

**Testimony of Dr. Desha Williams
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**House Education Committee
Public Hearing on Pennsylvania's Teacher Shortage
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My name is Dr. Desha Williams. I am the Dean of the College of Education and Social Work at West Chester University. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about a topic that I am extremely passionate about - teacher preparation.

As you may know, the State System's historical roots are founded in training teachers for classrooms throughout Pennsylvania and that continues today. Most of the State System universities spent the first 100 years of existence preparing teachers, first as regional teacher training institutions established in the mid-19th century, then transitioning from normal schools into state teachers' colleges, and finally the State System universities.

Teachers are foundational in the continued execution and further enhancement of our society, not only in the Commonwealth but globally. In yesteryears, State System universities did not have to recruit individuals interested in becoming a teacher; they found us! Times are different now, and State System universities, including West Chester University, are pulling out all the stops to address teacher pipeline concerns as well as challenges in diversifying the teacher workforce.

Teacher preparation remains an important part of the mission for the universities of the State System, along with other professions that are in high demand such as school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses. Our programs are gold-standard accredited (CAEP), and our universities maintain strong relationships with schools and intermediate units in their region.

That commitment has been made more important by the national shortage of teachers, which existed well before the pandemic. Unfortunately, the pandemic has made the shortage worse, which is well documented by numerous studies and media coverage over the past several months. Between 2010 and 2020, the PA Department of Education reported issuing 14,108 fewer new teaching certifications, reflecting that fewer students are completing preparation programs. Across the System, universities have witnessed a 35% decrease over the last decade in the number of awards conferred in Education.

Addressing the teacher shortage requires a sustained partnership between PK-12 schools, public higher education, and the Commonwealth to support a pipeline of students leaving high school. State System universities are well-positioned to use their long history of training teachers to prepare a new wave of educators for our PK-12 classrooms, including professionals in STEM fields who are interested in occupations as teachers (through traditional Bachelor's of Science in Education or alternative pathways to certification).

It is important to note that in addition to public higher education training teachers, building a pipeline of new educators requires a collaborative approach that includes scholarship support for teacher education majors, so they do not enter the profession saddled by student debt, and

ongoing professional development for teachers on the job. Another critical factor is state funding for public higher education to support teacher training as well as basic education funding to provide competitive salaries for PK-12 teachers that encourage people to enter and remain in the profession.

There may be many reasons why the Department of Education is issuing fewer teacher certifications or why System universities are issuing fewer degrees in Education. In some cases, students remain enrolled but take fewer credit hours. This means that candidates would take longer to complete their program. Also compounding the issue is the number of teachers retiring or changing careers. I am finding no subject area or grade band is excluded. The ones paying the ultimate price for the Commonwealth's pipeline issues are the students. They are being educated in less-than-optimal learning environments, like larger classes.

While System universities can work to build a pipeline and educate the Commonwealth's best and brightest to serve in PK-12 schools, there are several bills focused on addressing the pipeline issue. HB2389 provides financial support to education majors who agree to teach in the Commonwealth for one year for each year of support, HB2247 will assist in retaining teachers by providing loan forgiveness, and HB 2206 provides support for high-need schools in geographic areas that have hard-to-staff teaching positions.

Another challenge in teacher preparation is diversifying the teacher workforce. There is an abundance of research that documents the positive impact on student learning when students learn from teachers who share their cultural backgrounds. According to a Research for Action Brief on patching the leaking pipeline in Pennsylvania, roughly 4% of the teachers of Pennsylvania come from a non-White background, whereas, the student population is approximately 33.5% students of color, placing Pennsylvania 47th in the country in the disparity in the ethnic makeup of our teacher population compared to that of our students. HB 2206 gives voice and support to diversifying the teacher workforce as well.

I continue to question how we can attract more students into the field. What has changed in our society such that students are not choosing education as their major? Many would say money. Yes, salary and financial support in preparation matter! Absolutely! I would also argue the current perceptions of what it means to be a teacher are a factor. I remember when being a teacher was revered and now current perceptions have caused teaching to be less desired. I ask you, how can we change that narrative?

A final barrier I would like to highlight that is potentially limiting the educator pipeline is requiring the Basic Skills exam for admission to teacher preparation. This test presents an additional expense to students. Standards for teacher certification are necessary. However, as a leader in teacher education, I say give a university a person who loves kids and we will teach them to teach! Act 136 of 2020 waived the Basic Skills exam, and West Chester was able to provide 75 deserving students the opportunity to continue their journey in becoming teachers. Seventy-five new teachers for a stressed pipeline! I am excited to see what they will do with this opportunity. I urge legislation to allow educator preparation programs to determine the academic preparation needed to enter an educator preparation program and the Commonwealth continues to determine the criteria needed for certification.

While there are pain points in teacher education, there are many points of pride to share. The students who are completing our programs are having a tremendous impact. They have a strong sense of pride and understanding of the significance of the work they are doing. Our pain points are also inspiring innovative ideas. West Chester University is partnering with school

districts in developing pathways for high school students to have early exposure to teaching as a profession and opportunities for dual enrollment EDUCATION courses. Also, deans of colleges of education are collaborating to address common challenges and celebrate successes.

As I said earlier, teachers are foundational in the continued execution and further enhancement of our society, not only in the Commonwealth but globally, so it is critical that our System universities, the Dept. of Education, and the General Assembly work together where possible to encourage more people to enter and remain in the teaching profession.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this issue with you today and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.