

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten  
to the Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services,  
Education and Related Agencies  
May 25, 2022**

Good morning. My name is Randi Weingarten, and I am the president of the 1.7 million-member American Federation of Teachers. I'm pleased to speak to you today about the staffing shortage facing America's public schools, solutions that my union has been working on to address this crisis, and how Congress can assist with these efforts.

**The Challenge**

Educators help students not just read, think and problem solve. They also help mold them as human beings, instill democratic values, promote self-agency and foster a sense of community as they build the future generation of our country. While teachers play this critical role in our children's and our country's future, the United States falls woefully short in its recruitment, preparation and retention of these vital staff to meet the needs of all our students. Here are some pre-pandemic facts illustrating this crisis:

- All 50 states started the 2017-18 school year with teacher shortages.
- Every year, nearly 300,000 teachers leave the profession; two-thirds of them before retirement age.
- Teacher turnover is nearly double that of other occupations of their peers; 30 percent of teachers leave within five years, compared with 16 percent of engineers and 19 percent of nurses and lawyers.
- Teacher preparation enrollment dropped 35 percent between 2009 and 2014.
- 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.
- Schools serving majorities of students of color and students living in poverty experience the highest teacher turnover rates.

The pandemic and its aftermath made things worse, including layoffs at the start of the pandemic, the upheaval of lives and health caused by the virus, political attacks over the teaching of honest history, the otherizing of educators and students who are LGBTQIA+, and the challenge of returning to school—including demonization of educators for their response to the pandemic.

This is a challenge in both recruitment and retention. Students see the struggles of educators, hear negative public opinions, and learn about the lack of political and financial support teachers and schools receive. And since teachers earn nearly 20 percent less in wages than comparable workers,<sup>i</sup> students are choosing to go into other professions where they know they might get more respect, higher pay, better working conditions and increased opportunities for career growth.

Those same factors cause educators who are already in the profession to leave and find other careers. The passion for education cannot always overcome the struggles and stress. Losing so much expertise has an enormous negative impact on students' education and equity of learning opportunity—at great financial cost to taxpayers and sometimes, to the teachers themselves.

## **Solutions**

To address these issues, in December 2021, the AFT created a teacher and school staff shortage task force, comprised of 25 leaders from our affiliates across the country, to examine the challenges facing the profession. With support from leading researchers and informed by the AFT's 1.7 million members, including extensive polling and listening sessions with members across the country, the task force is developing bold, tangible and actionable solutions to address the issues we face. We will formally consider these recommendations at our convention this July, but I am honored to preview some of them today, focusing on those that federal policymakers can act upon. Developing creative ways to recruit the best candidates, and then keeping these teachers in our schools—without lowering standards for the profession—is a priority for our union, and we welcome the opportunity to share how federal policymakers can help.

I'll note here that our task force focused on teachers and school staff—such as school bus drivers, classroom aides and others who are also facing a staffing challenge—but I will focus my remarks here on teachers.

### I. Recruitment, Preparation and Hiring

#### **Reimagine the pathways to teaching to ensure the recruitment, preparation and hiring of a high-quality, diverse educator workforce.**

A critical step to improving shortages is to address the challenges with the educator pipeline. In recent years, there are fewer candidates enrolling in teacher preparation programs. We must ensure that we are taking targeted steps to improve access and entry into education professions.

One acute, ongoing challenge is lack of diversity in the educator workforce. Over 80 percent of teachers are white and female, while students of color make up more than 50 percent of the student population in public schools. Teachers should reflect this diversity.

Research indicates that most school districts “do not actively recruit and retain teachers of color,” and only a third of districts recruit teachers from colleges and organizations that serve primarily students and candidates of color.<sup>ii</sup> Recruitment practices must include intentional outreach to communities of color.

One promising practice is Grow Your Own programs, which educate, train and credential support staff to become certified teachers. Well-prepared teachers with ties to the community are more likely to remain in the classroom. Students benefit from having teachers who have

had experience in their schools, who know the community and who are committed to a career in education. GYO programs also recruit teachers to high-need schools, provide strong content and clinical preparation with mentoring, and offer financial incentives to complete the program and become a teacher of record. Many AFT affiliates are starting or are engaged in these programs.

*Federal role: One promising recently funded federal initiative that would significantly help with teacher recruitment and Grow Your Own programs is the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence Program, which would fund teacher preparation programs at historically black colleges and other minority-serving institutions. Eligible institutions currently collectively prepare half of all teachers of color in the country and are ideally positioned to help recruit and prepare the next generation of America's educators. We recommend a robust federal investment in this program in fiscal year 2023.*

The teacher pipeline can be strengthened by providing prospective workers access to high-quality preparation programs that prepare them for today's classrooms, meaning that teacher candidates learn subject-area content and pedagogy that are relevant, dynamic and differentiated for students, with an opportunity to hone teaching skills alongside a skilled practitioner over a significant period, ideally an entire school year.

Yearlong educator residencies are another way to provide candidates with thorough, paid classroom experience. Like a medical residency, teacher residents get experience alongside a veteran, expert teacher while also receiving coursework and a living stipend. After this experience, the candidate commits to teaching in the district for several years, ensuring that experience stays in the local schools. Residencies produce educators who stay in teaching at higher rates and who are, on average, more racially diverse than new teachers prepared through other routes.

*Federal role: The current Teacher Quality Partnership grant program funds partnerships between higher education institutions and high-need school districts to prepare educators who will enter and remain teaching in high-need districts, as that is where these educators have practiced their teaching and engaged with the local community. The program allows for residencies and Grow Your Own investments, and the AFT recommends maximum investment in this program.*

**We must support new employees through induction programs, along with mentoring programs with trained and appropriately matched mentors.**

Because high levels of teacher turnover can result in high costs for schools—both financially and in terms of human capital—it is critical to support teachers in their beginning years to give them a greater opportunity for success. Support for new teachers through mentoring and induction has a positive impact on teacher retention, teacher instructional practices and student achievement.<sup>iii</sup>

Being intentional about induction ensures new teachers have the guidance they need as they enter the workforce and have the time to learn teaching strategies from their colleagues, as well as understand the culture and structures of the school.

High-quality mentoring—which is a specific aspect of induction where an expert teacher supports and guides new teachers—offers one powerful solution for helping new teachers be successful and keeping them in the profession.

*Federal role: An excellent use of American Rescue Plan funds would be to support beginning educators right now as they work to support their students and strengthen their teaching via mentoring and induction programs. Titles I and II of ESSA could also be used this way for ongoing support.*

## II. Retention

**Restructure schools (through increased planning time, opportunities to collaborate meaningfully with colleagues, reduced paperwork and lower class sizes) to give educators time in their workday to prepare and teach well.**

Retention can be even more important than recruitment to the overall health of the teaching profession. With fewer people entering the teaching workforce, the shortcomings in retention have become more noticeable. And it is not just the financial cost of finding a new teacher or the loss of experience when that teacher leaves. Every year, more than 200,000 teachers leave the profession, which has a disruptive effect to school communities and can be especially harmful to low-income schools.<sup>iv</sup>

Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions. When it comes to structures such as planning time, opportunities to collaborate with peers, paperwork and class size, it is true. The environments where students learn are a critical part of their success. Creating ways to ensure that class size allows for individual attention, that teachers have the necessary planning time to prepare high-quality lessons and give personal feedback, and that educators can create teams to share workloads are not excessive but essential working and learning conditions that are the backbone of educational success. These are also the tangible links between educator retention and an environment of respect. Lack of professional respect is why teachers report burnout symptoms or leave the profession.<sup>v</sup>

### Planning Time

A myth in American education is that a teacher is not working if they are not providing instruction in front of students. This has prevented teachers from having the necessary time to properly prepare lessons, differentiate instruction and provide meaningful feedback to students. American teachers provide 40 percent more instruction per week and teach more non-native speakers, more students with special needs and more students from socio-economically disadvantaged homes than their international peers.<sup>vi</sup> And yet, they have less time to plan—including to collaborate with colleagues—during the week.

*Federal role: Federal policymakers should consider encouraging a ratio of instructional time to preparation time, at a minimum of 2 to 1. This ratio, although still higher than found in the school systems of many high-performing countries, will go a long way to ensure teachers have the time they need to create engaging and well-developed lessons for their students, and will allow teachers to work collaboratively with their peers and share best practices—a strategy that research shows is one of the most effective in raising student achievement.*

### Paperwork

The negative impact of burdensome paperwork must not be underestimated. The AFT’s surveys of our members showed that required, unproductive paperwork was a top area of concern for both teachers and staff. Teachers and school staff across the spectrum see too much valuable class, preparation and work time lost to data collection and writing worthless reports.

Additionally, some who work with special populations of students are required to complete hours of paperwork each day. Each day, important instruction and support time is lost to data collection and filling out unnecessary reports.

*Federal role: This is an opportunity for technology to play a greater role in schools. Federal investments in data collection and the generation of required reports could help with teacher retention. There is also an opportunity to examine required paperwork requirements—especially through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—and these requirements’ time commitments in relation to instructional time.*

### Class Size

The last two years have showed that for all students to thrive, they need help with academics and support for their well-being. Both needs can only be addressed when class sizes are reasonable.

*Federal role: An effective way to address class size is to create classroom teams of teachers and paraprofessionals, and this can be encouraged through federal funding. The supportive role of paraprofessionals in American classrooms should be widely developed and expanded beyond a few classrooms in each school. Creating classroom teams is a powerful and efficient way to provide a strong academic support system and ensure the social and emotional needs of all students are being met.*

### **Make schools hubs of community with comprehensive, well-staffed and immediately available resources to address the well-being of students and staff.**

These services are not “extra”; they are essential to student and staff success. More than half of the nation’s schoolchildren live in low-income households. Increasingly, they live in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage and racial isolation. Many suffer adverse experiences and persistent hardship: food insecurity, homelessness, inadequate healthcare. Often, these children are also locked out of schools with high-quality curriculum, instruction,

supports and facilities—a result of decades of state budget cuts and other policy choices. Many of these issues have been exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic. Our schools are under tremendous pressure to address students’ needs and help them succeed, while school staff are also faced with unprecedented challenges to their own mental and physical well-being.

Research<sup>vii,viii</sup> shows that when the community schools model is implemented with fidelity, students, staff and the surrounding community benefit. These benefits include reducing health-related obstacles that cost students instructional time; decreasing student mobility rates; increasing family involvement; promoting community involvement and programming; and potentially reducing racial and economic achievement gaps.

*Federal role: The proposed investments by this committee and by the Biden administration in the Full-Service Community Schools program will provide our schools an opportunity to respond to the immediate needs of students and families, support educators and help meet our goal of 25,000 community schools. Additionally, the proposal to invest \$1 billion to support the mental health needs of our students and their families by increasing the number of counselors, nurses and health professionals in our schools, and building the pipeline for these critical staff, with an emphasis on schools serving underserved students, is most welcome.*

**Let teachers teach by reducing low-quality and time-consuming standardized tests and empowering them to use authentic assessments that measure what students know and can do.**

So much of what is driving our nation’s teacher retention crisis is the test-and-punish system that discourages innovation, narrows instruction and, most important, fails to address the needs of children, particularly the most disadvantaged. The problem is not just with testing required by federal law—those tests are supplemented with unnecessary and expensive standardized tests at the state and district levels—leading to excessive testing that harms students.

*Federal role: Systems must change so that teachers are empowered to use performance assessments and curriculum-embedded formative assessments that give students opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to organize information to solve problems, frame and conduct investigations, analyze and synthesize data, and apply learning to new situations. Educators can use those results to modify, refine and individualize instruction to better meet students’ needs.*

- III. Enhance the overall system so that education is a respected, desirable and meaningful profession.

**Increase overall compensation and benefits to attract and retain education professionals and to align with their training and work as professionals.**

Compensation

Many of the staffing challenges facing public education can be linked to inadequate pay—specifically, the tradeoff between pay and increasing demands on educators’ working conditions. High school students rank low pay as the top reason for not being interested in a career in teaching.<sup>ix</sup> And the funding inequities across districts worsen this problem in districts with lower revenues and higher student poverty.

Exacerbating the inadequate compensation for teachers is the fact that they spend, on average, \$750 per year out of their own pockets on school supplies for their students.

### Student Loan Debt

Many educators start their careers saddled with student debt. Outstanding student loan debt balances for teachers average \$58,500, with one in eight owing more than \$105,000.<sup>x</sup> Student loan assistance is an attractive benefit to recruit new teachers and retain experienced ones.

### Family Leave and Child Care

Most teachers are still forced to choose between taking care of a loved one and drawing a salary. Paid family leave benefits may provide some relief to the higher rates of turnover among younger teachers who are more likely to be in the prime of their family formation years. One study found that 44 percent leave teaching within five years of being on the job. Among first-year teachers who left, 40 percent cited family or personal reasons, including health, the birth of a child and caring for family members.<sup>xi</sup>

Similarly, the cost of child care is rising, and it is increasingly difficult to access the affordable care necessary to enable parents of young children, who also happen to be teachers, to go to work. The struggle to find and pay for child care is a pre-pandemic problem that is much worse as we emerge from the pandemic.

*Federal role: There is a robust federal role for increasing compensation and benefits for America’s teachers. Titles I and II of ESSA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the recent American Rescue Plan all allow for school systems to increase educator compensation to help with our current staffing crisis, and federal policymakers should not shy away from encouraging this.*

*Additionally, the federal TEACH grant program provides up to \$4,000 annually for up to four years in grant aid for students who study to become teachers of high-need subjects in high-need schools. Once a degree is obtained, these teachers must commit to teach for four years in Title I schools. Although it is highly problematic that most of these grants convert to loans (leaving borrowers worse off than if they had not received the grants/loans), we are hopeful that the recent bipartisan changes to how the program is administered will cut down on those conversions and that TEACH grants will become a meaningful piece of the federal solution to America’s staffing crisis.*

*We are also fully in support of the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program, and the changes to that program that have been implemented by the Biden administration, in part due to the AFT’s*

*advocacy and litigation efforts. These changes are necessary for the promise of PSLF to become a reality for teachers and other public servants across the country. So far, 113,000 public servants, including teachers, have had nearly \$7 billion in loans qualified for forgiveness, with hundreds of thousands more eligible. This money in teachers' pockets will help many of them to afford to stay in the profession.*

*Congress can also enact family leave policies on par with other developed nations of the world and double the current \$250 per year that teachers can deduct from their federal taxes for school supplies that they have purchased out of pocket. And we will need a robust federal investment—through significantly increasing funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, for high-quality preschool grants, and for specific investments in compensation for early childhood educators, including Head Start teachers—to increase the pay and supply of child care providers so that it is affordable for educators throughout the system to stay in their jobs while they have young children.*

**Develop innovative ways to build advancement opportunities into education professions to give all employees a chance to lead and grow.**

Teachers often have to leave the classroom to increase their salaries. Many times, this means that the best educators are no longer working with students and the system loses important instructional and support capacity. We must allow teachers and school staff to assume leadership roles and remain in the classroom.

Several studies have found a direct correlation between the opportunity for career advancement and job satisfaction or happiness at work. Research suggests that teachers are less motivated by pay than they are by working conditions such as school culture, strong leadership and collegiality with other teachers.<sup>xii</sup> Unfortunately, in education, unless you are willing to move outside your job classification, you often have limited opportunity for advancement and wage growth.

*Federal role: The federal Teacher and School Leader Incentive grant program (formerly known as the Teacher Incentive Fund) supports efforts to develop, implement, improve or expand human capital management systems or performance-based compensation systems through supports such as career ladders, peer-to-peer mentoring and professional development. If districts work with their local unions to craft proposals for this competitive grant program, it is a good way to fund creative recruitment, retention and compensation initiatives.*

**Expand access to and scope of collective bargaining.**

The best way to ensure all public school teachers have a significant and real voice in their professional lives is through collective bargaining. It is the vehicle that provides the essential structure to ensure all students and staff receive the necessary resources that not only support teaching and learning, but also support the services necessary for the overall well-being of the entire school community.



*Federal role: Congress can pass the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act, which would guarantee the right of public employees, like teachers and school staff, to organize, act concertedly and bargain collectively. This legislation would go a long way—especially in states that do not guarantee this right—to elevate teacher voice and give agency to them as professionals.*

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<sup>i</sup> Sylvia Allegretto and Lawrence Mishel. (2020, Sept.). Teacher pay penalty dips but persists in 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> [www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2016/12/22/295574/to-attract-great-teachers-school-districts-must-improve-their-human-capital-systems](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2016/12/22/295574/to-attract-great-teachers-school-districts-must-improve-their-human-capital-systems)

<sup>iii</sup> R. Ingersoll and M. Strong. (2011). “The Impact of Induction and Mentoring Programs for Beginning Teachers: A Critical Review of the Research.” *Review of Education Research*. Vol. 81(2), 201-233. doi: 10.3102/0034654311403323.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/Ronfeldt-et-al.pdf>.

<sup>v</sup> Kierstin Nygaard. (2019, Sept.). The Cause of Teacher Burnout and Attrition.

<sup>vi</sup> TALIS—The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey, OECD 2019.

<sup>vii</sup> *Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement*, Oakes, Maier and Daniel, 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> *Community Schools Playbook, Partnership for the Future of Learning*, 2018.

<sup>ix</sup> Southern Regional Education Board. (2020, Sept.). “New Ideas in Teacher Compensation.”

<sup>x</sup> Nic Querolo, Olivia Rockeman and Madison Paglia. (2021, Sept.). “Teachers Drowning in Debt Face U.S. Moratorium End with Dread.” *Bloomberg*. [www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-09/teachers-are-drowning-in-student-debt-as-moratorium-end-nears](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-09/teachers-are-drowning-in-student-debt-as-moratorium-end-nears).

<sup>xi</sup> Richard Ingersoll, Elizabeth Merrill and Daniel Stuckey. (2018, Oct.). Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force—Updated October 2018. *CPRE Research Reports*. [https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre\\_researchreports/108](https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/108)

<sup>xii</sup> Susan Moore Johnson, Matthew A. Kraft and John P. Papay. (2012). How Context Matters in High-Need Schools: The Effects of Teachers’ Working Conditions on Their Professional Satisfaction and Their Students’ Achievement. *Teachers College Record*.