

Jennifer Thomas: HB1001 Testimony / Teacher Appreciation Grants
Senate Appropriations - School Funding Subcommittee
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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of this committee for allowing me an opportunity to testify on behalf of the House approved budget. My name is Jennifer Thomas and I am a Title One Non-Public teacher with Indianapolis Public Schools and a Teach Plus Indiana Teaching Policy Fellow.

I have been working in education for 15 years and have served in various roles. In that time, one of the most important lessons I have learned is how critical it is to have a cohesive and effective teaching staff. I have been blessed with several mentors throughout my career, but it all started with my friend Kerri Rhodes. Ms. Rhodes still teaches fourth grade at Fishers Elementary School and she was not only my mentor, but my advocate. She listened to me, coached me, and supported me during my first year of teaching and beyond. It is, in part, due to her guidance and leadership that I have become the teacher I am today. In fact, she is one of the letters of reference I continue to use because I value her feedback and I know she believes in me and my abilities. But most interestingly, Kerri is one of the few references I have who is still teaching or serving in education. As a state we must do a better job of supporting and retaining teachers like Kerri and myself in the classroom.

Within the House budget, \$5 million dollars has been allocated over the next two years for the creation of a teacher advancement grant program in alignment with House Bill 1008. This allocation of dollars would enable school districts to create or maintain teacher leadership models that would develop and compensate current educators for taking on additional responsibilities while staying in the classroom. I support the creation of this grant program because I personally would not be where I am today without the influence from Mrs. Rhodes.

In recent years, it seems educators have drawn the short stick when it comes to compensation. With districts and the state resorting to stipends and bonuses as opposed to substantial base pay increases.

This last school year, I had my first experience receiving the Indiana Teacher Appreciation Grant. I had returned to the classroom in 2017 after a brief break from teaching and was rated highly effective. At first, I was excited at the prospect of receiving a merit based grant, but my excitement started to wane as I went through the actual process of receiving my \$430 stipend. While some of my colleagues received their grants through direct deposit, mine and several hundred others were processed as paper checks which were printed a week later than they were supposed to be, impacting the holiday planning of many teachers in my district. Those who received the grant by direct deposit also ran into snags, with some of my colleagues receiving a payroll deduction to pay back some of what they received due to a clerical error. The entire process, rather than being something to help lift up teachers doing a good job, became daunting and more of a hassle than a sign of appreciation.

The house budget currently keeps intact the \$30 million Teacher Appreciation Grant program. In a recent flash poll conducted by Teach Plus Fellows, with over 500 teachers from across Indiana responding, the data showed that teachers preferred getting rid of Teacher Appreciation Grants completely, instead wanting to see the funds go toward teacher base pay. While many teachers saw this as a more equitable way to disburse the funds, the underlying reality is that teachers want to see an increase to teacher pay across the board. Programs that award teachers for good performance aren't bad, but we must do a better job of raising compensation for all teachers first.

Educators are generally goal-oriented individuals with plans for the future, dreams of accomplishments, and hopes for a better tomorrow. By allocating \$5 million dollars for the creation of teacher leadership opportunities and prioritizing the increase of teacher pay for all educators, we can better set our state up for success in keeping high

quality teachers in the classroom. Help Hoosier educators impact our state's youth and our profession. Thank to the House for approving this budget, I look forward to seeing education and teachers continue to be prioritized as we come to the end of the 2019 Session. Thank you.