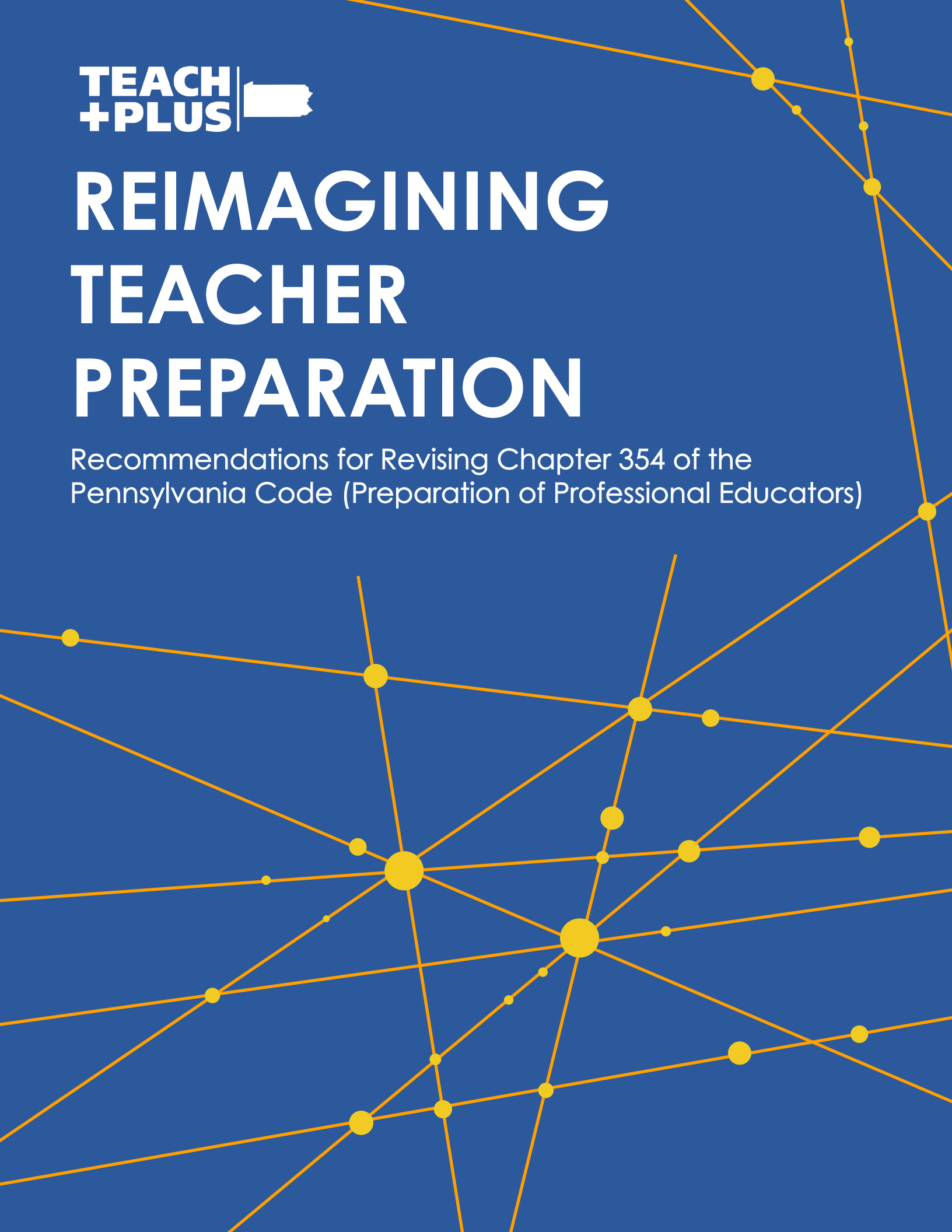




REIMAGINING TEACHER PREPARATION

Recommendations for Revising Chapter 354 of the
Pennsylvania Code (Preparation of Professional Educators)





INTRODUCTION

Teacher quality matters. Students can only achieve their potential when they have culturally competent, diverse, and knowledgeable teachers. In the last decade, there has been a decline in the number of initial certifications and in enrollment in teacher preparation programs. Pennsylvania now hires more underprepared teachers under emergency permits than it certifies teachers through formal teacher preparation programs (Fuller, 2022).

The current system keeps out too many interested teachers while not effectively preparing candidates for the demands of the classroom. We have too many different, redundant requirements for admission into and graduation from teacher preparation programs: coursework, certification tests, GPA for admission, GPA requirements for graduation, etc. That being said, we are *not* against all requirements. We insist on maintaining high standards for teachers.

Instead, we are against requirements for entry into preparation programs that are redundant or ungrounded in research, especially when they perpetuate racial inequities. In streamlining the requirements, we intend to lower the bar for entry into *programs* while maintaining high standards for entry into the *profession*. Our aim is to increase the number of highly qualified, formally certified professionals. Otherwise, we incentivize potential teachers to take less ideal pathways into the profession (i.e., emergency certification) and/or pathways out of the profession (i.e., choosing other careers with similar training requirements, but less stringent academic requirements).

Our recommendations will ensure that those who want to be teachers can participate in high-quality mentoring programs and achieve a level of cultural competence that prepares them to best work with the commonwealth's increasingly diverse student body. They will be equipped with the tools they need to feel confident—and to *stay*—in the classroom.

Teacher preparation in Pennsylvania is governed by Chapter 354 of the PA Code. Chapter 354 outlines requirements for educator preparation programs (EPPs) and preparing institutions (e.g., universities), as well as applicants, and for the candidate to be certified to become a teacher. Importantly to our recommendations, Chapter 354 requires applicants to have a 3.0 GPA and to have completed a basic skills assessment to enter a program, although the basic skills test requirement is currently waived by Act 55 of 2022. To successfully complete the program and be eligible for certification, candidates must also finish with a 3.0 GPA. Chapter 354 also mandates that candidates receive 12 weeks of full-time student teaching experience in the classroom. Below, we argue for the need to modify these eligibility requirements in the following ways:

Recommendations:

1. Revise teacher candidate GPA requirements to 1) eliminate the GPA requirement for entry into teacher preparation programs **and** 2) replace the individual GPA requirement for professional competency (currently 3.0) with a *cohort-based* GPA requirement of 3.0.
2. Expand candidates' full-time student teaching experience requirement from 12 weeks to a full school year of classroom experience.
3. Revise Section 354.32 (Monitoring and Assessment) and the department-created Pennsylvania Statewide Evaluation of Educator Candidates (PDE-430) form to incorporate Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE).

RATIONALES

- 1. Eliminate the GPA requirement for entry into teacher preparation programs AND change the individual 3.0 GPA requirement for professional competency into a cohort-based 3.0 GPA requirement.**

Currently, Chapter 354 requires a 3.0 GPA for applicants to enter teacher education programs. We propose eliminating the GPA requirement to address our state's teacher shortage, with a particular focus on increasing the number of teachers of color. The current GPA requirement for entry into teacher education programs serves as a barrier that keeps out many interested candidates, especially potential teachers of color, who continue to be underrepresented in our educator workforce (Van Overschelde & Morren López, 2018). Research consistently shows the importance of teachers of color in the classroom for all students and yet only 6 percent of Pennsylvania's teachers identify as teachers of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Pennsylvania's teaching force is among the least diverse in the country, despite an increasingly diverse student population (Cabral et al., 2022). Further, inflexible GPA requirements present a systemic barrier to candidates of color, as teacher candidates with the lowest academic achievement are primarily Black and brown (Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Our recommendation aims to address this discrepancy.

Additionally, while research has found a correlation between a teacher's content knowledge and student achievement, undergraduate GPA and standardized tests have not proven to be reliable predictors of a future teacher's effectiveness (Partelow et al., 2017). Stringent entry GPA requirements drive teachers of color to alternative programs, which have a higher turnover rate than traditional programs (Redding & Smith, 2016). If we want a qualified, diverse teacher workforce, we must make it more possible for applicants, especially those who have been needlessly excluded from the talent pool, to enter formal EPPs.

Currently, to show professional competency and remain eligible for certification, individual candidates must maintain a 3.0 GPA, or a 2.8 if it is supplemented with adequate scores on professional assessments. To maintain high standards and teacher quality while removing inflexible barriers that turn away candidates of color, Pennsylvania should make the 3.0 GPA exit requirement for teacher preparation programs *cohort-based*, or based on the average GPA of the graduating class. This means a candidate's class or cohort must meet a 3.0 GPA, while an individual candidate may have a GPA above or below the requirement.

While some research has found that a teacher candidate's program GPA correlates slightly with student achievement, recent studies on teacher performance have concluded that mentoring quality and teaching experiences are more reliable and powerful indicators of teacher competency than course grades. For example, Bastian et al. (2022) find that placing teacher candidates with high-quality mentors can "narrow and sometimes close the effectiveness gaps across the GPA distribution."

In creating a cohort-based GPA requirement of 3.0, programs preserve high standards while being able to retain students who show promise in areas beyond scores and grades. While candidates will continue to be expected to pass their courses with a 2.0 in order to receive a degree, a cohort-based requirement enables mentors and professors to properly weigh performance-based assessments such as the PDE-430 and teacher portfolios, rather than less reliable indicators that maintain and perpetuate barriers to Black and brown candidates' pathway into the profession.

In eliminating Pennsylvania's GPA entry requirement for teacher preparation programs while expanding how candidates can show professional competency, our GPA recommendations allow more students in without compromising the high quality of program graduates, and thus the high standard of teacher excellence the commonwealth has earned and continues to appreciate across the nation.

Models for Further Research:

- + According to the National Center for Teacher Quality (Putman & Walsh, 2021), as of 2021, 29 states have no GPA requirement for entry into teacher education programs and another 10 states set the GPA requirement below 2.75.
- + The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has a similar cohort-based requirement of 3.0 for programs.

2. Expand candidates' full-time student teaching experience from 12 weeks to a full school year of classroom experience.

The student teaching experience is meant to help teacher candidates gain practical classroom experience under the guidance of a mentor teacher and to fully immerse themselves in the teaching environment. However, the revolving door of novice teachers leaving the profession tells us that incoming teachers do not receive enough or appropriate training. To that end, it is our recommendation that teacher candidates should spend one full school year in the classroom before becoming certified for a lead teacher role.

By extending the student teaching experience to a full school year, our teacher candidates across the commonwealth will have opportunities to develop their preparedness in the classroom, work on adapting to a school-building culture, and enhance their ability to build stronger relationships with both students and school professionals. Teacher candidates and students stand to benefit enormously from

such an immersive series of experiences: First-year teachers can be as effective as typical third-year teachers by spending their “clinical practice,” or student teaching experience, in a classroom of a highly effective teacher (NCTQ, n.d.). Furthermore, a full-year student teaching experience will allow teacher candidates exposure to all different phases of the school year and provide new opportunities for reflection on their teaching practice throughout those phases. The extension of the student teaching experience to a full year will help to better retain candidates who enter the teaching workforce. In fact, the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) found that 86% of teachers graduating from their year-long residency programs returned to teach for a third year (National Center for Teacher Residencies, 2023).

We recognize that such a major change may require adjustments by EPPs to their current curricula, course requirements, partnerships with local education agencies, and structuring of earlier field experiences, particularly for some certification areas and for one-year post-baccalaureate programs. As a result, it may be appropriate to phase in this model over time, with teacher candidates entering EPPs in the 2025-26 school year, for example, being the first to experience this shift. Another approach may be to first shift from 12 weeks of student teaching to 16 weeks, prior to making the ultimate shift to a year-long model. Finally, a grant-funded pilot program, as Louisiana started with before making a full statewide shift, is another possibility to consider. Even if the department does not recommend a shift to a full year of student teaching in the upcoming revisions to Chapter 354, it should ensure that action is being taken to strengthen student teaching requirements in terms of both quality and quantity in evidence-based ways.

Models for Further Research:

- + In fall 2016, Louisiana adopted landmark regulations to expand year-long residencies for teacher candidates. By summer 2018, all teacher preparation programs in Louisiana were required to include a year-long residency alongside an expert mentor (Louisiana Department of Education, n.d.). Two years before the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary (BESE) adopted these new regulations in 2016, the Louisiana Department of Education launched a grant-funded pilot program to support closer coordination between EPPs and local education agencies and the development of year-long, competency-based residency experiences. This pilot built buy-in for the shift to longer student teaching and also allowed the state to identify and overcome potential barriers to success before a broader roll-out.
- + New Mexico, through state funding made available by the legislature, has implemented a grant program to support a year-long teacher residency, including a \$35,000 stipend for residents. This approach, similar to Louisiana’s approach of starting with a grant-funded pilot, may make sense to implement prior to a mandated shift to year-long residency in regulation (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2024).

3. Revise Section 354.32 (Monitoring and Assessment) and the Pennsylvania Statewide Evaluation of Educator Candidates (PDE-430) form to incorporate Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Education (CR-SE).

On April 23, 2022, amendments to Chapter 49 of Title 22 of the Pennsylvania Code required that the Pennsylvania Department of Education identify competencies and develop associated standards for educator training in culturally relevant and sustaining education (CR-SE). These amendments further required that the CR-SE competencies be integrated into teacher preparation programs, induction programs for new teachers, and continuing professional development programs for certified educators.

The CR-SE competencies in Pennsylvania help to ensure equity for all students by seeking to eliminate systemic institutional racial and cultural barriers. In a recent report, it was found that “positive student-teacher relationships developed through CRSE are associated with better student academic and behavioral outcomes” (Warner & Browning, 2021). By integrating the CR-SE competencies into the Pennsylvania Code, the Pennsylvania legislature, along with PDE, has highlighted how important it is for educators to take a role in dismantling systemic barriers that threaten Pennsylvania’s students’ opportunities for academic, personal, and economic success.

As Pennsylvania already mandates that EPPs must include CR-SE competencies in their training of teachers, the evaluation of teacher candidates through PDE-430 and the language of Chapter 354 should incorporate these critical competencies. Teacher candidates should be monitored, assessed, and evaluated on their ability to incorporate these competencies into their professional practice. Doing so would contribute to the high standards of professionalism we advocate for above, and assure our increasingly diverse student body that their teachers are equipped and prepared to engage with them in ways that honor their culture and recognize their individual potential so that each child sees a place for themselves in their school.

Means for Inclusion:

- + The Pennsylvania Statewide Evaluation of Educator Candidates (PDE-430) should be revised to include a separate domain that evaluates teacher candidates as either unsatisfactory, emergent, expected, or exemplary in their ability to incorporate the CR-SE competencies in their professional practice.
- + The language in Chapter 354.25 on “Monitoring and Assessment” should be revised to include the CR-SE competencies as one of the “skill dimensions” candidates should be monitored on by the EPP using performance-based assessments.

CONCLUSION

In making these revisions to Chapter 354, we have an opportunity to ensure that first-year teachers have the cultural competencies, evidence-based strategies, and pedagogical support to successfully manage a classroom on day one of their careers. By replacing redundant, unsound entry requirements (such as GPA) with more relevant, supportive protocols (such as high-quality mentoring and longer student teaching experiences), we can expand the teacher pipeline, keep our standards high, and invest in candidates’ ability to grow within their profession and communities, encouraging them to stay for the long term, so they can continue to serve our students’ ever-evolving and complex needs with the expertise and passion that make teaching, for so many of us, the best profession in the world.

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