

UW-Madison: School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge, extended through 2025-26, offers tangible step toward educator shortage solutions

Posted on Tuesday, Mar 1, 2022

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MADISON — Reports of school districts struggling to find enough qualified teachers weren't rare prior to the onset of the pandemic — and today these growing staffing challenges are placing significant strains on education systems across the nation.

Headline after headline documents a harsh reality: Teachers are leaving the profession and not enough people want to join the field.

This is one of several factors at play as the university announces the extension of the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge, an innovative program launched at the start of the fall 2020 semester that's designed to help bolster the teacher workforce and give schoolchildren access to the high-quality educators they deserve.

The initiative “pledges” to pay the equivalent of in-state tuition and fees, testing, and licensing costs for all teacher education students. In return, graduates “pledge” to teach for three or four years at a pre-kindergarten through 12th grade school in Wisconsin. Students who go on to teach in a high-need school or in a high-need subject area will fulfill their obligation in three years, while all others will do so in four.

“There are significant challenges across the field of education, but we're looking to

the future with a sense of optimism,” says UW–Madison School of Education Dean Diana Hess. “Our Teacher Pledge program holds great potential for the state of Wisconsin. We have to explore solutions quickly.”

Completely funded by donors, the \$20 million initiative was originally scheduled to run for five years. But Hess announced this week that the pilot is being extended for another year, making it available to students through the 2025-26 academic year. Over its duration, the program is expected to support more than 1,000 students in the School’s teacher education programs.

In addition to providing significant financial support, the initiative is also designed to incentivize teachers to stay on the job for at least three or four years. Currently, young teachers across the nation are leaving the profession at high rates after only a year or two.

“Especially early on in one’s career, teaching is a very difficult job,” says Hess, who began her education career as a high school social studies teacher in Downers Grove, Illinois, in 1979. “We feel if teachers stick with it, they will gain confidence, start to see the value they bring, and enjoy the important work they are doing.”

While staffing challenges are hitting rural areas of Wisconsin especially hard, most districts across the state are utilizing teachers on emergency licensure to fill gaps in at least some high-need areas, such as special education and STEM fields.

“It’s so easy to lament huge problems like teacher shortages and the lack of special educators in rural areas,” says Melinda Leko, a professor with the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education who has worked on projects designed to support special educators in rural settings. “But the UW–Madison School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge is actually a tangible step toward solutions.”

Over the next several years, researchers at UW–Madison will study this pilot of the Teacher Pledge and share key findings that could help aid efforts around Wisconsin and across the nation in building a stronger teacher workforce. This initiative is being evaluated and researched through the university’s Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab that is led by Nicholas Hillman, a professor with the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis.

Since its inception, more than 350 students have utilized the program, with numbers increasing every year. Currently, more than 85 percent of the students

enrolled in the School of Education's master's degree program that leads to teaching certification at the middle school and high school level are utilizing the opportunity — a promising trend when coupled with continued growth in enrollment at the undergraduate level for those pursuing elementary education certification.

“I never saw myself coming to Wisconsin until I heard about the Pledge,” says Camryn Booms, who earned her undergraduate degree at Ferris State University in her home state of Michigan and today is pursuing a master's with the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in a program that will lead to dual certification in secondary science education and English as a second language (ESL). “It's the reason I'm here. The financial support is a real difference-maker for me, and I know many of my classmates agree.”

The UW-Madison School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge is just one part of the School of Education's ambitious new Impact 2030 initiative that's designed to build upon the School's excellence and efforts to serve Wisconsin and beyond over the next decade, leading up to the School's centennial celebration in 2030.

Learn more about the UW-Madison School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge: <https://tec.education.wisc.edu/teacher-pledge/>