

**Written Testimony of Dr. Desha Williams
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**House Education Committee
Public Hearing on Pennsylvania's Teacher Shortage
Friday, May 3, 2024**

Esteemed Members of the House Education Committee,

In the spring of 2022, I had the privilege of addressing this esteemed body regarding the shortage of educators in our Commonwealth. Today, I am honored to return to discuss advancements in teacher recruitment, diversity of the teaching workforce, and the Student Teacher Support Program. But before delving into these topics, allow me to offer a brief retrospective on our journey since 2022, highlighting the progress we've achieved.

During my previous testimony, I highlighted a concerning decrease of 14,108 new teaching certificates issued between 2010 and 2020. Additionally, I emphasized the crucial impact of a diverse teacher population on student learning, juxtaposing the mere 4% representation of non-White educators against the 33.5% non-White student demographic. At that time, I advocated for financial aid for education majors, loan forgiveness programs, and the current waiver for the Basic Skills Testing for entry to teacher preparations. Furthermore, I shared uplifting news of collaborative initiatives within PASSHE institutions and the partnership between West Chester University and local school districts to foster teacher recruitment efforts.

Since then, we've witnessed modest improvements in teacher diversity, a postponement of the Basic Skills Test until 2025, and just recently, the inauguration of the Student Teacher Support Program, providing vital financial assistance ranging from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Moreover, there's been a positive trajectory in new certification numbers, and West Chester University's teacher recruitment initiative, PRIZE, has garnered commendation from Governor Shapiro as a model program. However, our journey is far from concluded.

PRIZE commemorated its one-year anniversary in January 2024, having forged partnerships with six school districts (with three more underway) and has admitted 15 students, with more being admitted weekly, for the 2024-2025 academic year. The financial obligations of this program are shouldered by the university, participating school districts, and generous donors. Yet, we ponder the sustainability of this financial model in the long term. We remain optimistic for the Senate Education Committee's favorable consideration of HB 1434 (Isaacson), earmarking funds for the dual enrollment facet of the PRIZE program.

Another stride forward lies in licensure reciprocity agreements. Pennsylvania's recent accession to the Interstate Mobility Compact has streamlined certification processes with nine other states, significantly reducing processing times for individuals who are already certified. Nonetheless, the associated costs pose a considerable barrier for certified educators seeking to relocate to Pennsylvania and prospective graduates.

Innovations spearheaded by institutions like West Chester University are also instrumental in exploring avenues to aid paraprofessionals and career changers in obtaining certification and, in some instances, a master's degree with certification. By offering flexible pathways to teaching, Pennsylvania has tapped into a richly diverse talent pool that might otherwise have remained untapped.

While these innovations promise to alleviate staffing shortages, it's imperative to confront the underlying causes of dwindling interest in educational careers. Several factors contribute to this trend, notably:

1. **Financial Constraints:** Educators across Pennsylvania and nationwide often contend with meager salaries and limited avenues for career progression, a stark contrast to professions demanding similar educational attainment and expertise. This financial strain dissuades potential educators and fuels high turnover rates.

2. **Inadequate Support:** Many educators feel overwhelmed by the demands of their profession due to insufficient support and resources. Limited access to professional development, administrative burdens, and scant classroom resources exacerbates this strain, leading to disillusionment and attrition. HB 528 (Nelson) that provides a \$500 tax credit for teachers' classroom purchases would help alleviate this strain.

3. **Societal Perceptions:** Despite its intrinsic rewards, teaching is frequently undervalued and stigmatized. Negative societal perceptions deter individuals from considering it as a viable career option, exacerbating recruitment challenges.

To effectively address the teacher shortage crisis, we must not only implement innovative recruitment strategies but also redress systemic issues undermining interest in educational careers.

I underscore the critical importance of supporting student teachers financially during their practicum experiences. Student teaching is pivotal in teacher preparation, offering hands-on classroom experience. However, the financial burden often borne by student teachers poses a significant obstacle, particularly for those who are experiencing economic insecurities.

Many student teachers struggle to cover basic living expenses during this period, impeding their ability to focus on teaching responsibilities. The recently established Student Teaching Support Program is commendable, yet its allocated budget of \$10 million will only

extend aid to a fraction of teacher candidates. To adequately address this issue, I urge the General Assembly to increase state funding for this program and add measures so that students with the most need are prioritized.

Last budget season, Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) proposed a cost-effective way for the state to get more qualified teachers into classrooms, asking for state funding to provide direct financial relief (scholarships) to education students. The State System proposed providing all State System education students at all PASSHE universities a \$1,500 scholarship. Pell-eligible (high need) students could receive an average of \$5,000, for total savings of approximately \$6,500 a year. By easing financial burdens, we can ensure aspiring educators from all backgrounds access invaluable teaching experience, enriching our teacher workforce with diverse talents.

Although slight gains have occurred, the lack of diversity in our teacher corps demands urgent attention. Research consistently underscores the transformative impact of diverse educators on student achievement and well-being. Yet, in Pennsylvania, our educator demographics fail to mirror student diversity, perpetuating systemic disparities.

To rectify this, we must implement targeted recruitment efforts, offering scholarships, loan forgiveness programs, and other incentives to diversify our teacher ranks. Moreover, prioritizing teacher retention and support through competitive salaries, robust professional development, and mentorship initiatives is paramount. Long-term solutions necessitate addressing systemic inequities fueling the teacher shortage and diversity gap.

As stewards of education policy, you wield the authority to effect profound change. I implore you to prioritize legislation and policies addressing the teacher shortage and fostering diversity within our educator ranks. This includes recognizing the invaluable contributions of Dreamers and immigrants with work visas by facilitating their certification processes as would be achieved by enactment of HB 1067 (Cepeda-Freyitz), which the House passed in June 2023 and awaits action by the Senate Education Committee. Our students deserve an equitable, inclusive education system that nurtures their potential.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment to this critical cause. I stand ready to support your endeavors in any capacity.