

TAKE ACTION!

Contact your congressional representatives and urge them to make college more affordable.

Specific steps to be taken include:

- Expand loan forgiveness programs to cover contingent faculty and encourage careers in education.
- Allow federal student loans to be refinanced when interest rates decline.
- Streamline federal loan repayment plans to create a single income-based option with affordable monthly payments.
- Restore federally subsidized loans for graduate students.

See nea.org/degreesnotdebt and look for the Legislative Action Center.



LOWER THAT LOAN

Student loan forgiveness programs reduce and even erase teacher debt

By KATHARINE FONG

NEW TO TEACHING, or preparing to enter the field? If you're like many, you've taken out student loans to finance your education. You should know that student loan forgiveness programs are available to help you reduce or even erase this debt.

But pay attention, because eligibility and application for the programs are complicated.

"Student loan debt is at the top of everyone's mind right now because of the increasing costs of higher education and the financial needs that everyone has," says Sean Mabey, NEA Member Benefits affiliate relations specialist for California, Colorado and Nevada. Mabey presents informational workshops for CTA members on loan forgiveness programs and reducing debt.

Eligibility depends on your loan type, current teaching

assignment and length of time teaching, Mabey says. He stresses that all student loans are highly personal and you should contact your lender regarding your eligibility.

There are two types of forgiveness programs, according to Mabey. One is the Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program and involves federal Stafford loans and Perkins loans. The other is the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program.

The programs for Stafford and Perkins loans have different eligibility requirements and different levels of debt reduction and erasure. Requirements may include:

- You're a new borrower.
- You have been employed for at least five consecutive years in an elementary or secondary school designated annually as a low-income school.

- You teach in the fields of mathematics, science, foreign language, bilingual education, special education, or another field of expertise determined annually by the state to have a shortage of qualified teachers (see sidebar).

The PSLF program forgives the balance due on your William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan Program loan after you have made 120 qualifying payments while employed full time in public service, including teaching.

CTA Member Benefits has a list of online resources to help determine your eligibility, including links to teacher shortage areas in California and the rest of the United States and eligible schools, at ctamemberbenefits.org/studentloan.

Beware of consolidation

Prospective applicants need to know that they should not consolidate their student loans through a private bank, because consolidation makes them ineligible for the forgiveness programs. (However, PSLF applicants must get a federal Direct Consolidation Loan to qualify.)

Many are unaware of this critical factor. An educator based in Oceanside, who prefers not to be named, took out loans while pursuing two master's degrees and a doctorate in K-12 curriculum and instruction. In 2006, after she received her doctorate, she consolidated her loans. Though she went on to work as a special educator in public schools, her consolidation meant she could no longer take advantage of forgiveness programs.

"I had no idea that I would qualify for loan forgiveness," she says. "I was a CTA member at the time. My universities also did not readily provide this information. They help you get the loan, but after that you are on your own."

Mabey agrees that there needs to be more awareness and dissemination of information about the programs. "When you

LEARN MORE

1. Check with CTA Member Benefits, which can point you to information, loan forgiveness applications and resources, at ctamemberbenefits.org/studentloan.
2. Look into NEA's Degrees Not Debt program aimed at making higher education costs affordable and lowering loan payments based on your income, at nea.org/degreesnotdebt or cta.org/degreesnotdebt.
3. Connect with NEA's Student Program at nea.org/studentloanhelp.
4. If you're still in college, ask your financial aid office for information.
5. Locate your paperwork at the National Student Loan Data System at nslds.ed.gov.

graduate, you're bombarded with offers to consolidate," he says. He advises that you always ask, "If I consolidate, am I still eligible for loan forgiveness?" and get the answer in writing.

An incentive to teach

More awareness of the forgiveness programs could provide a real incentive for people entering the field and staying in it. The programs are a win-win for both individual educators and the schools and subjects they work in.

Mabey urges prospective applicants not to be put off by the complex paperwork and application process. "For 80 to 90 percent of people, you teach for five years at a high-need school, have your administrator sign that paperwork, and you're done," he says.

He adds that if you're an educator in the midst of fulfilling your five-year teaching obligation before applying to a forgiveness program, you should check if you qualify for one of the plans available that may lower your monthly student loan payment based on your income.

"Try to get your payments as low as possible," he says. "You need to strike a fine balance between fulfilling your obligations as a borrower and maintaining as much of the loan as possible to be forgiven."

Eligibility for the forgiveness programs has no end date. Mabey says, "I have had some people come to me after a workshop and say, 'I taught nine years at one of the low-income schools or in one of the shortage fields. I didn't consolidate my loans. Am I eligible?' I say, 'Yes!'"

You can learn more about other Member Benefits trainings and more exclusive Member Benefits at CTAMemberBenefits.org and neamb.com. You can also contact the CTA Member Benefits department at (650) 552-5200 if you are interested in arranging a training for your local. ■



CALIFORNIA'S TEACHER SHORTAGE AREAS FOR 2015-16

- English/drama/humanities
- History/social science
- Mathematics/computer education
- Science
- Self-contained class
- Special education (including state special schools)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education