

Teach Plus Mississippi strongly supports the proposed Bridge-to-Career Course. The proposed course addresses gaps in current graduation structures by combining academic learning with workforce credentialing, career readiness, and community partnerships. This course can be especially beneficial for students with disabilities, who have experienced difficulties in earning a traditional high school diploma due to end-of-year testing requirements. We also recommend changes that will remove barriers and improve support for students with disabilities. Through the Bridge-to-Careers Course, Mississippi will improve graduation rates, support workforce development goals, and reduce long-term unemployment among underserved populations.

*“John had long struggled with dyslexia and read on a third-grade level even in 12th grade. Knowing he would never pass the English II exam, John faced the reality of leaving high school without a diploma. But with the test requirements waived during COVID, John finally walked across the stage. He earned a career scholarship, completed a welding degree, and today thrives as a successful adult. Students with disabilities should not have to depend on a pandemic to be given that chance. The Bridge-to-Career Course would provide that opportunity consistently and equitably..” —Brandy Richardson, Scott County School District*

## OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The Bridge-to-Career Course will be especially beneficial for a specific group of students with disabilities. These students fall between those who will earn certificates of completion and those who are able to meet exam requirements without intensive support. Considering that 92 percent of students with disabilities scored below proficient on the English II assessment in 2022, 32 percent are chronically absent from school, and 13 percent drop out, these students face disproportionate barriers to earning their high school diploma.

In the recent past, these students would have been eligible for the Occupational Diploma, which was discontinued in 2019. In the years since, teachers who have observed the challenges these students face in completing high schools have prompted discussions about re-establishing the Occupational Diploma. However the Bridge-to-Career Course is a far better alternative for these students because it:

- + **Establishes a Pathway to a Traditional High School Diploma** - Students with disabilities would have access to a traditional high school diploma, as opposed to alternative diplomas and certificates that may be accepted by employers or other postsecondary opportunities.
- + **Focuses on Workforce Development** - Ensuring that the course aligns with local and

state labor market demands and career readiness benchmarks ensures that students who complete the course requirements are better prepared for success in the workforce.

- + **Promotes Long-Term Economic Impact for At-Risk Students** - Ensuring that more students are graduating from high school career-ready will produce greater participation in the state economy through reduced unemployment and reliance on public assistance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure that the Bridge-to-Career Course fully meets the needs of students, particularly those with disabilities, we recommend the following changes to the policy:

### **1. Require students to have an updated Individual Success Plan or Special Education Transition Plan to participate in the course.**

Each student in our public schools is supposed to receive guidance as they plan their next steps after high school, either through an Individual Success Plan (ISP) or a transition plan for special education students. Requiring students to have an updated ISP or transition plan will assist Bridge-to-Career Course instructors in meeting the needs of participating students.

### **2. Allow students with disabilities to participate in the course by meeting their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals in lieu of the Grade Point Average (GPA) requirement.**

Some students with disabilities need additional support to reach their academic goals. While these students are more than capable of completing their portfolios and being successful in the workforce, they may face difficulty earning the 2.0 GPA required to enter the program. Allowing students to participate in the course by meeting their IEP goals, while also meeting other eligibility requirements, will ensure that promising students are unnecessarily barred from the program.

### **3. Require collaboration with special education teachers in the implementation of the Bridge-to-Career Course.**

As districts move toward implementation of the Bridge-to-Career Course, administrators must ensure that special education teachers are closely involved in the instruction and support these students receive. Special education teachers should be strongly considered when selecting instructors and should, at the very least, be closely involved in planning lessons and activities, as well as reviewing portfolios.

## CONCLUSION

The Bridge-to-Career Course would transform how Mississippi supports students with disabilities, ensuring they are not left behind because of a single test. Every student who demonstrates persistence, effort, and growth deserves the dignity of a diploma and the opportunities it unlocks. We respectfully recommend that the State Board of Education adopt the Bridge-to-Career Course for this academic year.

*“Kirby, a senior with orthopedic and visual impairments, faced recurring anxiety every year with state testing. Despite passing English II and U.S. History, she learned in her senior year she had failed Biology I, another barrier to graduation. Kirby dreams of cosmetology school, and a career as a beautician would be cut short without a diploma. The Bridge-to-Career Course would give her a realistic path to achieve her career goals.”* —**Lillian Scott, Sunflower Co. Consolidated School District**

### TEACH PLUS MISSISSIPPI POLICY FELLOWS

Armena Gamblin, Humphreys County School District

Elizabeth Maxcey, Biloxi Public School District

Gloria McDuffy, Mississippi Schools for the Deaf and Blind

Lillian Scott, Sunflower County Consolidated

Jessica Williams, Humphreys County School District

Brandy Richardson (Senior Fellow), Scott 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 affect their students’ success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning for students.

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