

September 2, 2020

United States Congress
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Member of Congress,

Even with potential substantial forthcoming federal relief, we know that educator layoffs and shortages in key subjects will coexist during a time where the one constant is disruption.ⁱ As such, we write to urge that you take action in the next relief package to ensure that all students – especially historically underserved students – have access to a well-prepared and diverse educator workforce. We desperately need to make adjustments that align with our current context to the nation’s educator service scholarship program, the TEACH Grant program.

Specifically, we ask that during this time of global disruption that you adjust the TEACH Grant’s grant to loan conversion provision such that interest begins accruing at the point when recipients can no longer complete their service rather than at the point of grant disbursement. Second, we ask that you increase the TEACH Grant’s award amount – which has not increased in over a decade – to align with the sudden economic impact of COVID-19 on students’ finances.

We know that educators are the most important school-based factor to student learning. Yet even before the pandemic, students of color, students from families experiencing low-incomes, students with disabilities, and other historically underserved students did not have equitable access to a well-prepared and diverse educator workforce. For example, research examining the most recent reporting from the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection shows that students in schools with high enrollments of students of color have significantly less access to certified and experienced teachers.ⁱⁱ Additionally, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. was already experiencing a shortage of over 100,000 qualified teachersⁱⁱⁱ and public employment in elementary and secondary schools had yet to recover the level it had reached prior the Great Recession.^{iv}

Research also shows that while all students benefit from learning from teachers of color, teachers of color have a particularly profound impact on students of color. For example, these students show greater academic achievement and social and emotional development in classes with teachers of color.^v For example, the Tennessee STAR class size study found that Black elementary students with Black teachers had reading and math test scores 3 to 6 percentile points higher than students without Black teachers, these gains accumulated with each year students had Black teachers.^{vi} Yet only about 20% of our educator workforce is comprised of teachers of color at a time when 40% of our population and the majority of children attending public schools are people of color.^{vii}

Unfortunately, in less than 5 months, COVID-19 has significantly impacted state efforts to provide all students with access to well-prepared and diverse educators. Already, more K–12 public education jobs were lost in April than in all of the Great Recession – a loss of 468,800

jobs in public school employment alone.^{viii} Half of these losses were among special education teachers (a TEACH Grant shortage field), tutors, and teaching assistants.

Should federal aid fail to materialize, this could be only the tip of the iceberg. An analysis from the Learning Policy Institute found that a 20% reduction in state contributions to education funding could result in the loss of nearly 460,000 teaching positions nationwide, or over 12% of the public school teaching workforce.^{ix} Communities of poverty will bear the brunt of this decline, as low-wealth districts have a greater reliance on state aid. These low-wealth districts disproportionately serve students of color and students from families experiencing low-incomes, as well as other historically underserved students. Further, three in four teachers of color work in the quartile of schools serving the most students of color nationally.^x

The other threat to student access to well-prepared and diverse educators is COVID-19's economic impact on prospective educators being able to afford and persist in high-quality educator preparation programs at institutions of higher education. Additionally, the pandemic has increased teacher turnover due to health concerns or family needs such as child care or needing to secure higher paying employment. The combination of these two factors deepen shortages in critical subjects and fields. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollments in teacher preparation programs had been on a steady decline for years, dropping 39% for undergraduate and post-baccalaureate programs between 2010 and 2017 — resulting in more than 277,000 fewer professionals working their way toward the classroom.^{xi}

The economic impact of COVID-19 threatens to put the affordability of high-quality teacher preparation further out of reach for prospective teachers of color who faced higher affordability barriers prior to the pandemic than their white counterparts. Already, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the higher education plans of people of color, with half of Latinos and about 40% of Black and Asian Americans canceling or otherwise changing their plans, including delaying enrollment, reducing courses, or switching institutions.^{xii} This raises concerns for the stability, quality, and diversity of the educator workforce, which will be difficult to accomplish without immediate federal attention and investment.

Given that educators layoffs and shortages will coexist during this time – as they did during the Great Recession – the next relief package must take steps to help ensure students have access to a well-prepared and diverse educator workforce by making needed adjustments to the TEACH Grant Program.

Authorized by Subpart 9, part A of Title IV of the Higher Education Act, the TEACH Grant program is the nation's teacher service scholarship program that is designed to incentivize students to teach high-need subjects in high-need schools. Furthermore, the TEACH Grant Program serves to diversify the teaching profession by helping to remove college affordability barriers to entering the profession.^{xiii} The TEACH Grant program is authorized to provide scholarships of \$4,000 per year (for up to 4 years) to undergraduate and graduate students who are preparing for a career in teaching and who commit to teaching a high-need subject^{xiv} in a high-poverty elementary or secondary school for 4 years. Those who fail to complete this service have their grants converted to loans “with interest thereon accruing from the date of the grant award.”

We ask that the next congressional aid package provide a fair consequence for prospective and current educators working toward fulfilling their TEACH Grant Service requirement who cannot complete their service requirement. Due to the unprecedented disruption in employment nationwide, teachers who are not able fulfill their four year service requirement should not face loan penalties that begin accruing interest from the date a grant was received. **Rather, interest on a grant converted to a loan should begin accruing from the date a recipient can no longer fulfill their service requirement.**

At the time of acceptance, grant award recipients were intending to fulfill the program's requirement to teach in a high-need subject in a high-need school. Recipients could not have foreseen a global pandemic that may have made college unaffordable, resulted in the loss of their job in the high-need schools that are heavily impacted by state budget cuts, required them to exit the profession due to health reasons, child care responsibilities, or family economic needs, or other unforeseen reasons. Loan interest should not accrue when recipients were and are in pursuit of fulfilling this promise of service. The TEACH Grant's loan conversion penalty must be made more just to reflect our only current constant: disruption.

As such, we recommend the following legislative adjustment in the next relief package:

“Section 420N of the Higher Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1070g–2) is amended – in subsection (c) by striking the language after “from the date ” in its entirety and inserting “that a recipient indicates that he or she will not fulfill the service requirement under subsection (b) or from the date in which a recipient no longer can meet the service requirement in the time allotted under section (b) in accordance with terms and conditions specified by the Secretary in regulations under this subpart.”

Second, we ask that the next relief package increase the TEACH Grant's award to align with what it takes to afford high-quality comprehensive preparation and our current reality of increased student financial need. Specifically we ask for a substantial increase of at least double the current award amount. Even before the pandemic, two-thirds of teachers took on student loan debt with an average debt of \$20,000 for a bachelor's degree and \$50,000 for a master's degree.^{xv} Further, research shows that the high cost of college and student loan debt disproportionately impacts students of color. For example, students of color are more likely to come from families unable to contribute financially to their higher education^{xvi} and for many teachers of color student loans are a greater barrier to high quality teacher preparation programs than their white counterparts.^{xvii}

The pandemic has also had a disproportionate toll on the health and economic well-being of people of color. Increasing the TEACH Grant Award can help stabilize our educator workforce, allowing prospective educators, especially prospective educators of color, the ability to afford high-quality preparation, and in turn ensure students in high-need schools have access to a well-prepared and diverse teachers in key shortages areas.

During this time of massive disruption and uncertainty the federal government has a key role to play in ensuring that all students – especially historically underserved students – have access to a

well-prepared and diverse educator workforce. Without sufficient federal action the pandemic threatens to further weaken students' access – particularly historically underserved students – to a well-prepared and diverse educator workforce.

As such, we the undersigned respectfully request that in the next relief package you adjust the TEACH Grant's grant to loan conversion provision so that interest begins accruing at the point when recipients can no longer complete their service rather than at the point of grant disbursement, and second, that you increase the TEACH Grant's award amount to align with the sudden economic impact of COVID-19 on students' finances. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)

AASA, The School Superintendents Association

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

ACTFL

American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC)

ASCD

Council for Exceptional Children

Council of Administrators of Special Education

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates

Deans for Impact

EDGE Consulting Partners

Higher Education Consortium for Special Education

Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU)

National Association for the Education of Young Children

National Association of Elementary School Principals

National Association of Independent Colleges & Universities (NAICU)

National Association of Secondary School Principals

National Association of School Psychologists

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

National Catholic Education Association

National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Down Syndrome Congress
National Education Association
Organizations Concerned About Rural Education
PDK International
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)
Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children
Teach Plus
Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF)
TNTF
Young Invincibles

Endnotes

ⁱ Kini, T. (2020, June 25). Raising Demands and Reducing Capacity: COVID-19 and the Educator Workforce [Blog post]. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-raising-demands-reducing-capacity-educator-workforce> (accessed 08/19/20).

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- ^v Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
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- ^x Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- ^{xi} Darling-Hammond, L. (2019, November 17). Burdensome Student Loan Debt Is Contributing To The Country's Teacher Shortage Crisis [Blog post]. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2019/11/17/burdensome-student-loan-debt-is-contributing-to-the-countrys-teacher-shortage-crisis/#6f9dd1005fc9> (accessed 08/19/20).
- ^{xii} Fain, P. (2020, June 11). Latinos, African Americans Most Likely to Change Education Plans [Blog post]. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/06/11/latinos-african-americans-most-likely-change-education-plans> (accessed 08/19/20).
- ^{xiii} Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- ^{xiv} High-need fields under this program include bilingual education and English language acquisition, foreign language, mathematics, reading specialist, science, and special education, as well as any other field that has been identified as high-need by the federal government, a state government, or a local education agency, and that is included in the annual *Teacher Shortage Areas Nationwide Listing (Nationwide List)*.
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- ^{xvii} Fiddiman, B., & Partelow, L. (2019). *Student debt: An overlooked barrier to increasing teacher diversity*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2019/07/09/471850/student-debt-overlooked-barrier-increasing-teacher-diversity/> Garza,R. (2019). *Paving the Way for Latinx Teachers Recruitment and Preparation to Promote Educator Diversity: Recruitment and Preparation to Promote Educator Diversity*. Washington, DC: New America.