

Pennsylvania's Teacher Shortage: What, Why and How to Fix It

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Dr. Taranto was the PA Principal Association's 2012 Middle School Principal of the Year, the recipient of the PA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's 2012 Research and Publication Award and the recipient of the PA Principals Association's 2013 Frank S. Manchester Award for Excellence in Journalism. Additionally, he served on Gov. Wolf's Education Transition Team and on the PA Principals Association's Editorial Review Board.

It is safe to say that all school districts in Pennsylvania and across the country are facing a teacher shortage. Once a problem for states where teacher pay was far below the national average is now a problem in every state due to a myriad of reasons. If you are a principal and reading this, then you have experienced not having enough qualified candidates for open positions or scrambling around in the early morning hours to fill coverages.

Teacher shortage

Every state in our union is seeing a record shortage in the teaching profession (Buttner, 2021; Garcia & Weis, 2019). This shortage has a dramatic trickle-down effect on student learning and achievement (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). Teachers in more specialty fields such as mathematics and science are even more difficult to find. Here are some alarming statistics (Modan, 2021):

- 48% of 6,000 teachers surveyed in November said they are considering changing jobs;
- 34% changed careers to leave teaching in the past month; and
- 11% considered taking a leave.

In the United States, more teachers leave their profession than any other profession with over 8% leaving annually. Let us compare that to other countries that we like to compare to as it relates to student achievement...Finland and Singapore who see only 3-4% year attrition rates. In some areas of the country, teacher attrition is nearly 50% over a five-year period (Taranto, 2011).

These high attrition rates result in positions going unfilled creating larger class sizes and a reduction in course offerings especially in those math and science areas (i.e., physics, chemistry, etc.).

Why did this happen?

In order to find solutions to this problem, we must explore how we got here in the first place. Unfortunately, it is just now that people outside of our profession are seeing the impact of many years of poor decision-making as it relates to the field of education.

Evaluation systems that bog down educators with paperwork and regulation have been a failure. A recent study has confirmed what many educators in the field already knew which is the multi-billion-dollar effort to reform education through standardized testing, using growth measures and teacher reform have resulted in a null effect in moving student achievement (Bleiberg, Brunner, Harbatkin, Kraft & Springer, 2021). In fact, one can argue that it has had a negative impact. Pennsylvania's teacher evaluation system (which has changed yet again), creates a paperwork nightmare for administrators and teachers. This valuable time takes away from quality lesson planning, student engagement and professional



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development. We spend more time justifying what we are doing than doing what we are supposed to doing!

Compensation to attract professionals to the field of education is simply lacking. Teacher compensation has declined relative to those college-educated peers since the early 1990s (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

The manner in which our educators are treated has steadily declined over the years resulting in poor morale and discouraging our youth from the profession. Again, in countries such as Finland, Singapore and China, educators are held to the highest regard. In the United States, we are ranked 16th which is in about the middle of developed countries as far as respect and support for educators (Strauss, 2018).

How can we fix it?

Federal and state legislators have to first recognize there is a problem then understand their decision or the predecessors' decisions have greatly contributed to this problem.

First, while there has been a trend for less emphasis on standardized testing, it is still there and takes up a lot of time. More importantly, it has narrowed our teachers' foci with a generation of teachers who grew up with NCLB, believing standardized testing is the end all, be all. We have to move to teaching a holistic approach to education. This frees teachers up by allowing some autonomy to be creative and understanding all aspects of education (the arts, wellness, social studies, etc.) are just as important as math and reading.

Standardized testing can still exist but making it a piece of the puzzle instead of the entire puzzle is the goal. If we can determine college placement on a three-hour SAT or ACT, then certainly we can develop an end-of-year exam in that same time period. By doing so, we are giving back weeks of valued instructional time to our students, and ultimately, why teachers go into the profession.

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Next, simplify the educator evaluation system. Unfortunately, Act 13 did not simplify Pennsylvania's evaluation system and has created more questions than answers. A more efficient system that respects and trusts local decisions will result in more time spent on lesson planning and professional development. Most importantly, it will boost morale creating an

environment of trust and ambition.

Third, more funding for school districts will go a long way. If we are able to boost new teacher pay, then we will more likely attract more people to go into the profession. The additional funding can also help reduce classroom sizes which equates to more attention to individual students. How can this be done? It does not have to be through raising taxes. In Pennsylvania, we have more cyber charter schools than any other state. It is time for genuine cyber charter school reform to determine the actual cost to educate a cyber student. This will result in hundreds of thousands of dollars going back to many school districts.

Finally, new teachers need intense support when entering the field. Organized and sustained teacher induction programs have been proven to help reduce teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2003; Taranto, 2011). Induction programs that involve sustained professional development and an assignment of a qualified mentor will help new teachers establish secure footing in our field.

While this list seems like an oversimplification of the solution, it is achievable and can certainly spark the conversation for real change to address our teacher shortage problem. Please reach out to your local, state and federal legislators. *It is time for a real conversation.*

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