



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
The Educator Shortage**

**Presented to the
Senate Education Committee**

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By

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Good morning, Chairman Argall, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Rich Askey, President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I want to begin by first expressing our gratitude for your inviting PSEA to share our perspective on the educator shortage, but more importantly, for hosting this vital conversation. I hear from PSEA members every week about the challenges they face in their schools and how staffing challenges impact the day-to-day operations of schools, the delivery of instruction, and the overall quality of teaching and learning environments.

The educator shortage is a crisis - not an ideological wedge issue. All parents want their children to learn from effective and properly trained educators and to have access to the support of staff like school nurses or counselors when they need it. Taking steps to implement a cohesive and bipartisan strategy to address the educator shortage now, and in years to come, is something we can all agree is a priority.

BACKGROUND DATA

I have been an educator for more than 30 years-long enough to remember when Pennsylvania was considered an exporter of teachers, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. That is not the case today. Based on the most recently available data from the Department of Education (PDE), Pennsylvania has experienced a 64 percent decline in the number of Instructional I certificates issued to in-state graduates between 2010 and 2021. PSEA has been sounding the alarm on this drastic decline in our pipeline, but let's consider two other important factors that shed light on the severity and nature of this educator shortage. First, during that same eleven-year period, there has been a 300 percent increase in the number of emergency permits issued.

| <u>Year</u> | <u>In-State Certificates Issued</u> | <u>Out-of-State Certificates Issued</u> | <u>Emergency Permits (Types 1 and 4)</u> |
|--------------------|--|--|---|
| 2010-2011 | 15,031 | 2,080 | 1,845 |
| 2011-2012 | 13,503 | 1,396 | 896 |
| 2012-2013 | 16,614 | 2,343 | 1,214 |
| 2013-2014 | 9,893 | 1,290 | 1,165 |
| 2014-2015 | 8,751 | 1,329 | 1,377 |
| 2015-2016 | 8,271 | 1,402 | 1,971 |

| | | | |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2016-2017 | 4,412 | 992 | 2,972 |
| 2017-2018 | 5,842 | 1,076 | 3,783 |
| 2018-2019 | 5,505 | 1,125 | 4,330 |
| 2019-2020 | 5,128 | 878 | 4,665 |
| 2020-2021 | 5,440 | 1,101 | 5,958 |

Source: PDE – Act 82 Report. <https://www.education.pa.gov/DataAndReporting/Pages/Act82.aspx>.

Second, a deeper dive into the data demonstrates that “teacher attrition does not appear to be the primary driver of the shortage of teachers in Pennsylvania.”¹ An analysis of the data indicates that annual teacher attrition from 2014-15 to 2021-22 ranges from 7.5 to 6.0. In fact, Pennsylvania is below the national average for teacher attrition.² Attrition is greatest at the beginning of an educator’s career and as they approach retirement age based on years of service. In addition, the difference in the attrition rates in school districts vs. charter schools is stark, with the rate of charter school teachers leaving the profession being “at least double the rates of teachers in school districts.”³

This situation is simply not sustainable.

All of this data tells us a few things:

1. Pennsylvania has a supply problem. The commonwealth is not producing enough teachers to meet demand.
2. If teachers are going to exit the profession, they will most likely do it within the first three years of their career.
3. Charter schools have a more substantial issue with attrition than school districts.

Why don’t young people want to become educators? How do we recruit the next generation of educators? How do we better support our early career educators? We need to ask these questions loudly and swiftly to devise solutions.

¹ Fuller, Ph.D., Ed. Pennsylvania Teacher Staffing Challenges Fall 2022. The Pennsylvania State University Department of Education Policy Studies. Page 10.

² Ibid.

³ Fuller, Ph.D., Ed. Pennsylvania Teacher Staffing Challenges Fall 2022. The Pennsylvania State University Department of Education Policy Studies. Page 11.

REBUILDING THE EDUCATOR PIPELINE

Substitute Teachers

In the short term, the lack of substitutes represents one of the most pressing of pipeline needs. Here are some examples of what is happening in schools:

- Students have been reassigned to large study halls in cafeterias and auditoriums at the secondary level for asynchronous instruction on an iPad or laptop, whereas elementary classes are being split and assigned to other classrooms for the day.
- Teachers are losing lunch and prep periods to cover other classrooms. Not only are they losing valuable time to plan instruction, but they are also losing equally precious time to have a mental break. Their days are truly non-stop.
- Sometimes, when a teacher is absent, multiple teachers cover a single class at various points throughout the day because a single substitute is not available.
- Administrators are providing coverage as a desperate last effort to have an adult in the room.

Fortunately, the General Assembly responded with Act 91 of 2021, which provided some much-needed relief. PSEA was proud to work on the development of HB 412, which became Act 91, widening the pool of potential substitutes, streamlining the process for retired educators to return to the classroom, and allowing for the designation of classroom monitors. This was a necessary band-aid to help alleviate the current crisis and will hopefully provide teachers and administrators with some relief. Some of the law's provisions were purposefully temporary. We are looking forward to the report from PDE in April to understand if schools used the classroom monitor permit to provide classroom coverage, but also if they responded to demand by increasing substitute teacher pay and making it worthwhile for people to take on those roles.

Aspiring Educators

Fixing the longer-term educator pipeline is going to take a sustained, multi-year commitment. It should be informed by data and feedback from current and aspiring educators, as well as high school students considering the profession.

One such group that PSEA is listening to is our aspiring educators. PSEA enjoys the honor of representing 7,000 future educators who are actively enrolled in teacher preparation programs. They would be the first to tell you that the excessive cost of attaining a bachelor's degree has been one of the greatest barriers for individuals seeking to enter and remain in the teaching profession. Forty-five percent of today's educators took out student loans to finance their education with a total average loan amount of \$55,580.⁴ Long-term income projections and the

⁴ "Student Loan Debt Among Educators: A National Crisis." July 2021. National Education Association and the Center for Enterprise Strategy. <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Student%20Loan%20Debt%20among%20Educators.pdf>.

ability to afford student loan payments, housing, transportation, and other necessities and accomplish personal life goals are things EVERYONE considers when they plan their future. The continued demonization of educators by some parents, the changes to the retirement system, and the failure of school districts to keep up with the private sector in terms of starting salaries for similarly-educated professionals have not encouraged the next generation to commit their talents to public schools.

Our future teachers would also tell you that the traditional student-teaching model is an emerging barrier. Pennsylvania requires a 12-week student teacher experience. There are two concerns with these programs. First, for both traditional and non-traditional students, a lack of income for a semester is often not feasible, especially for those living independently and/or lacking family support. The traditional student-teaching model does not contemplate the current economic conditions of our society. Second, student-teaching placements are not guaranteed to be local for the student teacher. In fact, depending on availability candidates can be forced to travel over an hour each way to their placement. This might seem insignificant to you and me but put yourself in the shoes of a 21-year-old who is trying to pay for housing, keep up with transportation costs, and get back to their campus for other course responsibilities following their student teaching day.

States are responding to these concerns of aspiring educators by creating PAID student-teaching experiences. Oklahoma committed \$12.75 million in federal relief funds to pay eligible Oklahoma college students for their work as student teachers. Michigan's state budget now includes \$50 million for stipends for student teachers, providing up to \$9,600 per semester to help with tuition, living expenses, childcare, and other costs associated with student teaching. In Colorado, teacher candidates placed in a semester-long academic residency may receive a stipend of up to \$11,000.

We must remember that aspiring educators do not just pay tuition to earn a bachelor's degree. There are also fees associated with assessments to achieve certification, certification fees to PDE, costs for the 24 post-baccalaureate credits required to get an Instructional II certificate, and finally the ongoing costs associated with professional development for the rest of an educator's career. Two years ago, one of our student members tallied his costs to get his certification after college. He spent \$1,128 to become certified in Pennsylvania with four state certificates – including his Instructional I – all before he started earning a paycheck.

Finally, we would be naïve to believe that compensation does not play a role in a young person's career planning, particularly when we consider the significant costs associated with becoming a teacher. Salaries have simply not kept up with inflation. Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that many states, including Florida, Arkansas, and Maryland, have proposed or passed significant increases in their starting teacher salaries, while Pennsylvania's statutory minimum salary remains at \$18,500.

Educator Diversity

Within the overall educator shortage, there is an even uglier problem. Pennsylvania lacks teachers of color. A [report](#) issued by Research for Action in December 2020 on educator diversity in Pennsylvania found that:

- Students of color make up 36 percent of Pennsylvania’s public school student population, yet teachers of color comprise only six percent of the educator workforce.
- 138 school districts and 1,078 public schools had zero educators of color during any of the prior seven school years. In these schools, an average of 15 percent of students were students of color.

Further, a [report](#) issued by the Learning Policy Institute in April 2018 revealed that when taught by teachers of color, students of color have better academic performance and improved graduation rates and are more likely to attend college. As we aim to resolve the overall shortage, Pennsylvania must concurrently focus on educator diversity.

Attracting and Retaining Educators

Solutions that focus on both recruitment and retention are the key to effectively addressing the education workforce shortage. The good news is that policymakers have already taken preliminary steps to help address Pennsylvania’s education workforce needs. Act 55 of 2022 established a strong foundation upon which we can build and strengthen our efforts to support a robust and diverse pipeline of aspiring educators and support staff long-term. Act 55 included evidence-based strategies such as the creation of a program of study that was specifically designed to provide high school students with early exposure to K-12 education career pathways and will allow aspiring educators to begin earning post-secondary credits while still in high school. In addition, the law established the Talent Recruitment Grant Program within PDE, which, if funded, would provide grants to institutions of higher education to increase diversity within teacher preparation programs. Finally, the law created the Chief Talent Officer within PDE, who is responsible for coordinating recruitment and retention efforts in the education workforce and increasing participation in education-related jobs, including outreach efforts to communities that have low participation in the education workforce.

Another strategy that would build seamlessly into this foundation to ensure long-term success in rebuilding the educator pipeline would be for policymakers to establish and invest in a statewide Grow-Your-Own program. Grow-Your-Own programs are partnerships between school entities, community organizations, and institutions of higher education that are designed to recruit AND retain individuals from within the local school community to meet local education workforce needs on an ongoing basis. Grow -our-Own models are particularly effective because recruiting from local communities means that school staff are more likely to reflect student demographics. Grow-Your-Own programs provide technical and financial assistance for the development and implementation of multiple pathways which are designed to support participants in becoming

certified educators. Grants can be used to support participants in wage-earning internships, mentoring, and tuition assistance to help cover the costs associated with quality preparation and post-secondary credential attainment.

In addition to the pathway for high school students that was established via the program of study under Act 55, a Grow-Your-Own Program in Pennsylvania will help to fill other gaps and meet challenges that exist along the educator workforce continuum. PSEA is working with Senator Comitta to craft Grow-Your-Own legislation that seeks to support education preparation program candidates by providing technical and financial assistance to partnerships between postsecondary providers and districts that offer candidates high-quality clinical experiences and coursework throughout the preparation program. This pathway is designed to employ and retain the programs' teacher candidates and ensure that students completing postsecondary programs are prepared to teach in the specific communities that need them the most. A third pathway would tap current school staff, including paraprofessionals and instructional aides, who have demonstrated a commitment to school-based employment and who have already completed some post-secondary work, by creating a pathway for those individuals to become full-time certified educators. Finally, we cannot overlook the challenges that schools are facing in filling support positions. Grow-Your-Own programs can include a fourth pathway for individuals who are looking to re-enter the workforce or shift to school-based employment by filling paraprofessional and other support staff positions that require an associate degree or some level of postsecondary study to qualify for employment.

Compensation is a critical factor in one's decision whether to enter or remain in the education profession. Educator compensation must reflect the value that these professionals provide to their students, their communities, and society as a whole. Educator and support staff contract negotiations cannot be approached as an opportunity to pinch pennies, but instead must be a means of establishing appropriate levels of salary and benefits that will keep educators in the classroom. That shift in approach should begin at the top – through legislative efforts to increase funding for schools, thereby negating tax impact on district taxpayers, and raising the minimum educator salary, which has remained unchanged since 1989. Several other states including Maryland, Delaware, Texas, and Arkansas have enacted or proposed an increase in educator salaries. That is why PSEA is advocating for lawmakers to increase the statewide minimum salary to \$60,000 for certified educators and \$20/hour for support professionals. As we collectively prepare for the state budget process and related School Code negotiations, PSEA asks that you prioritize these proven strategies and advocate for meaningful investments to implement them statewide. These are the most meaningful actions that lawmakers can take to immediately begin rebuilding and strengthening Pennsylvania's education workforce.

Prioritizing Health and Mental Health Professionals

Even before the COVID crisis, our educators were pushed to maximum limits. Working in schools today is completely different from those times when Pennsylvania had an oversupply of

educators. Technology (cell phones, computers, etc.), social media, toxic standardized testing, a diminished retirement system, mass school shootings, facilities in dire need of repairs and improvements, and the long-term consequences of the pandemic are the reality of current and future educators. On top of these complex demands, educators must support students through ever-more prevalent mental health needs, without an adequate support structure of in-school or community mental health resources. These challenges not only impact the students facing crisis, but also cause disruption and uncertainty in the broader classroom environment, impacting all students.

Often overlooked in the rhetoric around the “educator shortage” is the fact that this term includes not only teachers, but pupil services employees like school nurses, psychologists, counselors, and social workers. Teachers serve many roles for their students, helping them learn, grow, and explore their interests. But for children and youth to really thrive, they need access to pupil service employees. Many of our students are struggling with mental health issues, anxiety, depression, bullying, and self-harm, as evidenced by the 83,000+ reports received via the Safe 2 Say Something system. This crisis is not unique to Pennsylvania. We’ve known for a long time that our districts do not employ the recommended numbers of mental and physical health staff, including school nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists, and dental hygienists, and the need for the services these professionals provide has grown exponentially since March of 2020.

Certainly, strategies like those suggested above for teachers and paraprofessionals also must be considered to attract and retain health and mental health professionals in a school setting. In addition, we must continue to invest in targeted programs to remove barriers to entry for practitioners to work in schools. Schools are very different practice environments than clinical settings, therefore internship or practicum experiences provide invaluable insight and preparation prior to employment. However, these internships are often unpaid and do not provide health benefits, creating a financial disincentive for those interested in pursuing work in schools. This financial burden also contributes to a “brain drain” of professionals who may choose to study and subsequently seek employment in other states that provide incentives.

The General Assembly wisely appropriated funding in Act 55 to provide stipends to help sustain professionals during their internship experience, based on legislation championed by Senators Michele Brooks and Lindsey Williams. We thank them for their foresight and urge legislators to continue this investment in future years to address the massive gaps between existing and optimal staffing levels. Given that there is high demand for health care and mental health professionals in all practice settings, we must also be aware of the highly competitive nature of this labor market. Practitioners are being lured away from work in school settings with the promise of higher pay and more flexible work environments in private or clinical practice.

In the absence of qualified health professionals to whom students can be referred, teachers and paraprofessionals bear the brunt of their students’ distress. Often the challenges impacting student performance originate from factors completely outside an educator’s control, such as

unresolved issues at home, including food or housing insecurity or lack of reliable transportation or support in the home. Educators care deeply about their students, but they are not trained counselors or social workers. Watching a student struggle and being unable to help weighs heavily on the hearts of our school staff. Districts must view adding these positions as a means to improve well-being for both students AND educators.

Protecting Quality

While we have raised significant issues and the many challenges associated with addressing the educator shortage, we must state for the record that the very worst possible solution would be to lower standards for our school employees. Our students deserve better. Pennsylvania’s educator certification requirements are some of the most rigorous and comprehensive in the nation. These high-quality standards must be lauded and protected. During times of crisis, it may seem tempting to loosen standards and fast-track preparation; however, we know that this just leads to much higher rates of turnover. For example, many people point to Teach for America (TFA) and lowering certification requirements as a solution. But those people ignore the studies that have demonstrated that retention rates among TFA are lower than overall retention rates. After four years, only 14.8 percent of TFA graduates are in the same placement and only 27.8 percent are still teaching.⁵ Compare that retention rate to an estimated 50 percent for all new teachers across all types of schools and I think we can agree that we must address the underlying issues of why teachers leave – not create new, failing programs.⁶

CONCLUSION

Pennsylvania’s educators and support staff have risen to meet every challenge and every hurdle placed in their path – all with the singular focus to do what they love – care for and teach students. Policymakers can demonstrate their respect for and the value they place on the work our educators have done and continue to do by tackling the educator shortage in a way that doesn’t blame them for the problem or diminish their calling. Rather, I humbly ask policymakers to approach the educator shortage in a way that recognizes my friends’ and colleagues’ value to children, communities, and society. PSEA stands ready to work with all policymakers to respond to the teacher shortage in a holistic way that puts solutions in place, so we’re not dealing with this same issue in another twenty years.

Thank you, again, for the invitation to participate today and for your consideration of PSEA’s comments. I will be happy to answer any of your questions.

⁵ Morgaen L. Donaldson and Susan Moore Johnson. 2011. “[Teach For America Teachers: How Long Do They Teach? Why Do They leave?](#)” Phi Delta Kappan, 93, 2, Pp. 47-51.

⁶ Smith, T. & Ingersoll R.M. (2003, May). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. Educational Leadership, 60 (8), 30-33.