentive system that would encourage teachers to improve their knowledge and skills and compensate them for such an effort. This issue is the main reason colleges of education have provided advanced degrees. At Towson University, the advanced degree programs for teachers have been developed and offered as a result of the close partnership between the College of Education and school systems and identification of their needs for improving teachers' performance. For example, integrating technology in teaching and learning process require knowledge and skills that cannot be fully accomplished by just a self-study and researching one's own practice. Thus, we are concerned that the ambiguity of how NBC and its self-study/self-assessment nature will allow teachers to improve their knowledge and skills in the areas such as technology integration, the design of online and blended learning environments, using the 21st-century pedagogy of learning such as problem-based and project-based learning are worrisome.

As the largest preparer of teachers in Maryland, we feel a tremendous responsibility for communicating the impact these recommendations would have on teacher preparation, especially critical shortage areas, in the state. Again, we appreciate this opportunity to share our feedback with you and look forward to the ways in which we can continue to discuss the impact of this reform on children and their families. We also wish to thank you for your efforts to ensure innovative educational opportunities for all children in Maryland.

Respectfully,

Towson University College of Education