SENATE BILL NO. 2122

AN ACT TO AMEND SECTION 37-159-9, MISSISSIPPI CODE of 1972, TO AUTHORIZE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS WHO ARE LICENSED UNDER AN ALTERNATE TEACHING ROUTE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE UNIVERSITY ASSISTED TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION MASTERS DEGREE PROGRAM; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSE.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI.

SECTION 1. Section 37-159-9, Mississippi Code of 1972, is amended as follows:

37-159-9. (1) There is established the University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program within the State Department of Education. The purposes of the program shall be to attract additional qualified teachers to those geographical areas of the state where there exists a critical shortage of teachers and to retain the qualified teachers already serving as licensed teachers in geographical critical teacher shortage areas by making available scholarships to persons working towards a Master of Education degree or an Educational Specialist degree at an institution of higher learning whose teacher education program is approved by the State Board of Education.

(2) Any institution of higher learning in the State of Mississippi which offers a Master of Education degree or an Educational Specialist degree may apply to the department for participation in the program. As part of the program, participating institutions shall collaborate with the Mississippi Teacher Center to identify, recruit and place teacher education graduates, from both within the state and out-of-state, in school districts situated within those areas of the state where there exists a critical shortage of teachers, as designated by the State Board of Education.
Board of Education. Any licensed teacher employed by a public
school district, including any teacher licensed under an
alternative teaching route, shall be fully eligible to participate
in the Master of Education degree or Educational Specialist Degree
Scholarship Loan Program authorized under this section.

(3) The State Department of Education shall provide funds to
participating institutions of higher learning for the purpose of
awarding scholarships to qualified persons pursuing a Master of
Education degree or an Educational Specialist degree at such
teacher in a school district in a geographical area of the state
where there exists a critical shortage of teachers, as approved by
the State Board of Education. The financial scholarship shall be
applied to the total cost for tuition, books, materials and fees
at the institution in which the student is enrolled, not to exceed
an amount equal to the highest total cost of tuition, books,
materials and fees assessed by a state institution of higher
learning during that school year. Teachers who relocate within
Mississippi from out-of-state in order to participate in the
program shall be classified as residents of the state for tuition
purposes.

(4) Students awarded financial scholarships under the
University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant
Program may receive such awards for a maximum of four (4) school
years; however, the maximum number of awards which may be made
shall not exceed the length of time required to complete the
number of academic hours necessary to obtain a Master of Education
degree or an Educational Specialist degree. Financial
scholarships under the program shall not be based upon an
applicant’s eligibility for financial aid.

(5) Persons relocating to a geographical area of the state
where there exists a critical shortage of teachers, as approved by
the State Board of Education, to participate in the University
Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program shall be eligible for reimbursement for their moving expenses to the critical teacher shortage area from the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education shall promulgate rules and regulations necessary for the administration of the relocation expense reimbursement component of the University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program.

(6) Subject to the availability of funds, the State Board of Education may provide for professional development and support services as may be necessary for the retention of teachers participating in the program in those geographical areas of the state where there exists a critical shortage of teachers.

(7) Any person participating in the program who fails to complete a program of study that will enable that person to obtain a Master of Education degree or Educational Specialist degree shall become liable immediately to the State Board of Education for the sum of all awards made to that person under the program, plus interest accruing at the current Stafford Loan rate at the time the person abrogates his participation in the program.

(8) As a condition for participation in the program, a teacher shall agree to employment as a licensed teacher in a school district located in a geographical area of the state where there exists a critical shortage of teachers, as designated by the State Board of Education, for a period of not less than three (3) years, which shall include those years of service rendered while obtaining the Master of Education degree or Educational Specialist degree. However, for any person who obtained a baccalaureate degree in education with a financial scholarship under the Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program and who entered the University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program before rendering service as a teacher, the period of employment for the purposes of this subsection shall be two (2) years, in addition to the employment commitment required under the
Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program. Service rendered by a participant as a licensed teacher in a school district in a geographical critical teacher shortage area before that teacher becomes a participant in the program may not be considered to fulfill the employment commitment required under this subsection. Any person failing to comply with this employment commitment in any required school year shall immediately be in breach of contract and become liable immediately to the State Department of Education for the sum of all scholarships awarded and relocation expenses granted to that person, less one-third (1/3) of the amount of that sum for each year that service was rendered, or for those persons whose required period of employment is two (2) years, less one-half (1/2) of the amount of that sum for each year that service was rendered, plus interest accruing at the current Stafford Loan rate at the time the breach occurs, except in the case of a deferral for cause by the State Board of Education when there is no employment position immediately available upon the teachers obtaining of the Master of Education degree or Educational Specialist degree. After the period of such deferral, the person shall begin or resume the required teaching duties or shall become liable to the board under this subsection. If a claim for repayment under this subsection is placed in the hands of an attorney for collection after default, then the obligor shall be liable for an additional amount equal to a reasonable attorney’s fee.

(9) All funds received by the State Department of Education from the repayment of scholarship awards and relocation expenses by program participants shall be deposited in the Mississippi Critical Teacher Shortage Fund.

(10) The State Board of Education shall promulgate rules and regulations necessary for the proper administration of the University Assisted Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program.
SECTION 2. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2003.