

UW-Madison: Teacher Pledge program extended

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As the nationwide teacher shortage continues to generate headlines, stress education leaders, and frustrate policymakers in search of answers, the UW-Madison School of Education is announcing the extension of an innovative program aimed at addressing the problem in Wisconsin.

The UW-Madison School of Education Wisconsin Teacher Pledge program first started supporting students in the fall of 2020 and is dedicated to bolstering Wisconsin's teacher workforce. This donor-funded initiative pays the equivalent of in-state tuition and fees, testing, and licensing costs for students enrolled in one of the School's teacher preparation programs. In return, graduates "pledge" to teach for three or four years at a pre-kindergarten through 12th grade school in Wisconsin.

And today, School of Education Dean Diana Hess is announcing that a major gift from Susan and James Patterson is allowing the School to extend the Teacher Pledge program and make it available through the 2026-27 academic year. This generous support from the Pattersons is also helping jumpstart the School's goal of making the Teacher Pledge available through the 2027-28 academic year.

"Thanks to generous donors like the Pattersons, this ambitious program can support even more students as we work to address educator staffing challenges and provide schoolchildren across Wisconsin with the best possible education," says Hess.

According to data published last summer by Brown University's Annenberg Institute, there were 36,000 teacher vacancies across the nation. That same study noted that another 163,000 educators were working in positions they weren't fully certified to teach. And 53 percent of public schools surveyed by the Institute of Education

Sciences reported that school employees felt they were understaffed starting the 2022-23 academic year.

In Wisconsin the story is much the same. A new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum notes that the number of emergency teaching licenses issued has nearly tripled during the past decade. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction issued 3,197 emergency teacher licenses in the 2021-22 school year, which is up from the 1,125 emergency licenses issued in 2012-13.

The shortage of educators is so significant, some states and school districts have resorted to untraditional concepts — such as having National Guard volunteers help in classrooms and switching to four-day school weeks.

“The teacher shortage is a real problem and a significant one — especially in rural areas and in particular subject areas, like special education and STEM fields,” says Hess. “There is no simple fix, but we think our Teacher Pledge holds the potential to inspire more people to enter the profession, to keep them teaching longer, and to help deliver some solutions. Our donors are helping make this important work possible.”

Susan Patterson is an alumna of the UW–Madison School of Education, earning a BS in 1979 and an MFA in 1982, both with the Art Department. She has a passion for helping kids learn to read and is a New York Times bestselling co-author of children’s books. Susan Patterson also is the co-author of a soon-to-be-released novel, “Things I Wish I Told My Mother.” James Patterson, a fellow supporter of schools and universities, a reading advocate, and a self-described honorary Badger, is the world’s bestselling author.

“Teachers have never been more important than they are right now in America,” says Susan Patterson. “My mother was a professor of nursing at Wisconsin and Jim’s mom was a middle school teacher. We’re proud to help support this amazing Teacher Pledge program.”

Current students and alumni alike who have dreamed of becoming educators speak highly of the benefits of the Teacher Pledge.

Katie Swope, a UW–Madison senior who has taken the Teacher Pledge and is pursuing her goal of becoming an elementary education teacher, says she has wanted to work in a classroom since she first started attending school in Stanley,

Wisconsin, a small town about 180 miles northwest of Madison.

“I remember sitting in my kindergarten class and looking at my teacher, Mrs. Anderson, reading us a story,” says Swope. “As I got older, a lot of my values aligned with teaching and wanting to live a life of serving and helping others. The Teacher Pledge is helping make it possible in a big way.”

Swope is currently doing her student teaching work with a first grade class at Shorewood Hills Elementary School.

“The Teacher Pledge has helped me in many different ways, but the financial assistance is incredibly helpful for someone who is supporting herself,” says Swope. “In addition, as a first-generation college student, going to college can be a little overwhelming. All the supports through the School of Education, including the Teacher Pledge, have made things much easier.”

Trixie Catagatan, another UW–Madison senior who is pursuing certification in elementary education and English as a second language (ESL), is also thrilled with the benefits of the Teacher Pledge.

“The Teacher Pledge program is supportive of my endeavors to become a teacher,” she says. “I appreciate that this program emphasizes the significance of having teachers across Wisconsin schools who can make a difference. I’m glad to be part of a program that invests in future teachers and their students.”

The Teacher Pledge won’t solve the teacher shortage by itself, but enrollment numbers show it is helping incentivize students to enter the School’s teacher education programs.

As of the start of the spring semester, 556 students have taken the Teacher Pledge, and 226 Pledge alumni are now teaching in classrooms across 65 different Wisconsin public school districts and 11 private schools.

One Teacher Pledge alum, Madeline Abbatacola, earned an MS in curriculum and instruction with the School of Education in August 2022, leading to secondary science teaching certification. The native of Chicago is now teaching life sciences — from biology to a new anatomy and physiology class — at Cameron High School, which is located about 225 miles northwest of Madison.

“The Teacher Pledge was one of the main reasons I pursued becoming a teacher,”

says Abbatacola. “It really was the deciding factor because I had quite a bit of loan debt from earning my undergraduate degree and I didn’t want to accumulate more debt. So I thought, ‘If they’re going to pay for my tuition and fees, why not do it?’ I’d love for more people to know about the Teacher Pledge. It’s such a great opportunity.”

In addition to providing significant financial support, the Teacher Pledge is also designed to incentivize teachers to stay on the job for at least three or four years. Students who go on to teach in a high-need school or in a high-need subject area will fulfill their Teacher Pledge obligation in three years, while all others will do so in four. Currently, young teachers across the nation are leaving the profession at high rates after only a year or two.

“Teaching is a very difficult job, especially when you are getting started in the profession,” says Hess, who began her education career as a high school social studies teacher in Downers Grove, Illinois, in 1979. “We believe that if teachers stick with teaching for three or four years, they will gain confidence, keep with it, and better enjoy the vital work they are doing.”

UW-Madison Professor Nick Hillman, who directs the university’s Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) lab, is leading efforts to study this pilot of the Teacher Pledge. The researchers are examining the program’s impact on desired outcomes, such as entering the School’s teacher education programs, teaching in Wisconsin schools, and staying in the profession longer. Results of this research could one day help aid efforts around Wisconsin and across the nation in building a stronger teacher workforce.

Completely funded by donors, the \$18 million Teacher Pledge initiative was originally scheduled to run for five years. In March 2022, the pilot was extended for another year. Today’s announcement and generous gift from the Pattersons pushes the extension through the 2026-27 academic year and helps jumpstart the School’s goal of making the Teacher Pledge available through 2027-28.

“There are significant challenges across education,” says Hess. “But we’re focused on the future and we’re feeling optimistic. We think the Teacher Pledge holds great potential for Wisconsin’s children, its schools, and our collective future.”

Hess and the School of Education continue to actively raise money to support the Teacher Pledge. If you’d like to help support future teachers, contact School of



Education Development Director Betsy Burns via email: betsy.burns@supportuw.org