

Teachers Fight Back against Unfavorable Conditions

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Teachers Fight Back against Unfavorable Conditions

In the United States, teacher shortages strain many school districts. The shortage has led to overcrowded classrooms, reduced course offerings, and a higher workload for the available teachers. Teachers' unions, school districts, non-union teachers, parents, advocacies, and others compete to influence the responses to teacher shortages. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), US school districts must hire an estimated 300,000 teachers in 2024 (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Many school districts cannot find the teachers they need. The competing social groups disagree about problems such as salary, responses to political pressures, parents' authority over their children's schools, and low interest among teachers.

Review of Research

According to Bryner (2021), a former teacher, teachers' salaries can be less than the cost of living. Bryner also notes the stresses of the job, such as gun violence, inadequate maintenance, and threats from students. All valid points, but it narrows the point of view of the shortage to only participants related to the school such as the board of the school district, administration, teachers, and students. To extend this issue it needs to be broadened out more to see the big picture of even more participants who each have a part in this. Using multiple sources of data from the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Teacher Salary Project, and more allow more answers to the question given in the introduction.

Salaries

Many U.S. public school teachers say that low pay is a hardship among teachers. In replying to a survey conducted by the Teacher Salary Project (TSP), teachers reported hardships

due to low pay. “My net K-12 salary pays only for my mortgage, HOA, and utilities. To make ends meet, I teach at five different community colleges; two on-ground and three online.” “I’ve definitely held off on starting a family due to my salary. I’m a homeowner but would definitely need a second job if I didn’t have roommates. It is sometimes hard to watch friends leave the classroom for starting salaries nearly double mine” (Sherratt & Calegari, 2021). Of those surveyed, 91 percent blamed teacher shortages at least in part on low pay. At some point in the year, 53 percent held multiple jobs (Sherratt & Calegari, 2021). For some, a second job is necessary to cover basic expenses.

Although teachers’ pay has been increasing, it is not enough to cover their living expenses. According to the National Education Association (NEA, 2021), for a teacher, the average starting salary in the United States in 2020-2021 was \$41,770. The District of Columbia had the highest starting salary, at \$56,313, but D.C. also has a higher cost of living than any state (MERIC, 2022), at about \$65,169 per adult (BEA, 2021). As a teacher states in TSP’s survey, “I actually moved to this state because at my previous job, I could barely afford to eat after paying my monthly bills. This prompted me to move 8 hours away from my home and family to be able to continue teaching and live a somewhat comfortable life” (Sherratt & Calegari, 2021). The AFT says that if the goal is to keep teachers not leave then, “livable pay for the area where they live” (AFT, 2022) is needed.

Student loan debt combined with low pay is also another landmine teachers need to deal with. According to Rudolph (2022), “In the education field, debt is often the price of entry.” For background, nearly 45 percent of teachers have taken out a student loan with an average total standing amount of \$55,800. Also, half of those teachers still have a balance with an average debt amount of \$58,700 within the group (NEA 2021). Even after college, some teachers will

have to head back to get a bachelor's or master's degree in education. Rudolph (2022), says "After college, some educators find it necessary to take on even more student debt. When I entered the classroom in 2000, teachers who didn't have a bachelor's degree in education were required to have a master's in education — or to be pursuing one. Over the years, some states have required educators to earn a master's degree within their first five or 10 years of teaching." Even after the degree, teachers will still have more certifications they have to pay out of pocket for. The AFT reports that, "teachers are typically required to take at least one test as part of their licensure requirements," which can cost at least \$150. With debt and extra financial hurdles that they must cost, as the AFT puts it, "these costs are a deterrent for many, but in particular for lower-income candidates" (AFT, 2022). Joshua Starr, managing partner of the International Center for Leadership in Education says, "Nobody goes into teaching for the money, but you have to survive." When asked about making college more affordable he said, "is one part of a larger fabric that we have to consider when we want to promote the idea that teaching is a sustainable job" (Jacobson, 2022).

While teachers' pay has been rising, the increases have not kept pace with inflation (Walker, 2022). By accelerating inflation and destabilizing employment, the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated conditions for teachers. According to Walker (2022), inflation-adjusted income for teachers has fallen 4 percent since 2009. This means teachers are making on average \$2,150 less than they did 10 years ago when adjusted for inflation. In their report, "[This] decrease in inflation-adjusted pay could not have come at a worse time. Though multiple factors are driving what has been a years-long teacher shortage, insufficient pay is certainly one of the primary reasons that fewer people are entering the profession, and more are leaving" (NEA, 2022). Samantha Twohig, a teacher from West Virginia reports: "True, no one goes into this

profession for the money, but teachers in many parts of the country barely make enough to live, and that's insane... and they are being pushed out of the profession." Another teacher, Mike Burton-Tillson said, "I definitely always appreciate a raise, and every little bit helps. But it's definitely not going to cover the cost of living or inflation. The bitter part is that if you look at other industries, we don't have a comparable pay scale whatsoever. With my experience and my education I'm not compensated the same way other people are " (Farrell, 2023).

Politics

In recent years, politicians have been issuing bills that limit what schools can teach on topics causing teachers to have to be very careful or just leave. HB 1040, a house bill from Indiana limits teachers when discussing socialism, marxism, communism, totalitarianism, or any similar political systems. It requires teachers to also teach students they are incompatible with the principles of the U.S. and are detrimental to those living there (Indiana, 2022). Since 2021 there have been over 122 bills similar to HB 1040 that has been restricting what teachers can say or teach to their students (Sachs, 2022). Failure to comply means punishments including the right to sue, loss of funding, and being fired. As teachers describe feelings such as terror, anxiety, and more they have begun altering their lessons to not break the laws (Natanson, 2023).

Alongside the new bills and laws, politicians have begun restricting the books students read in their libraries and classrooms causing teachers to remove or hide their books from classrooms and school libraries. HB 1467, a house bill from Florida is requiring books can only be displayed if they are approved by media specialists or school librarians. But those same people must take a training program from the state beforehand (Florida, 2022). Punishment for

showing or giving a student a banned book is a third-degree felony. Teachers are leaving or in fear of walking away as their mission of educating children is being lost as said by the union president of the Manatee Education Association. (Monteil, 2023).

This sudden force from politicians is also gaining support from some parents who are also pushing for these changes, causing teachers to favor parents even more as well to keep their job. Parents seeing what their children were taught in online classes began to blame teachers by going to board meetings, having politicians push new bills and laws, or going directly to the teacher. In Virginia, Gov. Youngkin made an email for parents to “report inherently divisive practices in schools” (Simon & Paviour, 2022) which was criticized by educators as they do not see how it helps any problems. However, some parents plan to use it, for example, Heather Jermacans whose children went to school without masks yelled at administrators that she would not pick them up. She says, “they are being segregated,” and that an email will be sent to the governor (Carey, 2022). Some parents go further with harassing a teacher such as Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr., who had parents show up to board meetings and call him a groomer for being openly gay. Going so far as to begin doxxing his private Facebook which had Carver in the end quit his job (Natanson, 2022). Another teacher states that control is fine as long as it is indirect and goes “through admin, PTO, school board, and one’s elected representatives.” However, for it to be directed toward the teacher is impossible as on average a class will have 24 students as of 2022 (Postma, 2023) and 48 or fewer parents “telling me what to, or what not to teach... it’s simply not workable or functional to think that can happen” (Natanson, 2023).

Violence and Weapons

Ever since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, violence has been a new fear that teachers and students deal with. In 2021, there were at least 202 incidents of gunfire on school grounds. In 2022, there were at least 177 incidents of gunfire on school grounds. (Everytown, 2023). According to NEA in a survey, 60 percent of teachers worry that there could be a mass shooting in their school. (Walker & Writer, 2018). Dr. Christine Drew, an associate professor of special education said, “If you're not a teacher and you've never had to hold a student with severe anxiety who now thinks someone is coming to kill them, while they cry--it is really hard for the average person to understand that level of stress. It's not an easy thing, there are teachers who are probably reconsidering.” This is causing teachers to retire early or students to reconsider becoming a teacher in the first place (Wise, 2022). Sarah Lerner, a teacher from Parkland has said “we get into education because we love children, we love our subject matter, and we love teaching. None of us go into education to be human shields, and to be bodyguards, and makeshift police officers”. Tragedy after tragedy, teachers are tired of waiting for politicians to help reform this issue. “These politicians offer their thoughts and prayers, which doesn't do anything. We want policy, we want change, we want action,” Lerner states. However, a parent who lost their child at Columbine said, “There is no easy solution to this. There is no one solution” (Reilly, 2022).

Students

Students can be another variable that most do not consider. Teachers come to their work with joy in teaching their students, but what happens when it is not reciprocated? r/Teachers is a Reddit board filled with teachers speaking of their experiences. One teacher reported, “What do

you do, when you get a class that is SO uninterested, they suck the life right out of you? I have one hour that will come in (7th graders), already unenthused, won't listen to a word I say, heads down, some barely even facing me, staring at the ground, very unengaged. I got to the point today that I stopped mid-lesson because no one was participating and told them to get on Canvas and read it themselves" (Straight-Rice-777, 2022). Many teachers will post similar things asking for help. The Yale Center survey found that 75 percent of high school students reported negative feelings toward school. Zorana Ivcevic, the research scientist said, "It was higher than we expected, we know from talking to students that they are feeling tired, stressed, and bored, but were surprised by how overwhelming it was" (Belli, 2020). Teachers have noticed that post-COVID both interest and abilities of their students have dropped. Is a college degree worth it, is the material I am learning important, is school relevant are some reasons students' interest has dropped. According to Shakira Perez, "A lot of them are scared ... They're like, 'I don't want to go to college. Or if I go, I don't want to go out of state. I don't want to leave my home'" (Otte, 2022).

Classroom Sizes

With an average of 24 students in a classroom together, some teachers are feeling that they are getting stretched too thin, and students are getting impacted as well. In a study, smaller classes led to better learning progress, especially for elementary school students (Bruhwiler & Blatchford, 2011). In some studies, like the Wisconsin Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE), test scores were shown to be higher in classrooms with a smaller size. Teachers also reported having more knowledge about students, more time to cover content, fewer disciplinary problems, as well as connecting with the students more than in a larger class setting

(Millsap et al., 2004). According to Cara Berg Powers, “Thirty-two kids per class is still common in many places and, due to teacher shortages, some districts are now having teachers hold classes in auditoriums where they’re expected to teach upwards of 50 students at a time.” This makes it hard for teacher-student relationships to form according to her (Bader, 2022). The AFT’s solution is by creating a team in the classroom utilizing paraprofessionals to support a teacher in class and help assist with larger class sizes (AFT, 2022).

School Environment

Alongside classroom sizes, the state of classrooms is another factor that affects both teachers and students. The average school in America is 44 years old and hasn’t had a renovation in at least 12 years. Health threats pop up in schools such as lead exposure, mold and water damage, and animals such as bats (Harper, 2019). Lindsay Bryner recalls a time when a bat appeared in her classroom, “I looked up at the ceiling. Squeezing out of the sprinkler head of my classroom was a fuzzy, mouse looking animal. Yes. It was a bat” (Bryner, 2021). Links between a student’s ability to learn to the condition of their school have been found. Scores rank lower by things like wobbly broken desks or mold in classroom ceilings (McIntyre, 2016). Another issue is hot classrooms as some schools do not have air conditioning. Marcia Turner, a parent whose children deal with hot classrooms said, “My children can’t even breathe in the school. It be so hot. One have asthma and I can’t get off because I’m just starting a job.” Hot temperatures can disrupt a student’s success as test scores tend to be lower when it is a hot school year according to the National Bureau of Economics Research (Zdanowicz & Yan, 2022). Although public schools get the third highest payout in American infrastructure, “the American Society of Civil Engineers gives the condition of America’s 100,000 public school buildings an overall grade of

D+. And no wonder—half our school buildings are half a century old”(NEA, 2021). Teacher morale becomes affected by both students and fellow instructors becoming ill which can cause “reduced levels of effort, lower effectiveness in the classroom, and reduced job satisfaction” (McIntyre, 2016).

Teacher Recruitment

Another reason for a shortage of teachers is there not having new teachers appear to fulfill the vacancy. Satisfaction with the profession is at an all-time low with only 42 percent of teachers saying the job is worth the stress compared to 81 percent in the 1970s. The amount of new applicants is at its lowest point as well in the last 50 years with only 215,000 newly licensed teachers in 2020 (Kraft and Lyon, 2022). Jeffrey Henig, a professor of education at Teachers College states that teachers are the key to making sure students stay educated. With teachers “becoming not just less happy, but less able to do a good job” the result is as seen (Peetz, 2022). With student scores declining in reading and math Doris Santaro, a professor of education at Bodwin, wrote that teachers are feeling burnt out, under-compensated, and asked to teach mis-educational information to their students. Stating this is why teachers are leaving the profession, as feeling as if “my profession left me” (Edsall, 2022). Needing a degree to teach, students are not seeing the appeal anymore. Pam Grossman, the dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education has said, “Teaching has to compete with so many other professions that also require a bachelor’s degree or more, but pay much better than teaching” (Belsha, 2022).

Conclusion

With many different aspects baking together, the teacher shortage will continue until agreements can be made between all groups. Teacher unions continue lobbying to get politicians to agree to demands, but with politicians having their own ideas it may be some time until they can come to a conclusion. Parents after realizing what has been taught in classrooms will continue to take the reigns of what their child is learning with trust at an all-time low. Politicians and teachers, parents and politicians, teacher unions and teachers, until all these groups come together the decline of teachers will continue on the trend it has been on. In the end, each group has laid down their values and beliefs on the situation, but further work is needed to see if the trend will continue or if a common ground can be met to solve the grievances. “This is a five-alarm crisis. We are facing an exodus as more than half of our nation’s teachers and other school staff are now indicating they will be leaving education sooner than planned. If we’re serious about getting every child the support they need to thrive, our elected leaders across the nation need to address this crisis now” said National Education Association President Becky Pringle (Jotkoff, 2022).

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