



**Testimony of the  
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Informational Meeting Regarding  
Educator Certification**

**Presented to the  
House Education Committee**

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**By**

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Good morning, Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Cutler, and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Aaron Chapin, and I am the President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). Thank you for inviting me to share PSEA’s recommendations for ensuring educator certification is designed to meet the intended goal – prepared and qualified individuals teaching and supporting our students.

Before I was elected to PSEA’s leadership team, I was a fourth and fifth grade teacher for 30 years at the Stroudsburg Area Middle School in Monroe County. I received my bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Penn State University, after which I received my K-6 Elementary Certificate. To achieve my permanent (Instructional II) certificate, I received my master’s degree in education from Wilkes University. My certificate means a great deal to me, as it does to every teacher I know. It represents a formative decision to enter public service as an elementary school teacher and improve the lives of hundreds of children in the process. It represents a commitment to improve my craft and expand my knowledge so I could be a better teacher for students, and better servant of my community.

PSEA appreciates the Committee’s focus on evaluating the Commonwealth’s certification system. And we also appreciate the work of Governor Shapiro’s administration to speed up the system to process certification applications. It is only logical that policymakers examine the system as Pennsylvania continues to grapple with the educator shortage. It is vital for policymakers to implement a cohesive policy framework – including improved access for securing high-quality certification – to ensure the commonwealth recruits and retains our best and brightest. As you consider and evaluate proposals, I urge you to ask two key questions:

1. Does this proposal demonstrate **respect for educators as professionals** and value the effort invested in securing and maintaining their certification?
2. Does this proposal ensure **schools are staffed with enough certified personnel** who are equipped to meet the demands of today’s classrooms and provide students with what they need?

Proper certification matters. It demonstrates to the public that an educator has met national and state standards and has demonstrated they have the skills and knowledge needed to effectively

support student learning and success. It provides clear recognition within the school community of fellow qualified professionals who can offer valuable contributions and input.

Before I address PSEA’s recommendations, I want to quickly summarize the most common way a person becomes a certified teacher in Pennsylvania. First, one must earn a bachelor’s degree, which includes successfully completing at least 12 weeks of student teaching and earning at least a 3.0 GPA in a Department-approved educator preparation program. Then candidates must take and pass subject matter test(s) related to the certification area to receive an Instructional I certificate. Within six years, candidates must complete at least 24 post-baccalaureate credits to move to their permanent Instructional II certificate. In my experience, most teachers get their master’s degrees at this point, because it takes only six additional credits. And while all of this is happening and continuing until retirement, educators are undergoing annual evaluations by a chief school administrator, participating in training mandated by state law and completing their professional development requirements every five years.<sup>1</sup>

Ensuring high quality preparation for teaching and working in today’s increasingly complex school environment is essential. Teachers today face increasing training requirements from the General Assembly; more and more students with diverse and complex mental, emotional, and physical needs; intense pressures of high stakes standardized testing; and the need to keep our students and themselves safe from violent threats. It is essential that any solutions proposed by policymakers maintain high quality preparation and do not lower standards for certification nor undermine the certification requirement.<sup>2</sup>

When Pennsylvania was first undergoing its review of state regulations for the certification of professional personnel, Chapter 49, the Learning Policy Institute provided the Department and

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<sup>1</sup> Educators must earn six semester credits of collegiate study; OR six credits of PDE-approved continuing professional education courses; OR 180 hours of continuing professional education programs, activities or learning experiences through a PDE approved provider; OR any combination of these equivalent to 180 hours every five years to maintain an active certification status.

<sup>2</sup> Research demonstrates that public schools where certification is not universally required have higher attrition rates. A recent study on the educator shortage determined that, “across all 15 years of experience, the attrition rate for teachers in charter schools was substantially greater than for teachers in school districts.... The much greater attrition rates for teachers in their first three years of experience in charter schools is partially due to the hiring of a substantial number of teachers without certification.” ["Pennsylvania Teacher Staffing Challenges"](#). Dr. Edward Fuller. Penn State College of Education – Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis. Fall 2022.

the State Board of Education with findings and recommendations specific to certification that we believe are still timely today:

*Specifically, the goal should be to provide the necessary supports and structures to ensure every individual working within the public school system has the requisite knowledge and skills to support each and every child. Underprepared or unqualified individuals in any position hinder schoolwide efforts to meet the needs of all students and can contribute to teacher attrition. The skills and expertise of all staff should be effectively developed and utilized as part of a comprehensive vision for school and student success.”<sup>3</sup>*

**This vision stands for our teaching professionals but also for our non-teaching professionals as well. Together, they support the needs of the whole child to optimize learning success and each of them deserves respect and recognition for what they bring to the table.**

But the current definition of “professional employe” in Section 1101 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code does not guarantee any protections or rights to professional staff - such as Behavior Analysts, Orientation and Mobility Specialists, Physical Therapists, and Occupational Therapists - who are employed in positions that are not explicitly captured in the current definition of “professional employe” or for which there is no corresponding certificate. This definition has not been revised for over 50 years.

These professionals have successfully completed rigorous educational requirements and clinical experiences, as well as attainment of advanced degrees and professional credentials, and are consistently subject to numerous requirements and responsibilities including Act 82 (educator evaluation) and Act 48 (continuing professional development requirements) applicable to “professional employes” in the School Code.

And while many school entities do recognize these individuals as professionals - granting them tenure, realignment rights, sabbatical leave rights, transfer-between-entity rights, or other Article XI-style rights – local recognition is not the same as consistent recognition under the law. This

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan Saunders, Tara Kini, and Linda Darling-Hammond. [Examining Educator Certification in Pennsylvania: Research and Recommendations for Chapter 49](#). Learning Policy Institute. 2018.

must be rectified. It is time to modernize Section 1101 and other relevant School Code provisions to more accurately reflect the various individuals that ensure students have the services they need to succeed both inside and outside the classroom.

Licensure for a profession is important, but it is not the same as *certification* for a pre-12 school environment. Certification ensures professionals have essential content and practice knowledge and skills, but also a deeper understanding of the needs and complexities of today's students and school systems. Simply having a Certification Staffing Policy Guideline (CSPG) issued by the Department recognizing that a professional with licensure *can* be employed in a school district is *not* certification. For more than a decade, licensed social workers working in schools told PSEA and policymakers that licensure was not sufficient to prepare those professionals to practice social work in the public school setting. Finally, in 2021 —after more than a decade of advocacy navigating an unclear and subjective process — PSEA was successful in securing the creation of the school social worker certificate, with the full implementation of CSPG 87 by August of 2026. This is not how the process should work.

### ***Recommendation 1: Greater Transparency in Certification Process***

PDE should adopt an objective, timely, and transparent process for evaluating certifications to provide better alignment between the current roles and demands of professionals working within our schools and meeting the complex needs of today's students.

In 2018 when the Department and the State Board began their comprehensive review of Chapter 49, PSEA strongly advocated for revisions to Sections 49.51 - 49.53 to create a structure to receive public requests for new, modified, or discontinued certification subject areas with a *clearly defined and transparent process for reviewing and responding to these requests*.

Unfortunately, no such changes were proposed by the Department nor included in the final rulemaking for Chapter 49. *While there is a process in the regulations for the State Board and the Department to receive requests for a new "type/category of certificate," there is no such corresponding process for receiving requests specific to subject areas within the various categories of certificates. No objective, transparent, and timely process currently exists for the Department to receive, review and respond to public requests for new, modified or discontinued certification subject areas.* The result is a system that neither approves nor denies requests from

professionals who are employed by public schools and who are seeking certification to improve their preparation and professional practice.

*Recommendation 2: Reduce financial burdens of securing certification*

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the importance of the Student Teacher Support program within the context of certification. PSEA appreciates that this Committee has undertaken a bipartisan effort to solicit information, carefully consider ideas proposed by stakeholders and advance targeted solutions over the past two years to respond to the educator shortage crisis. This Committee deserves tremendous credit for prioritizing and leading an effort to establish the Student Teacher Support program, which provides financial support to eligible student teachers during the 12-week student teacher experience, incentivizes more qualified educators to become cooperating teachers, and ensures that those aspiring educators stay in Pennsylvania for at least three years post-graduation. I want to take a moment to recognize the leadership of Rep. Danielle Friel Otten, Rep. Gina Curry, and Chairman Schweyer who responded to the call of our future teachers around the state. The three of you, working on a bipartisan basis in the House, as well as the Senate, have removed a significant barrier to becoming a teacher, and we are grateful for your work.

This year, Pennsylvania distributed over 2,100 stipends to students using about \$27 million in available state funding. But according to PHEAA, 50 percent of applicants weren't able to receive a stipend this spring due to the lack of available state funding. I would urge this Committee to support Gov. Shapiro's proposed funding level of \$40 million for the program in FY 25-26 and look for opportunities to do more. PSEA estimates that the program requires at least \$50 million in total funding for FY 25-26 to ensure all eligible student teachers receive a stipend, as well as support the bonuses available to eligible student teachers who perform their student teacher experience in a high-vacancy school entity.

After completing their student teacher experience, aspiring educators might graduate with jobs lined up for the following school year, but they can incur hundreds of dollars in initial fees to receive their Instructional I certificate before they even prepare their first classroom.

Pennsylvania requires assessment of teacher candidates in General Knowledge, Professional Knowledge and Subject Area Knowledge prior to issuance of a certificate. In Pennsylvania,

teacher candidates take assessments through ETS (Praxis) or Pearson and pay fees to these companies to sit for the exams. Then candidates must pay an application fee to the Department. Each application or request for certification submitted to the Department includes a \$200 fee – even for certification add-ons. And finally, candidates must pay for the associated background checks to submit to their potential (or current) employers at a cost of \$59.95 every five years.

All of this is on top of the reality that Pennsylvania’s statutory minimum salary for teachers hasn’t increased in over 30 years!

Here are a few examples of teacher candidates and how much they paid in fees before ever receiving their first paycheck:

*Teacher Candidate A – Seeking Prek-4 Certification*

- ETS Praxis Exam for Prek-4 (three modules) - \$131
- Application fee to PDE - \$200
- Background checks - \$59.95
- **Total Cost - \$390.95**

*Teacher Candidate B – Seeking Pre-k -12 Special Education Certification*

- Pearson Assessment K-8 (two modules) - \$87
- Pearson Assessment 7-12 (two modules) - \$87
- ETS Fundamental Subjects (Content Knowledge) - \$130
- Application fee to PDE - \$200
- Background checks - \$59.95
- **Total Cost - \$563.95**

But what if Teacher A wanted to have a certificate that covers grades 5 and 6? The individual would have to take the ETS Praxis 5/6 add-on assessment. This plan is often suggested by the early learning community as a solution to teacher shortages in grades 5/6 in place of PDE and the State Board realigning the instructional grade span for the certifications. The issue of grade span realignment is addressed in more detail later in my testimony.

Teacher A – Seeking Prek-4 Certification AND the 5/6 Certificate Add-on

- ETS Praxis Exam Prek-4 - \$131
- Application fee to PDE (for Prek-4) - \$200
- ETS Praxis Exams for 5/6 add-on - \$100 (must take two \$50 tests)
- Application fee to PDE (for 5/6 add-on) - \$200
- Background checks - \$59.95
- **Total Cost - \$690.95**

Teacher Candidate C – Seeking Career and Technical Intern Certification

A Career and Technical Intern Certificate is a temporary certificate (valid for three calendar years) issued by the Department that allows a certificate holder to work as a teacher in career and technical education programs while also attending a state-approved career and technical teacher preparation program at an institution of higher education. The requirements for a Career and Technical Intern Certificate are: Acceptable evidence of four years (8,000 hours) of wage-earning experience (or volunteer hours for Protective Services) in the occupation to be taught; Acceptance to a State-approved career and technical teacher preparation program at one of the approved universities; Passing scores on the appropriate occupational competency examination, or evaluation of credentials for occupations where examinations do not exist; Having been recommended for the Career and Technical Intern Certificate by the university at which they are enrolled or accepted; and meeting all requirements under the School Code.

- Occupational Competency Exam - \$415 (Temple)
- Credential Review - \$155 (Temple)
- Background check- \$59.95
- **Total Cost - \$629.95**

Teacher Candidate D – Seeking Career and Technical Instructional Certification

A Career and Technical Instructional Certificate (valid for eight service years) is issued by the Department on the recommendation of a university having a Pennsylvania-approved career and technical teacher preparation program. The applicant must complete 18 credit hours in an



approved program of career and technical teacher education (which can only be completed at Penn State, Temple, IUP, or Point Park).

- Per credit hour/PA Resident - \$1105 (Temple) x 18 credits =\$19,890
- ETS Praxis Core Reading Exam - \$90
- ETS Praxis Core Writing Exam - \$90
- Application fee to PDE - \$200
- Background check- \$59.95
- **Total Cost - \$20,329.95**

All of the candidates in these examples will pay another \$200 in application fees within 6-8 years to be eligible for their Instructional II certificate.

In general, once teachers achieve their permanent Instructional II certificate, they don't want to pay for any more exams or application fees, nor do they want to commit the time to prepare and sit for more certification exams. We should not keep asking our educators to spend their personal money and more of their personal time to remedy the deficiencies in Pennsylvania's certification system or to help administrators fill vacancies and shortages that remain prevalent in public schools.

Half of a candidate's \$200 application fee to the Department is intended to support the Professional Standards and Practices Commission (PSPC) in its administration of the EDA. If the Department is inadequately funded to support the work of the PSPC, then the General Assembly should address this concern as part of the state budget process.<sup>4</sup> The application fee to the Department was increased from \$125 to \$200 in late 2016. Previously, \$100 was the standard application fee, and \$25 was added to help finance the PSPC efforts to clear a backlog of misconduct petitions. The portion of the fee dedicated to the PSPC was increased by 300 percent, resulting in a total application fee that is too high. Moreover, this fee is inconsistent with what educators in neighboring states are expending for their certifications.

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<sup>4</sup> 22 Pa Code § 233.102 outlines the purpose of the PSPC: "The body charged with the oversight and enforcement of the educator discipline system, the primary goal of the Commission is to ensure the health, safety and welfare of students and other individuals in schools in this Commonwealth while facilitating the fair, efficient and transparent adjudication of complaints against educators."

### *Recommendation 3: Improve pathways to Certification for various candidates*

When an educator decides to leave the profession, they have the option of placing their certification in a lockbox, of sorts, referred to as voluntary inactive status. This effectively stops the clock on the educator's Act 48 continuing professional education (CPE) requirement. For this privilege, educators have to pay the Department \$75. When an educator wants to remove their certificate from voluntary inactive status, these individuals must complete 30 CPE hours and pay the Department another \$75.

Greater efficiency can be incorporated into this process, especially given the educator shortage. PSEA's members don't think it makes sense for certified educators to have to complete 30 CPE hours *before* they can apply to the Department to remove their certificate from voluntary inactive status. Pennsylvania should allow these certificated educators to return to classrooms and perform their 30 CPE hours prospectively through school entities' in-service days over a two-year period. This will give these educators returning to the field plenty of time to complete their 30 hours, as well as get started on their next Act 48 requirement. Our members would also recommend relieving some of the financial burden by eliminating the fee to *place* a certificate in voluntary inactive status.

### *Recommendation 4: Address Certification Grade Spans*

Over the years, many school administrators have suggested revising the grade spans for early childhood and middle certificates and either adding the old K-6 certificate to the slate of options or, alternatively, eliminating the separate early childhood and middle certificates and returning altogether to the K-6 certificate. PSEA can see the logic of their reasoning. After all, the need for a K-6 elementary certificate is largely driven by the realities of the structure of schools in Pennsylvania and the need to have teachers with certificates that make deployment throughout the school more viable. PSEA even went as far as drafting House Bill 1386 for then-Rep. Kristin Phillips-Hill in the 2017-2018 legislative session to address the issue.

The data supports the anecdotal evidence provided by school administrators. According to the Department's Act 82 certification data, in 2022-2023 there were 390 in-state certificates issued in the four academic areas (math, science, social studies, and English) for grades 4-8. There were

also an additional 149 grade 5-6 in-state certificates issued, and 13 grade 5-6 add-on certificates. Meanwhile there were 1,263 preK-4 in-state certificates issued. Less than half of new early “childhood and middle grade certificate-holders can provide classroom instruction in grades 5 and 6.

With this said, I think it’s equally important that we acknowledge some additional truths, as well.

- The grouping of the current grade levels for early childhood and middle certificates was done to more closely align professional expertise with children’s brain development.
- The regulatory changes that split the elementary certificate into early childhood and middle grades helped to create the pipeline of certified educators for the Pre-K Counts and Keystone 4-Star childcare programs. Research has historically demonstrated that pre-kindergarten programs with teachers that have bachelor’s degrees and specialized training in early childhood education have better outcomes for kids.

All of these things can be true at the same time. PSEA supports high-quality pre-kindergarten programs taught by certified educators. They are among our members. That said, we believe the certificate grade spans must be revised.

PSEA would support either of the following solutions:

1. Reinststitute the K-6 instructional certification while maintaining the early childhood, middle and secondary instructional certificates; or
2. Revise the early childhood and secondary instructional certificates by extending the preK-4 certification to 5<sup>th</sup> grade and lower the secondary instructional certification to grade 6 (as opposed to grades 7-12).

### *Conclusion*

In closing, I believe that we can address some of the inefficiencies in our certification system if we examine policy proposals through the lens of respect for educators as professionals and with the goal of ensuring schools are staffed with certified personnel to meet student needs. PSEA stands ready to provide feedback on ideas and we look forward to partnering with this Committee to make positive change for public education across the commonwealth. Thank you

for your consideration of PSEA’s testimony today. I will be happy to answer any of your questions.