

Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers
Testimony to the Senate Policy Committee
On Teacher Shortages and More
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On behalf of the 3,000 incredibly hardworking and increasingly stressed teachers, paraprofessionals and technical-clerical staff I currently represent as President of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

I'm here today to sound an alarm about the weakening physical, emotional and mental well-being of the dedicated educators I serve throughout the Pittsburgh Public School district.

This alarm should also serve as a red-alert warning about a potential upcoming perfect storm—a possible tempest of early retirements, combined with good, experienced teachers now considering leaving our profession, combined with an alarming decline in applications to regional and statewide teacher preparation institutions that provide our school districts with new talent every year.

Any one of these elements – retirements, departures, and fewer new teachers – is a cause for concern. Taken together? We are soon facing the teacher shortages that have plagued other states for a number of years now. Shortages very likely accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, I'm confident you will hear a lot of pain points and sobering statistics about shortages across the entirety of a school district's footprint— shortages in teachers, paras, technical-clerical staff, counselors, service providers, security staff, custodial staff, early childhood teachers, bus drivers, substitutes, administrative staff and more.

While these growing shortages are quite painful district-to-district across our commonwealth, I fear that you might be lulled into a belief that our current list of problems is something new or something pandemic-driven.

Take it from me: we teachers have been sounding the alarm for years.

About not having adequate mental health or resiliency support in our schools. About needing more qualified paraprofessionals and other support personnel, including professional security staff, when needed – because TEACHERS SIMPLY CAN'T DO IT ALL.

We've been sounding the alarm about securing adequate pay and top-notch healthcare to attract the best candidates; about increasing opportunities for diversity throughout our teachers' ranks; and about reinstating the retirement system that, in the past, was truly an incentive to go into and then stay in education.

We've been sounding the alarm about public education dollars siphoned away from districts to largely unaccountable charter schools. It is a well-known fact that Pennsylvania has one of the worst charter-school laws in the country. This year in Pittsburgh alone, over one in every seven budget dollars will go to charter schools not held to the same accountability standards that public schools are.

We've also been sounding the alarm about doing more with less—educators are wearing more hats than we ever thought possible: educator, counselor, security aide, therapist, fight referee, surrogate parent, and mediator when needed.

And now with the pandemic ... we are the technology expert, interactive teacher and virus police. We are the mask monitor and the transportation captain when buses are late, or don't show at all.

We're filling in wherever we can to help out in our schools ... but in the process we're losing our prep periods, skipping lunch, skipping bathroom breaks—all to maximize time that was already stretched too thin. We have little or no time to collaborate or innovate.

There are simply less of us to go around while we are being asked to do more — and being held accountable for more – than I have ever seen. We're not being consulted or used as subject matter experts. Not just with relentless testing protocols that dwarf authentic teaching time or head-scratching changes to Act 13 in teacher evaluation, but within the increasingly politicized chambers of School Boards, now becoming populated by individuals who lack any meaningful education experience or knowledge.

And all while we've seen a significant increase in violence in some of our schools, and the

unthinkable trauma our educators suffer while trying to manage students acting out against one another, and against the adults sworn to protect them.

Recently, one of our Pittsburgh students was shot and killed while he waited in his school van—a crushing loss for our whole district, and a particularly devastating blow to the school family that knew and loved him.

And yet our teachers and paraprofessionals are still waiting for the extra counselors and social workers that were promised as support for a successful return to the school year.

Our District states they can't find enough counselors and social workers to hire: Our Board of Directors claim that the ESSER money "has not come in yet". But without these supports, all our teachers are seeing and feeling pain and trauma and violence and uncertainty in our schools.

And if that isn't a recipe for an impending teacher shortage, then I don't know what is.

In closing, I want to be sure you know I still believe wholeheartedly in the potential and purpose of public education; the eternal, powerful promise of students; and the remarkable dedication and selflessness of professional educators. I have always been so proud to be a teacher.

I believe that our public schools, properly staffed and supported, are the solution to most of society's truly difficult problems.

However, my son Luke informed us he is interested in joining the family business—to do his part as a teacher like he's seen from his mom and dad and many other family members over the years.

As much as it breaks my heart to admit this, I have to be honest: **I don't know if I want him to do it. Not unless our teachers are finally provided with the support they need to do the job properly. Educators deserve it---and our students require it in order to be successful.**

I may not want my own son to become a teacher.

If that doesn't truly alarm you ... then nothing else I've said today will, either. Thank you.