

**“Student Teaching Is Unpaid  
& That’s How It’s Always Been”**

**BARRIERS TO ILLINOIS EARLY  
CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR LICENSURE**

# INTRODUCTION

The practice of student teaching, or learning under the guidance of an experienced mentor in a classroom, has been a staple of teacher preparation programs for over a century since the implementation of modern public schools.<sup>1</sup> While there are unquestionable concrete benefits in requiring hands-on, authentic classroom experience in teacher preparation programs, student teaching practices are closely tied to (traditional) university and school cultures and thus do not provide the best opportunities for learning for every educator and especially for early childhood educators.<sup>2</sup> The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has established basic guidelines requiring a student teaching experience for professional educator licensure<sup>3</sup> but defers to teacher preparation programs to set the specific requirements,<sup>4</sup> which vary from program to program. As Illinois considers pathways to increase teacher recruitment and retention, student teaching, especially in early childhood education, is a prime area for improvement.

We are a group of Teach Plus Early Childhood Educator Policy Fellows and dedicated teachers who are working to increase access to and advancement within our profession. To answer our question regarding how to ensure that participants are getting an accessible and valuable student teaching experience, we conducted a survey seeking to hear directly from early childhood educators in Illinois. Our research highlights the elements of student teaching that should be targeted by policymakers for legislative action in order to make the pathway to licensure more accessible and thus recruit and retain more highly qualified, diverse early childhood educators. In this brief, we present our findings and recommendations for policymakers as they seek to address the shortage of early childhood educators in Illinois.

## Findings

1. Student teaching is beneficial for future teachers. Participants highlighted strong mentor teachers and genuine classroom experiences as positive characteristics of student teaching.
2. Expenses (particularly the inability to be paid for student teaching) during licensure programs can be a financial burden and/or barrier to preservice teachers.
3. Different programs have varying requirements leading to a wide range of experiences for newly licensed teachers. Lack of flexibility can be a major barrier for educators already working in the field.

## Recommendations

1. Maintain a student teaching element of teacher preparation programs that incorporates flexibility and differentiation based on experience.
2. Universally allow student teaching to be a paid experience by prohibiting programs from preventing student teachers from getting paid, especially for incumbent educators.
3. Provide reasonable compensation via stipends to ensure paid student teaching experiences.

## BACKGROUND

In order to refine the student teaching experience, it is critical that we understand the current landscape of early childhood teacher preparation and determine which practices work well for participants. Flexible programming, including class times and student teaching requirements, has been cited as a key quality in recruiting and retaining teacher candidates.<sup>5</sup> Illinois recognizes the value in such flexibility, but still allows programs to establish their own requirements.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equality (ECACE), which the state created in 2021, has outlined flexibilities it expects participating institutions to offer preservice teachers, specifically including “allowing students to complete student teaching in their workplace.”<sup>7</sup> This aligns with ECACE’s guiding principle that participating institutions will “work together, collaboratively, within our differences to develop policies, procedures, systems, and decisions that benefit students and the Consortium as a whole to ensure student success.”<sup>8</sup>

It also is important to consider which previous experiences and demographic elements make teacher candidates feel the most prepared to be lead classroom teachers. One element of student teaching worth noting is the difference in learning style between age groups. Given that the teacher workforce varies greatly with respect to age, it is important to acknowledge that adult learners (including members of the incumbent education workforce) learn differently than traditional undergraduate students.<sup>9</sup> In general, people with previous classroom experience feel more ready to support students’ needs and enact effective classroom management strategies compared to those who do not.<sup>10</sup> Paraprofessionals and assistants already working in classrooms have significant potential as a pool of (diverse) teacher candidates.<sup>11</sup> However, a number of obstacles stand in their way.<sup>12</sup> Supporting them in the teacher certification process would help them advance in the field and provide many more diverse and qualified teachers. *How can we remove some of these obstacles, namely burdensome elements of student teaching, so that we can support these educators and increase teacher certification and retention?*

## METHODOLOGY

We created a survey to address the following research questions:

1. What is the student teaching experience like for teacher preparation program participants?
2. What practices in student teaching work well for participants?
3. How can we ensure that participants are getting a valuable and accessible student teaching experience?

We emailed Illinois institutions of higher education that participated in the ECACE program to get information about their student teaching process and requirements. We also conducted seven informal interviews with universities to get a more in-depth view of their teacher preparation programs, including the student teaching aspect.

We conducted an online survey from April 2023 to early May 2023 to collect data from early childhood educators. We recruited participants by contacting Illinois institutions of higher education, ISBE, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), and Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) and having our survey shared in their communication blasts. The survey asked both closed

and open-ended questions about participants student teaching experience. The survey also inquired about what practices worked well for them and asked if they experienced any barriers to meet the student teaching requirements.

The survey was completed by 66 participants who either finished their student teaching programs or are currently enrolled. Sixty of these individuals were adult learners (aged 25+).<sup>13</sup> Many of the participants had already finished their teaching licensure programs at the time of the survey, with 23 currently enrolled in their schooling.<sup>14</sup> Sixteen participants finished their programs within the last three years, 16 completed between 2010-2019, 9 finished before 2010, and one did not complete their licensing program.<sup>15</sup> The survey asked participants to expand on their experiences prior to entering a licensure program: 52 survey respondents were incumbent educators.<sup>16</sup>

For the purpose of this policy brief, we define **licensed teachers** as individuals with a professional educator license (PEL) awarded by the state and **incumbent educators** as all people working in the field of early childhood education without PELs (such as paraprofessionals, assistant teachers, and aides). **Preservice teachers** (PSTs) are individuals in the process of attaining their PEL, whether they are currently working in the field or not. Survey respondents are defined as both preservice teachers and licensed teachers who completed our survey.

## FINDINGS

Survey respondents were asked to reflect on their teacher preparation programs and their time as student teachers. The following are key findings from our data. Overall, preservice teachers found student teaching to be a beneficial experience in their training. Our survey also revealed patterns of current obstacles for teachers to acquire their teaching licenses through programs run by Illinois universities, namely the inability to receive payment for their student teaching as well as a lack of flexibility within teacher preparation programs.

### 1. Student teaching is beneficial for future teachers. Participants highlighted strong mentor teachers and genuine classroom experiences as positive characteristics of student teaching.

The survey respondents cited certain practices from teacher preparation programs that they found to be especially helpful in their development as educators. One respondent shared that *“being able to do [student teaching] at the site I work in”* helped them to be successful.<sup>17</sup> Another respondent shared that student teaching in an environment where student backgrounds were different from their own was of great value.<sup>18</sup> Respondents also noted their mentor teachers played a critical role in student teachers’ professional development. One teacher explained: *“I had a very positive experience with student teaching. I was fortunate that I already had a working relationship with one of my cooperating teachers. I was able to take over activities much more quickly while working with him. My other cooperating teacher was also very supportive and easy to work with. I genuinely felt that both of my cooperating teachers wanted to help me learn.”*<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Expenses (particularly the inability to be paid for student teaching) during licensure programs can be a financial burden and/or barrier to preservice teachers.

A common theme amongst survey participants was the difficulty in working without pay. Survey respondents began their teaching programs in different roles, with some entering the field of education from another career path and some beginning their license programs after working in classrooms under established teachers. Regardless of the PSTs' previous experience, many of them struggled with financial security while student teaching. Many teacher licensure programs across Illinois do not allow their preservice teachers to receive monetary compensation for their work efforts throughout student teaching, despite ISBE allowing monetary compensation. Twenty-seven survey participants were not paid for any of their student teaching, with three receiving some compensation for a portion of their time.<sup>20</sup> Some teachers shared their financial struggles during student teaching. One noted, *"Having to babysit everyday after student teaching because I needed to make enough money for gas and other living expenses was rough."*<sup>21</sup> Another wrote, *"Pay me for my time! This is hard work. It doesn't matter if you are the classroom lead, a student teacher, assistant, etc. ... everyone should be paid for time worked if it is benefitting an entity."*<sup>22</sup> Because many survey takers were required to complete their student teaching without pay, they had to take on additional work outside of their schooling program. This led to delays in program completion and, for some, inability to complete the program altogether.

One of our survey participants calculated wages lost during her time as a student teacher: *"My program required 400 hours (800 total in four years!) and were unpaid. If I would have been paid \$15/hour, that is \$12,000 in lost wages ... ! In grad school, I was required to do an additional unpaid 450-hour internship. This cost me roughly \$6,750 in lost earnings. And all of these lost wages are then compounded by student loans and interest that continue to accumulate to this day! It's a racket and needs to change!"*<sup>23</sup>

*"This cost me roughly \$6,750 in lost earnings. And all of these lost wages are then compounded by student loans and interest that continue to accumulate to this day! It's a racket and needs to change!"*

## 3. Different programs have varying requirements leading to a wide range of experiences for newly licensed teachers. Lack of flexibility can be a major barrier for educators already working in the field.

Survey respondents reported universities' lack of flexibility prevented them from completing their student teaching and earning their teaching credentials. One example is when and where student teaching hours may be completed. PSTs are expected to complete their hours during the school day, typically between 8:00-3:30, making it difficult for PSTs to continue working in a 9-5 workplace. Teaching programs may also require working teachers to leave their current positions in order to complete their hours in other schools or classrooms. ECACE's first annual report indicates that "67 percent of four-year institutions reported they allow students to complete some or all (of) the student teaching requirements" at their place of work, though that leaves 33 percent that do not offer such flexibility and it is unclear what portion of the requirements "some" might cover.<sup>24</sup> While it is beneficial for PSTs to experience different ages, classrooms, and schools, this can lead to incumbent educators leaving their positions to complete their

student teaching requirements. Incumbent early childhood education workers pursuing higher education increased by 17.9 percent since 2020, most commonly pursuing bachelor's or associate degrees.<sup>25</sup> Sixteen survey participants were not able to complete their hours at their place of employment, and nine were able to complete some of their hours at their workplace.<sup>26</sup> One participant shared their struggle in the survey: *"I would have to quit in order to do student teaching, that is why I haven't finished the program."*<sup>27</sup> Lack of flexibility during the student teaching portion of programs can force PSTs to choose between paid positions and unpaid student teaching work; many do not have the financial means to do so. Another participant highlighted the need for flexibility by emphasizing the current barrier: *"If you work a full-time job and your family is dependent on your check, you are way less likely to be able to complete the hours of student teaching."*<sup>28</sup>

*"I would have to quit in order to do student teaching, that is why I haven't finished the program."*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. **Maintain a student teaching element of teacher preparation programs that incorporates flexibility and differentiation based on experience.**

Since teachers benefited most from hands-on classroom experience, it is critical that we maintain this element of teacher preparation. The respondents stated that they benefited most from direct classroom experience during their student teaching experiences because it allowed them to develop teaching skills in a real-world environment. Soft skills such as behavior management, classroom routines, time management, and communication with parents and students were mentioned with the greatest frequency.<sup>29</sup> Maintaining job site continuity and having a flexible program schedule are characteristics of student teaching practice experiences that we recommend continuing as part of programming for educators seeking licensure.

However, we recognize that different learners have different needs. For example, PSTs who already have significant classroom experience can fulfill state student teaching requirements through competency-based programs, such as the program at National Louis University. Instead of completing traditional student teaching, this online program allows PSTs with direct ECE experience to demonstrate mastery through summative assessments to earn credits for prior learning. A PST can complete the entire program at their workplace without having to quit their job or take unpaid time off. One adult learner who had significant classroom experience enrolled in the program said, *"The fact that we can do it through portfolios for credit at our place of work is so very helpful."*<sup>30</sup>

We recommend the maintenance of student teaching as a practice in teacher preparation in Illinois, but stress the importance of tailoring the experience to meet the needs of the learner.



## 2. Universally allow student teaching to be a paid experience by prohibiting programs from preventing student teachers from getting paid, especially for incumbent educators.

Allowing PSTs to get paid during student teaching is critical given that the process of obtaining licensure can be quite expensive, a fact that prohibits potential candidates from pursuing it.<sup>31</sup> Illinois explicitly allows teacher candidates to get paid for their student teaching.<sup>32</sup> However, many teacher preparation programs do not allow participants to be paid. Ten survey participants shared that they were told that they could not receive compensation for student teaching because it went against their preparation program's policy or because the value was in the educational experience. Another 10 were given no reason or explanation.<sup>33</sup> It is possible that there has been a lack of communication around this topic and institutions simply do not know that Illinois allows preservice teachers to be paid for student teaching.

It also is possible that institutions are choosing to prohibit PSTs from being paid. In this case, steps need to be taken to overcome this discrepancy. We recommend that ISBE change the regulations regarding licensure. Rather than simply allowing paid student teaching, the regulations should explicitly prohibit universities and other preparation programs from preventing PSTs from getting paid. Alternatively, legislators can amend the school code to allow PSTs to get paid as a part of their teacher preparation program.

For incumbent educators, some or all of their paid student teaching experience should come in the form of continuing to teach in their place of employment. When asked about recommendations for policymakers to make student teaching more accessible and useful for early childhood educators in Illinois, one participant offered a clear suggestion: *"Make sure that teachers can student teach where they work and still get paid because that is a huge hindrance if you have to leave your job to student teach."*<sup>34</sup>

Incumbent educators have significant potential as a pool of diverse teacher candidates.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, many of them cannot afford to complete student teaching. As one participant explained, *"I would have to quit my job to do student teaching and I'm the sole provider for my family. [I] can't afford to quit working."*<sup>36</sup> Supporting them in the teacher certification process would help them advance in the field and provide many more diverse and qualified teachers. By removing the financial obstacle of student teaching, the state can support these incumbent educators and increase teacher certification and retention.

## 3. Provide reasonable compensation via stipends to ensure paid student teaching experiences.

Illinois can support more educators seeking licensure by providing stipends to make student teaching a paid experience. This option is especially valuable for those who are unable to complete their student teaching experience in their workplaces.

When asked what recommendations they had to make student teaching more accessible and useful for early childhood educators, survey participants suggested eliminating the financial burden; as one participant explained, *"If you work a full-time job and your family is dependent on your check, you are way less likely to be able to complete the hours of student teaching."*<sup>37</sup>

In order to be effective, these stipends must provide reasonable compensation comparable to a living wage salary. By setting a base rate and paying preservice teachers for their required student teaching hours, Illinois can ensure that more educators complete their preparation programs and become licensed teachers.

A variety of small programs throughout the country, including the Grow Your Own program in Illinois, have shown that providing financial support for student teachers strengthens the pipeline from paraprofessionals to licensed teachers, and some alternative pathways for licensure provide compensation for student teaching experiences.<sup>38</sup> However, a state-wide initiative would allow for greater, more consistent access and therefore lead to an increase in the number of licensed teachers in Illinois. There are multiple potential avenues for providing stipends for student teaching. These payments could come in the form of stipends paid directly to teacher candidates regardless of which program they are in.

ECACE could specify student teaching stipends as a logical addition, especially considering that the state initiative was established specifically to support incumbent educators in advancing in the field.<sup>39</sup> Through the creation of ECACE, Illinois has indicated it understands the value in supporting PSTs, and paying them for their student teaching efforts is an important expansion of that support. Sixty-seven percent of the four-year institutions participating in ECACE report allow PSTs to complete some or all of their student teaching at their workplace.<sup>40</sup> Stipends could provide coverage for those portions required to be completed outside their workplace and could provide financial support for those enrolled at the other 33 percent of institutions.

Districts receiving funds through the new teacher vacancy grant pilot program could use some of the allocated funds to provide student teaching stipends or establish residency and apprenticeship programs that include compensated student teaching. Along with strengthening the teacher pipeline, this plan would contribute to a number of the program's named strategies, including investing in diverse teacher recruitment and recruiting and supporting bilingual educators by financially supporting preservice teachers and creating better career pathways.<sup>41</sup>

As part of their recruitment and retention strategies, individual districts could use their own funds to pay preservice teachers who are student teaching in their schools. If preservice teachers felt supported and valued during their student teaching experience, they may be more likely to seek employment in that district upon licensure. In turn, schools could fill vacancies with teachers they know. Research shows that newly licensed teachers remain in their future positions longer if their student teaching sites and employment schools are similar in culture and population, so districts hiring teachers already familiar with their schools would be advantageous.<sup>42</sup>

The state could create a program to provide paid student teaching opportunities, particularly in shortage areas like early childhood education, special education, and STEM and in locations with higher levels of teacher vacancies. By decreasing the financial barriers to licensure via compensation for student teaching, Illinois could recruit additional preservice teachers to help fill vacancies while ensuring that they have the valuable classroom experience they need to become qualified teachers while still being able to pay their bills.



## CONCLUSION

While student teaching provides many benefits for preservice teachers, limitations on flexibility and financial compensation continue to be barriers for early childhood educators. These barriers prevent incumbent educators from advancing in the field and restrain the teacher pipeline, thus making it harder for schools to fill vacancies. By increasing flexibility in student teaching requirements and placements and by expanding options for paid student teaching experiences, Illinois and teacher preparation programs can support more early childhood educators in obtaining PELs and becoming highly qualified teachers equipped to better support young children throughout the state.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The authors wish to thank Margi Bhansali, Sinthu Ramalingam, Josh Kaufmann, and Aubry Stapleton for their guidance and support in this research project.

## 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 affect their students' 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. Since 2009, Teach Plus has trained thousands of teacher leaders across the country who are driving policy changes and improving the instructional practices of teachers to create an education system driven by equity, access, and excellence for all students. [teachplus.org](https://teachplus.org)



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## ENDNOTES

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14 See Question 6 in Appendix.

15 See Question 6 in Appendix.

16 See Question 10 in Appendix.

17 See Question 30 in Appendix

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20 See Question 26 in Appendix.

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# APPENDIX

Overall Sample Size: 66

## 4. Which of the following best describes you?

	Frequency
Young adult learner (18-25)	6
Adult learner (25+)	60

## 5. Race/Ethnicity

	Frequency
Asian or Pacific Islander	4
Black or African-American	15
Hispanic or Latinx	14
Middle Eastern or North African	1
White or Caucasian	35
Other	1

<b>Other-Write in</b>
NIGERIAN-AMERICAN

## 6. In what year did you complete your teacher preparation program?

	Frequency
Before 2000	3
2000-2009	6
2010-2019	16
2020-2023	16
Currently a student	23
Did not finish	1
<b>Total:</b>	<b>65</b>

## 7. What institution did/do you attend?

8. Did you receive an ECACE Scholarship (only applicable since 2021)?

	Frequency
Yes	24
No	42
<b>Total:</b>	<b>66</b>

9. Did you participate in an alternative certification program?

	Frequency
Yes	16
No	49
<b>Total:</b>	<b>65</b>

10. Did you work in early childhood education before starting your teacher preparation program?

	Frequency
Yes	52
No	14
<b>Total:</b>	<b>66</b>

11. How many years of experience did you have prior to enrolling in your prep program?

	Frequency
Less than 5 years	32
5-9 years	14
10-15 years	6
16-30 years	12
<b>Total:</b>	<b>64</b>

12. What is the name of the institution you work at currently?

13. What is your current role and title?

14. What is the zip code in which you work?

15. In which setting did you work prior to enrolling in a prep program?

	Frequency
School-based	3
Center-based	6
Home-based	16
Not applicable	16
Other	23
<b>Total:</b>	<b>66</b>

<b>Other-Write in</b>
Family/relatives

17. In which setting do you work currently?

	Frequency
School-based	40
Center-based	25
Home-based	4
Other	1

16. What was the age range of the students you worked with prior to enrolling in a prep program?

	Frequency
0-12 months	27
12-24 months	28
24-36 months	32
3-4 years	43
4-5 years	38
5+ years	24

18. What is the age range of the students you currently work with?

	Frequency
0-12 months	10
12-24 months	12
24-36 months	14
3-4 years	36
4-5 years	40
5+ years	29

19. Where are you in your student teaching?

	Frequency
In progress	14
Completed	30
Not yet started	22
<b>Total:</b>	<b>66</b>

20. How many weeks of student teaching does your program require?

	Frequency
Less than 5	4
5-14	34
15-29	14
30-50	4
More than 50	1
<b>Total:</b>	<b>57</b>

21. How many different student teaching placement sites does your program require?

	Frequency
1	19
2	17
3	5
3	2
5	2
6	2
10	2
More than 10	2
<b>Total:</b>	<b>51</b>

22. Which age ranges does your program require you to work with during student teaching?

	Frequency
0-12 months	11
12-24 months	13
24-36 months	17
3-4 years	39
4-5 years	41
5+ years	41

23. In which settings does your program require you to student teach?

	Frequency
School-based	49
Center-based	33
Home-based	3

24. How much of your student teaching does your program allow you to complete at your place of employment?

	Frequency
All	37
Some	9
None	16
<b>Total:</b>	<b>62</b>



25. What reason(s) were you given for not being allowed to complete your student teaching at your place of employment? (Open Response)

26. Does your program allow you to be paid for your student teaching?

	Frequency
Yes, for all of it	23
Yes, for a portion of it	3
No, for none of it	27
Unsure	8
<b>Total:</b>	<b>61</b>

27. What reason(s) were you given for not receiving compensation? (Open Response)

28. Please share any other requirements, rules/guidelines, or restrictions for your student teaching experience. (Open Response)

29. How would you describe your student teaching experience? \* (Open Response)

30. What elements of your student teaching experience worked well for you? \* (Open Response)

31. What skills did you learn (or do you hope to learn) through student teaching?

32. Are/were any student teaching requirements a barrier for you? If so, please elaborate. (Open Response)

33. What elements could (have) support(ed) you better through student teaching? (Open Response)

34. What recommendations would you give to policymakers to make student teaching more accessible and useful for early childhood educators in Illinois? (Open Response)