

Brandi Sapp
House Education Committee
Submitted Written Testimony
In support of House Bill 1553
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My name is Brandi Sapp and I am an instructional coach for Goshen Middle School (GMS) in Goshen, Indiana, as well as a Teach Plus Policy Fellow. I have been in education for twenty-two years and have served in a variety of teaching and educational leadership roles. I also serve as an adjunct instructor for the student teaching seminar at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB). I am testifying in support of House Bill 1553 and the adjustment of the criteria necessary to apply for the Next Generation Hoosier Educators Scholarship.

For the last seven years as an 8th grade teacher at GMS, One of my favorite projects was called “Invest in You”, a six-week project, where students focus on life after high school by researching careers, creating resumes, and conducting mock interviews with local businesspeople. Often this was the first time these 8th graders had considered what their futures might eventually look like and how their behavior and academic performance might impact that future.

With a diverse student body, over half of our GMS students identify as Hispanic and over three-quarters of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Many students have experienced or are experiencing trauma that prevents them from having a “perfect” educational career even as a middle schooler. In fact, through the “Invest in You” project, we found that many of them view their futures in only vague terms, with some not seeing the need to invest any effort in their futures because in their eyes they aren’t sure they are going to have a future

A previous student of mine, Tamara, was a stubborn 8th grader with high potential, yet she struggled to regulate her emotions and make good decisions. She would get in trouble for fighting and often became mad and sullen, impacting her academic performance. Through the “Invest in You” project, Tamara picked a shorter term certification path, yet had the potential to earn a 4-year degree if she could learn to keep her emotions in check. Throughout that year, her team of teachers counseled and encouraged her to explore all the options available to her, yet she still seemed closed to the idea of considering other opportunities. This was discouraging as I thought we had gotten through to her. I ran into Tamara recently. She is now a sophomore and she shared that she has decided to pursue a degree to become a pediatric nurse. As a high school student, she has maintained a 3.5 GPA and is doing better at monitoring her emotions and decisions. Yet now she is struggling with the impacts of learning during the pandemic. Even if Tamara recovers her grades now that we are back in school, she may have a difficult time maintaining that 3.5.

The Next Generation Hoosier Educators Scholarship was designed to help create a pipeline for students to enter into the field of education in Indiana. As we continue to see declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs across our state, this scholarship is much needed. Yet as it stands the law currently states that the scholarship requires applicants to rank in the top 20% of their high school graduating class or have a top 20% ACT or SAT score. While I applaud the desire to have a high quality teaching force, this requirement automatically limits the candidate pool. The reality of meeting these standards can be difficult for students facing tenuous home lives or those who haven’t had the opportunity to plan for their futures.

I thoroughly endorse the proposed changes to the Next Generation Hoosier Educators Scholarship in House Bill 1553, in particular, the change to the grade point average requirement. Students from poverty or those who have experienced adversity often struggle to maintain the consistency necessary to have a near perfect GPA. Whether the student struggles in transitioning to high school or there is a family crisis that interrupts sophomore year, students from poverty often have the same abilities as their more privileged peers. However, their life circumstances can often impact their academic performance.

For my 8th graders who can't "see" their future and often need their freshmen years to "figure it out" or have a family situation that holds them back, achieving in the top 20% of their class is rare. However, this is not because they don't have ability—they just need time and grace to rise above the adversity that won't loosen its hold on them quite yet. Setting the GPA requirement to 3.75 opens the door for these potential educators who are more like the student body that they will be trained to teach.

Many of the new teachers I coach at GMS and as an instructor at IUSB are Transition to Teaching students. These Transition to Teaching students are more diverse than those taking the traditional path. This leads me to believe that there are people who want to become teachers—people who look much more like and have experiences like my 8th grade students, but often can't follow the typical path because of the challenges life has put in front of them. Widening the opportunity for more of our students to join the teaching profession earlier when they are earning their undergraduate degrees helps students financially and gets qualified teachers into Indiana classrooms more quickly.

Scholarship programs like the Next Generation Hoosier Education Scholarship offer a tremendous opportunity to all students to become teachers, but especially those who provide diversity to Indiana's teaching force. Making the adjustments to the qualifications opens this pathway to a more diverse group of potential teachers who can best serve the diverse student body of the state of Indiana.

I want to thank Representative Behning for authoring this bill. Members of the Committee, I urge you to support HB1553 and in doing so encourage a more diverse group of Hoosier educators. Thank you