



TESTIMONY OF LAURA BOYCE
ON BEHALF OF TEACH PLUS
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 Laura Boyce, and I'm the Executive Director of Teach Plus Pennsylvania. I started my career as a high school English and social studies teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, and was also an elementary and middle school principal in Camden, NJ prior to my current role. I'm also the parent of two sons who will attend public schools in Philadelphia in a few short years.

Teach Plus is a national education non-profit that empowers excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing our mission, Teach Plus is guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

Teach Plus, along with the National Center on Education and the Economy, co-leads the #PANEedsTeachers campaign, a cross-sector coalition working to address Pennsylvania's teacher shortage crisis. As you all know from your own districts, Pennsylvania is experiencing a dire and worsening teacher shortage, whose roots go back long before the pandemic. The supply of teachers has plummeted by 75% over the past decade, and the state now issues more emergency permits – granted to underprepared teachers when schools cannot find qualified teachers – than it issues regular teaching certificates to fully-qualified teachers. Teacher attrition is also at an all-time high, so our pipeline is bleeding from both ends.

Thanks to your actions in improving data collection in the 2023 school code, we can now begin to quantify the actual number of additional teachers we need across Pennsylvania for the first time. Based on data recently released by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and analyzed by Dr. Ed Fuller of Penn State University, Pennsylvania needs an estimated 9,000 additional qualified teachers just to fill *current* vacancies and positions being filled by underprepared emergency-permitted teachers. That doesn't include additional teachers to replace teachers who are leaving each year – almost 10,000 left in 2022. It also doesn't take into account the additional positions districts could post if they receive potential historic increases to education funding as proposed by the Basic Education Funding Commission and Governor Shapiro, which could cause demand for teachers to skyrocket further.

While the shortage is affecting all districts due to its severity, it doesn't affect them all equally. Both national and state data suggest that low-income, urban, and rural schools are impacted the most. In terms of subject areas, we have the greatest shortages in special education, English as a second language, and secondary science, technology, and math. We also have an acute shortage of teachers of color, with only 7% teachers of color compared to 37% students of color. And finally, the distribution of the teacher shortage crisis is inextricably linked to our unconstitutional school funding system, with underfunded districts with large adequacy gaps by far the most impacted due to their inability to compete with wealthier districts in terms of salaries, class sizes, facilities, and working conditions.

In our first report from #PANEedsTeachers, we identified four systemic root causes contributing to the teacher shortage crisis, based on both research and the input of stakeholders across Pennsylvania. The first root cause was that the financial value proposition for becoming a teacher in Pennsylvania continues to worsen as the cost of college and other expenses to enter the profession rise and teacher compensation remains stagnant. Specifically, the cost of college in Pennsylvania has skyrocketed, making us one of the most expensive states in the nation for in-state tuition *and* one of the states where costs have risen the fastest. This forces many college students, especially students of color and those from low-income families,

to take on increasing amounts of student loan debt, which then pushes them into higher-earning professions that will allow them to pay off their loans. Meanwhile, after adjusting for inflation, teacher compensation – taking into account both wages and benefits – has *declined* about 10% since the early 2000s, and teachers pay a wage penalty of around 15% compared to other workers with similar educational attainment. All of this means that the cost-benefit equation for prospective teachers is increasingly unattractive, and we see that reflected in the plummeting number of college students choosing to major in education.

This analysis led us into one of five policy strategies identified in the report: improve the financial value proposition, or cost-benefit equation, for becoming a teacher. There are two main ways to do this: by lowering or ideally eliminating the cost to become a teacher, or by increasing the financial rewards associated with being a teacher.

You can see this principle at work in a number of policy proposals that have been considered by this chamber over the past year. Proposals for teacher scholarships, grow-your-own programs, paraprofessional pipeline programs, and teacher apprenticeships all aim to reduce the cost of becoming a teacher. Proposals for student teaching stipends – as passed in last year’s budget – as well as minimum teacher salaries and salary supplements or stipends for teachers in high-need subjects and districts aim to improve the compensation or reward side of the equation.

House Bill 528 can be understood within this framework as working to improve the financial rewards for being a teacher by providing a tax credit of up to \$500 for certified teachers who spend their own money on school supplies for their students. It can also be understood as a simple matter of fairness, in that we don’t generally expect other professions, including lawmakers, to pay out-of-pocket for business expenses, but this is very common for teachers, particularly those in underresourced schools. And finally, it can be viewed as a way of signaling to our teachers and our society as a whole the value we place on teachers and education, as foundations of our commonwealth’s economy, workforce, and well-being.

Teach Plus is generally supportive of measures aimed at improving the financial value proposition for teachers in order to attract and retain a strong, well-prepared, and diverse educator workforce. We applaud the sponsors of HB 528 for their efforts to ensure that teachers are better compensated and appreciated in Pennsylvania. While this proposal is not the only one aimed at addressing the cost-benefit mismatch for prospective teachers, and it may not be the highest-priority measure for our organization among all the proposals discussed previously, it is a worthwhile proposal for the General Assembly to consider as part of a larger suite of efforts to address teacher shortages and better value our educators.

Recognizing that state resources are finite and that the details of a program’s design often play a great role in ensuring that it achieves its intended impact, we would propose two potential adjustments to the current bill:

- First, that the tax credit be made refundable, meaning that even if a teacher’s entire state tax bill were not as high as the maximum tax credit amount, they could receive a refund payment for the unused part of the credit. This is important because lower-earning and lower-income teachers, who would likely benefit the most from the tax credit, would otherwise risk not being able to access the full amount of the tax credit, particularly if the maximum amount were ever raised above \$500. Making the tax credit refundable would ensure that all qualifying teachers could receive the full amount, regardless of what the rest of their tax return looked like.
- Second, that the bill authors consider targeting the tax credit more narrowly to teachers in high-need and/or underfunded schools. This would address issues of equity discussed previously; teachers in wealthier districts are already, on average, better compensated than those in low-wealth districts, and this would provide a boost to those teachers who choose to serve a higher-need population and potentially incentivize more qualified teachers to teach in such settings. Teachers in underresourced schools are also more likely than their counterparts in wealthier districts to be paying out-of-pocket for supplies their schools can’t afford to provide. Additionally, since the currently-proposed appropriation of \$15 million is unlikely to be sufficient to reach all 125,000-150,000 teachers in the commonwealth, this would provide a more equitable way of prioritizing which teachers will benefit from the program than a first-come, first-served approach (or an approach of reducing the size of the tax credit per teacher to an amount that became too small to make an impact on a teacher’s finances or behavior).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide context on the challenges facing our educator workforce as well as feedback on this specific bill. We stand ready to partner with you on this and other important proposals to help us solve our teacher shortage crisis and build a strong and thriving educator workforce to serve every public school student in Pennsylvania.