

N.J. has a big shortage of substitute teachers. Could college students help?

Subscriber article



Lawmakers are considering a bill to reduce the number of college credits required to become a substitute teacher. Ed Murray | NJ Advance Media for

By [Samantha Marcus | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

New Jersey college sophomores who are at least 20-years-old could soon be eligible to become substitute teachers, a proposal lawmakers say could both increase teacher diversity and chip away at a [substitute teacher shortage](#) exacerbated by the pandemic.

Under a bill passed by the state Senate Education Committee on Monday, students enrolled in college would need to complete 30 course hours — the general equivalent of one year of college studies — to serve as a substitute teacher. Current law mandates college students who want to substitute teach have completed 60 hours of college credits.

The bill is being amended to specify the substitutes be at least 20 years old and to allow individual school districts to establish their own qualifications, said Sen. Teresa Ruiz, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee.

Although the proposal predates the coronavirus, it could also help with the current substitute teacher shortages as schools grapple with staffing needs amid the health crisis, said Ruiz, D-Essex.

The bill ([S2832](#)) is part of a legislative package to make the pool of educators more reflective of the students they teach, said Ruiz. Other proposed bills would create a mentorship

program for male students of color studying to be teachers and require cultural competency training, among others.

Just 16% of educators are people of color, compared with 56% of the state's student body, according to the state Department of Education.

The idea is to get college students into a classroom setting earlier and expose more students of color to teaching as a career and "maybe open the doors of someone who wasn't thinking about education and then falls in love with it," Ruiz said.

While not originally intended to deal with the immediate pandemic crisis, the bill is very timely and badly needed, she added.

"I am hopeful that maybe it can do both," Ruiz said.

New Jersey schools had a hard time finding substitute teachers before the pandemic, and the health crisis has only increased demand for qualified substitutes, said Richard Bozza, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators.

Citing health concerns or childcare dilemmas, classroom teachers have sought leaves of absence or remote teaching allowances, local school officials say. Some districts experienced a wave of such requests since Gov. Phil Murphy announced in mid-August districts could switch to remote-only instruction if they can't open safely, jeopardizing their ability to reopen.

Superintendents are still reporting new resignations, Bozza said, adding he expects the [teacher shortage](#) to persist, particularly with the prospect of a second wave this fall. Like Ruiz, Bozza said he hopes long term the relaxed credit requirement exposes more college students to the teaching profession and ultimately diversifies the workforce.

In the meantime, he said, there is an emergent need for more substitutes.

The Senate Education Committee approved the bill 5-1 on Monday. Sen. Samuel Thompson, R-Middlesex, voted against the bill, saying 30 hours of college credits is insufficient.

"An individual who has 30 hours of credit has finished his freshman year in college. Your freshman year you have a lot of required courses you take and so on, and they're not necessarily at all related to what you're going to do, your subject matter and so on," Thompson said. "Might as well just say somebody who graduated high school can teach."

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