

Teach Plus Mississippi strongly supports the proposed addition of the Performance-Based License pathway to our current licensure policies. This policy change would allow 5th-8th grade teachers in tested subject areas the opportunity to earn a 5-year license after three years of teaching and proving their effectiveness through observations and student growth in MAAP testing. This pathway would also allow schools to retain great teachers and fill the gap for teacher shortages, all while maintaining a relevant high bar to enter the profession.

“The Performance-Based Licensure Program has been the tool needed to help many great teachers; those who are great at educating children but just not good test takers.” —Mississippi educator

A HIGH BAR WITH MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

All students in Mississippi need excellent teachers to support them and ensure their progress. As classroom teachers, we recognize that one of the most important things we can do for educational equity is ensure that new teachers are well-prepared and positioned for success as they enter the classroom. This includes maintaining a high bar for educator prep and licensure programs, while recognizing the need for multiple pathways that reflect the diverse background and experiences of our current and future teacher workforce.

Currently in Mississippi, passing the PRAXIS Content Knowledge exam is a final requirement for aspiring teachers to earn their license. Over the past year, we've heard from many teachers and administrators about colleagues, all excellent educators, who have had a difficult time passing the PRAXIS exam. For some, the exam was a hurdle they were eventually able to overcome after numerous attempts and hundreds of dollars. For others, it remains a barrier that blocks them from becoming a fully licensed teacher.

“I graduated from college with an English degree and could not pass the English PRAXIS. In fact, I could not pass it for four years. A test does not and should not solely determine the effectiveness of a potential teacher.” —Evonie Ross, 19 years of teaching experience, Hollandale School District.

“I took the PRAXIS three times and had trouble passing it.” —Leslie Martin, three years of teaching experience, kindergarten teacher, Prentiss County School District.

We believe that additional high-quality pathways are necessary in order to increase the number of effective teachers in our classrooms. Over the past three years, the Mississippi Department of Education has created such a pathway through the Performance-Based Licensure pilot program. Through this pilot program, aspiring teachers in participating districts have been able to earn licensure by teaching for three years in a tested subject area, demonstrating their effectiveness through observations and student growth.

This policy change is consistent with the State Board of Education's authority outlined in subsection (6)(d) of the state statute on *Certification of teachers and administrators* (Section 37-3-2 of the [MS Code of 1972](#)). This subsection authorizes the State Board of Education to establish rules and regulations for

educators to obtain a **Special Nonrenewable License**. This subsection also allows educators “to be licensed for a period of not more than three (3) years, except by special approval by the State Board of Education”.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM EDUCATORS

Over the past year, Teach Plus teacher leaders have engaged with several educators to learn more about our state’s licensure policies, and the barriers that may keep aspiring teachers from the classroom. This engagement has included:

- + Interviews with 17 deans, department chairs, and professors from eleven educator prep programs in Mississippi to learn how the waiver of licensure exam requirements have impacted the teacher pipeline;
- + A survey of 64 current or former participants of the PBL pilot program to learn about their satisfaction with the program and their preparedness for the classroom.; and
- + Interviews with four experienced teachers who have shared stories about their licensure experiences.

The interviews and survey we’ve conducted on licensure policies have revealed the following:

- + **The PRAXIS waiver boosted our teacher pipeline.** The waiver of PRAXIS exam requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented increase in educator prep program enrollment and completion. As one EPP leader stated, this strong cohort of new teachers had *“years of experience, connection and commitment to their communities, and the relationships they established with their students and colleagues”*.
- + **PBL participants feel prepared for the classroom.** Sixty-two of the 64 current or former PBL pilot participants who [responded to our survey](#) felt “very prepared” or “somewhat prepared” in each of the four domains of the Professional Growth System. In fact, at least 70 percent of respondents felt “very prepared” in each domain.
- + **Teachers strongly support multiple pathways to the classroom.** The teachers we’ve heard from on licensure policies were unequivocal in their belief that licensure exams cannot—and should not—be a sole determinant of a teacher’s effectiveness. Whether they were licensed before or after the PRAXIS waiver, teachers stated that their on the job performance is what best shaped them to become effective teachers.

In addition to our findings, an [evaluation of the PBL pilot](#), conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, indicated that the students of PBL teachers “perform about the same as students assigned to comparable teachers, across all years and comparison groups.” Students of PBL teachers were also noted to have fewer absences than students of comparable teachers.

“I think other pathways like the Performance-Based Licensure Program will allow schools to retain a lot of great teachers. There is a huge percentage of teachers who leave the classroom simply because they cannot pass one simple test. Additional high quality pathways will be our saving grace in education right now. We desperately need other avenues to keep passionate and effective teachers in the classroom.”

—LaKima Ross, eight years of teaching experience, Leflore Legacy Academy, Greenwood.

CONCLUSION

The proposed changes to Mississippi's licensure policies create a new pathway for aspiring teachers while maintaining a high bar for entry into the profession. Participating teachers must be college graduates, must be recommended by their school districts, and must commit to teaching for three years in a state-tested subject area in grades 5-8th. PBL teachers can then earn a 5-year license once they've proven their effectiveness through both their summative ratings on the Professional Growth System and the growth their students achieve through MAAP testing. In short, this is NOT a lowering of standards to enter the teaching profession, but the creation of an additional pathway for aspiring teachers to obtain licensure.

We are very appreciative of the work MDE has done to thoughtfully create this new pathway to aspiring teachers. We ask the State Board of Education to approve the proposed changes and support this effort to strengthen our teacher pipeline.

TEACH PLUS MISSISSIPPI POLICY FELLOWS

Andrew Huey, Long Beach School District
Evonie Rash, Hollandale School District
Joviladra Blake, Clarksdale Municipal School District
Lakima Ross, Leflore Legacy Academy
Drew Hall, Quitman County School District

Sanford Johnson, Executive Director of Teach Plus Mississippi

About Teach Plus

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing this mission, Teach Plus is guided by the Student Opportunity Mandate: All students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.