

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Teacher Shortages

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My name is Lindsey Burke. I am the Mark A. Kolokotronis Fellow in Education and the Director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation.

Public school districts have been on a hiring spree for decades. Although there has been teacher turnover as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no shortage of school staff across the country.

It is true that 44 percent of public schools reported at least one teacher vacancy as of January 2022. Half of those vacancies were the result of resignations, and 61 percent of those resignations were the result of COVID policies.¹ Across the country, the Bureau of Labor Statistics currently reports 386,000 teacher vacancies – up from 108,000 vacancies ten years ago.² While that may sound alarming, these figures have to be considered in the larger context of an ongoing school staffing surge.

Significant growth in non-teacher administrative staff has opportunity costs for school districts. From 2000 to 2019, while the number of students and teachers in public schools increased a modest eight percent,³ the number of principals and assistant principals increased 37 percent, and the number of school district administrative staff increased 88 percent.⁴ Today,

¹ Lauren Camera, New Federal Data Shows Pandemic's Effects on Teaching Profession, U.S. News & World Report, March 2, 2022, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2022-03-02/new-federal-data-shows-pandemics-effects-on-teaching-profession#:~:text=As%20of%20January%202022%2C%2044,and%20retirements%20accounted%20for%2021%25>

² Tracie Mauriello and Lori Higgins, Michigan's teacher shortage: What's causing it, how serious is it, and what can be done? *Bridge Michigan/Chalkbeat Detroit*, May 13, 2022, at <https://www.bridgemi.com/talent-education/michigans-teacher-shortage-whats-causing-it-how-serious-it-and-what-can-be-done>

³ Table 203.10. Enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by level and grade: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2030. (2010). Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_203.10.asp

⁴ Table 213.10. Staff employed in public elementary and secondary school systems, by type of assignment: Selected years, 1949-50 through fall 2019. (2021). Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_213.10.asp

teachers comprise only half of education jobs.⁵ This is part of a longer-term trend Dr. Benjamin Scafidi has been tracking for many years. As Dr. Scafidi has documented, since 1950, public schools have added personnel at a rate nearly four times that of the rate of growth in student enrollment. Notably, that increase in school personnel was disproportionately non-teaching staff. The increase in new teacher hires was nearly two and a half times the increase in students, but incredibly, the number of *non-teachers* (that is, administrative and other staff) increased more than seven times that of student enrollment.⁶ From 1950 to 2019, while the number of students increased 100 percent, the number of teachers increased 243 percent and the number of administrators and all other staff increased 709 percent.⁷

He also points out that while inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending increased by 27 percent from 1992 to 2014, teacher salaries actually fell by two percent. Public schools chose to fund a non-teaching staffing surge rather than direct ever-increasing taxpayer-funded spending to higher teacher salaries. During this period, they increased full-time staff 36 percent, despite student enrollment increasing at a far lower rate. Although student enrollment increased 19 percent, teaching positions increased 28 percent while *non-teaching* staff increased 45 percent over this time period. As Dr. Scafidi explains:

“The disproportionate growth in ‘all other staff’ has presented the public education system with a very large opportunity cost. If the increase in ‘all other staff’ alone had

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, “Staff employed in public elementary and secondary school systems, by functional area: Selected years, 1949-50 through fall 2009,” Table 85, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_085.asp

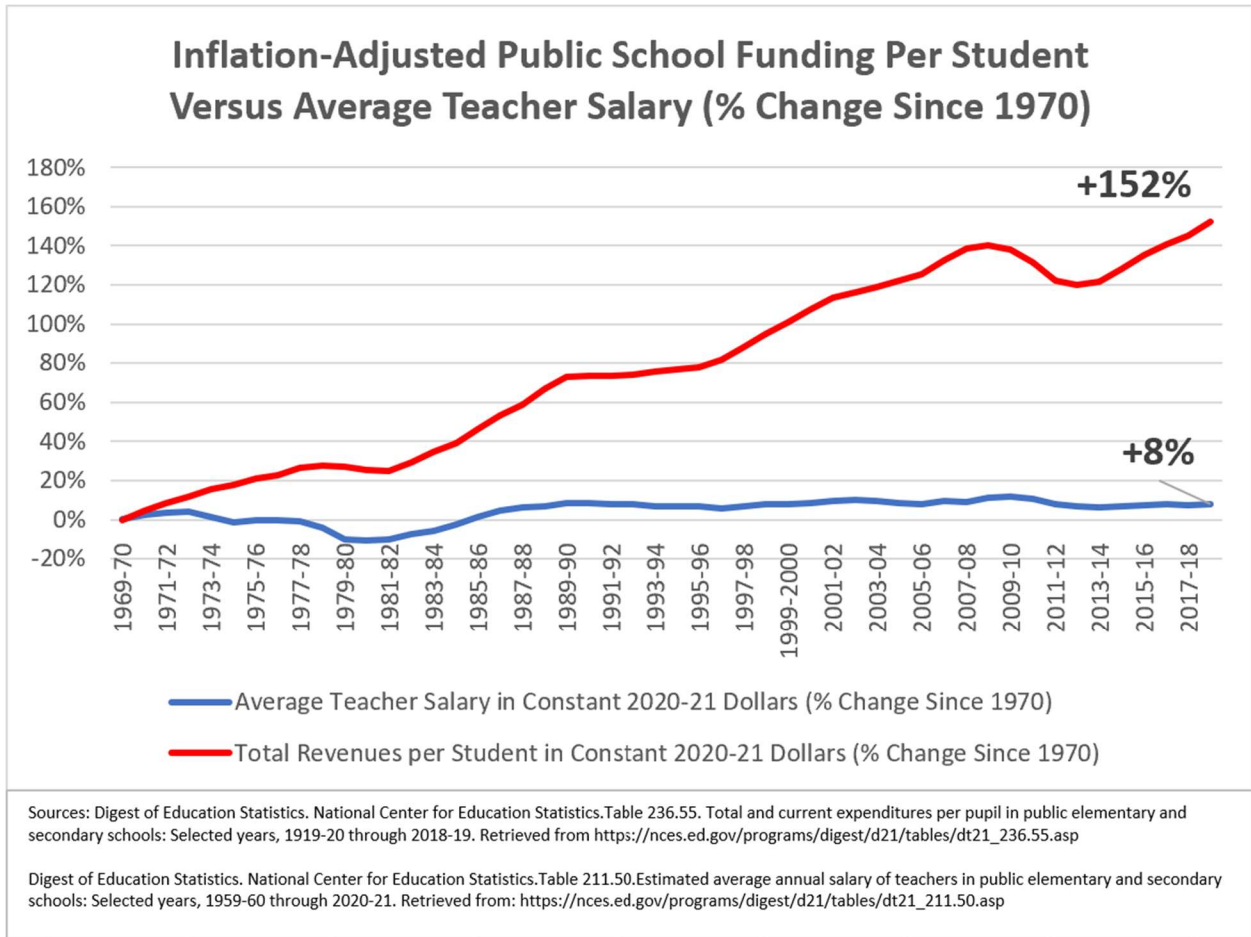
⁶ Benjamin Scafidi, Back to the Staffing Surge: The Great Teacher Salary Stagnation and the Decades-Long Employment Growth in American Public Schools, *EdChoice*, May, 2017, at <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Back-to-the-Staffing-Surge-by-Ben-Scafidi.pdf>

⁷ Benjamin Scafidi, Back to the Staffing Surge: The Great Teacher Salary Stagnation and the Decades-Long Employment Growth in American Public Schools, *EdChoice*, May, 2017, at <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Back-to-the-Staffing-Surge-by-Ben-Scafidi.pdf>

matched student enrollment growth between FY 1992 and FY 2015...then a cautious estimate finds American public schools would have saved almost \$35 billion in annual recurring savings. That is \$35 billion every single year from 1992 to 2015, for a cumulative total of \$805 billion over this time period. One thing public schools could have done with that recurring \$35 billion: Give every teacher a permanent \$11,100 raise.”⁸

To be clear, raises should be based on merit, and not simply doled-out based on step-in-lane increases. But these data illustrate just how poorly existing dollars are managed, and that options exist for attracting qualified individuals into the K-12 classroom.

⁸ Benjamin Scafidi, Back to the Staffing Surge: The Great Teacher Salary Stagnation and the Decades-Long Employment Growth in American Public Schools, *EdChoice*, May, 2017, at <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Back-to-the-Staffing-Surge-by-Ben-Scafidi.pdf>



Source: Table created by Corey DeAngelis (2022).

Problems created by unions. Teachers unions have typically supported policies to increase the number of school staff, as increases in staff, which have not improved student learning outcomes over time, mean increases in the number of dues-paying members. Among all American wage and salary workers, the union membership rate stood at 10.3 percent in 2021.⁹ However, among public school teachers, that rate soars to nearly 70 percent, and is the highest unionization rate of any employment sector.¹⁰ Those millions of members mean hundreds of

⁹ Union members – 2021. New Release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, January 20, 2022, at <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>

¹⁰ Total number of public school teachers and percentage of public school teachers in a union or employees' association, by selected school characteristics: 2015-16. National Teacher and Principal Survey, National Center for

millions of dollars of tax-exempt dues revenue paid annually to the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).¹¹

Why does this matter? Because these unions oppose reforms that hold promise for attracting qualified individuals into the teaching profession, including removing certification barriers to entry into the classroom, addressing unfunded pension liabilities, and providing merit pay for exceptional educators. Union policies also exacerbated teacher frustration during the pandemic by forcing schools to remain closed long past the time experts knew it was safe to return to the classroom, forcing teachers to engage in emergency remote instruction or crisis hybrid schooling.

Solutions

If states and school districts want to attract more high quality teachers to local classrooms, what policies should legislatures and school boards pursue?

First, they should remove barriers to entry into the classroom. The teaching profession is constrained by policies that mandate aspiring teachers obtain paper credentials, often at a substantial cost. Requiring several years of certification work can be a significant deterrent for certain individuals, such as mid-career professionals who would otherwise consider entering the teaching profession. Generally speaking, the justification for requiring certification in a given profession, such as medicine and law, lies in the idea that “the potential costs to clients of an

Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ntps/tables/Table_TeachersUnion.asp

¹¹ The American Federation of Teachers took-in \$186 million in dues revenue in 2020. Mike Antonucci, Analysis: American Federation of Teachers Membership Rose in 2020 – or Fell, Depending on How You Look at It, *The 74*, October 14, 2020, at <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-american-federation-of-teachers-membership-rose-in-2020-or-fell-depending-on-how-you-look-at-it/> The National Education Association’s 2020-21 budget estimated \$357.8 million in revenue. Mike Antonucci, Analysis: NEA’s Membership May Drop, but Its Budget Continues to Grow. So Do Affiliates’ Dues, *The 74*, June 24, 2020, at <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-neas-membership-may-drop-but-its-budget-continues-to-grow-so-do-affiliates-dues/>

unregulated market are high, and thus professional licensing to enforce standards is an efficient way to ensure competent practice in a field.”¹²

However, research has demonstrated there is little if any connection between teacher certification and a teacher’s impact on student academic achievement. The absence of a relationship between teacher certification and teacher effectiveness is most noticeable in the negligible difference in outcomes between traditionally certified, alternatively certified, and uncertified teachers. Differences in teacher effectiveness *within* these groups is large, however. As researchers Robert Gordon, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas Staiger found, “the difference between the 75th percentile teacher and the 50th percentile teacher for all three groups of teachers was roughly five times as large as the difference between the average certified teacher and the average uncertified teacher.”¹³ As they conclude:

“To put it simply, teachers vary considerably in the extent to which they promote student learning, but whether a teacher is certified or not is largely irrelevant to predicting his or her effectiveness.”¹⁴

Moreover, once a teacher has obtained that paper credential and enters the classroom, policies like tenure effectively end that teacher's evaluation process. This is exactly the opposite of how the teaching profession should manage personnel. How can we ensure excellent teachers find their way to the classroom and are encouraged to stay? By making it easy to enter the profession, but rigorously evaluating teachers once they’re there. States and school districts

¹² Mehta, J., & Teles, S. (2014). Professionalization 2.0: The case for plural professionalization in education. In F. M. Hess & M. Q. McShane (Eds.), *Teacher quality 2.0: Toward a new era in education reform* (pp. 109-131). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.

¹³ Thomas J. Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger, “What does certification tell us about teacher effectiveness? Evidence from New York City,” *Economics of Education Review*, 27 (2008) 615 – 631, at <https://www0.gsb.columbia.edu/faculty/jrockoff/certification-final.pdf>

¹⁴ Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (2008).

should remove many of the barriers to entering the classroom – namely, requirements for certification – but should demand excellent performance of teachers in the classroom.

Second, they should tackle pension reform. Many public pension plans rely on a forecasted rate of return of eight percent – an unrealistic assumption that has led to billions in unfunded teacher pension liabilities. Rosier assumptions about the rate of return on these public pensions reduce the amount that needs to be contributed so that pensions are fully funded and can meet future payout obligations. Coupled with generous retirement benefits, such as basing retirement on years worked rather than teacher age, means “a teacher could be collecting retirement benefits for a longer period than they actually taught,” according to the National Council on Teacher Quality.¹⁵ While an individual teacher may see this as a feature, rather than a bug, it strains overall taxpayer resources and limits district flexibility to direct dollars to promising teacher candidates or merit-based salary increases. Yet special interest groups resist reforms such as moving from defined benefit pension plans (in which 85 percent of public school teachers are enrolled¹⁶ compared to just 15 percent of private sector workers¹⁷) to defined contribution retirement plans like 401(k)s popular in the private sector. Switching from defined benefit to defined contribution plans would not only save taxpayer money because of the lower costs of defined contribution plans, it could provide retirement account portability across state

¹⁵ Sandi Jacobs, Kathryn Doherty, and Trisha Madden, No One Benefits: How Teacher Pension Systems are Failing BOTH Teachers and Taxpayers, National Council on Teacher Quality, December 2012, at <https://www.nctq.org/publications/No-One-Benefits:-How-Teacher-Pension-Systems-are-Failing-BOTH-Teachers-and-Taxpayers>

¹⁶ Madeline Will and Stephen Sawchuk, Teacher Pay: How Salaries, Pensions, and Benefits Work in Schools, *Education Week*, March 30, 2018, at <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teacher-pay-how-salaries-pensions-and-benefits-work-in-schools/2018/03>

¹⁷ A Visual Depiction of the Shift from Defined Benefit (DB) to Defined Contribution (DC) Pension Plans in the Private Sector, Congressional Research Service, December 27, 2021, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12007>

lines for teachers, allow them to roll over account balances if they change jobs, and accumulate equivalent benefits even if they switch employers.¹⁸

Third, they should eliminate “last- in, first-out” policies and reward excellence in the classroom. Too many schools continue to use seniority-based layoffs when making staffing decisions. These last-in, first-out (LIFO) policies should be abandoned in favor of staffing decisions based on teacher effectiveness and competence, not years spent in the school building.

Finally, they should end the non-teaching staff hiring spree. Total, inflation-adjusted per-pupil expenditures increased 152 percent from the 1969-70 school year to the 2017-18 school year, from \$6,653 to \$16,774.¹⁹ Teacher salaries increased just 7.3 percent over the same time period.²⁰ On top of those increases, schools are swimming in COVID cash. Ninety-three percent of the \$122 billion in K-12 spending doled out to schools as part of the American Rescue Plan remains unspent, as of May 2022.²¹ If districts want to attract and retain high quality teachers, they should refrain from continuing to increase the number of non-teaching staff in public schools, and instead revamp teacher-compensation systems to better reward those teachers who have a positive impact on student performance.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Table 236.55. Total and current expenditures per pupil in public elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1919-20 through 2018-19. (2021). Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_236.55.asp

²⁰ Table 211.50. Estimated average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1959-60 through 2021-21. (2021). Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, at https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_211.50.asp

²¹ Ben Chapman and Sara Randazzo, Billions in School Covid-Relief Funds Remain Unspent, *The Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 2022, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-districts-are-struggling-to-spend-emergency-covid-19-funds-11652866201>

Public school districts have the tools – and considerable financial resources – at their disposal to attract and retain quality teachers. But that outcome requires making different decisions than what school districts have made historically. They can begin by eliminating certification barriers, tackling pension reform, ending last-in, first-out policies, and curtailing the non-teaching staffing surge.