



# **Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators**

## **Written Testimony to the House Education Committee**

**Friday, May 3, 2024**

### **Teacher Certification/Teacher Pipeline Initiatives**

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Good afternoon Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and members of the House Education Committee. I am Dr. Sherri Smith, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. Thank you for hosting this informational hearing and inviting PASA to speak on behalf of more than 1040 PASA members including 458 who are sitting school superintendents and executive directors. Thank you for your continued efforts to find solutions to the critical concerns we are experiencing in getting certified educators into our schools. I anticipate that unless we continue to find creative ways to address these shortages, both in the short-term and the long-term, the situation will become even more desperate. I provide this testimony to discuss another part of the problem in getting teachers into our classrooms, a cumbersome and inflexible certification process in Pennsylvania.

The workforce shortage is affecting all our schools- rural, urban, and suburban. Both in retention as well as recruitment. It is also affecting many certification areas, leaving many open positions in our schools filled with emergency-certified teachers.

**A complete review and overhaul of Pennsylvania's teacher certification programs is needed to provide greater flexibility within specific content certifications and to align more relevant coursework within certification requirements.**

#### **Grade Spans**

The current teacher certification grade spans, updated beginning in 2013, have created many implementation barriers for schools. In 2013, teacher certification changed from grade spans N-3, K-6, 7-12, and K-12 special education certification to pre-K-4, 4-8, 7-12, with a mandated dual certification for special education teachers in Pre-K-8, reading or a content area of secondary education. Concerns were corrected for Special Education Certification in 2021 when state law rolled back certification requirements for special education to a single certificate to teach students from pre-K to 12th grade (or age 21). The other certification grade bands continue to be very problematic for schools. Reverting to grade spans more closely aligned to those prior to 2013, such as Pre-K to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, K-6<sup>th</sup> grade, and a secondary certification would provide much relief to schools. The only additional recommendation would be to offer a secondary certification for grades 6-12 grade (an expansion from

grades 7-12). Currently, schools can use a secondary certified teacher to teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade in the subject area of their certification (CSPG 104) - this seems an unnecessary extra step and can be corrected by moving to a grade 6-12 secondary certification.

Pre-K -4<sup>th</sup> grade certified teachers can extend their certifications to include grades 5 and 6 with an instructional add-on through testing; again, an unnecessary additional step for elementary certified teachers and also creates a block for many schools as some teachers refuse to go back and obtain the grade 5-6 certification.

The middle-level certification, grades 4-8, has not been as effective or popular of a certification grade span for both educators who receive the certification or for schools in their implementation. If we move to PreK-6 elementary certifications and 6-12 secondary certifications, this middle-level certification is no longer needed.

Changing to Pre-K- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, K-6<sup>th</sup> grade, and 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade bands will create greater flexibility for schools in their many different school building configurations in the Commonwealth.

### **Content-Specific Certification Barriers**

Specific content certifications have created additional workforce barriers in our schools. A good example of this is secondary certifications for the Sciences. We have separate certifications for biology, chemistry, earth and space science, environmental science, general science, middle-level science, physics, and agriculture. The current educator shortages have only exasperated the need for a change in the manner in which we certify our secondary content teachers.

#### **STEM PA Certifications Provided in 2021-2022:**

<b>Certification</b>	<b>Number of PA Certifications</b>
Biology 7-12	73
Tech PK-12	14
Chemistry 7-12	17
Computer Science 7-12	0
Earth and Space	10
General Science 7-12	21
Grades 4-8 Science	40
Math 7-12	116
Physics 7-12	9
Technology Ed PK-12	8

Providing a Secondary General Science Certification that permits teaching in all the areas of the sciences reduces the impact of workforce shortages and allows for greater flexibility in our schools for teaching various science courses. The option for add-on courses in specific science areas could then be offered as a part of continuing education for those educators wanting to specialize in a particular area or science. The same concept holds for mathematic-specific certifications.

If we would certify our future teachers in broader content areas (such as science and mathematics), there would be more equitable instructional opportunities for all students (particularly in our small districts that can only hire 1-2 science/mathematics teachers) and provide flexibility in scheduling for our schools.

### **Teacher Preparation Program**

Chapter 354, Preparation of Professional Educators, outlines the requirements of teacher preparation programs, including coursework, assessments, and student teaching experience. It is appreciated that the Department of Education is currently reviewing these requirements, with hopes of a total revision that outlines a more aligned and efficient preparation program for pre-service teachers. Changes to these requirements will remove many of the unnecessary programmatic requirements that currently exist and remove additional barriers that are preventing individuals from program completion and ultimately, assist in addressing the educator workforce shortages.

#### ***Course Requirements***

The first recommendation is to remove many of the unrelated elective courses in the first two years of the teacher preparation program; many of these courses are unrelated to the preparation of a teacher and are schedule fillers. Why are we not only providing courses that relate directly to the future profession as an educator? Necessary preparation courses would include ensuring these students have a solid base of knowledge and personal skills in Language Arts (reading and writing), mathematics, research/study skills, and the use of technology.

Thereafter, coursework should relate to their area(s) of certification. For instance, are elementary certified teachers receiving appropriate preparation to teach reading (including structured literacy) and mathematics skills to their students? A review of current higher education course requirements shows that many times there is minimal coursework preparation in these critical instructional areas. Another example is to provide courses for our secondary teachers on workforce development in their certification areas so that they can instruct their secondary students in applicable workforce skills in their class instruction and mentor them in apprenticeships, internships, post-secondary education, etc.

A total review and rework of coursework in teacher preparation courses is critically needed to ensure our future teachers are receiving the education that is aligned to their future profession, remove wasted time and money on unnecessary courses, and prepare them to be successful as teachers.

#### ***Testing Requirements***

In addition to the coursework, testing and assessment requirements in teacher preparation programs need to be reviewed and more appropriately aligned.

The Basic Skills test has been waived through July 8, 2025, providing the perfect time to revise this process. Without a doubt, we need to ensure that future teachers have basic reading, writing, and mathematics skills to be successful teachers. High school students are required to take Keystone Exams in Language Arts and Algebra. If these students score proficient or advanced in these assessments, would this not signal that they have the basic skills necessary to be a future teacher? Why not use what we have available to us instead of another test? Furthermore, if a student did not either take the Keystones or did not score proficient and advanced, offer preparation courses for these students in the freshman year of their preparation program. If they show proficiency

in these basic skills courses, they have met the basic skills requirements. This will allow the basic skills tests to be eliminated as a requirement; these tests have been a barrier for many future teachers in past years.

There are also content knowledge tests, Praxis, that are a requirement of teacher preparation. Future teachers must pass the content knowledge test in the subject area they wish to teach. A review of this process as well as content in the subject area tests is also warranted to ensure appropriate knowledge of future teachers without creating another difficult hurdle and barrier to completion of the teacher preparation programs.

### ***Student Teaching and In-class Experiences***

Fortunately, the expansion of student teaching experiences has received a lot of attention over the past few years. The more time pre-service teachers spend in classrooms the better prepared they are to be future teachers. Teaching is complex, therefore the more opportunities from early on in their pre-service program, the better prepared they will be upon graduation. We need to continue to emphasize these experiences in their preparation programs, as well as in their official student teaching assignments.

### **Other Pathways to Increase Certification of Educators**

1. In Higher Education, many courses are taught by Adjunct Professors; professionals who have areas of expertise that teach part-time to our college students. As we move to focus our high school programs on more career preparedness and earlier opportunities, adopt the concept of Adjunct Teachers, and community and business partners who teach a course for our students. By attending to a few courses on pedagogy of teaching, many businesses Imagine the opportunities for our students to learn from a chemist, nurse, business manager, or lawyer... the opportunities are endless.
2. As per Chapter 49, Section 49.142. Career and Technical Instruction I, we provide opportunities for individuals holding an occupational competency credential (issued by the Department or an IHE approved by the Secretary) with a minimum of 4 years of full-time experience, and other requirements, to hold an Instructional I Certification and teach in our CTE classrooms. They can hold this Instructional I Certification for 8 years to complete the approved preparation programs which lead to their Instructional II Certification. Although a good idea in concept – this burdensome process needs to be streamlined to make it more possible an avenue for those who want to enter the educator workforce to contribute to the CTE field. Fixing the time-consuming process of obtaining CTE Certification I & II will encourage more individuals to pursue careers in CTE education, expanding the talent pool and making our training capacity stronger. If this CTE certification process is streamlined, the same type of process would be a viable opportunity for other secondary education certifications as well.
3. Expansion of 2-year certification preparation programs for other 4-year degree professionals.

We appreciate the House Education Committee providing PASA with the opportunity to provide these certification thoughts. We welcome further collaboration to engage in other creative thinking and discussion to strengthen our educator workforce across the Commonwealth.