

TESTIMONY OF DR. PAUL WALSH
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Wednesday, April 10, 2024
Harrisburg, PA

Chairman Samuelson, Chairman Greiner, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Paul Walsh, and I am an English teacher at Liberty High School in the Bethlehem Area School District and a 2022-2023 Teach Plus PA Policy Fellow. I am also a professor in the education departments of Lehigh University and Moravian University in Bethlehem where I teach courses to undergraduate students seeking to enter the teaching profession and to graduate students seeking to further hone their craft as educators.

I will be entering my 14th year as an educator next school year. Much has changed in my profession since I began my career all those years ago. But for all that has changed, one thing has unfortunately remained the same: simply put, teachers are not paid commensurately with the many jobs they are tasked with completing on a daily basis. Each year, it seems that we are asked to do just a bit more to support our students; that just a bit more each year over the course of a career is in no way proportionally reflected in our salaries. We are not compensated adequately for the time we put into the profession (much of which must occur outside of the designated "work day" if one wants to have even a shot at being the best teacher for one's students). And in some cases, we are also expected to incur financial expenses in order to make our student's learning experiences the best they can be.

I mentioned just a moment ago that much has changed in the teaching profession since I entered the workforce 14 years ago. People often ask me what has changed the most. While I could talk about classroom and student-specific issues, these would pale in comparison to the largest change. When I completed my undergraduate degree in 2011, the prospect of finding a teaching job at the age of 22 with no experience seemed beyond grim. There were no teaching jobs. Many of my friends, like me, took on daily substitute jobs in order to pay their bills. If you were lucky, you landed a long-term sub gig. If you hit the lottery, you were offered a full-time contracted position.

In 2024, however, this is not the case at all. Many people I come in contact with, when they find out I am a teacher and professor of education, say things like "Oh, it is such a shame that we have such a teacher shortage. Teaching used to be a 30 plus year career for people." I am quick to correct them. We are not in a teacher shortage. We can weather teacher shortages. We are in a crisis of the teaching profession. And we will not weather it if it is not taken seriously. The combination of the small numbers of students who deem the profession a worthy one to pursue combined with the fact that according to the U.S. Dept. of Education, nearly 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years has created a situation that requires immediate attention. We must find a way to reprofessionalize teachers in the state of PA for the sake of our children's future and the future of the Commonwealth at large.

The proposed House Bill 528 is a step in the right direction. While \$500 might not seem like a lot of money to some, this tax credit would be incredibly helpful to educators, especially those early in their careers at the bottom of the pay scale. I was lucky enough to land a full-time teaching job in 2012. My starting salary was just over \$35,000. I had a \$300 per month loan payment from a state school. I had car expenses. And on top of this, I wanted to do everything I could to be the best teacher and to create the best possible learning environment for my students. I would have loved to have \$500 to start a classroom library and reading nook where not only students could fall in love with reading but where I could also add a sense of calmness to the classroom environment that would support teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the budget at my school was outrageously tight, so any extra materials for my classroom or training to improve my teaching would have to come out of my own pocket. I simply could not afford any of these things. In truth, had I not had kind parents who allowed me to live in their home after college, I would not have been able to pay rent on a salary of \$35,000.

This is the reality for many teachers, especially teachers brand new to the profession. They are doing the fiscally "responsible" thing by attending a state school. They are leaving that school with \$50,000-100,000 in debt. There are certainly teaching jobs if they want one, but their entry-level salaries are often not enough to pay rent, for a car, or for

groceries let alone anything for their classrooms that a school might not be able to provide. We should be finding as many ways as possible to incentivize teachers and to show them that we are supportive and appreciative of their passion in being in a profession that so few are willing to enter or stay in. The tax credit proposed by House Bill 528 speaks to this appreciation.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you all today. I hope that my testimony offered a glimpse into some of the financial challenges facing teachers today. I am excited for the opportunity to further partner with you on this and other proposals to strengthen the teacher workforce in PA. I believe wholeheartedly that together we can make PA an example for what education should be for our students and teachers.

Dr. Paul F. Walsh
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