

Loan Forgiveness for Educators Act of 2026
Senator Luján and Representatives Leger Fernández and Hayes

Inequitable access to a well-prepared, diverse, stable, and supported educator workforce has been a longstanding challenge for our country's education system, with students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and other underserved students having less access to this essential resource. One of the barriers to a diverse and well-prepared educator workforce is the high cost of college and student loan debt. [Research has found](#) that student loan debt influences students' career choices, with higher debt burdens associated with students avoiding public service jobs, particularly in the education field. Student loan debt can also impact educator retention, with educators leaving high-need areas or the profession altogether because of the added strain of debt on low salaries

Since 2004, outstanding student loan debt has increased by over \$1.3 trillion. Individuals who take out loans to go into the education field owe an average of [about \\$30,000 of debt](#) for a bachelor's degree. Sixty percent of teachers have had to borrow for their education and nearly 4 of 10 teachers today still hold some or all of their entire balance. Further, these debt burdens further reduce teachers' already low pay and effectively counteract state and local efforts to raise teacher pay. In fact, K-12 teachers [earn about 27% less](#) compared to those with college degrees in other fields. Early educators fare even worse, earning a national median wage of [just over \\$13.00 an hour](#), which is not even half the hourly pay elementary and middle school teachers receive. Educators across the spectrum often take on two or more jobs to pay for basic needs, let alone afford their monthly student loan payments; in fact, about 1 in 5 teachers work multiple jobs specifically because of their student loan debt. Further, due to structural inequities, postsecondary students of color have fewer resources to put towards paying for college and face higher student loan debt burdens than white students. These factors impact the diversity of the profession as they create barriers for people of color to enter the teaching profession and hinder their ability to stay in it.

Fortunately, [research shows](#) that well-designed loan forgiveness programs that underwrite all or most of the cost of comprehensive educator preparation are effective in recruiting diverse and well-prepared educators, in both K-12 and early education settings. In addition, these programs are good at keeping educators in the profession for longer. Yet our country's loan forgiveness program specifically designed for teachers—the Teacher Loan Forgiveness (TLF) Program—has not been significantly updated since 2004 to keep pace with rising debt levels and increasing educator shortages. A recent report found that nationwide, [over 410,000 teaching positions](#) were either left vacant or filled by individuals who were not fully certified for their assignments, representing about 1 in 8 of all teaching positions nationally. Enrollment in educator preparation programs in the majority of states [has declined](#) by 5% or more in the most recent five years where there is available data, with 16 states losing more than a third of their pipeline. Teacher turnover also [remains persistently high](#) and concentrated in schools serving larger concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds. All these factors deepen an already severe teacher shortage.

TLF currently offers \$5,000 worth of loan forgiveness in exchange for five consecutive years of K-12 teaching service in high-need schools or up to \$17,500 for teaching in a high-need subject

area at these schools. These rates have not increased since 1998 and 2004, respectively, despite widespread shortages in our schools and mounting student loan debt. Further, despite needs throughout the education continuum, the TLF program also excludes early education educators and program directors as well as K-12 school leaders like principals. TLF also does not provide forgiveness for federal Parent or Grad PLUS Loans or federal loans made prior to October of 1998, leaving out whole swaths of educators who are no less in need of benefits. In addition, TLF does not allow educators to concurrently count their service toward both TLF and Public Service Loan Forgiveness benefits, potentially causing educators to stay in repayment for longer periods of time.

The *Loan Forgiveness for Educators Act of 2026* will reform the TLF Program so that more children have access to a diverse and well-prepared educator workforce (including early childhood and K-12 educators and leaders) by:

- Incentivizing educators to go into and continue serving in early education programs and high need public schools by having the federal government make educators’ monthly student loan payments during service and provide complete forgiveness of student loan debts at the end of five years of service;
- Allowing more and diverse candidates to afford comprehensive educator preparation programs that are associated with high educator retention rates, a key strategy to decrease shortages, save districts money, and help increase educator diversity in early childhood and K-12 education;
- Expanding program eligibility to early childhood educators and program directors and K-12 school leaders serving in early education programs and high need public schools. To reflect this update, the bill would also change the name of the program to the Educator Loan Forgiveness (ELF) Program;
- Making federal Parent PLUS loans—whether held by an educator or their parent—along with Grad PLUS loans eligible for ELF benefits. This would be in addition to federal subsidized, unsubsidized, and consolidation loans in the Direct Loan program and legacy Federal Family Education Loan program;
- Allowing service in pursuit of ELF to concurrently count as service toward Public Service Loan Forgiveness, removing an unnecessary roadblock that can keep educators saddled with student loan debt for longer periods of time; and

Ensuring that educators retain loan repayment and forgiveness benefits if the status of their school changes to no longer be high need or if they take on additional responsibilities while they are serving. In addition, educators will still be able to make progress toward loan forgiveness if they have to take off for Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) needs, military service, or are impacted by a national emergency.

Endorsing Organizations (119th Congress)

AACTE (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education)

AASA, The School Superintendents Association

ACTFL

Advance CTE

AFT New Mexico
AFT: Education, Healthcare, Public Services
All4Ed
American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)
American Federation of School Administrators
Asian Americans Advancing Justice-AAJC
Association for Career and Technical Education
Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
Chiefs for Change
Council for Exceptional Children
Council for Opportunity in Education
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Early Care & Education Consortium
Early Edge California
EdTrust
Educators for Excellence
First Focus Campaign for Children
Growing Up New Mexico
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Institute for Educational Leadership
MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund)
NAACP
Nafme
National Art Education Association
National Association for Family Child Care
National Association for Media Arts Education

National Association for Music Education
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR)
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
National Council on Teacher Quality
National Dance Education Organization
National Education Association
National Indian Education Association
National Rural Education Association
National Science Teaching Association (NSTA)
Navajo Preparatory School, Inc.
New Mexico Association for the education of young children
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)
Public Advocates
Southern Education Foundation
Teach Plus
Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children
The Teacher Salary Project
Today's Students Coalition
UnidosUS
ZERO TO THREE
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Women's Law Center