

STATEMENT FOR
THE RECORD BY
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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
AND THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON 21ST CENTURY COMPETITIVENESS
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Introduction

Chairmen Brown and McKeon, Congressmen Michaud and Kildee and members of the Subcommittee on Benefits and the Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the National Association of State Approving Agencies to provide comments on the Troops to Teachers program. I should mention at the outset that I also am the Director of the Maine State Approving Agency for Veterans Education Programs and the Northern New England Troops to Teachers program and am very proud to be associated with the program that you will be receiving testimony on today.

It is my understanding that today's hearing is to determine the short-term and long-term successes of the Troops to Teachers program and the challenges facing it as we proceed into the future. My testimony will be from the perspective of someone who has worked in the field of education and for veterans for nearly thirty years and who has been officially associated with the Troops to Teachers program since the year 2000. As requested, I will focus my comments on the relationship of the Troops to Teachers program to the priorities and work of State Approving Agencies, what the program means to Northern New England, and the issues that inhibit maximum program success. Additionally, I will offer a couple of recommendations for legislative change that we believe can be very beneficial to helping the program be more successful.

Relationship to State Approving Agencies

There are a number of current Congressional initiatives that are related to the enhancement of the education, training and employment opportunities available to veterans and others eligible for GI Bill assistance. Some of these are directly related to the work of State Approving Agencies and to the Troops to Teachers program. I will speak to two of these initiatives today.

The first is improving the opportunities for our servicemembers to transfer the knowledge and skills learned in the military to a civilian occupation or profession. In academic terms this is referred to as credit for prior learning. It is one of the major concerns of State Approving Agencies (SAAs) when evaluating the quality and integrity of education and training programs and the policies of educational institutions for enrolling veterans who are entitled to GI Bill benefits. It has been a central theme of the work of SAAs for over fifty years and has taken on new meaning as we proceed into the 21st century.

As a society, we find ourselves inundated with new information at an unprecedented pace. This requires the continued expansion of our knowledge and skills if we, as individuals and a nation, are to remain viable and competitive. It truly is a time of life long learning and State Approving Agency personnel believe that along with the increased importance of this concept comes greater responsibility. One responsibility is the continuation of our work with licensing and certification entities. Veterans cannot afford to waste valuable time and resources by being required to participate in learning experiences that provide certain knowledge and skills that they already have. Working toward entrance into the teaching profession is no exception.

The broad concept of credit for prior learning is easy to comprehend; putting it into practice is not as easy. As you know, each state has specific requirements for teacher certification and, frankly, some states are more “user friendly” than others when it comes to recognizing the past experiences of military personnel that are related to teaching in a certain field and at a certain level. As State Approving Agency (and Troops to Teachers) personnel we find that one of the major obstacles to our veterans entering the teaching profession is the various state processes for becoming certified, specifically the rigidity of policies or lack of procedures for evaluating existing knowledge and skills. Most states require military training and experiences to be evaluated and transcribed by an educational institution that has been authorized to offer teacher preparation programs. Direct utilization of resources, such as the American Council on Education *Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services*, by state Department of Education officials who have responsibility for teacher certification is limited to a very few states. We need more providers of teacher preparation programs and more state Department of Education officials to recognize and grant credit for relevant military training and experience.

In 1997, a report was issued from a study that was funded by the Department of Labor and coordinated by the American Legion. This report, entitled *Study of Civilian Licensure and Certification for Veterans*, brought national attention to the difficulties that servicemembers have in transitioning the knowledge and skills learned in the military to a civilian occupation or profession. Since then, several meetings and conferences have been held where members of the Departments of Defense, Labor and Veterans Affairs; State Approving Agencies; and others continue to work toward providing servicemembers with greater opportunities to enter, upon discharge, their chosen occupation or profession with advanced standing. While advances have been made, there

is still more to do. A continued emphasis from the Subcommittees on improving the transferability of prior learning will not only be beneficial to Troops to Teachers (TTT) participants, but also will be a win-win situation for our schools, our youth and the Nation.

The second Congressional initiative that is related to SAAs and the TTT program is the further development of job training programs for veterans and other GI Bill eligible persons. As the federal government and states have begun to recognize the severity of the teacher shortage, they also have recognized the value of utilizing the expertise, experience and talents of individuals who were not specifically trained for the classroom. These individuals transition from a wide variety of careers into teaching and arrive with a different set of needs from those who graduate from an approved teacher preparation program. Because of this movement there has been increased emphasis on the development of alternative certification approaches to include mentoring programs within the “school house”. For example, once a veteran is deemed to have the minimum number of credit hours necessary to teach a subject at a certain level, they may be hired on a conditional basis to perform certain teaching responsibilities while participating in an apprenticeship like program under a mentor or master teacher. As these programs continued to develop, we project that there will be opportunity to approve the learning experience as on-the-job training under the GI Bill. In states where there are severe shortages and low salaries, this option may prove to be very valuable to the recruitment and retention of excellent teachers who qualify for participation in the Troops to Teachers program.

Importance of the Troops to Teachers program to Northern New England

As you are aware the Troops to Teachers program was conceived during the drawdown of our active duty military during the early nineties. It also was a time when the shortage of teachers was beginning to escalate throughout the Nation. As implied above, that shortage continues today and in many parts of the country at a higher rate than before. In Northern New England we anticipate up to 40% attrition of teachers during the next five years, largely through retirements. This phenomenon is made worse by slumping state economies that create even greater difficulties for school administrators and school districts to attract and retain highly qualified teachers as now required by the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

Below are excerpts from a recent proposal entitled *Creating Regional Teacher Development Centers: A Plan to Promote Teacher Quality and Address Maine’s Teacher Shortages*. They describe the current situation pertaining to Maine’s teaching force. Similar concerns can be found in all of New England.

- Teacher shortages exist statewide, especially in the areas of math, science, modern languages, and special education, and are particularly acute in rural areas of Maine.

- Schools are being forced to hire teachers who lack the required professional credentials and preparation needed for early success in the classroom; there are over 1600 conditionally-certified teachers working in Maine this year.
- Many new teachers, lacking mentors or other critical supports during their first few years, experience failure and leave the profession in high numbers, worsening teacher shortages and affecting the quality of the educational experience of their students.

In an effort to respond to escalating teacher shortages, the changing culture of schools and new research on learning, the Northern New England states continue to work hard to redesign and/or refine their teacher certification requirements. New Hampshire has developed several alternative approaches to teacher certification including one that is primarily competency based and another that is on the job training for individuals with at least 30 credits in the area that they wish to pursue certification. Vermont has a competency based Peer Review process that begins with the submission of a portfolio. Basic eligibility requirements include a Baccalaureate degree with a major in the liberal arts and sciences. The Maine State Board of Education has provisionally adopted revisions to its teacher certification requirements “that will transform alternative teacher certification from a course-based system to a performance-based system, thereby streamlining the process for career-changers to enter teaching”. Each state is also working with the providers of current state approved teacher preparation programs to help in the redesign and deliverance of alternative programs. These developments are very helpful to attracting TTT participants seeking employment in Northern New England and will be increasingly beneficial as further refinements are made.

I will not repeat the data that I believe will be provided to you by others today on the numbers, diversity and strengths of the servicemenbers and veterans who enter teaching through the TTT program. However, I would like to amplify the invaluable assets that these men and women bring to our Nation’ schools. Evidence shows that TTT participants who enter the teaching profession bring a level of maturity and experience that is invaluable to assisting their students to learn and become productive and contributing members of society. Additionally, TTT participants arrive in the classroom with high expectations of themselves which translates to their students. Simply put, TTT participants have become role models for their students throughout the Nation. The feedback that we receive in the states of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont from school administrators is overwhelmingly positive. We look forward to being able to attract more of these highly qualified veterans to the teaching ranks.

Other Challenges Facing the Troops to Teachers Program

In addition to the credit for prior learning issue and the further development of alternative approaches to teacher certification, there are two other challenges that I would like to highlight for you today. I am pleased to report that some progress has been made in one of the areas, I believe the other requires immediate attention.

Acquiring the course work necessary to meet the minimum requirements for teacher certification can be a challenge for many TTT participants who are still on active duty as well as veterans upon discharge. Over 60% of the veterans who leave military service are married and many have children. Enrolling in a residential program as required by many educational institutions is not an option for many TTT participants. Fortunately, a few colleges and universities now offer teacher preparation programs and/or subject matter and professional education methodology courses through what is termed distance education. One is in Northern New England and currently offers a viable option to TTT participants. Just recently, I was invited to a meeting with a university in the Boston area to explore the further development of their distance education teacher preparation programs with an emphasis on special education. The continual development and expansion of these types of programs and courses will provide greater opportunity for TTT program success, especially if the providers maximize the awarding of credit for relevant military training and experience.

A significant challenge to the success of the TTT program is the legislative language that authorizes the TTT program. The *No Child Left Behind Act* states that the purpose of the program is two-fold. In essence, the first is to assist eligible members of the Armed Services to obtain certification "as elementary school teachers, secondary school teachers, or vocational or technical teachers, and to become highly qualified teachers". The second is to facilitate the employment of such members in schools or school districts that serve a high percentage of children from low-income families. However, the legislative language for determining which TTT participants qualify for financial assistance is not consistent with the second purpose. Section 2304(a)(1)(B) of PL 107-110 severely limits the locations where TTT participants who have received a \$5,000 stipend may seek employment. Based on the definition of qualifying Local Education Agencies found in Section 2102, only 28% of all school districts in the nation would satisfy the obligation of our Troops to Teachers participants to teach for three years. In fact in New England, the situation is even more restricted. For instance in New Hampshire, there is only one school district that meets this criteria. This disincentive does not serve the veteran, the school district, the state, the Nation and, more importantly, the children of these communities well – especially during a time of national teacher shortages. Serious consideration needs to be given to revising Section 2304 as indicated in the Recommendations Section of this testimony.

There is one other change in legislation that also would be consistent with the goals of the program and helpful to attracting more TTT participants to teach in high need, high demand areas. Some of our communities with the lowest income require the use of extra incentives to recruit and retain high quality teachers, especially rural areas. A revision to Section 2304 of PL 107-110 could greatly enhance the success of the program by providing this additional financial incentive.

Recommendations

Two changes to the Troops to Teachers program legislation would help to make the program more successful. The first is to Section 2304(a)(1)(B) of Public Law 107 – 110 and is as follows:

“... for not less than 3 school years with a local educational agency or public school charter, as defined in section 2302(b)(2), to begin the school year ...”

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As mentioned, this change would provide an increase in the number of school districts that qualify for recognition as low-income and, thus, authorize the awarding of stipends to a larger number of Troops to Teachers participants as well as assist school districts with hard to fill positions.

The second recommendation for change is to Section 2304(d)(1) and is as follows:

“**BONUS AUTHORIZED** – Subject to paragraph (2), the Secretary may pay a bonus of \$10,000 to a participant in the Program ...”

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Deleted: in lieu of paying a stipend under subsection (c),

This change would provide a greater incentive to TTT participants to teach in high need and/or high demand areas.

Closing

In closing, I would like to emphasize the importance of the Troops to Teachers program to the country and to our youth. This is a win-win program that has taken on new life at a very important time in the history of public education in America. As the program motto reads: “Proud To Serve Again”, it could not be more fitting for us to be proud and thankful for the interest and dedication that members of our Armed Services bring to the classroom upon separation from the military. I encourage members of the Committees and the Congress to continue their support of the Troops to Teachers program and to enact the recommendations for legislative change that will help the program to be even more successful.

Thank you Chairmen Brown and McKeon and members of the Subcommittees on Benefits and 21st Century Competitiveness for the opportunity to testify on the Troops to Teachers program. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.