



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

**Public Hearing Regarding
The Educator Shortage**

**Presented to the
Senate Democratic Policy Committee
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**By
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Good morning, Chairwoman Muth, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee. I am Rich Askey, President of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I want to begin by first expressing our gratitude to the Senate Democratic Policy Committee for inviting PSEA to share our perspective, but more importantly, for hosting this vital conversation. It is imperative that policymakers – all policymakers – start talking about this issue, so we can consider statewide solutions to triage a situation that is worsening by the day.

The educator shortage is a crisis. It's a national crisis. It's a Pennsylvania crisis. It has the potential to change the delivery of education if we don't get proactive and start implementing strategies to resolve it now. The educator shortage is not an ideological wedge issue. Parents want great public schools. Parents want in-person learning. All of this means that schools need to have properly trained and certificated staff employed and available for instruction.

SUBSTITUTE TEACHER SHORTAGE

No one should be surprised that we're experiencing an educator shortage. We've seen the signs that this crisis was on the horizon for years, with the most glaring early warning sign being the substitute teacher shortage.

In the short term, substitutes represent the most pressing of pipeline needs because of the pandemic and the need to keep schools open for in-person learning while educators may be ill or forced to quarantine. It might be hard to believe, but the substitute shortage is worse this school year than last. I speak to our members - my friends and colleagues - and I can share that teachers and support staff are feeling a level of pressure and frustration unlike anything they have experienced before. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "by the end of September, I felt like it was May." As the Delta and Omicron variants made their way through communities and the regular circulation of illnesses began, the need for substitutes steadily ticked up by the day. Here are some examples of what is happening in schools:

- Teachers are losing lunch and prep periods to cover other classrooms. So not only are they losing valuable time to plan instruction; they are losing equally precious time to have a mental break. Their days are truly non-stop.
- Students are being 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.
- Sometimes, when teachers are absent, multiple teachers cover a single class during school days.
- Paraprofessionals and administrators are providing coverage as a desperate last effort to have an adult in the room.

Fortunately, the General Assembly responded with Act 91 in December. I want to be clear on two points:

First, PSEA was proud to work on the development of the original legislation (HB 412) and the amendment that was adopted on the Senate floor. And second, we don't think that Act 91 is the cure-all for the substitute teacher shortage. On the contrary, it was a necessary band aid to help alleviate the current crisis and will hopefully provide teachers and administrators with some relief this school year and next. Some of the bill's provisions are purposefully temporary so we can determine if certain provisions were effective or had no impact. But to sit back and do nothing or just say we should only rely on retirees was not an option for PSEA. *Our members were unequivocally clear – Help us right now. Do something.* I'm proud that we did and I'm grateful to every legislator who supported HB 412.

THE EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

We can't solve the substitute teacher shortage until we address the underlying problem of the educator shortage – including both teachers and education support professionals. Pennsylvania is not the exporter of teachers that many recall from the 1990s and early 2000s. The data is staggering. Pennsylvania has experienced a 66 percent decline in the number of Instructional I certificates issued to in-state graduates and 58 percent decline in the number of certificates issued to graduates intending to work out-of-state. This is not sustainable.

<u>Year</u>	<u>In-State Certificates Issued</u>	<u>Out-of-State Certificates Issued</u>
2010-2011	15,031	2,080
2011-2012	13,503	1,396
2012-2013	16,614	2,343
2013-2014	9,893	1,290
2014-2015	8,751	1,329
2015-2016	8,271	1,402
2016-2017	4,412	992
2017-2018	5,842	1,076
2018-2019	5,505	1,125
2019-2020	5,128	878

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

What happened? Why don't young people want to become educators? We need to ask that question loudly and swiftly to devise solutions. The pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated the impact of the educator shortage. Not only are people not going into the profession, but we're seeing many long-time educators - people with a decade or more of experience, people who are in the prime of their instructional careers - leave in the last 18 months. It's too much. The pressure of COVID-19 mitigation both in schools and at home has sucked the last ounce of joy from the profession. In addition to working under COVID-19 mitigation and managing both in-person and virtual education switches over the past two years, and trying to support students who've experienced trauma, loss, and disappointment, these experienced educators have also been made the scapegoats of political posturing and community frustration. It's too much. Education has always been one of the most well-respected professions, the profession that creates all other professions, but educators are not feeling respected right now.

Educators became teachers because they love their craft, but their craft isn't as important as their survival right now.

THE PROBLEM

The deterioration of the educator pipeline occurred steadily over a ten-year period, so we must begin our efforts with the understanding that fixing this problem is not something that is going to occur in a single budget year. It's going to take a sustained, multi-year effort to turn the tide - one that should be informed by data and outreach to current educators and young people to understand the challenges and considerations they are facing to stay in or enter the profession.

There is no single root cause of the shortage, nor a quick and easy antidote. But we do know the excessive cost of attaining a bachelor's degree and maintaining certification has been one of the greatest barriers for individuals to enter and remain in the teaching profession. It is impossible for educators with high student loan debt to stay in public service, particularly in areas of the state that are plagued by low salaries, and afford things like rent or a mortgage, transportation, and other necessities. Moreover, we must remember that teachers do not just get a bachelor's degree. There are 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 their career. Last spring, 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.

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 last 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.

REBUILDING THE EDUCATOR PIPELINE

Attracting Educators

The good news is that we know there are preliminary steps that policymakers can take right now that will help address Pennsylvania’s education workforce needs in the longer term. We are grateful for the opportunity to have worked with members of the Senate to help develop a bipartisan proposal that is aimed at attracting and training the next generation of Pennsylvania educators. PSEA strongly supports Senate Bill 99, which is jointly sponsored by Senators Hughes and Aument. This legislation represents more than a year of stakeholder engagement, a process that culminated in a comprehensive proposal which, upon introduction, had already earned the support of the education community.

Senate Bill 99 proposes evidence-based strategies to support a robust and diverse pipeline of aspiring educators now and in the future. First, this legislation would establish high school CTE programs that are specifically designed to provide students with early exposure to K-12 education career pathways and allow interested students to begin their career training and credentialing—at no cost—while still in high school. In addition, SB 99 expands dual enrollment programs, which - if funded- can make post-secondary education significantly more affordable. Third, the legislation would establish the Diversification of Education Workforce Fund, which would provide competitive grants to institutions of higher education to increase diversity within teacher preparation programs. Finally, the bill would require PDE to collect and publish data, set goals, and coordinate efforts around teacher recruitment, retention, and diversity.

As we collectively position for the state budget process and related School Code negotiations, PSEA asks that you prioritize passage of Senate Bill 99 and allocate \$10 million for the first year of the Diversification of the Education Workforce Grant Program. These are the most meaningful actions that lawmakers can take to immediately begin rebuilding and strengthening Pennsylvania's education workforce.

We would also encourage you to look at other states and their efforts to attract the next generation of educators. Even a state like Indiana, under former governor and Vice-President Mike Pence, enacted a teacher student loan forgiveness program. The [Next Generation Hoosier](#)

[Educators Scholarship Program](#) was created more than five years ago and provides scholarships to eligible applicants of up to \$7,500 per year for four years. For the low price of \$2.7 million annually, the program is supporting 200 future educators per year. Perhaps this program could be a model for a targeted Pennsylvania program.

Retaining Educators

Earlier in my testimony I mentioned the substitute teacher shortage. Not surprisingly, the primary reasons cited for not wanting to serve as a substitute - low pay, lack of benefits, lack of respect, and increasing concerns about school climate – are fully in line with reasons our full-time teachers are leaving the profession at such high rates. If the Commonwealth is serious about addressing this crisis, then it must adopt a cohesive policy and resource framework aimed at addressing the major factors identified that influence why teachers leave *before* retirement, and what improvements might cause them to stay: high-quality preparation and professional supports; competitive compensation that recognizes the skill, knowledge, and commitment required for teaching; and working conditions that foster a climate of being valued and respected.

In this area, there is an immediate step that public school administrators and school boards can take to demonstrate the value and respect they have for their employees and substitutes. Public school entities were provided with \$4.5 billion of funding through the American Rescue Plan’s (ARP’s) third iteration of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund. The U.S. Department of Education and PDE have repeatedly told school administrators they can use these funds to increase substitute teacher pay and provide one-time retention bonuses to educators. The days of paying substitute teachers \$90 or \$100 per day are over. The pandemic and the economy restructured what individuals are willing to accept to come into schools. Increasing substitute teacher pay and thinking about how those Federal dollars could be used for temporary building substitute positions – including benefits -- is the perfect use of ARP ESSER dollars. Strategies like these could provide greater day-to-day stability for teachers and students. There should be no hesitation to use these dollars for such. Similarly, there should be no hesitation to use these one-time dollars as retention bonuses for current educators. We cannot lose more teachers, support professionals, nurses, and other mental health professionals to burnout. What one-time retention bonuses say to educators is simple, “We see you. We hear you. We know this is hard. We’re providing you with this bonus to make your life just a little easier. Please stay with us.” Sometimes, people just need to know they are being seen and heard.

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, and the long-term consequences of the pandemic are the reality of current and future educators. On top of these complex demands, educators are trying to support students and their families while the global workforce is changing around them. Highly educated professionals have found that they want more flexibility in their

work schedules, and employers have necessarily adapted to recognize that changing reality. But most students and their families need consistent in-person education to thrive, thus work schedule flexibility is not an option for most school staff. Given this, we must consider other ways to keep educators from seeking that flexibility in other professions.

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, raising the minimum educator salary, and considering retention bonuses as I mentioned earlier.¹

Prioritizing Health and Mental Health Professionals

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 55,000+ reports received via the Safe 2 Say Something system and by consulting any news outlet. 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 similar to those suggested above must be considered to attract and retain these professionals in a school setting. In the absence of qualified health professionals to which students can be referred, teachers and paraprofessionals bear the brunt of their students’ distress. Educators care deeply about their students, but they are not trained counselors. Watching a student struggle socially or emotionally 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

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

¹ North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Michigan have all enacted short-term retention efforts.

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.² 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.³

CONCLUSION

During COVID, it has been our educators doing everything in their power to keep students safe and learning – whether virtually or in-person. It has been our educators and staff supporting students through grief, trauma, and loss – all while dealing with much of that in their own lives. They 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 value of 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 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.

² 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.

³ Smith, T. & Ingersoll R.M. (2003, May). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. Educational Leadership, 60 (8), 30-33.