

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 22, 2016

The Honorable Dr. John King
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary King:

Thank you for your continued partnership to ensure effective implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to protect and promote the right of every child to learn, grow, and thrive no matter where they live, how they learn, or how much money their parents make. We write today to request that the U.S. Department of Education (“Department”), in developing guidance for Title II of ESSA, ensures that such guidance details how states and districts can use these important federal funds to address teacher shortages in their communities. Like many other states across the country, our home states of Washington and Virginia are experiencing teacher shortages, especially in schools that serve high numbers of low-income students; in critical areas such as special education and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects; and for teachers of English learners. In our states, as in other states, the schools that serve the students with the greatest need are often the ones experiencing the most significant teacher shortages. The Department has an opportunity to provide clarity and direction to states and districts who want to use Title II funds to address their teacher shortages and help ensure that all students have access to an effective teacher.

A key purpose of Title II of ESSA is to increase the number of effective teachers serving our nation’s most vulnerable students. To help achieve this purpose, Title II provides funding for a variety of teacher preparation, development, and retention activities. The Department should provide guidance to states on how to use these Title II funds to address teacher shortages and to increase the number of effective teachers in the classroom through three important activities - multiple and innovative pathways to teaching, meaningful induction programs, and effective professional development activities.

Multiple and innovative pathways to teaching can help increase the number and diversity of teachers across the country and in turn, reduce the teacher shortage. Special education is a critical shortage area nationwide. Recruiting and retaining special education teachers is a challenge because many special educators leave the profession after only a year. Paraeducators, who are already in the classroom, fully understand the high demands of the job and have relationships with students, families, and communities. The Department’s guidance should include information on developing effective programs that support paraeducators moving from their role as a support staff to certified teachers.

Alternate routes such as this can also help increase the diversity of the teaching force so that teachers better reflect the student population they serve. Further, states across the country have

created successful “grow-your-own” programs that recruit students to the teaching profession while they are in high school and then provide support throughout their postsecondary preparation. This can be particularly important for rural areas, which often struggle to attract teachers to more remote locations. Multiple pathways to teaching support the development of a diverse, invested workforce that is better prepared for the demands of the teaching profession.

Once teachers are in the classroom, they must have access to training and support throughout their careers, starting with meaningful induction programs to effective professional development activities throughout their careers, in order to be successful long-term. Induction should engage a new teacher in the school climate and provide support during the challenging first years. Innovative teacher preparation models, such as teacher residency programs that meet the needs of prospective teachers, can help encourage more students to decide to become teachers. While models vary, effective programs prioritize partnering teacher candidates with one or more effective teachers.

Another critical strategy for addressing teacher shortages through improving teacher retention is to ensure that teachers have access to meaningful and evidence-based professional development that hones and improves their teaching skills throughout their careers. Research has shown that professional development disconnected with teachers’ daily activities—such as a one-time afterschool seminar—is ineffective as a standalone professional development strategy and does little to retain teachers in the classroom. Professional development should be an ongoing, job embedded, dynamic experience aimed at consistent improvement for teachers regardless of their level of expertise and experience. Further, providing teachers with opportunities to share their experience with other teachers in professional development settings empowers teachers to be leaders and build strong education communities. As states develop their ESSA plans, guidance from the Department on how to develop a cohesive pipeline of support—starting in teacher preparation and induction and proceeding with job embedded evidence-based professional development and teacher leadership opportunities— would help states tackle their teacher shortages.

Title II of ESSA encourages states to use their federal funds to support teacher recruitment, preparation, and retentions activities based on state need. Across the country, schools are reporting teacher shortages, especially in hard to fill subjects such as special education and STEM and for teachers of English learners. The Department’s guidance on how to use Title II funds to successfully support teacher recruitment efforts, multiple pathways to teaching, high-quality evidence-based professional development, and teacher leadership can help states to leverage their funds to minimize these shortages.

Sincerely,



PATTY MURRAY
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education
Labor and Pensions



ROBERT C. “BOBBY” SCOTT
Ranking Member
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on
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