MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE REGULAR SESSION 2021

By: Representative Scott

To: Education;
Appropriations

HOUSE BILL NO. 981

AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE ASSISTANT TEACHER SALARY WAIVER GRANT PROGRAM FOR THE PURPOSE OF ASSISTING ELIGIBLE ASSISTANT TEACHERS TO BECOME LICENSED TEACHERS THROUGH THE AWARDING OF GRANTS TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN QUALIFIED TEACHERS IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION; TO REQUIRE THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TO IMPLEMENT AND ADMINISTER THE GRANT PROGRAM; TO AUTHORIZE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO ENTER INTO AGREEMENTS WITH QUALIFIED ASSISTANT TEACHERS TO WAIVE THAT PORTION OF THEIR SALARY EQUAL TO THE AMOUNT ESTABLISHED AS THE STATUTORY MINIMUM SALARY IN LIEU OF A GRANT FOR TUITION AT A POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTION FOR THE COMPLETION OF A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE FOR PURPOSES OF BECOMING A LICENSED TEACHER; TO PRESCRIBE THE CRITERIA TO BE USED IN DETERMINING ELIGIBILITY AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE PROGRAM; TO REQUIRE THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TO MAKE AN ANNUAL REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE BY DECEMBER 31 OF EACH YEAR ON THE NUMBER OF VACANT TEACHER POSITIONS THAT ARE AVAILABLE THROUGHOUT THE STATE AND THE NUMBER OF TEACHER POSITIONS FILLED BY INDIVIDUALS WHO HOLD A PROVISIONAL OR EMERGENCY LICENSE; TO IMPOSE FINANCIAL LIABILITY UPON ANY INDIVIDUAL WHO FAILS TO FULFILL HIS OR HER TEACHING OBLIGATION UNDER THE GRANT PROGRAM UPON COMPLETING A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE; TO AMEND SECTION 37-21-7, MISSISSIPPI CODE OF 1972, IN CONFORMITY THERETO; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

WHEREAS, for all students to learn well in an academically competitive global society, they must have highly skilled, committed and professionally supported teachers in every core content area of the state's adopted curriculum standards; and

WHEREAS, nationally there are simply not enough such teachers entering the profession or committing to long-term careers in the

profession, and a variety of actions from many individuals and organizations are needed to recruit, prepare and retain a sufficient number of licensed teachers; and

WHEREAS, it is the intent of this Legislature to reinforce the commitment that the State of Mississippi has always had to its public educational system, the children and families served, and to the educational professionals who provide daily instruction to ensure that our state's most valuable resource is equipped to compete and succeed on the global academic stage, by further investing in the training and preparation of educators and prospective educators in order to place quality teachers in every classroom; and

WHEREAS, teacher quality includes, but is not limited to, appropriate subject matter content knowledge; deep interest in core subject content areas; a commitment to lifelong professional improvement; the desire and skill to help students learn and apply subject content-specific knowledge; and the ability to use the resources necessary to teach effectively; and

WHEREAS, the welfare of all our children calls for policies to attract new teachers into the profession in a way that benefits all students, as the shortage of teachers hurts all of our schools by increasing job stress on teachers and administrators alike, which in turn leads to increased turnover of staff, undermines curriculum quality and hinders efforts at staff development; and

WHEREAS, moreover, the shortage of qualified teachers hurts our children by forcing too many students into too few classrooms, reducing the amount of time that teachers can spend helping individual students, and spans the breadth of education, threatening to deprive the children of all races and social classes, in rural, urban and suburban communities, of the quality education needed to meet the challenges of the future; and

WHEREAS, in view of this pending crisis, the Mississippi Legislature believes that addressing the growing shortage of quality teachers must become one of our state's highest public policy priorities, and we call on all legislators to come together in a bipartisan effort to craft policies that promote more vigorously the recruitment, retention and development of quality teachers for all our children; NOW, THEREFORE,

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI:

SECTION 1. (1) There is established the Assistant Teacher Salary Waiver Grant Program for the purpose of assisting eligible assistant teachers to become licensed teachers through the awarding of grants to attract and retain qualified teachers in the teaching profession. The grant program shall be implemented and administered by the State Board of Education.

(2) Under the Assistant Teacher Salary Waiver Grant Program, qualified assistant teachers may be awarded financial assistance in an amount equal to the minimum salary established for assistant teachers under Section 37-21-7 per year. However, no assistant

teacher may receive a salary waiver grant through the program for more than two (2) academic years. An assistant teacher grant shall not be based upon an applicant's financial need, and the receipt of any other grant or financial assistance shall not affect an assistant teacher's eligibility under the program.

(3) In order to qualify for an assistant teacher grant, an applicant must satisfy the following requirements:

(a) The applicant must be employed full-time as an assistant teacher with a local school district, with a minimum of five (5) years of classroom experience;

(b) The applicant must be enrolled as a full-time student at a baccalaureate degree-granting institution of higher learning in the State of Mississippi that is regionally accredited and approved by the board with two (2) years or less remaining until he or she completes all courses for graduation;

(c) The assistant teacher must maintain a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.5 calculated on a 4.0 scale for the duration of his or her academic tenure;

(d) Achieve a qualifying score on the Praxis Core Academic Skills for Education examination as established by the State Board of Education upon completion of his or her first academic year of course instruction;

(e) Sign a salary waiver statement that expresses, that such assistant teacher will waive the the statutorily authorized portion of his or her salary authorized under Section 37-21-7, for

purposes of receiving a grant to be paid towards tuition and any books and other instructional material required by the institution of higher learning of enrollment and directly related to pre-major coursework; and

(f) The assistant teacher must have expressed in writing a present intention to teach in the state for each year he or she received a grant.

(4) At the beginning of the school year next succeeding the date on which a person who has received an assistant teacher grant obtains a baccalaureate degree, that person shall begin to render service as a licensed teacher in the school district of employment at the time the person entered the grant program or in a school district designated by the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education shall be required to report to the Legislature by December 31 of each year, the number of vacant teacher positions that are available throughout the state, and the number of teacher positions filled by individuals who hold a provisional or emergency license. Failure of an assistant teacher who receives a grant under the provisions of this section to fulfill his or her required teaching obligations, shall become liable to the school district of employment, for which the salary waiver agreement was entered, for the sum of all grants made to that person plus a penalty of five percent (5%) of the loan awards and interest on the combined amount accruing at the current

unsubsidized Federal Stafford loan rate at the time the person abrogates.

SECTION 2. Section 37-21-7, Mississippi Code of 1972, is amended as follows:

37-21-7. (1) This section shall be referred to as the "Mississippi Elementary Schools Assistant Teacher Program," the purpose of which shall be to provide an early childhood education program that assists in the instruction of basic skills. The State Board of Education is authorized, empowered and directed to implement a statewide system of assistant teachers in kindergarten classes and in the first, second and third grades. The assistant teacher shall assist pupils in actual instruction under the strict supervision of a licensed teacher.

(2) (a) Except as otherwise authorized under subsection (7), each school district shall employ the total number of assistant teachers funded under subsection (6) of this section. The superintendent of each district shall assign the assistant teachers to the kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade classes in the district in a manner that will promote the maximum efficiency, as determined by the superintendent, in the instruction of skills such as verbal and linguistic skills, logical and mathematical skills, and social skills.

(b) If a licensed teacher to whom an assistant teacher has been assigned is required to be absent from the classroom, the assistant teacher may assume responsibility for the classroom in

lieu of a substitute teacher. However, no assistant teacher shall assume sole responsibility of the classroom for more than three (3) consecutive school days. Further, in no event shall any assistant teacher be assigned to serve as a substitute teacher for any teacher other than the licensed teacher to whom that assistant teacher has been assigned.

(3) Assistant teachers shall have, at a minimum, a high school diploma or a High School Equivalency Diploma equivalent, and shall show demonstratable proficiency in reading and writing skills. The State Department of Education shall develop a testing procedure for assistant teacher applicants to be used in all school districts in the state.

(4) (a) In order to receive funding, each school district shall:

(i) Submit a plan on the implementation of a reading improvement program to the State Department of Education; and

(ii) Develop a plan of educational accountability and assessment of performance, including pretests and posttests, for reading in Grades 1 through 6.

(b) Additionally, each school district shall:

(i) Provide annually a mandatory preservice orientation session, using an existing in-school service day, for administrators and teachers on the effective use of assistant

teachers as part of a team in the classroom setting and on the role of assistant teachers, with emphasis on program goals;

(ii) Hold periodic workshops for administrators and teachers on the effective use and supervision of assistant teachers;

(iii) Provide training annually on specific instructional skills for assistant teachers;

(iv) Annually evaluate their program in accordance with their educational accountability and assessment of performance plan; and

(v) Designate the necessary personnel to supervise and report on their program.

(5) The State Department of Education shall:

(a) Develop and assist in the implementation of a statewide uniform training module, subject to the availability of funds specifically appropriated therefor by the Legislature, which shall be used in all school districts for training administrators, teachers and assistant teachers. The module shall provide for the consolidated training of each assistant teacher and teacher to whom the assistant teacher is assigned, working together as a team, and shall require further periodic training for administrators, teachers and assistant teachers regarding the role of assistant teachers;

(b) Annually evaluate the program on the district and state level. Subject to the availability of funds specifically

appropriated therefor by the Legislature, the department shall develop: (i) uniform evaluation reports, to be performed by the principal or assistant principal, to collect data for the annual overall program evaluation conducted by the department; or (ii) a program evaluation model that, at a minimum, addresses process evaluation; and

(c) Promulgate rules, regulations and such other standards deemed necessary to effectuate the purposes of this section. Noncompliance with the provisions of this section and any rules, regulations or standards adopted by the department may result in a violation of compulsory accreditation standards as established by the State Board of Education and the Commission on School Accreditation.

(6) In addition to other funds allotted under the *** * *** Mississippi Adequate Education Program, each school district shall be allotted sufficient funding for the purpose of employing assistant teachers. No assistant teacher shall be paid less than the amount he or she received in the prior school year. No school district shall receive any funds under this section for any school year during which the aggregate amount of the local contribution to the salaries of assistant teachers by the district shall have been reduced below such amount for the previous year.

For the 2019-2020 school year and school years thereafter, the minimum annual salary for assistant teachers shall be Fourteen Thousand Dollars ($14,000.00).

In addition, for each one percent (1%) that the Sine Die General Fund Revenue Estimate Growth exceeds five percent (5%) in fiscal year 2006, as certified by the Legislative Budget Office to the State Board of Education and subject to the specific appropriation therefor by the Legislature, the State Board of Education shall revise the salary scale in the appropriate year to provide an additional one percent (1%) across-the-board increase in the base salaries for assistant teachers. The State Board of Education shall revise the salaries prescribed above for assistant teachers to conform to any adjustments made in prior fiscal years due to revenue growth over and above five percent (5%). The assistant teachers shall not be restricted to working only in the grades for which the funds were allotted, but may be assigned to other classes as provided in subsection (2)(a) of this section.

(7) (a) As an alternative to employing assistant teachers, any school district may use the allotment provided under subsection (6) of this section for the purpose of employing licensed teachers for kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade classes; however, no school district shall be authorized to use the allotment for assistant teachers for the purpose of employing licensed teachers unless the district has established that the employment of licensed teachers using such funds will reduce the teacher:student ratio in the kindergarten, first-, second- and third-grade classes. All state funds for

assistant teachers shall be applied to reducing teacher:student ratio in Grades K-3.

It is the intent of the Legislature that no school district shall dismiss any assistant teacher for the purpose of using the assistant teacher allotment to employ licensed teachers. School districts may rely only upon normal attrition to reduce the number of assistant teachers employed in that district.

(b) Districts meeting the highest levels of accreditation standards, as defined by the State Board of Education, shall be exempted from the provisions of subsection (4) of this section.

(8) As an alternative to compensating assistant teachers under the provisions of subsection (6) of this section, a school district may enter into agreement with eligible assistant teachers for the payment of an Assistant Teacher Salary Waiver Grant for educational purposes outlined in Section 1 of this act, in lieu of the minimum salary authorized under subsection (6) of this section.

SECTION 3. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2021.