

Connecticut Educator Preparation and Certification Board

Hartford, CT

To: Connecticut Educator Preparation and Certification Board
From: Jennifer Rodriguez, CEPCB Chair
Date: August 17, 2026
Subject: Adoption of An Act Establishing the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program

Adoption of An Act Establishing the

Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program

Introduction

Connecticut's teacher shortage is not simply a workforce problem—it is a student-access problem. When schools struggle to recruit and retain qualified educators, students can face larger class sizes, fewer course offerings, increased reliance on long-term substitutes, and less consistent access to qualified teachers. Ensuring that Connecticut has a strong pipeline of educators is therefore essential to ensuring that every student has access to the high-quality education they deserve.

One significant barrier to that pipeline is the cost of becoming a teacher. Qualified candidates may be unable to enter or complete educator preparation because of tuition, and assessment costs, required materials, transportation, and the loss of income associated with unpaid student teaching and other clinical experiences. These costs can be particularly challenging for candidates who already carry undergraduate debt, career-changers, parents with childcare responsibilities, and individuals who cannot easily leave full-time employment.

Both the Connecticut Educator Preparation and Certification Board and Connecticut Aspiring Educators have identified the cost of educator preparation and certification as a significant barrier to entering the profession and have called for state action.

The issue, therefore, is not simply whether Connecticut has pathways into teaching. The issue is whether qualified candidates can afford to complete those pathways and ultimately reach Connecticut classrooms.

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would address this gap by creating a debt-free pathway through educator preparation for eligible students who commit to

teaching in Connecticut public schools. By reducing the financial barriers to preparation and connecting financial assistance to Connecticut's workforce needs, the program would strengthen the educator pipeline and, ultimately, expand students' access to qualified teachers.

Background

National Outlook:

The need for state-level support is particularly timely because federal policy is reducing some of the resources historically available to graduate students.

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed into federal law in July 2025, eliminates the federal Grad PLUS loan program for new borrowers beginning July 1, 2026, and imposes new annual (\$20,500) and lifetime (\$100,000) borrowing caps on federal loans for graduate students. Many of Connecticut's approved educator-preparation programs — particularly pathways to initial certification built on a master's or post-baccalaureate degree — are graduate-level programs whose candidates have historically relied on Grad PLUS loans to cover the full cost of attendance.

The same legislation narrows the income-driven repayment plans available to borrowers pursuing Public Service Loan Forgiveness, a program many teachers rely on to manage debt incurred during preparation. As federal borrowing capacity and forgiveness options contract, state-level last-dollar assistance becomes a more important tool for keeping educator preparation affordable and for insulating Connecticut's teacher pipeline from reduced federal support.

The April 2026 Legislative Landscape Report provided by NASDTEC demonstrates that Connecticut's educator workforce challenges are part of a broader national policy response. A number of states have adopted comparable last-dollar or debt-free models to strengthen their teacher pipelines. New Mexico's teacher-preparation scholarship covers tuition, fees, books, and living expenses for students completing an approved program and can be combined with other state aid to allow candidates to pursue an education degree debt-free. Arizona, Michigan, Indiana, and Nevada each provide last-dollar or near-full tuition support to candidates who commit to teaching in-state after certification.

Connecticut's Steps:

Connecticut has already made investments in reducing financial barriers to higher education and strengthening the educator pipeline.

Whether towards the teaching profession or other pursuits, Connecticut has made significant investments in reducing financial barriers to higher education overall. The state's debt-free community college program, established pursuant to C.G.S. §10a-174, provides a model for using last-dollar financial assistance to reduce tuition barriers for eligible Connecticut students.

Specifically for the education profession, the state has expanded its Aspiring Educator Scholarship program. Connecticut's Teacher Registered Apprenticeship pathway is designed to address teacher shortages, fill shortage areas, and diversify the educator workforce. The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would complement these initiatives by addressing a critical gap that remains across preparation pathways: the cost of completing educator preparation and obtaining certification. A streamlined pathway is only effective if candidates can financially complete it.

At the same time, Connecticut is overhauling its educator certification system. The General Assembly has enacted legislation revising certification requirements and creating the State Educator Preparation and Certification Board (CEPCB). As the CEPCB redesigns how candidates become certified, pairing that redesign with a mechanism to remove financial barriers helps ensure Connecticut's investment in a more streamlined certification system actually translates into more candidates completing preparation and entering classrooms.

A streamlined pathway is only effective if candidates can financially complete it.

Local Leaders/Stakeholders:

Both the Connecticut Educator Preparation and Certification Board and Connecticut Aspiring Educators have identified the cost of educator preparation as a significant barrier to entering the profession and have called for state action.

Proposal

Eligible Connecticut students enrolled in an approved educator-preparation program at a Connecticut public institution of higher education would receive last-dollar assistance for remaining tuition and required fees after other grants and scholarships are applied, in exchange for a five-year commitment to teach in a Connecticut public school.

Students who do not complete their preparation or fulfill the teaching commitment would be required to repay some or all of the assistance, with provisions for prorated repayment and waivers or modifications in cases of hardship, military service, or other circumstances determined by the Office of Higher Education.

The program would be administered by the Office of Higher Education, funded through General Fund appropriations and designated Connecticut Lottery revenues. Annual reporting would track participation, awards, program completion, certification, public-school employment and retention, and the program's impact on educator workforce needs by endorsement area and geographic region, allowing the state to measure whether the investment is strengthening Connecticut's educator pipeline.

An Investment in CT Students and Our Workforce

The ultimate purpose of the proposal is not simply to increase the number of teacher candidates. It is to improve students' access to qualified educators, ultimately strengthening our workforce not just for now but for years to come.

When qualified candidates are unable to complete preparation because of cost, Connecticut loses potential teachers and students lose potential access to those educators. Conversely, when financial barriers are reduced and candidates complete preparation, certification, and employment, Connecticut strengthens the workforce that serves students every day.

A stronger educator pipeline can help schools fill vacancies, expand course offerings, reduce reliance on long-term substitutes, and provide students with more consistent access to qualified teachers. With consistent access to high-quality education, students thrive, set their own goals for the future, and make Connecticut a better place to live and work.

Strengthening the Pipeline

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would build directly on Connecticut's existing debt-free community college framework under C.G.S. § 10a-174, extending an approach the state has already established rather than creating an entirely new financial-aid system. By using existing higher-education and financial-aid infrastructure, the program would create a more continuous, debt-free pathway from postsecondary education through educator preparation and certification and into the Connecticut public-school workforce.

This pathway could allow a student to begin at Connecticut State Community College, transfer to a Connecticut public institution of higher education, complete an approved educator-preparation program with no remaining eligible tuition and required-fee costs, earn certification, and enter a Connecticut public school. In this way, the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would extend Connecticut's investment in college access into a profession where the state has a demonstrated workforce need.

Connecting Existing Efforts

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would strengthen—not replace—Connecticut's existing investments in preparing and recruiting educators. Connecticut supports multiple pathways into teaching, including traditional educator-preparation programs, alternate routes to certification, aspiring educator scholarships, and registered teacher apprenticeships, as well as financial assistance for certification-related expenses.

The aspiring educator would fill out the FAFSA, accepting any scholarships and grants as they would be applied first. Then, the Promise Program would cover remaining eligible tuition and required fees.

This structure would allow targeted programs to retain their distinct purposes while ensuring that financial barriers do not prevent candidates from completing preparation.

Most importantly, the program would treat educator preparation not as another stand-alone scholarship, but as the next stage of Connecticut's broader investment in college access, educator preparation, and workforce development.

Alignment with Statutory Objectives (C.G.S. §10-150c(b))

- ☒ **Builds streamlined, flexible pathways in the educator profession grounded in a commitment to educator effectiveness** by removing financial barriers to approved preparation programs.
- ☒ **Enables educators to broaden their scope of practice to meet the needs of more students**, by increasing access to preparation and certification.
- ☒ **Ensures accountability of educator preparation programs for both quality training experiences and candidate outcomes**, by limiting eligibility to approved programs that meet Connecticut's preparation and certification requirements.
- ☒ **Supports continuous improvement of educator practice, including systems that recognize and reward demonstrated mastery**, by connecting candidates to preparation, certification, induction, mentoring, and professional learning.
- ☒ **Improves data transparency and equity, including addressing disparities in educator distribution and vacancies**, through annual reporting of participation, completion, certification, placement, retention, and demographic data to assess program effectiveness and workforce impact.
- ☐ **Supports educators as professionals and lifelong learners, including access to high-quality professional learning and mentorship.**

Conclusion

Connecticut is investing in the pieces of an educator pipeline: debt-free community college access, aspiring educator scholarships, alternative certification, teacher residencies, registered apprenticeships, mentoring, and preparation reform.

The missing piece is a comprehensive last-dollar mechanism that ensures the cost of completing educator preparation does not prevent qualified candidates from reaching the classroom.

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would fill that gap.

It would build upon Connecticut's existing debt-free community college framework while complementing the state's newer investments in aspiring educators and apprenticeships pathways.

The national legislative landscape reinforces this direction. States are increasingly combining financial assistance with practice-based preparation, targeted workforce strategies, and stronger connections between preparation providers and school districts.

Connecticut has an opportunity to do the same through a coordinated system rather than a collection of disconnected programs.

Teacher preparation should be treated as a continuation of Connecticut's investment in college access and as a direct investment in the state's public-school workforce.

All in all, the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program would:

- Extend Connecticut’s debt-free college investment through educator preparation.
- Create a clearer pathway from Connecticut State Community College into approved educator-preparation programs.
- Reduce the financial barriers associated with the additional education required for teacher certification.
- Complement the state's existing Aspiring Educator Scholarship.
- Complement Teacher Residency and Registered Apprenticeship initiatives.
- Expand access to the teaching profession for candidates who may otherwise be unable to afford preparation.
- Strengthen Connecticut’s educator pipeline by connecting financial assistance to a commitment to teach in Connecticut public schools.
- Leverage existing higher-education, financial-aid, and educator-preparation infrastructure.
- Create a more predictable pathway from postsecondary education to certification and employment.
- Align the financial-aid structure of the program with the state's existing debt-free community college model established under C.G.S. § 10a-174.

Recommended Action

The Connecticut Educator Preparation and Certification Board should endorse the concept of a Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program and recommend that the General Assembly establish a last-dollar tuition and required-fee assistance program for eligible candidates enrolled in approved educator-preparation programs at Connecticut public institutions of higher education, coupled with a five-year Connecticut public-school teaching commitment and a dedicated, nonlapsing General Fund account to support the program.

Prepared by: Jennifer Rodriguez

Legislative Language:

An Act Establishing the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. (NEW) (Effective July 1, 2027) There is established a Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program to provide last-dollar financial assistance for tuition and required fees to eligible students enrolled in approved educator-preparation programs at public institutions of higher education in the state.

(a) Definitions

As used in this section:

(1) “Award” means the greater of: (A) the unpaid portion, if any, of an eligible student’s eligible institutional costs after subtracting such student’s financial aid, or (B) a minimum award of five hundred dollars for a full-time student or three hundred dollars for a part-time student, provided no award shall be made in an amount that would cause such student’s total financial assistance to exceed such student’s cost of attendance, as defined in 20 USC 1087ll, as amended from time to time, or otherwise conflict with federal law.

(2) “Eligible institutional costs” means the tuition and required fees incurred each semester by an eligible student enrolled in an approved educator-preparation program at a public institution of higher education in the state.

(3) “Financial aid” means the sum of all scholarships, grants and federal, state, and institutional aid received by an eligible student, except that financial aid shall not include private scholarships, as defined in *[section 10a-NEW-13]* of the general statutes, unless excluding such private scholarships would cause such student’s total financial assistance to exceed such student’s cost of attendance, as defined in 20 USC 1087ll, as amended from time to time, or otherwise conflict with federal law. “Financial aid” does not include any federal, state, institutional or private student loans received by an eligible student.

(4) “Eligible student” means any person who:

(A) is classified as an in-state student pursuant to section 10a-29 of the general statutes;

(B) enrolls as a full-time or part-time student in an approved educator-preparation program at a public institution of higher education in the state;

(C) is making satisfactory academic progress while enrolled in such approved educator-preparation program;

(D) has completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or, if such person is ineligible to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, has completed an application for state or institutional financial aid in a form and manner prescribed by the Office of Higher Education and, if applicable, has filed any affidavit required pursuant to section 10a-29 of the general statutes; and

(E) has accepted all available nonloan grant and scholarship aid for which such person has been awarded or offered aid and is legally eligible, provided no eligible student shall be required to borrow under any federal, state, institutional or private loan program.

(5) “Approved educator-preparation program” means an educator-preparation program approved pursuant to the general statutes and regulations of Connecticut state agencies.

(6) “Full-time student” means a student enrolled in an approved educator-preparation program who meets the institution’s requirements for full-time enrollment.

(7) “Part-time student” means a student enrolled in an approved educator-preparation program who does not meet the institution’s requirements for full-time enrollment.

(8) “Public institution of higher education” means any constituent unit of the state system of public higher education identified in section 10a-1 of the general statutes, including The University of Connecticut and all campuses thereof, the Connecticut State University System, the Connecticut State Community College and all campuses thereof, and Charter Oak State College.

(9) “Year of teaching commitment” means not less than one school year, or the full-time equivalent thereof as determined by the Office of Higher Education in consultation with the Department of Education, of teaching in a Connecticut public school in a position requiring Connecticut educator certification.

(b) Establishment and Administration

(1) The Office of Higher Education, in consultation with the Board of Regents for Higher Education, the Board of Trustees of The University of Connecticut and the Department of Education, shall establish the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program to make awards to eligible students each semester and shall adopt regulations, in accordance with chapter 54 of the general statutes, and such policies, procedures and forms as are not inconsistent with such regulations, necessary to implement the program.

(c) Awards

(1) Beginning with the fiscal year designated by the General Assembly, the Office of Higher Education shall make awards to eligible students within available appropriations and funds available in the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account established pursuant to subsection (g) of this section.

(2) An award shall be available to an eligible student for the first seventy-two credit hours earned by such student in an approved educator-preparation program, provided the eligible student meets and continues to meet the requirements of this section.

(3) An award shall be calculated in accordance with subdivision (1) of subsection (a) of this section.

(4) The program shall not use an award to supplant any financial aid, including, but not limited to, state or institutional aid, otherwise available to an eligible student.

(5) If available appropriations and funds available in the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account are insufficient to make full awards to all eligible students, the Office of Higher Education shall reduce awards proportionately.

(d) Service Commitment

(1) As a condition of receiving an award, each eligible student shall agree to obtain Connecticut educator certification and teach in a Connecticut public school for five years of teaching commitment following completion of the approved educator-preparation program and certification.

(2) The Office of Higher Education, in consultation with the Department of Education, shall establish procedures for verifying fulfillment of the service commitment.

(e) Repayment

(1) An eligible student who fails to complete the approved educator-preparation program, fails to obtain Connecticut educator certification or fails to fulfill the required five-year teaching commitment shall be required to repay all or a portion of the financial assistance received under the program, as determined by the Office of Higher Education.

(2) The Office of Higher Education shall establish regulations, in accordance with chapter 54 of the general statutes, governing repayment, including provisions for prorated repayment and for suspension, waiver, or modification of repayment requirements based on hardship, military service, or other circumstances determined appropriate by the Office of Higher Education.

(3) Before determining that an eligible student is liable for repayment under this subsection, the Office of Higher Education shall provide such student written notice of the basis for repayment, the amount alleged to be owed, the method used to calculate such amount, the student's right to request an administrative hearing and the deadline for requesting such hearing. Any such hearing and any appeal from a final decision shall be conducted in accordance with chapter 54 of the general statutes. No repayment obligation shall become final until the time for requesting a hearing has expired without a timely request or, if a hearing is timely requested, until the Office of Higher Education issues a final decision after such hearing.

(f) Reporting

Not later than October 1, 2027, and each year thereafter, the Office of Higher Education, in consultation with the Board of Regents for Higher Education, the Board of Trustees of The University of Connecticut and the Department of Education, shall report, in accordance with the provisions of section 11-4a of the general statutes, to the joint standing committees of the General Assembly having cognizance of matters relating to higher education and employment

advancement and appropriations and the budgets of the state agencies regarding the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program.

The report shall include, but not be limited to:

- (1) the number of eligible students enrolled in the program during each semester;
- (2) the number of eligible students receiving minimum awards and the number receiving awards for the unpaid portion of eligible institutional costs;
- (3) the average number of credit hours eligible students enrolled in and completed during each semester;
- (4) the average amount of awards made for the unpaid portion of eligible institutional costs;
- (5) the number and percentage of eligible students completing approved educator-preparation programs;
- (6) the number and percentage of eligible students obtaining Connecticut educator certification;
- (7) the number and percentage of program participants employed in Connecticut public schools;
- (8) the retention of program participants in Connecticut public schools; and
- (9) the impact of the program on educator workforce needs, including participation, certification, placement, and retention by endorsement area and geographic region.

(g) Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account

There is established an account to be known as the “Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account,” which shall be a separate, nonlapsing account within the General Fund.

The account shall contain any moneys required by law to be deposited in the account, including, but not limited to:

- (1) state appropriations for the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program established pursuant to this section; and

(2) deposits from the Connecticut Lottery Corporation pursuant to section 12-812 of the general statutes, as amended by this act.

Moneys in the account shall be expended by the Office of Higher Education, upon appropriation, for the purposes of the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program established pursuant to this section.

(h) Connecticut Lottery Corporation Reporting

Not later than January 1, 2028, and January first annually thereafter, the president of the Connecticut Lottery Corporation shall report to the Board of Regents for Higher Education, the Board of Trustees of The University of Connecticut, the Department of Education, the Office of Higher Education and the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management:

(1) the amount of revenue received by the corporation from online lottery ticket sales, as defined in section 12-801 of the general statutes, during the current fiscal year; and

(2) an estimate of the amount that will be deposited in the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account from such sales pursuant to section 12-812 of the general statutes, as amended by this act, during the next fiscal year.

(i) Amendment to Section 12-812

Section 12-812 of the general statutes is amended by adding subsection (e) as follows (Effective July 1, 2027):

(e) On a monthly basis, after making any payment required pursuant to subsection (c) of this section to the trustee of the Connecticut Teachers' Retirement Fund Bonds Special Capital Reserve Fund, established in section 10-183vv, the president of the corporation shall estimate and certify to the State Treasurer the amount equal to *[policy choice: ___ per cent]* of revenue received by the corporation from online lottery ticket sales, as defined in section 12-801, for deposit in the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account established pursuant to section 1 of this act. The corporation shall transfer the amount so certified from the lottery and gaming fund of the corporation to the Treasurer for deposit in the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account.

(j) Funding

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program shall be funded through annual General Fund appropriations and revenues deposited into the Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program Account and shall operate within available appropriations and funds available in such account.

(k) Sunset

The Connecticut Educator Workforce Debt-Free College Program shall terminate on *[policy choice: July 1, 20__]*, unless reauthorized by the General Assembly.