

Project to Revitalize Educator Preparation in America (PREP America) Federal Policy Framework

Background

Educator preparation has been a core mission of most public colleges and universities, and many regional public institutions can trace their roots to normal schools established by the states to prepare teachers for their public-school systems.

Given their historical connections to the preparation of educators—not only teachers, superintendents, and principals, but also counselors, school psychologists, librarians, speech therapists, social workers, and educational diagnosticians—members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) strive to continuously improve their educator training programs to produce professionals who will prepare future generations in their communities for success in college and careers.

In recent years, the context in which educator preparation programs operate has grown increasingly complex, and the discipline's evolution, pedagogical improvements, and other innovations have been overshadowed by inadequate funding of future teachers on the front-end and incommensurably low salaries for educators, heavy-handed political scrutiny, micro-management by outside groups, and general misrepresentations about the state of the teaching profession.¹ Specifically:

- The P-12 teaching profession is being asked to do more with less, confronting growing expectations coupled with declining autonomy, low pay, constrained budgets and acute teacher shortages in certain regions and subject areas.
- University-based educator preparation faces declining enrollment, increasing costs for education majors, difficulties recruiting diverse students and candidates in high-need fields, and shrinking budgets—all compounded by persistent criticism from policymakers, the media and others.
- External entities have created policy challenges for educator preparation programs, including heightened federal and state accountability burdens, unproven regulatory demands, shifts in professional accreditation and burgeoning alternative and emergency certification provisions.
- As the U.S. student population continues to grow in diversity and specific needs, the demand for quality educators is increasing.

¹ Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. A Coming Crisis in Teaching. Learning Policy Institute. (Sept. 2016). Retrieved https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/A_Coming_Crisis_in_Teaching_BRIEF.pdf and Aragon, S. Teacher Shortages: What We Know. Education Commission of the States. (May 2016). Retrieved <http://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Teacher-Shortages-What-We-Know.pdf>

The following recommendations are partial results of a two-day convening in June 2019 by the University of Northern Iowa (UNI)—a public institution with a superb educator preparation program, a university-wide commitment to training highly qualified educators, and a major research venue through its Center for Educational Transformation—and AASCU. The convening was designed to lay the groundwork for developing a policy framework for addressing critical problems confronting educator preparation in the United States. The goal was to clearly delineate and articulate distinct and appropriate roles for the federal government, the states, and academic programs themselves. What follows is an outline of the consensus of the group of scholars and experts at the UNI-AASCU convening with regard to the proper role and responsibilities of the federal government. While public P-12 education is primarily a state and local responsibility, given the vital function it performs in the financing of higher education, the federal government can play an important and constructive part in addressing a number of these challenges.

The UNI-AASCU convening in June was followed by a pre-conference convening of academic leaders (Provosts and Deans), and an additional concurrent conference session, at AASCU's Summer Academic Affairs Conference in Minneapolis in July 2019. At the conference, AASCU and UNI gathered additional feedback on the initial PREP America Federal Policy Framework, and broadened the dialogue to include disciplinary and programmatic challenges, opportunities, and needs associated with preparing America's dynamic educator workforce. As the UNI-AASCU initiative evolves and expands, it is expected that additional recommendations will be developed to address the responsibilities of the states and point the way to additional programmatic and institutional academic policies and practices.

Recommendations for Improving the Federal Role in Educator Preparation

I. Proposed Changes to Title IV Student Assistance Programs

One of the least understood aspects of the process of becoming an educator is the significant additional costs associated with choosing the field as a vocation. Students seeking to become educators face significant direct costs associated with state or national assessments, and expenses related to initial and advanced credentialing and licensure. Beyond the direct costs, these students face sizeable additional expenses for required clinical experiences such as student teaching, externships, and internships. What's more, these required clinical experiences severely limit the ability of students to work part-time, and often force them into more borrowing to cover the additional costs of professional attire and transportation to and from the venues where they fulfill their programs' clinical requirements. Educators at rural institutions, moreover, often face long commutes to practicum/clinical sites

- Broaden the definition of cost of attendance in the Higher Education Act (HEA), Part F, Section 472 to include an allowance for reasonable costs associated with clinical experiences for students enrolled in an educator preparation program.

In addition, broaden the current allowance in HEA, Section 472 (13) for the first professional licensure, advanced certifications, or additional endorsements to allow for inclusion of all mandatory assessment fees and credentialing and licensure fees.

Educators are some of the most heavily credentialed and lowest-paid professionals in the labor market. While educator salaries are strictly a state and local matter, the federal government can and must act to reduce the financial barriers that are increasingly discouraging college and university students, particularly students from under-represented communities of color, from pursuing careers as educators. The most efficient way of targeting federal resources to those who most need help—and simultaneously help states and districts with recruitment and retention of highly qualified educators—would be to reduce the burden of debt for educators who had to borrow to finance their own education.

- Modify the teacher loan cancellation program in HEA Section 460 to require the Secretary to make a monthly co-payment for every educator enrolled in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program authorized under HEA Section 455(m) in an amount that, when added to the monthly payment required from the borrower, is equal to the monthly payment amount that would repay the borrower's original balance and accrued interest on the basis of a ten-year amortization schedule. This would significantly address the greatest financial obstacles that turn low- and moderate-income college students away from choosing education as a profession and enable the states and school districts to retain teachers by providing them with real-time financial incentives.
- Mandate annual reports by the Department of Education to Congress on key performance indicators.

II. Proposed Changes to TEACH Grants

TEACH Grants, created in the 2008 reauthorization of the HEA, have proven exceedingly useful for recruiting and graduating future educators. That success, however, has been marred by significant design flaws and poor implementation, causing many grant recipients to have their TEACH Grant balances converted into unsubsidized loans and driving many teachers either into greater financial hardship or entirely away from the profession.

One of the great flaws in the configuration of TEACH Grants is the all-or-nothing approach to the number of years of service.

- Provide a graduated accrual of Teach Grants by allowing each qualifying year of service to offset one year of TEACH Grant funding.

In addition, many TEACH Grant recipients have had their grants converted to unsubsidized loans because they have been unable to secure qualifying employment due to district budget constraints or other factors beyond their control.

- Provide a one-year extension, up to three years, for TEACH Grant recipients who fail to fulfill their service requirements for every year in which they sought, but were unable, to secure an offer of employment in a qualifying school. A similar extension should be provided for candidates recommended by their schools for licensure who attempt, but fail, to pass licensure examinations or acquire required certifications.
- A similar extension of up to three years should also be available for life events covered under the Family Medical Leave Act.

- Minimize the adverse impact of conversions for all grant recipients by converting TEACH Grants to subsidized, not unsubsidized loans.
- Provide up to three years of deferment for grant recipients who are employed as educators at ineligible venues.

Beyond the design flaws flagged above, the high rate of conversion of TEACH Grants to unsubsidized loans can be driven by institutional or servicer behaviors. It is critical that the program be updated to control the risk of bad outcomes attributable to institutional or servicer choices.

- Impose a maximum threshold on participating institutions for TEACH Grant conversions. Institutions that fail the threshold for three consecutive years would lose eligibility to participate in the program for three years and would need to apply to regain eligibility based on remedial action to prevent recurrence.
- Provide grant recipients flexibility to maintain their benefits by correcting administrative mistakes, missed deadlines, or erroneous paperwork.
- Impose robust administrative oversight requirements on servicers and require them to assume liability for individual losses of benefits attributable to their failure to properly perform their contractual obligations.
- Mandate annual reports to Congress on key performance indicators.

Lack of educator diversity and specific shortages are significant problems across the nation. The federal government can address these issues through broadening the eligibility criteria for TEACH Grants.

- Expand the goals of TEACH to promote diversity within the P-12 educator professions. This would enable populations that are currently under-represented among professional educators to receive TEACH Grants and enter these professions. Such recipients would be allowed to retain their TEACH Grant benefits by serving at any public school or school system on terms specified above.
- Expand the goals of the program by allowing educators in district-designated shortage categories (special education, English as a Second Language, STEM, etc.) to retain their TEACH Grant benefits.
- Extend undergraduate TEACH Grant eligibility to five years to enable students to qualify for additional credentials or endorsements.

III. HEA Title II Reforms

Over time, the vision of the federal role in educator preparation articulated in Title II of the HEA has been transformed into a punitive oversight function. This paradigm of the primary federal function, often rationalized in terms of accountability, reached its apex in the 2016 Obama Administration regulations—rescinded in 2017 by the Trump Administration with near-unanimous support from higher education groups—that sought to mandate state ratings of teacher preparation programs. In addition to making the changes to Title IV provisions identified above, a more affirmative federal role should be enshrined in Title II by eliminating mandatory state ratings, maintaining the Teacher Quality Partnership program, and incorporating the following recommendations in three distinct categories:

Academic Support

- Invest in grant programs focused on mentorship of new educators.
- Create grants that pay for licensure exams.
- Provide financial support and planning for 1st Generation future teachers.
- Provide grants to university-based programs to cover additional costs of placing students in areas of shortage

Partnerships (Induction and Professional Development)

- Provide grants for university-based programs to offer professional development services, including second endorsements, to school districts
- Provide grants for university-based programs to offer professional development services, including second endorsements, to educators
- Promote the integration of career and college readiness training in an educator preparation program that is a partnership between counselors in schools and educator preparation faculty at colleges and universities.
- Incentivize institutions to offer additional support services, co- and extra-curricular support, for pre-service teachers involved in the TEACH Grant.
- Create incentives for the states to hold all teacher training programs—including alternative certification options—to the same uniformly high standards.

Research

- Invest in research on effective teaching and disseminate evidence-based findings to be implemented in educator preparation program curricula.