

Testimony for Teacher Shortage

Good morning, Chairman Schweyer and members of the Committee. Thank you for asking me to speak this morning on the ever-important topic of teacher shortages in Pennsylvania.

I'm Arthur Steinberg, President of AFT Pennsylvania, the state chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, which represents about 36,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, school staff, higher education faculty and staff, and state workers across 64 local unions.

I'll start this morning by stating what should be obvious: there is no one single cause of the teacher and school staff shortage, so there is no one-size-fits-all solution. That said, I hope to shed some light on the obstacles we face as a profession, as a commonwealth, and as a nation as it pertains to education and provide some idea of legislative solutions that you and your colleagues may employ to help begin closing the gap.

Just last July, our national union, the American Federation of Teachers, published a report titled, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?: What America Must Do to Attract and Retain the Educators and School Staff Our Students Need" compiled by the union's Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. As a union representing 1.7 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; federal, state and local government employees; and nurses and other healthcare professionals across the nation, our opinions on provision of education and the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff are based on firsthand knowledge.

To give you an idea of the scale of this crisis, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers nationwide were leaving the profession every year. In an op-ed that Speaker Rozzi published in the Reading Eagle in November, he mentioned that the Pennsylvania Department of Education recorded a 66% drop in newly issued in-state teaching certificates over an 11-year stretch.¹ And per a June 2022 Rand Corporation survey, about one-third of teachers and principals reported that they were likely to leave their current job by the end of the 2021-22 school year, up from about one quarter of teachers and 15 percent of principals in January 2021.

So, what do teacher and staff shortages mean for our kids and our schools?

Every child deserves to have qualified, caring teachers and staff—people who are excited to work with them every day and dedicated to giving them a rich, joyful education. We also cannot have a strong democracy and a strong economy without an engaged, informed, well-educated citizenry. Public school staff and educators are literally the builders of democracy.

Plus, our students really need their teachers and school staff around them right now. They need the stability. Children and their families are struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic caused untold grief, trauma, and economic hardship to many Americans. And even without the pandemic, the ravages of gun violence, housing and food insecurity, and parents either forced to work several jobs to make ends meet or those who have been incarcerated, all take a toll on students. At a time when teachers and school staff are so vital in helping our children and communities recover and heal, untenable conditions are driving educators away.

The good news is that this problem is solvable.

Other countries have no problem retaining their teachers and few barriers to recruitment and retention. We can do this, too.

We must tackle shortages by changing what the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force refers to as the “Four-C’s”: the conditions, compensation, climate, and culture of education professions—things that can be changed, if there is a will to change them.

The educator shortage is a challenge in both recruitment and retention. Teacher preparation enrollment dropped 35 percent between 2009 and 2014.ⁱⁱ A 2018 PDK poll showed that for the first time in 50 years, a majority of Americans opposed their own children becoming public school teachers.ⁱⁱⁱ Students see the struggles of educators; hear all the negative attacks; learn about the lack of political and financial support teachers and schools receive; and students see educators choose other professions where they know they might get more respect, higher pay, better working conditions and increased opportunities for career growth.

Along with teachers, support staff and other school positions are facing similar and harmful shortages. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this challenge. Since the pandemic, school staff employment has fallen across positions, with a 2.6 percent decrease for teaching assistants, 6 percent for custodians, and 14.7 percent for bus drivers, leaving schools without the necessary staff in almost every position.^{iv}

The most successful education systems in the world are able to recruit and retain qualified teachers because the teaching profession is greatly valued by their societies; teachers are fairly compensated; the teaching career is transparent and clearly structured; teachers are given many opportunities—and encouragement—to learn; and they receive regular feedback on their teaching, such as through mentoring programs organized by schools.^v In the U.S., those who do enter the profession are hit immediately with the realities of low pay, low support, low resources, and low trust and respect. The passion many have for education often cannot overcome the austerity, struggles and stress.

We also face a shortage in the diversity of educators. The teaching workforce is overwhelmingly white and growing less representative of the students we teach, a majority of whom are now students of color. The opportunity to learn from different perspectives is valuable to all, and in particular students of color benefit from having teachers with shared backgrounds and culture. However, we do not do enough to attract and retain a diverse workforce of teachers and educators, even implementing policies and supporting a culture that prevents people from wanting to work in schools.

While the challenges that have led to the teacher and school staff shortage may impact the number of people entering or remaining in the profession, they have not removed the genuine desire many still have to work with and help children. We need to take a different approach to education to help students achieve and attract and retain educators and staff in the profession.

First, we need to change the way schools are funded. From the recent Commonwealth Court ruling, we know Pennsylvania’s public education system is unfairly funded—Judge Cohn Jubelirer’s opinion made very clear that education equity is nearly impossible in a locally funded education system. Even with the best staff, kids cannot learn when they are homeless, hungry or struggling with other family or non-school challenges. Family income is one of the most important factors affecting a child’s educational performance, and schools with the lowest rates of poverty tend to have the highest performers.^{vi}

We cannot put a Band-Aid on the teacher and school staff shortage by cutting corners and lowering the bar for entry, as some of your colleagues have suggested. We must simultaneously raise entry standards, improve the way we treat workers, and improve recruitment and retention issues. To do this, we must give educators a larger voice in their work and allow them to have the oversight of their profession just like lawyers and doctors. Research indicates that when teachers have more control over their social and instructional roles, there is less turnover.^{vii} And less teacher turnover is good for students.^{viii}

During the pandemic, it became increasingly apparent just how vital teachers and school staff are to our nation's children. Education professionals shifted quickly to a new, emergency mode of schooling while taking on work beyond their traditional roles. The nation collectively saw educators as truly essential workers, with public outcries for higher pay and more respect. Yet when most of the country began to return to schooling (somewhat) as usual, the public outcries were gone. We cannot let this opportunity pass. Our children depend on us to take action that will improve the teaching and school staff professions. Every child deserves to have people in their schools who are well-trained, well-supported and excited to work with them every day. We need an overhaul in all aspects of the profession to ensure people want to enter and stay in school careers. The future of public education depends on it; the future of our democracy depends on it.

Solutions

The first action we must take is to revitalize the educator and school staff pipeline.

We ought to also pass a "grow-your-own" bill to support partnerships among local education agency, university and district partners to develop and sustain residency and "grow-your-own" programs.

We must also examine why teachers of color leave the profession, and consider levers aimed at increasing equity. One such lever is the licensure exam. It has proven to be a barrier to entrance to the profession for many candidates of color. States should re-examine how content knowledge and pedagogical skills are demonstrated and measured. And we should invest in culturally responsive licensure assessments. Policymakers should also name diversity as a marker of teacher quality.

We must expand support and funding for mentorship programs. This includes administrative support and dedicated time for implementation. Administrators will ensure that mentors have the ongoing training they need to be successful, and that mentors/mentees are given the opportunities they need to make the relationship effective. Mentors should go through a strict application and interview process to determine if they are right for the job.

We also need to restructure schools to create positive working and learning conditions for all. One way for our legislature to do this is to support community schools and continue to support legislation that protects staff and students from discrimination and bullying.

Along with creating positive school cultures, restructuring schools also requires addressing the day-to-day functions of teachers and school staff workers. The AFT heard from countless members about how important it is for them to be trusted by policymakers, administrators and community members to make decisions relevant to their jobs and to their students; to be given the time in their workday to plan and prepare for their instruction or other duties; to collaborate with colleagues; and to meaningfully assess

their students' work and needs; to be given the tools and resources they need to do their jobs without being overburdened by paperwork or large class sizes; and to be given ongoing, job-embedded training that allows them continuous growth and opportunities to develop within their career or between roles.

These changes will also benefit students by ensuring that the people who work with them can exercise their professional judgment to make the best, most-informed decisions regarding teaching and learning.

To achieve a system that provides workers with time, tools, trust, and training to do their jobs, legislators must work to reduce or eliminate standardized assessments on top of those that are federally required; provide diagnostic assessment tools; and create sufficient supports for performance assessments so that the validity, reliability, and comparability requirements can be met under ESSA.

Additionally, we must require an evaluator certification to ensure every evaluator has high-quality, long-term training on how to properly evaluate evidence and provide staff with appropriate feedback.

We must also immediately review the actual class sizes in all schools. This information should be published on the state's website. Many times, the real number of students in each class is hidden behind budgeting ratios such as full-time-equivalents or FTEs. States should consider legislation that limits actual class size in all grades and subjects.

Working in partnership with teachers, state legislators should consider legislation that reduces the amount of required paperwork from teachers and school staff by removing what is redundant or unnecessary. States should investigate using technology to collect and analyze education data without burdening teachers or staff and by streamlining what tools are used.

And we must expand funding and access to high-quality professional advancement opportunities.

Finally, the teaching profession must provide sustainable and commensurate compensation and benefits.

When teachers and school staff ask for higher pay, we are often perceived as wanting to take money and resources away from students, as selfish, or suggest that we knew about the pay when we joined the profession. That narrative, however, does not accurately represent the situation that faces many teachers and school staff: Many are not paid a living wage; they must take on a second or even third job to afford necessities; they are burdened with the high costs of healthcare; and they have unimaginable student loan debt. It is true that most people do not enter education professions expecting to become rich, but they should have the expectation that they will not have to go into debt to take a job, that they will be able to start and support a family, and that they will be compensated for their education and for the job that they do.

To meet this challenge, we must create and pay for robust, speedy loan forgiveness programs—Last session, Speaker Rozzi introduced the PA Teach Scholarship Program to provide scholarships up to \$8,000 per year (for a maximum of \$32,000 over four years) to eligible students graduating from the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. This would be an excellent first step.

Pennsylvania should also codify a salary floor for teachers and set a living wage standard by county or metro area and use it to create a salary floor for every worker in their public schools and colleges.

Conclusion

Our proposed solutions recognize the need to reverse and rewire many, many years of poor policy and decision-making that have led to this point, and reflect the realities faced by students and educators each day.

The adage “teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions” has never been more apt. The effects of long-term neglect, never-ending austerity, misguided policy, lack of respect, concerns about health and safety, political attacks, combined with a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic have made schools a very tough place in which to work and learn. Large class sizes, inadequate time for planning and collaboration, obsessing over standardized tests, too few support staff and bus drivers, and obsolete or scarce learning materials not only affect teachers’ and school staff’s ability to do their jobs, but these things also negatively impact student learning.

Teachers experience twice as much stress as the general population.^{ix} Although educators’ passion to serve their students remains strong, the deteriorating working conditions are taking a heavy toll.

We will not be able to recruit or retain educators and school staff in a broken system. The current situation is not sustainable. Things must change. Yes, in the short-term, but with the long-term in mind.

These solutions, grounded in the realities facing teachers and school staff, are not new—they are what educators and their unions have been seeking for decades. And now, we look forward to working on them with you.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak and I’m happy to answer any questions you may have.

ⁱ <https://www.readingeagle.com/2022/11/14/how-to-boost-pennsylvanias-new-educator-pipeline-opinion/>

ⁱⁱ https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/body/Teacher_Shortages_Causes_Impacts_2018_MEMO.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ajc.com/blog/get-schooled/new-poll-majority-parents-don-want-their-kids-become-teachers/Gqdq0h8hbFmkmJpOhVch2J/#:~:text=The%202018%20PDK%20poll%20on,becoming%20a%20public%20school%20teacher>

^{iv} <https://www.epi.org/publication/solving-k-12-staffing-shortages/>

^v OECD. (2016). Overview: Policies and practices for successful schools: PISA 2015 Results (Volume II).

^{vi} OECD, Equity and Quality in Education, 2012.

^{vii} https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg_potter_sb

^{viii} Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff, “How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement,” AERJ, (2013).

^{ix} https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-4.html