

A Policy Adjustment to Improve the Student Teaching Experience
for Student and Cooperating Teachers
by Granting Act 48 Credit

Education Policy Fellowship Program

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Introduction

Schools and their teachers have been under siege since the release of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, *A Nation at Risk*, (Labaree, 1983). That report focused the public's attention on the human and economic costs of an inferior K-12 educational system and the need for curricular improvements, clear and measurable student learning outcomes, and improved teacher quality. In response, the federal and state governments have attempted to effect improvements to educational outcomes through legislation and regulatory changes. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Race to Top competitive grant initiative of 2009, and the push for state adoption of the Common Core State Standards are recent examples of federal activity. States have adopted analogous legislation and regulations. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, for example, has approved and implemented mandates for subject-matter standards, school and teacher accountability, and more rigorous and selective teacher training.

Professional Development in Pennsylvania

The selection, preparation, and continued professional development of the Commonwealth's teachers are critical to the public's welfare. The Commonwealth has a vested interest in the quality of its educator force. Encouraging and rewarding the engagement of our strongest teachers in the preparation of the next generation of teachers serves the public's interests through the sharing of best teaching practices. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) governs teacher preparation in the Commonwealth and has adopted rigorous standards for both teacher preparation program approval and the admission of teacher candidates. Additionally, recognizing that the need for professional development does not cease with one's first teacher appointment, the Commonwealth approved legislation in 1999 (Act 48) that

mandated continuing education for all educators holding public school certification. The Department of Education, in turn, developed and promulgated regulations and procedures designed to enforce and monitor this requirement.

Act 48 providers in the Commonwealth are regulated by the Department of Education. Prospective providers must meet regulatory requirements, submit an application, and be approved by the Department. School districts, intermediate units, and institutions of higher education are among the more common providers.

Student Teaching

Student teaching is the teacher candidate's capstone experience in his or her teacher preparation program. It is through this experience that student teachers apply the theories and knowledge they gain through preparatory coursework, practice different teaching skills, learn from their mistakes, and discover their own teaching style (Snider, 2006). Student teaching is a PDE-mandated requirement for all initial teacher certification programs in Pennsylvania. This clinical experience must be a minimum of twelve weeks duration and must be completed under the direct supervision of a professional educator holding a public school certificate in the teacher candidate's program area. The student teaching experience is described as one of the most influential factors in the preparation of beginning teachers (Baumgartner, Koerner, & Rust, 2002; Lemma, 1993).

While teachers, teacher education programs, and state boards of education recognize that the student teaching experience is a pivotal experience in learning to become an effective teacher, the quality of the supervision and coaching of the student teacher in this critical experience varies. Identifying experienced teachers who are willing to serve as cooperating teachers (mentors) for teacher candidates is a challenge for teacher preparation programs.

According to Greenberg, Pomerance, and Walsh (2011), cooperating teachers should have experience, effectiveness, willingness and mentoring ability. The authors suggest there is little incentive to become a cooperating teacher and that there is a vast shortage of qualified cooperating teachers in this country. Additionally, Kamens (2007) stated that the ultimate goal for both the student teacher and cooperating teacher is to learn from each other. The cooperating teacher offers knowledge of content, pedagogy, and classroom management. The student teacher shares knowledge related to the most current teaching techniques and strategies.

Research supports that the cooperating teacher is a key component to the educational process of the student teachers and their potential as future leaders in education (Booth, 1993; DelGesso & Smith, 1993; Karmos and Jacko, 1977; Manning, 1977; McNally, Cope, Inglis, & Stonach, 1994; Stark, 1994). The cooperating teacher's role has been cited as influential, important, and essential to the teaching experience of student teachers (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Sanderson (2003) researched the best student-teaching experiences by surveying over 60 cooperating teachers in the Greater Philadelphia area. Her research asserts that it is imperative that student teachers and cooperating teachers meet prior to the start of the experience, as well as discuss expectations, and observe the cooperating teachers before the program begins. Duquette (1994) found that the cooperating teacher must be able to orient, induct, guide, reflect, cooperate and support. She adds that the cooperating teacher's role is complicated because he or she must be an excellent teacher but also supervisor, providing opportunities for growth of the student teacher. She also found that cooperating teachers were concerned about overload and stress related to their role. Despite the pivotal role, there is a lack of incentive to become a cooperating teacher.

“Improved mentoring programs for members of the triad (student, cooperating teacher, and teacher education programs) could be an avenue that institutions of higher education need to focus on in order to improve the student teaching experience” (NCTQ, 2011, p. 11). To improve the quality of student teaching experiences through better mentoring, there must be proper training, collaboration, and commitment to a high-quality student teaching experience (Sanderson, 2010). The effective mentoring of the teacher candidate by the professional educator is critical to the candidate’s preparation as a teacher. Professional educators who fulfill the role of mentor do so, as a general rule, without district compensation, outside the scope of their general duties. While the Department of Education endorses a variety of continuing education activities for educators, Act 48 does not currently award continuing professional development credit to those who mentor student teachers. The awarding of Act 48 credit can serve as a valuable inducement to experienced teachers to take on the role of cooperating teacher.

Proposed Regulatory Change

The policy change being suggested is to allow Act 48 credit to be awarded for the activity of supervising a student teacher if the potential cooperating teacher successfully participates in a preparatory program prior to being selected as cooperating teacher. Higher education institutions offering teacher preparation programs may develop training opportunities for future cooperating teachers that will develop the skills needed to successfully mentor, coach and develop the student teacher that he or she will supervise. Participation in the training program would be required to receive the Act 48 credit.

Rationale and Support

Providing a pathway for obtaining Act 48 credit is one way to incentivize more highly effective teachers to become cooperating teachers and support the next generation of future

teachers. Because good cooperating teachers are needed to improve the quality of the student teachers participating in teacher preparation programs at Pennsylvania colleges and universities, it is necessary to increase the incentives to become a cooperating teacher. Better cooperating teachers would mentor and prepare student teachers in more reflective and critical ways. Offering Act 48 credit to cooperating teachers would impact the educational process in several meaningful ways.

There are several examples of states allowing professional development credit or requiring a training program before becoming a cooperating teacher. Some examples of states that permit cooperating teachers to receive continuing education credit toward license renewal include Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Texas, and Utah. States that have recognized the value of a training program for cooperating teachers include, but is not limited to Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, North Dakota, and Wisconsin.

In addition to states recognizing the value of training cooperating teachers, foundations have also taken action. Such an example occurs in Arizona where the Rodel Foundation of Arizona offers a rigorous program, the Rodel Exemplary Teacher Initiative, which has incentivized becoming a cooperating teacher to improve the performance of the student teacher. Universities work together to select cooperating teachers for competence and effectiveness and matching them with student teachers. In addition, the cooperating teachers receive compensation and recognition. This program has shown to be very successful and was recognized by the National Council on Teacher Quality as a model program (Rodel Foundation of Arizona, 2015).

Because supervising student teachers requires excellence in teaching and professional experience involving mentoring, coaching, reflection and support, it is a viable professional development activity that extends existing knowledge. As such, cooperating teachers should

receive Act 48 credit. In successful experiences that combine observation, evaluation, journaling, supervision and leadership, cooperating teachers will grow professionally through this experience, which is deserving of professional development credit (Act 48). Through the recommended implementation, cooperating teachers have an opportunity to be involved in a professional learning network (PLN) with faculty supervisors, peer cooperating teachers, as well as student teachers assigned to their classroom. This PLN would allow for a sharing and collaborative approach to discussing the improvement of instruction within the classroom environment. We suggest that offering Act 48 credit would be appropriate compensation and incentive to improve the depth of the pool of cooperating teachers.

PDE has adopted Charlotte Danielson's framework for enhancing professional practice as its theoretical model for its educator effectiveness program. Indeed, Danielson's rubrics in the domains of planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibilities serve as the organizing framework for the assessment of a teacher's observed practice and comprises fifty percent (50%) of an educator's overall performance rating. Moreover, in detailing expectations for teachers in the professionalism domain, PDE notes that "reflection on their own teaching results in ideas for improvement that are shared across professional learning communities and contribute to improving the practice of all." Serving as a cooperating teacher or mentor prompts this form of reflection by surfacing and interrogating a teacher's pedagogical reasoning across each of Danielson's domains. It is therefore developmental in nature for both the cooperating teacher and student teacher and consistent with PDE's educator effectiveness initiative.

It is important to note that participation in such a training program would not be required to be a cooperating teacher, but merely an additional pathway to earn Act 48 credit for the work

that it involves. Frequently, the teacher preparation programs have specific requirements and responsibilities for cooperating teachers that are beyond the teacher's regular duties. In addition to the Act 48 credit, there are several benefits to the cooperating teacher, teacher preparation program, and the school district when participation in such a program occurs. The cooperating teacher will develop additional skills that can be utilized by the district to assist with induction programs, mentor new teachers, and even support other struggling teachers as a coach. Teacher preparation programs should see an increase the numbers of interested cooperating teachers as well. Lastly, the cooperating teacher will develop his or her own skills to be a more reflective, supportive, and collaborative educator.

Recommendation for Implementation

Higher education institutions offering pre-service teacher preparation programs may apply to have their training programs approved by the PDE for Act 48 credit using the established application process. These institutions would decide how their programs would be structured, the expectations for participation, and the number of hours that would be awarded upon successful completion of just the training program and then the actual process of supervising and mentoring a student teacher. Supervising a student teacher would be required to earn all of the potential hours that could be awarded.

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