

EDUCATION

Pa. tackles teacher shortage by offering up to \$15k stipends to student teachers

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College professor Melissa Marks only has to recall a recent conversation she had with a student to know what Pennsylvania's new student teacher stipend program will mean to future educators.

The aspiring teacher, who left college due to finances, had re-enrolled and was trying to figure out how he could afford tuition while working an unpaid 12-week student teaching requirement. Marks said he broke into tears when she told him that a state-funded stipend could be available to help him with his expenses.

"This was going to be a dealmaker for him," said Marks, an education professor at the University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg. "It was going to allow him to actually finish school and become a teacher."

She predicts it will have the same game-changing impact on other education majors across the state as they approach the final phase of their teacher preparation.

The student teacher stipend was established as part of [a multi-faceted education bill](#) that became law in the flurry of legislative activity late last year. Pennsylvania, a one-time exporter of teachers, now finds itself with a teacher shortage and this program is to intended help rebuild its pipeline to the classroom.

In 2022, about 5,000 new teaching certificates were issued in Pennsylvania compared to more than 17,000 in 2011, according to [a report from the Pennsylvania Department of Education](#). At the same time, the state is experiencing record-high numbers of teachers leaving the profession, according to [data from Penn State's Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis](#).

"I don't know if the general public realizes how few teachers were certified the past few years but I'm terrified for those who have young children," Marks said.

The goal of providing a stipend is to begin to remove a financial hurdle that has stood in the way of aspiring teachers. The program will offer \$10,000 to student teachers with an extra \$5,000 stipend available to those who do their student teaching in a school with high turnover. The student teaching can be done at a public or private school.

In return, the student must commit to teaching at a Pennsylvania school for at least three years or the stipend turns into a loan that must be paid back.

The program also provides a \$2,500 stipend for the cooperating teacher who takes on a student teacher provided they are not already being paid by the student teacher's college or university.

'Chipping away at the problem'

The legislature approved \$10 million for the program to be administered by the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency. It likely won't be enough to offer stipends to all eligible student

teachers, but Senate Democratic Appropriations Committee Chairman Vincent Hughes of Philadelphia said it's a start.

"We are chipping away at this problem to try to stem the tide and really flip it and start getting back to the numbers we need to get back to," said Hughes, who championed the bill in the Senate along with Senate Majority Whip Ryan Aument, R-Lancaster County. "This is clearly a need. It is important. It is one of the most important professions that exist and we've got to respond to this."

Said Aument, "By valuing teachers and student teachers for their hard work in the classroom, we can incentivize them to stay in Pennsylvania, to live, work, and raise a family here, and build vibrant communities while simultaneously addressing our severe teacher shortage. It's a win-win."

Marina Lagattuta, who finished her student teaching last fall, was among the student leaders who lobbied lawmakers to pass a stipend program. She said other states around the nation had taken a step that makes a career in education accessible to more students and the profession more attractive.

Lagattuta knew that with the slow pace of government, her efforts, if successful, wouldn't likely benefit her but she recognized the difference it would make for friends and others who had to work a second job while they also worked as student teachers.

"You are sacrificing doing well in one of the most pivotal moments of your entire program with all of the extra work that you have to do when you leave the job," Lagattuta said. "How can you be successful at that when you have to balance a serving job at night or a bartending job?"

For non-traditional students, particularly those with families, the 26-year-old said the stipends are even more critically important. "I feel like that group of people are often left out of the conversation and there are many non-traditional students who are aspiring to become an educator in this state," she said.

Pennsylvania State Education Association President Aaron Chapin said for many students, the sacrifice of having to pay their semester's tuition, possibly give up a part-time job, and afford the commute and other bills, while fulfilling the required unpaid internship, served as a deterrent to entering the teaching profession.

"Paying student teachers a modest stipend will remove a heavy financial burden on the way to becoming a teacher," he said.

Details of how the program will operate are still being fine-tuned at PHEAA but the legislation requires the agency to post applications for the stipends by mid-April. The first stipends will be awarded to applicants doing their student teaching in the fall.

Is \$10M enough? Lawmakers will see

With the priority the legislation gives to schools with high turnover, PHEAA officials anticipate that will be a criterion factored into which applicants receive stipends along with a first-come, first-served component.

"The first year is really an exploratory year," said Maggie Keithley, PHEAA's vice president of program development, operations and management. "Not all student teachers are going to be necessarily receiving a grant but we will try to fund as many as possible that are out there."

While it will take years to address the state's educator needs, she said, "a program like this in place is really smart to start to build that pipeline to channel students into these positions."

PHEAA officials, as well as lawmakers, will be looking at the response to the program to determine whether its \$10 million appropriation is sufficient. An unrelated one-time loan forgiveness program for nurses who cared for patients during the pandemic began with a \$5 million appropriation but ultimately it was increased to [\\$55 million due to the high level of interest](#), said Nathan Hench, PHEAA's senior vice president for public affairs.

If more funding is needed for this program, Hughes said he will fight for it because getting qualified teachers in every classroom is a priority. That is especially so with the mandate from the court to address inequities and inadequacies in the state's school funding system, he said.

"You can't fix that without teachers. You just can't," he said.

The stipend program will require student teachers to be enrolled in a state-approved teacher preparation program, have a minimum 3.0 grade-point average, have child abuse and criminal history clearances, have a student-teacher placement, and agree to teach in the state for at least three years.

The school where a student teacher plans to teach also will be required to apply, Keithley said. There are obligations it must agree to regarding the distribution of the stipend to the student teacher as well as the cooperating teacher.

Marks said she was elated this program is getting established not only for the student teachers who come through her department but for the commonwealth as a whole.

"It's so incredibly impactful on my students. I can't say enough about it. I'm really, really grateful to the (legislature) and to the everyone who made this happen," she said. "This indicates in so many ways a governmental recognition that we need teachers in Pennsylvania."

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