



A Union of Professionals

Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?

What America Must Do to Attract and Retain the
Educators and School Staff Our Students Need

**Report from the AFT Teacher and
School Staff Shortage Task Force
July 2022**



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[Our Mission](#)

The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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A Message from AFT President Randi Weingarten

Educating the next generation has always been one of America's highest priorities. At the same time, educators have never been treated in a way that matched the importance of education. Underpaid, under-respected, often with challenging conditions. Yet those who become educators and stay in education do so because of a burning desire to make a difference in the lives of children. That is what sustains the thousands of AFT teachers and school staff I meet and talk with each year.

Unfortunately, in the past two years, our members' already hard jobs have become unsustainable. Stressful, frustrating, challenging, overwhelming, yet rewarding. Those are the five most frequent words I have heard from educators this year. The pandemic, combined with the political culture wars, has made the last two years the toughest in modern times for educators. And then, on top of all of that, the unthinkable happened again, when gun violence took the lives of 19 students and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas.

It's hard not to be stressed when the pandemic has created so much disruption and uncertainty—when you're trying to give students individualized attention, but your classes are too large, or you are pulled away to cover extra classes or have students added to yours because of the shortages of staff. It's hard to help children recover from this pandemic when there is a crying lack of school counselors, social workers, psychologists and nurses to support kids' well-being. And the pacing calendar, and paperwork requirements tend to be more important to the powers that be than they are to children's needs.

And then there are the politics. It's hard not to be stressed when you're worried that you'll be fired for teaching the basics about why the Civil War happened, or when you wonder if you can even teach what happened in May when a murderer, whose racist intentions were obvious, killed 10 people in a supermarket in Buffalo, N.Y. It's hard to help children feel safe and be their true selves in the face of vicious attempts to marginalize LGBTQIA+ kids, students of color and immigrant students, and the hate-filled drumbeat from extremists who demonize certain groups as "the other." It's hard not to be exhausted when you are asked to be the mask police and a tech wizard, reinventing new platforms, at the same time you are teaching a math lesson.

These crises are piling on top of the tough conditions that teachers and school staff have been struggling with for years: a lack of professional respect; inadequate support and resources; subpar compensation; untenable student loan debt; and a culture of blame that weaponizes standardized tests to attack public schools and public school teachers (and which contributes to endless paperwork with little educational value). The events of the past two years have only spotlighted the reality that for a long time, teachers and school staff have lacked the climate, culture, conditions and compensation to do their jobs.

Is it any wonder that so many teachers and school employees, who chose this work in order to make a difference, are voting with their feet and leaving the profession because they no longer feel they can make that difference? Our own polling this year shows that 75 percent of our teacher members said they would not recommend teaching to young people today.

This can change, and that is the importance of the work of the AFT's Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. The truth is we call it a teacher shortage, but in reality, we have a shortage of respect for teachers and all school staff. We have a shortage of the professional working conditions teachers and school staff deserve, conditions that allow teachers and school staff to do their best for their students. There is a shortage of pay for what is arguably the most important job in the world.

Our children's education is at risk as shortages increase

The numbers tell the story: We have a teacher and school staff shortage crisis any way you cut it:

- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 300,000 teachers were leaving the profession every year.
- Per a June 2022 Rand Corp. survey, about one-third of teachers and principals reported that they were likely to leave their current job by the end of the 2021-22 school year, up from about one-quarter of teachers and 15 percent of principals in January 2021.
- The same survey found that teacher and principal stress is twice that of the general public.
- Since the beginning of the pandemic, school staff employment has fallen across positions, leaving schools without the necessary staff in almost every position.

There's also a diversity crisis: Almost 79 percent of U.S. public school teachers are white, while 7 percent are Black and 9 percent are Hispanic. Fewer than 3 percent of teachers are Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI).¹ Yet less than half of students are white, while 28 percent are Hispanic and 15 percent are Black. Schools serving majorities of students of color and students living in poverty experience the highest teacher turnover rates. In other words, the children who need well-prepared, experienced teachers the most are not getting them.

What do teacher and staff shortages mean for our kids and our schools?

Every child deserves to have qualified, caring teachers and staff—people who are excited to work with them every day and dedicated to giving them a rich, joyful education. You can't have a strong democracy and a strong economy without an engaged, informed, well-educated citizenship. Public school staff and educators are literally the builders of democracy.

Plus, our students really need their teachers and school staff around them right now. They need that stability. Children and their families are struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic caused untold grief, trauma and economic hardship to many Americans. At a time when teachers and school staff are so vital in helping our children and communities recover and heal, untenable conditions are driving educators away.

The good news: This is solvable

Some countries have no problem retaining their teachers and have few problems recruiting new teachers and staff. We can do this, too. That is why the AFT brought together what's probably the most important task force we have ever convened in our history: the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. We need to listen to the people who work in schools every day, the people who are closest to the issues that are driving teacher and school staff shortages. They can guide us to solutions.

Not just studying the problem, but finding real-world solutions

Our task force brought together 25 leaders from AFT state and local unions across the country. They worked intensively with leading researchers in the field; they surveyed our membership and sought frontline input from many of AFT's 1.7 million members. Some of those members are interviewed in the Summer 2022 issue of AFT's *American Educator*.²

They understand what the teachers who spoke to the Rand researchers understand: Let's tackle shortages by changing the conditions, compensation, climate and culture of the education professions—all the things that are very possible to change if there is the will to change.

So, along with outlining the reasons for teacher and school staff shortages, our task force developed bold and realistic strategies for recruiting the best candidates into education—along with recommendations for the conditions, pay, support and agency necessary to keep them. They envision not only practical, research-proven solutions, but also using these solutions in a transformative way to make schools safe and welcoming places where kids can recover from the past two years and go on to

thrive—places where parents want to send their children, where teachers can teach, and children can learn at their best. And like parents, educators are sick and tired of politicians making it harder for them. In a recent AFT member poll, 88 percent of teachers said education has become too politicized, the same number who said staff are not receiving the tools, time or trust needed to meet their professional responsibilities.

The Four Cs and the Four Ts: Solving the shortages and revitalizing the profession

The task force identified four key areas that need to change if we are to reverse the teacher and school staff shortages: Climate, culture, conditions and compensation. We know that by focusing on those four Cs, we'll ensure that educators and school staff have the four Ts: the tools, time, trust and training they need to do their jobs and to stay in their jobs.

Here are a few top priorities from the detailed recommendations in the report—all are about one or more of the four Cs:

- **Treat teachers and school staff like the professionals they are.** Our task force heard from countless members about how important it is for them to be trusted and treated as professionals: to be given the time in their workday to plan and prepare for classes, to be able to collaborate with colleagues, to have authority to make day-to-day school decisions based on their professional judgment, and to have ongoing, job-embedded professional development so they can grow in their careers. Those are some of the hallmarks of professional jobs, and they're central to the world's most successful education systems, such as Finland's. In fact, in a March 2022 survey of AFT K-12 members conducted by Hart Research, "more respect and support from administration," was one of three top choices for addressing staffing shortages for more than 90 percent of members.
- **RESPECT is not just an Aretha refrain; it must be a real practice.** Nothing better encapsulates this than the recent debate on gun violence. Some of the very same people who are proposing arming teachers have also proposed banning books or limiting curriculum. If you trust educators enough to carry firearms, why are we not trusted to do what we are trained to do—teach kids, decide curriculum, answer hard questions?
- **Increase salaries and benefits** to attract and retain education professionals, with livable pay for the area where they live. Money matters. Too many teachers and school staff must work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, and too many are burdened with heavy student debt. (People shouldn't have to go into decades of debt to become teachers or school staff and to stay in these jobs.) In the March 2022 Hart Research survey mentioned above, when asked for their top three choices on what actions would improve recruitment and retention, 93 percent of AFT K-12 members answered "pay raises." We will never successfully recruit and retain enough diverse, highly qualified teachers until we significantly raise the salaries of American teachers—especially in these times of increasing inflation.
- **Address the "teacher pay penalty" or "teacher tax"**—i.e., the 20 percent disparity between teacher pay and the pay of college-educated non-teaching peers. As the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has pointed out, "U.S. teachers earn less than 70 percent of the salaries of full-time, full-year workers (25- to 64-year-olds) with tertiary education in the United States, some of the lowest relative earnings across all OECD countries." In other words, the pay penalty is far greater in the U.S. than in most other developed countries. The often given reason, summers off, fails to explain why American teachers' salaries are not as competitive as those of their international counterparts. (Given the range of job titles under the school support staff umbrella, there is less data on those employees, but many of the same subpar pay patterns hold. There is no doubt, for example, that a school employee in the skilled trades could make more in the private sector.)
- **Lower class sizes.** As we focus on academic recovery this coming year, what better way to meet students' academic needs than by lowering class size? Studies in California, Minnesota, New York City, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin indicate that lower class sizes raise test scores as well. The

federal government should also expand its support for class-size reduction through Title I and other federal programs. As our schools continue to expand their effort to address social and emotional needs, small classes are essential—ideally, no larger than 20 students in prekindergarten through third grade, 23 students in grades 4-8, and 25 students in grades 9-12.

- **Turn schools into community hubs that serve the needs of the whole child and the whole family.** This means investing in thousands of community schools with wraparound services—a model that is working across the country, including in the 700 community schools (to date, and counting) that the AFT and our affiliates have helped create. This model strives to make all schools safe and welcoming places with a culture of parent and family engagement and strong partnerships between home and school. Especially after the past two pandemic years, every one of America’s 97,000 public schools should have a well-staffed program that addresses the well-being of students and staff.
- **Curb the nation’s current “test-and-punish” obsession with low-quality, time-consuming standardized tests,** in favor of educator-led, curriculum linked assessments, project-based learning, and true measures of what students know and can do. The obsession with standardized testing and its impact on teaching and learning is killing the joy of teaching and learning and results in prioritizing pacing schedules and paperwork over student learning.
- **Reduce the endless paperwork.** Teachers and school staff are required to provide an increasing amount of data and written reports that document classroom activities—but to what end? Data collected for administrative purposes and districtwide reports should not be the responsibility of the teacher. Paperwork should help teachers and school staff do their jobs—not be part of their jobs. In our March 2022 Hart Research survey, 95 percent of AFT K-12 members chose “less paperwork and fewer non-teaching duties that take away from student needs” as a top answer for how to fix the shortage crisis.
- **Diversify the educator workforce** and create more ties with community through promising practices such as grow-your-own programs; a minimum of a year in clinical experience; and comprehensive, sustained mentoring. Increasing diversity will take a multipronged approach like this.
- **Programs should provide candidates with extensive clinical experiences** that offer real-world practice alongside a skilled practitioner over a significant period, ideally an entire school year. Candidates need to experience the rigors of the profession in an authentic classroom environment. They should start with setting up their classroom and meeting students on the first day, and they need to be with those students throughout the different experiences of the whole school year.
- **Expand the scope and reach of collective bargaining.** Some districts do not have collective bargaining; others limit its scope. Collective bargaining is the best way for teachers and school staff to have a voice to advocate for what their students need and for what they need as professionals. It is the best way to solve problems, and truly change conditions, climate, culture and compensation to ensure that educators have the tools, time, trust and training to help all students have the brighter futures they need and desire.

Yes, this is a big to-do list. There is no single cause of the teacher and school staff shortage, so there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Education is never “one sizes fits all.” Some of these ideas will work better in some settings than others. The point is they are all targeted toward giving teachers and school staff the time, trust, tools, training and compensation they need.

Build it and they will come—and stay

There is a silver lining in all this. Educators are exhausted and fed up, yes—but by the conditions

they work under, not the kids they teach and work with, or the vocation of teaching. As the recent Rand report found: *“Many teachers we interviewed (even those who were stressed about their jobs) emphasized that they love teaching. For many of these teachers, it is the context in which they are teaching that is stressful rather than teaching itself.”* As the study’s lead author noted, *“Teachers told us that their dedication to working with students kept them in their jobs, even though pandemic conditions have made teaching more challenging. Teaching conditions—not the work of teaching itself—are what they find to be stressful.”*

What teachers and school staff are saying is that if conditions change, they will stay. That’s because every day, they see it as their mission to come to work and nurture, love, teach and protect our kids. In the Hart Research survey, the two most common reasons cited for choosing to be educators were “helping students” and “making a positive difference in society.”

One thing is certain: Act, we must. We can no longer hope that things will get better. That’s why this report is called “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?” We can no longer just hope the desire and commitment of educators to make a difference in young people’s lives will overcome all the challenges.

So, the AFT task force thought big and bold. It envisioned our schools to be student-centered and educator-led where talented, dedicated people want to come and stay in education. They confronted, rather than complained about, the challenges facing our schools—challenges that have gone unresolved for so long, that have negatively impacted teaching and learning, particularly for communities of color and communities that have been long shortchanged. The solutions proposed here understand the need to rewire the many years of poor policy and decision-making that have led to this point, and reflect the realities being faced by students, teachers and staff each day. Only then will our nation have schools where teachers want to teach, students want to learn and parents want to send their children.

Every moment in history can be viewed through a lens of hope or fear, aspiration or anger. I see a lot of hope in this report. I’m confident that we can rise to meet this moment—and that our country can learn to treat and respect teachers and school staff in ways that befit their importance to our society. In the process, we will not only save our profession, increase student achievement, and revitalize our schools, but also build a better future for all.

My deep gratitude to the task force members for their incredible work, and for this insightful, inspiring and practical report. The leaders from the field and the staff spent untold hours figuring out how to meet this crisis, with solutions that represent our collective wisdom and which policymakers cannot ignore. And my thanks to the two co-chairs, Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers, and Carl Williams, president of the CFT Council of Classified Employees and the Lawndale Federation of Classified Employees, as well as Rob Weil, director in Educational Issues, and former president of the Douglass County Federation of Teachers, who led all the staff work. Michael, Carl and Rob made sure we left no stone unturned. They, along with PSRP Director Lauren Samet and Robin Vitucci from Educational Issues, turned the stress and frustration and challenge our members feel today into a set of recommendations that can usher in a new day in public education—one in which our rhetoric about the importance of education for our children and for our country is matched by our actions in how we treat the people who educate our children.

Now, our job is to take these recommendations, first, to the delegates of the AFT convention for their consideration. And with their concurrence, we then translate these words into action at the local, state and national levels. That is union work, and this report is a formidable and a fabulous road map to move forward with that work.

In unity,

Randi Weingarten
AFT President

Introduction

Teacher and School Staff Shortage

Educators and school staff are drawn to their professions because of their love for children, their passion for helping them to learn and grow, and their desire to make a positive difference in society through their work. Some educators knew from the time they were young children that they wanted to grow up to be a teacher; some found their paths during high school or college exploration; others were adults who changed careers to find engaging work helping students. No matter the pathway, educators and school staff all enter their jobs with the desire to develop students' well-being, to help them achieve their life goals, and to create a better society.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses, guidance counselors, teachers, support staff and bus drivers were facing disrespect and de-professionalization, stress and lack of support, low pay relative to other professions and daunting workloads. Many educators are leaving long before they had planned, and the number of people entering the profession has plummeted.³ These shortages and the conditions contributing to them imperil the future of public education, the quality of the education our children receive and our democracy itself. The AFT is not just studying the problem; we have laid forth in this report specific remedies necessary to address this crisis.

All 50 states started the 2017-18 school year with teacher shortages. Every year, nearly 300,000 leave the profession—two-thirds before retirement age.⁴ Teacher turnover is nearly double that of other occupations; 30 percent of teachers leave within five years compared to 16 percent of engineers and 19 percent of nurses and lawyers.⁵ The situation has been made even worse by the layoffs of school employees at the start of the pandemic—there are still 331,000 fewer school staff than before COVID-19—and by severe stress and burnout due to the lengthy pandemic, increasing attacks on teachers, and efforts to mire schools in political and culture wars.

Public education is central to achieving our individual and collective goals—to prepare young people for productive and fulfilling lives and for engaged citizenship, and to ensure a well-educated populace necessary for a thriving society. Every child, regardless of circumstance or background deserves to have qualified, trained and knowledgeable people working in their schools to support their success. And successful students positively impact parents and families, communities and democracy. Teachers and educators not only help students learn facts and critical thinking skills, they also help mold and shape them as human beings; they instill democratic values, promote self-agency and a sense of community as they build the future generation of this country. It is essential for the success of our public school system and our children that we make systemwide changes that will help attract and keep people in these positions.

The educator shortage is a challenge in both recruitment and retention. Teacher preparation enrollment dropped 35 percent between 2009 and 2014.⁶ 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.⁷ Students see the struggles of educators; hear all the negative attacks; learn about the lack of political and financial support teachers and schools receive; and students see educators choose 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 teachers and other school staff who are already in the profession to leave and find other careers. The passion many have for education cannot overcome the struggles and stress. Lack of candidates entering the profession and high attrition rates contributed to a teacher shortage that nearly doubled from 2015 to 2018 when there were 110,000 fewer teachers than were needed.⁸ Schools serving majorities of students of color and students living in poverty experience the highest teacher turnover rates.⁹ Losing so much expertise has an enormous negative

impact on students' education and equity of learning opportunity. The financial consequences are also steep—more than \$2 billion annually.¹⁰

Along with teachers, support staff and other school positions are facing similar and harmful reductions. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this challenge. Since the pandemic, school staff employment has fallen across positions, with a 2.6 percent decrease for teaching assistants, 6 percent for custodians, and 14.7 percent for bus drivers, leaving schools without the necessary staff in almost every position.¹¹

Why has education become such an undesirable career in our country? The most successful education systems in the world are able to recruit and retain qualified teachers because the teaching profession is greatly valued by society; teachers are fairly compensated; the teaching career is transparent and clearly structured; teachers are given many opportunities—and encouragement—to learn; and they receive regular feedback on their teaching, such as through mentoring programs organized by schools.¹² In the U.S., those who do enter the profession are hit immediately with the realities of low pay, low support, low resources, and low trust and respect. The passion many have for education often cannot overcome the austerity, struggles and stress.

Our society does not question careers such as law and medicine as being “professions”—with all the previous values as well as agreed-upon standards for entry, ongoing training requirements, and oversight by members of the profession. Education jobs, however, are not viewed or treated with the same regard. Since the Industrial Revolution, our nation's education system has had a history of measuring results in a “scientific” way.¹³ The accountability for student outcomes was placed heavily upon educators after the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*.¹⁴ This report, commissioned by the Department of Education under President Ronald Reagan, described the struggles of students in the U.S. and offered recommendations for recovery—namely through a call for new, rigorous standards for student learning. The responsibility of ensuring children reached those standards ultimately was placed on teachers without consideration of growing rates of child poverty, inequitable and inadequate school funding in many communities, and an overall lack of investment in resources and supports for schools.

In the early 2000s, that pressure continued when the No Child Left Behind Act blamed teachers for low standardized test scores and imposed sanctions on those that did not improve, without significant accompanying resources and supports for improvement. Race to the Top placed additional blame on teachers by requiring narrow teacher evaluations that were based mainly on student summative assessment test scores and tying punitive job decisions to those evaluations—despite grave concerns from education researchers and practitioners about the challenges of isolating the contributions of teachers from the many other factors that shape student learning.¹⁵

The public narrative in the past several decades (heightened by media portrayals, including the 2010 film *Waiting for Superman* and the “Rotten Apples” *Time* magazine cover in 2014) has become that teachers and other educators are the cause and solution to all student struggles. Educators have been evaluated primarily based on student test scores and ultimately held responsible for many challenges beyond their control even though research clearly showed classroom teachers had a limited effect on the scores.¹⁶ It is no wonder why people are not choosing to enter or stay in a profession that is associated with so much public disrespect and so many personal frustrations.

A majority of states report teacher shortages in math, science, career and technical education, special education and bilingual education. Yet another area of shortage is in the diversity of educators. The teaching workforce is overwhelmingly white and growing less representative of the students they teach, a majority of whom are now students of color.¹⁷ Almost 79 percent of U.S. public school teachers are white, but only 47 percent of students are white.¹⁸ As the diversity of student enrollment in our public schools continues to grow, the diversity in our teacher workforce does not; 7 percent of teachers are Black, 9 percent are Hispanic,¹⁹ less than 3 percent are Asian American and Pacific Islander,²⁰ and less than 1 percent are Indigenous Americans.²¹ Additionally around two-thirds of teachers are women.²² We know that all students benefit from a diverse workforce.²³ The opportunity to learn from different perspectives is valuable to all, and in particular students of color benefit from having teachers with shared backgrounds and culture. However, we do not do enough to attract and retain a diverse workforce of teachers and educators, even implementing policies and supporting a culture that prevents people from wanting to work in schools.

Another detractor from giving someone a desire to work in schools is having had a negative experience as a student. Racial violence, accompanying bans on teaching students about race and racial justice in schools, and a biased justice system within schools have damaging effects on our students and particularly Black students. Teachers in the profession have cited the recent laws against teaching honest history as a factor in their wanting to leave the profession.²⁴ Some states have doubled down on those laws by creating hotlines for parents to complain about teachers who are teaching “divisive concepts,” making it even more challenging for them to teach accurate history, and making it harder for students to learn about different viewpoints and develop the critical-thinking skills they need to succeed.²⁵ We need to fix the problems of the educator pipeline overall but pay close attention to how we educate our students of color to make working in schools appealing rather than traumatizing. Equally important is our treatment of LGBTQIA+ students, immigrants and other students from marginalized communities.

Children and their families are struggling. The COVID-19 pandemic has put many adults out of work, has had detrimental health impacts on millions of people, and has caused stress and anxiety for many Americans. School buildings closed for weeks, months, even years, while school staff continue to support students in different ways. The number of children living in poverty has increased by more than 1 million since before the pandemic, with 16 percent of kids nationally living in poverty.²⁶ Children of color are disproportionately more likely to grow up poor. We must take bold actions to help our children and communities recover and thrive.

To address these issues, the AFT created the Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force, composed of 25 leaders from state and local unions across the country, to examine the challenges facing the profession. Guided with support from leading researchers in the field and informed by AFT’s 1.7 million members, the task force has developed bold but realistic solutions to address the issues we face. This is a crisis, and we cannot continue to let policymakers ignore it. Developing creative ways to recruit the best candidates, and then keeping these teachers and other personnel in our schools, must be a priority for our union, for superintendents and school boards, and for policymakers at all levels.

We need to reignite the passion that many have for entering the education profession, not extinguish

it. We must change how teachers and other school professionals are treated and supported. Schools need to be places where adults and children alike can thrive and grow; where there are relationships built on trust and respect; and where partnerships exist among students, educators, families and communities. Teachers and support staff need to be compensated adequately for the work they do and on par with other similarly educated professionals. Working conditions must be improved to make schools safe and welcoming places for everyone where students and educators alike can feel successful. Teachers need career pathways that allow them to grow within their profession without having to leave the classroom. Paraprofessionals need the opportunity to develop their careers through pathways into teaching. Educators need opportunities to connect with parents and families to build relationships to support each other for the benefit of all children.

Vision for a New Era of Schooling

The challenges that have led to the teacher and school staff shortage may have impacted the number of people entering and leaving the profession, but they have not taken away from the intrinsic desire many still have to work in schools and help children. People will always be called into these jobs, or be inspired by teachers they have had, or discover education careers in school, or find something lacking in their job that they seek out a new one in an education field. We can and must revitalize this passion through new and targeted recruitment and retention efforts. The people who work in schools should not have to sacrifice their professional or personal goals, financial security or dignity to pursue this important work.

Schools are the centers of neighborhoods and communities, and it is detrimental to our students and staff when top-down decisions on schools are made without consideration of or by the people in the schools. In the last century, people who work in schools have changed, those who are educated in schools have changed, and the desired outcomes of schooling have changed. Yet, we have done very little to change the structure of schools on a wide scale. School structures in all U.S. schools must move from outdated factory models and become modern and professional organizations.²⁷ Schools, in partnership with all stakeholders, must be the learning and cultural centers of their communities.

The AFT has long advocated for the professionalization of teaching and education careers. Albert Shanker, the late former AFT president, first wrote about strategies to ensure teaching is considered a true profession in 1986, and he laid out ways to strengthen the profession again in 1996.²⁸ The elements of a professional career model are not new, but we must advocate for bold changes that ensure education professions have a level of expertise to serve students, high-quality training and standards of entry, systematic and rigorous induction and mentoring of new employees, worker voice and independent judgment, evaluation that is tied to development, ongoing growth opportunities, and respect from society.²⁹

There is a public perception that teaching and school staff jobs are undesirable, easy, or filled with un- or underqualified people. We must do a better job of promoting education as a field where people want to work. But we cannot just talk the talk. We must also walk the walk—we must *make* education a field where people want to work. We need to change systems to create safe and welcoming environments where all students can and want to learn, and where teachers and school staff are trusted and supported to help them learn.

Student-Centered Schooling

Schools first and foremost are for student learning, and we must look at how to restructure schools and the school day in a way that focuses on students rather than on accountability, money, or meeting arbitrary standards set by people who have never worked with children. Schools need to be places where all students can go to learn, grow and be respected. Teachers must be able to teach students honest history so that all students feel valued, and so that schools are a place of acceptance and tolerance. Teachers should be able to assess their students in a more holistic way, such as through project-based learning, rather than through standardized tests. Counselors, nurses, social workers and other support staff need to be included in teams that work on interventions or other aspects of student learning. All school staff need supports and trust to develop positive relationships with students and families.

Educational equity is a challenge in a locally funded schooling system. Educators can only control what they can control; even with the best staff, kids cannot learn when they are homeless, hungry or struggling with other family or non-school challenges. Family income is one of the most important factors affecting a child's

educational performance, and schools with the lowest rates of poverty tend to have the highest performers.³⁰ Some students need more or different supports to overcome the additional challenges they face in their lives, and reforms must shift the distribution of resources and educators to ensure that all school systems are rooted in meeting the needs of all students.

People will want to go into education careers when they have had a positive experience in schools. And educators will want to stay in those careers when they are able to support those positive learning experiences. Schools will be more successful when educators are treated as the knowledgeable professionals they are and given the freedom, tools, time and trust they require to meet the needs of all children. To do this, we must get political fights out of our classrooms. Public school families and educators are natural allies in the fight for the supports and resources students and schools need to succeed. The latest anti-public education attacks have been focused on stoking fear and division, pitting families against educators and blaming teachers for COVID-19-related school shutdowns.³¹ Despite these attacks, the fact remains that a strong majority of parents give their public schools and teachers top marks for their efforts to respond to the challenges of COVID-19. In fact, parents see teachers and their unions as valuable partners in the effort to help kids recover and thrive throughout the pandemic. Educators and parents know it is always better when we can be partners in helping our children succeed.³²

Educator-Led Schooling

We cannot put a bandage on the teacher and school staff shortage by cutting corners and lowering the bar for entry. We must simultaneously raise entry standards, improve the way we treat workers, and improve recruitment and retention issues. To do this, we must give educators a larger voice in their work and allow them to have the oversight of their profession just like lawyers and doctors. Research indicates that when teachers have more control over their social and instructional roles, there is less turnover.³³ And less teacher turnover is good for students.³⁴

Teachers and school staff respect the roles of administrators and want to work collaboratively with them, but administrators must also recognize teachers and school staff as leaders of their work. Voice and input have always been important for educators, but in recent years—beginning with uprisings and strikes over disinvestment in education, to racial tensions and the assault on teaching truthful history, to the shift in how

schools functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic—it is evident that if schools are going to fully serve students, then teachers and school employees need more autonomy. Educators feel like the professionals they are when they have trust and autonomy over their work, which leads to more respect from society for workers who acknowledge the expertise it takes to make those professional decisions. They can also develop stronger relationships with administrators when they know their voices are respected.

Educators are dissatisfied with poor working and learning conditions, but also with de-professionalization that has stripped them of their freedom to teach. Teachers are not given the time nor the trust to do what they need to do for their students. The outdated obsession with standardized testing created a broken system where teachers are overwhelmed with test preparation and collecting and reporting on data that does not help their students. Now, teachers are not even able to teach their students accurate history. On top of that, during the pandemic, educators were called on to teach, to be public health workers, to support children and families through trauma and mental health crises, to support learning recovery, to adapt to virtual or hybrid instruction, to substitute for colleagues or cover classes, and to support an “all hands on deck”

approach to schooling. Educators had to determine what their students needed and adjust to new delivery formats and lessons.³⁵ Then, many were told whether, and when, to return to their place of work without any say in determining if the conditions were adequate for returning or if it was best for their students. It has become too much for many to bear.

During the pandemic, it became increasingly apparent just how vital teachers and school staff are to our nation’s children. Education professionals shifted quickly to a new, emergency mode of schooling while taking on work beyond their traditional roles. The nation collectively saw educators as truly essential workers, with public outcries for higher pay and more respect. Yet when most of the country began to return to schooling (somewhat) as usual, the public outcries were gone. We cannot let this opportunity pass. Our children depend on us to take action that will improve the teaching and school staff professions. Every child deserves to have people in their schools who are well-trained, well-supported and excited to work with them every day. We need an overhaul in all aspects of the profession to ensure people want to enter and *stay* in school careers. The future of public education depends on it; the future of our democracy depends on it.

Recommendations

Revitalize the Educator and School Staff Pipeline

A critical step to improving shortages is to address the challenges in the educator and school staff pipeline. In recent years, there have been fewer candidates taking school support jobs and attending teacher preparation programs. Of course, all the suggestions for improving the shortage do not stand alone; recruiting teachers and school staff will be easier when other aspects of those professions are improved. But we must ensure that we are taking targeted steps to improve access and entry into education professions.

A strong teacher and school staff pipeline directly supports student learning. Students benefit from having teachers who have already had experience in their schools, who know the area, and who are committed to a career in education. Positive school experiences for students serve as a direct recruitment tool; when students feel welcomed, supported and engaged by teachers and staff, they will want to return to those schools and encourage others to do so.

An educator-led school system needs a well-trained workforce. Teachers and in-class support staff need training in working with students both in content and pedagogy, as well as clinical experiences with students before they become the teacher or support person of record. All new staff need opportunities to work with experienced staff not only to hone their craft but also to become immersed in the culture and administrative functions of the workplace.

As the racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. continues to change and become more diverse, so must our educators. All students benefit when they can learn from different perspectives, and students of color benefit from having educators with shared backgrounds and culture. Students should feel represented and supported by the adults in their schools, and educators must be able to teach and work in an environment that is respectful and inclusive of all.

Here are some ways that have been proven effective in improving recruitment and entry into education professions:

Early and ongoing identification and recruiting of educators and support staff

Teachers and school staff can be identified or targeted into the profession well before they enter preparation programs. Career and technical education (CTE) programs are one way to create career pathways for students in high school or earlier. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education funded a project to provide states with career pathway programs of study for occupations in the teaching and training pathway at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Research indicates that “early recruitment of middle and high school students is a more effective strategy than pulling from adult populations,” so we must ensure that every state offers CTE course sequences for education careers.³⁶ Students who are not in dedicated CTE programs should still have opportunities to learn about teaching and school staff positions, for example through informational sessions, clubs or other similar school programs, or from their school’s career services departments.

School systems can also improve teacher and school staff recruitment through support of grow-your-own (GYO) programs. These are locally based programs that target candidates, often paraprofessionals, and assist them with the funding and mentoring they need to complete the requirements to become teachers.³⁷ Students benefit from having teachers who already have had experience in their schools, who know the area, and who are committed to a career in education. GYO programs can take many forms, but overall, the goal is to educate, train and increase pathways into various education professions. 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.

Another way stakeholders can recruit more intentionally is through outreach to communities of color. 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.³⁸ School districts should adjust their recruitment strategies to have more intentional measures to attract a more diverse teaching population that more closely aligns with the U.S. student population.

High-quality preparation programs and residencies

To strengthen the teacher and school staff pipeline, prospective workers need access to high-quality preparation programs. Most other countries work to increase the quality and rigor of their teaching preparation programs; but here in the U.S., recent legislation has reduced the qualifications to become a teacher. Further, there are more alternative and nontraditional ways to become a teacher in the U.S. than ever before, and unfortunately many of them are low quality.

The AFT has offered extensive recommendations for aligning and elevating teacher preparation and the teaching profession.³⁹ Teacher preparation programs vary in myriad ways, but what should be consistent is providing teacher candidates with a strong foundation in subject-area content along with instruction in relevant, dynamic and differentiated pedagogical practices. Programs should provide candidates with extensive clinical experiences that offer practice alongside a skilled practitioner over a significant period, ideally an entire school year. Candidates need to experience the rigors of the profession in an authentic classroom environment. They should start with setting up their classroom and meeting students on the first day, and they need to be with those students throughout the different experiences of the whole school year.

Preparation programs require candidates to pay to receive on-the-job training, but one way to provide candidates with thorough, *paid* classroom experience is through yearlong educator residencies. Teachers who successfully complete well-designed and well-implemented programs tend to remain in the classroom longer than their peers. Similar to a medical residency, teacher residents get experience alongside an expert veteran teacher while also receiving coursework and a living stipend.⁴⁰ After this experience, the candidate

commits to teaching in the district for several years, ensuring that experience stays in the local schools.

According to the Learning Policy Institute, “Strong educator preparation is critically important to support improved teacher effectiveness and retention and improved student achievement. Research suggests that residencies produce effective educators who stay in teaching at higher rates and who are, on average, more racially diverse than new teachers prepared through alternative routes.”⁴¹ Considering teaching an apprenticeable profession under the Department of Labor’s definition is a new, promising strategy that, with proper standards, can ensure quality while removing some of the time and cost barriers for future educators to enter the profession.

Districts must be more intentional about training school support staff as well. In many instances, districts will hire support personnel without any job-specific training prior to the start of the school year. Specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) may have training in their position, such as counselor, psychologist or nurse, but may need additional school-specific or student-related training. For example, many SISP are responsible for the district Medicaid in Schools program, but their training does not introduce any of the basic concepts of the program. The AFT has advocated for state departments of education and the federal government to address this. Districts could also work more proactively with preparation programs to integrate core concepts into professional preparation programs.

Support new employees through induction and mentoring programs

Because high levels of teacher and school staff turnover can result in high costs for schools—both financially and through the loss of experienced staff—it is critical that schools use strategies in school staff’s beginning years to give them a greater opportunity for success. All new school employees should receive comprehensive support as they transition to the workplace. Research suggests that support for new teachers through mentoring and induction has a positive impact on teacher retention, teacher instructional practices, and student achievement.⁴²

The AFT spoke to many new teachers who said they had experienced weak or ineffective induction and mentoring programs, with a mentor who visited

sparingly or who only focused on ensuring the teacher passed the Praxis. Others had mentors in different schools, which meant they did not have regular meetings or access to the person who was supposed to be their support. Most school support staff reported no mentoring of any kind. Teachers and support staff said they needed help with curriculum along with help adjusting to the building, their colleagues, and administrative logistics. They wanted more help with their workload and planning from master teachers and staff.

Induction programs are typically reserved for beginning teachers and can provide support as teachers move from pre-service training into the profession. All new school staff would benefit from a comprehensive induction and mentoring program. Because there are no uniform standards for all university preparation programs, and some teachers come from alternative certification programs, induction is extremely important to ensure new teachers have the guidance they need as they enter the workforce. Newly hired support staff would similarly benefit from a structured mentoring or job-shadow program upon hire. The first year of employment is a critical time for all employees as future good work habits can be nurtured by a competent mentor. As much as possible, mentors need to be in the same job classification or grade/subject area as their mentee. This may not always be possible, especially in small schools or in more specialized subject areas/job classifications, but for teachers and support staff to have the support they need, it is beneficial to be paired with a mentor who is a content or skill master. Further, teachers and staff of color have indicated that having the opportunity to have a mentor who shares their cultural or ethnic background would be helpful for them to learn from the unique experiences they might encounter.

We should look to countries, such as Japan, that have a full year of induction where new teachers apprentice with a master teacher before becoming responsible for their own classrooms.⁴³ This strategy continues throughout the teaching career with regular time for teachers to work together to plan and practice lessons. Induction programs should ensure teachers have time to learn not only teaching strategies from their colleagues but also an understanding of the culture and structures of the school. Induction programs can include a variety

of strategies to help introduce new school employees to their career.

Ensure students are taught and supported by a diverse workforce

The lack of diversity in the education workforce continues to be of growing concern. More than 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. Paraprofessionals, while more diverse ethnically than teachers, have an even higher percentage of female workers—more than 87 percent—than teachers.⁴⁴ Ethno-racial and culturally linguistic students are sitting in America's classrooms. Teachers should also reflect this diversity.

Research indicates that increasing diversity in the educator workforce can positively impact students' academic growth as well as social and emotional development. Students of color demonstrate greater academic gains and social emotional development when their teacher identifies as a person of color and has the same ethno-racial background. "Asserting that diversity is a dimension of quality can disrupt practices that privilege one group of students over another and can level the playing field for teachers and students who stand to benefit most from a diverse teaching workforce."⁴⁵

Increasing the diversity of our education workforce is not only a benefit to students, but also to the entire profession. Teachers of color can serve as ambassadors of the profession for students in teacher academy programs. This is an opportunity for interested teachers of color to take on a leadership role. It would also serve as a potential retention strategy; many teachers of color cite lack of autonomy and professional growth opportunities as a reason for leaving the classroom. To achieve this end, barriers to student debt, licensure, hiring and retention of teachers of color must be closely examined.

» Implementation Strategies

To revitalize the educator and school staff pipeline,

The federal government should:

- **Fund teacher preparation**—
 - Continue to fund teacher preparation as an “allowable use” through the Every Student Succeeds Act. Currently, funds can be used to create and support teacher residency programs.
- **Fund professional development**—Continue to fund Title II, Part A (Supporting Effective Instruction State Grant Program) that provides districts funds for professional development and support for educators.
- **Promote diversity**—
 - Develop a Diverse Teacher Corps fund/grant to ensure candidates of color do not incur significant debt while training to become teachers.
 - Include robust funding for the Hawkins Centers of Excellence program to support diversifying the educator workforce by increasing the number of high-quality teacher preparation programs at historically black colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities, and minority-serving institutions, such as Hispanic-serving institutions. Eligible institutions collectively prepare half of all teachers of color and are ideally positioned to help prepare a new generation of effective teachers of color for high-need schools.
- **Encourage partnerships between districts and higher education institutions**—Expand funding for the federal Teacher Quality Partnership grant program, which funds competitive grants to partnerships of higher education institutions and high-need local school districts to prepare profession-ready educators in high-need subjects. The program extends clinical practice and includes the option of a residency for master’s level programs. In addition, TQP grantees develop metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of program graduates once they

enter the classroom. Graduates of TQP residency programs agree to serve in a high-need school for three years, ensuring teachers are prepared to serve where they are needed most.

Each state should:

- **Pass a grow-your-own bill**—Pass a GYO bill that supports partnerships among local education agency, university and district partners to develop and sustain residency and GYO programs. Such programs should provide supports, including release time for student teaching, child care and allowances for course materials, that will help nontraditional students to succeed. State and LEA investments in comprehensive educator preparation are allowable through multiple routes. States should also consider partnerships with higher education, districts and labor unions in support of registered apprenticeships in teaching.
- **Increase diversity and equity**—Examine why teachers of color leave the profession, and consider levers aimed at increasing equity. One such lever is the licensure exam. It has proven to be a barrier to entrance to the profession for many candidates of color. States should re-examine how content knowledge and pedagogical skills are demonstrated and measured. States should invest in culturally responsive licensure assessments. Policymakers should also name diversity as a marker of teacher quality.
- **Support mentorship programs**—Maintain and expand support and funding for mentorship programs. This includes administrative support and dedicated time for implementation. No school program can be successful without a principal’s leadership, and something as time intensive as mentoring and induction means administrators need to allow mentees and mentors the time they need to talk and work together. Administrators will ensure that mentors have the ongoing training they need to be successful, and that mentors/mentees are given the opportunities they need to make the relationship effective. Mentors should go through a strict application and interview process to determine if they are right for the job. They should also have training and ongoing professional development to keep current on their skills.

- **Develop teacher and staff induction programs**—Ensure there are set policies for a framework for teacher and staff induction. Every state should adopt such a program, and existing programs should be strengthened to set standards for mentors, require training for mentors, provide stipends or compensation for mentors, and provide for reduced course loads for mentors and mentees alike. Each of these policies has been a statutory requirement in at least one state.

School districts should:

- **Partner with higher education institutions**—Actively seek partnerships with local colleges and universities to implement residency programs. By doing so, districts are investing in their future staff and are likely to mitigate high teacher turnover.
- **Provide support for staff to transition into teaching roles**—Offer time within the workday or paid leave and financial support for education costs to school support staff who want to transition into a teaching role to help eliminate the barriers to entry.
- **Increase diversity and equity**—Ensure there are diverse members on hiring committees, as well as inclusion of teachers of color on leadership teams involved in interviews. A diverse selection committee will not only create a more equitable hiring process but will also help candidates to learn about the school culture from different perspectives. Hiring committees should reflect the intended makeup of the school and district workforce.
- **Create structures to help new teachers learn and thrive**—Create schedules that provide new teachers with a lighter class load to allow time to observe and receive support from expert teachers. Also, new teachers should not be placed in the most demanding classrooms and should have a network of colleagues to support them as they develop. Students in more hard-to-staff classrooms and schools, such as those with lower grades, higher absences and lower socioeconomic status, will benefit from having more experienced educators.
- **Create organizational cultures that help all educators and staff thrive**—District leaders must make sure all schools have strong organizational conditions and strong leadership to ensure that all

new educators are placed in a school where they can thrive.

Unions should:

- **Work collaboratively with all stakeholders**—Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels—and with leaders and members—to advocate for best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working; stakeholders should use creative ways to address obstacles.
- **Support residency programs**—Work with the university and district to support residency programs with professional development for supporting teachers and candidates.
- **Provide technical assistance**—Partner with stakeholders to provide technical assistance for program development and implementation at all levels, including teacher academies, paraprofessional-to-teacher pathways, or residency programs.
- **Inform and support prospective teachers and support staff**—Attend career or recruitment fairs to be involved in the process, to be visible, and to help provide prospective teachers and support staff with information and resources about the union and about the teaching profession. This is also a great way to get the union and district to work together and create a collaborative relationship that can be useful in other situations.
- **Negotiate career pathways**—Negotiate career pathways with specific financial and other support for current employees to transition into other roles within the district. (e.g., paraprofessional-to-teacher programs.)
- **Negotiate mentoring programs**—Negotiate with districts to establish effective mentoring programs. This includes clearly defined peer mentor/coach selection and review process, training for peer mentors/coaches, timelines and structures for the mentoring process, and oversight of intervention programs.

Restructure Schools to Create Positive Working and Learning Conditions for All

Educators' working conditions are their students' learning conditions. The environments where students learn are a critical part of their success. Unfortunately, educators are overburdened by the demands that often go beyond their job classification and working in school-related careers has become unsustainable for many. Beyond our need to treat educators as professionals and their work as a profession, school structures in the U.S. must move from the bureaucratic factory model into a modern and professionally run organization.⁴⁶ We must redesign the structure of public schools to meet the needs of all who work there, all who are educated there, and all who benefit from having a well-educated and well-supported society. If we want to attract and retain a well-trained and well-supported workforce, both school culture and school resources must be re-evaluated and redesigned.

Here are recommendations that support restructuring schools both through cultural changes that impact students and staff broadly, and through system changes that impact the day-to-day work done by teachers and school staff:

Create a Culture That Supports All Workers and Learners

While creative, innovative instruction is provided in thousands of schools every day, in some places, scripted or pre-formulated lessons are still required. All educators and staff must have latitude to take into consideration individual student needs and background to ensure instruction is "grounded in the idea that children are curious, capable, interested people, whose personhood needs to be respected and whose interests can be stimulated."⁴⁷ We cannot continue to educate students with outdated strategies and norms. Students will struggle without understanding their purpose for learning and without being treated as individuals. Teachers and school staff need the freedom and flexibility to adapt to the needs and interests of their students. We will not be able to attract or retain teachers or staff to work in school systems that do not recognize and provide for the needs of the current U.S. student population.

Ensure every school has a comprehensive, well-staffed support program with immediately available resources to address the well-being of students and staff

State, local and district resources for social services should be coordinated to provide more effective and efficient support. In addition, every school must have a student support response team of highly trained individuals who can immediately intervene when student behavior is an issue. Finally, every school in the country should have the opportunity to become a community school. These public, neighborhood-based schools connect families, schools and communities with "support they need to be safe and healthy, access to the equal opportunities they deserve for prosperity, and a sense of responsibility for civic engagement."⁴⁸ These schools are often open year-round and connect schools and families with social services, healthcare, libraries and extracurricular learning opportunities.⁴⁹ The community schools approach provides a framework that facilitates and supports the collaborative practices and leadership as well as the coordination that is necessary to implement a comprehensive school-based program for student and staff well-being. These programs should also ensure that the work environment is positively regarded by educators of color and other traditionally marginalized groups.

These services are not "extra." They are essential to student and staff success. More than half of the nation's schoolchildren—about 25 million—live in low-income households. Increasingly, they live in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage and racial isolation, where they face society's neglect of their most basic needs. Many suffer adverse experiences and persistent hardship: food insecurity, homelessness, inadequate healthcare. Children experiencing these hardships are also often locked out of schools with high-quality curriculum, instruction, supports and facilities—a result of decades of state budget cuts and other policy choices. Over the last couple of years, many of these issues have been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 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.⁵⁰ A recent study by the Rand Corp. found that teachers and principals reported worse well-being than other working adults, and that well-being and poor working conditions are associated with an intention to leave their job.⁵¹ These stressors are even more prominent

for teachers of color. It is even more important to focus on well-being after multiple years of pandemic-related challenges. By supporting community schools through stronger policies, funding and coordination of services, state and local leaders have an opportunity to respond to the immediate needs of students and families and support educators.

Ensure school sites are safe and welcoming for all

Every state has standards for student learning content and for teaching. It is time to have standards for the places where they learn. We must hold our school sites to the same high standard we have for the people who work and learn there. AFT teachers and school staff believe that improved workplace safety is an important strategy for recruitment and retention. This can include healthy environments, quality of physical spaces as well as safety from violence and equitable treatment for all. These are not only the working conditions of our members, but also the learning conditions of our students. Neither educators nor students should be asked to work or learn under conditions that are unsafe or unhealthy.

In terms of physical working conditions, districts across the country have deferred capital repairs and failed to take reasonable steps to ensure physical spaces are free of known dangers like cancer-causing asbestos.⁵² The pandemic has brought new challenges to teacher and support staff working conditions. While many districts have instituted safety precautions such as vaccinations or masks in enclosed spaces, some politicians have made these strategies, like mandatory masking, a political issue rather than a public health issue. Where this happens, teachers and support staff, particularly those with compromised immune systems, face real dangers simply showing up to work.

Compounding these challenges, teachers and support staff in districts that have a higher percentage of Black and brown students face some of the worst working conditions. The 2018 infrastructure failures seen in Baltimore schools epitomize this overall lack of investment in Black majority school districts and the people who work in them.⁵³ In September 2018, Detroit school leaders had to shut off the drinking water in all schools after elevated levels of lead and copper were found in the water at dozens of facilities.⁵⁴ School systems must maintain practices that keep school buildings and property healthy and safe for all employees and students.

Unfortunately, negative behaviors exist in many schools, leaving educators and students fearful for their safety.⁵⁵ School discipline policies and practices often lead to the disruption of learning opportunities not just for those involved but for others in the classroom or building. Students who engage in negative behavior may be removed from class or school and are not able to keep pace with their peers, often leading to more negative behaviors. Suspensions lead to dropouts, with students of color far more likely to receive harsher punishments like suspension than their white peers for similar offenses. In some cases, the juvenile justice system becomes involved, leaving students to carry a stigma of involvement with the legal system and an uphill climb to get out.

We need all school employees along with community members to work together to find a way to create positive school discipline practices, conflict resolution strategies, and behavior management structures for all students. Educators need training so they are equipped with the tools and skills to support students and their families. We must further investments in social and emotional learning and in support teams for students to address behaviors quickly and effectively. No one should feel unsafe while in our public schools. Educators and support staff need strategies and training to prepare them for the many challenges they will face working in public education; they need to feel supported if they are to be successful for the long term. We must enact policies to keep students and staff safe, while ensuring those policies do not contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Public schools should be the hub of a community, where all kids feel safe and valued; and most often, schools are the safest place for kids. Unfortunately, our national gun violence problem is highlighted by mass shootings in public places, including schools. Gun violence impacts the lives of students in and out of schools, especially in communities of color. To keep our schools and students safe, our country needs to enact commonsense policies, such as universal background checks and funding mental health programs.

AFT President Randi Weingarten has committed our union to making “schools safe and welcoming places for every member of the school community—whether for LGBTQIA+ students and staff, immigrants and refugees, students with special needs, or any other student who for whatever reason feels vulnerable.”⁵⁶ Every person in our community deserves to feel safe and accepted, and schools should be actively working

to create and support programs where all students and staff are protected.

Some topics or issues can be more sensitive or challenging to teach, made all the more difficult by the harmful politicization by some stakeholders. Educators must be allowed to exercise their professional judgment and have a responsibility to provide their students with developmentally and age-appropriate materials that develop their literacy, skills, increase their knowledge, and expand their intellectual horizons. This means teaching honest, accurate history and opposing any campaign to ban books or censor the written word in schools and libraries. Schools must be welcoming of diverse people, backgrounds and beliefs. Educators should not have to make these decisions without support, and school leaders should provide professional development and guidance so that educators can make the most informed decisions on teaching and curriculum.

Create standards to gauge the overall health and quality of the workplace

For too long, American schools have lacked basic workplace standards. Each school district creates its own learning and working environment based mostly on historical budgeting practices. But what are generally accepted standards of practice? How can research help teachers, staff, schools and districts use their resources in ways that are most beneficial to students?

Working with experts from across the education spectrum, the AFT will translate research on best practices into a set of easily understood standards that teachers, staff, unions and districts can use to help develop learning and working conditions that are the most conducive to learning. Not meant as a checklist, these standards will instead help guide schools to create strategic plans to improve their learning environments. Schools need goals for improvement, and these goals must be research-based and go well beyond a simple standardized test score.

The standards should include metrics such as: actual class size (not full-time equivalents), planning time, workplace supports, materials, wraparound services, ratio of students to counselors, technology accessibility, building guidelines, and compensation relative to the local cost of living. This living document would be continually updated as new research on working and learning conditions is available.

The importance of learning and working conditions cannot be overestimated. Having a set of research-based standards as a starting point to create the schools where teachers want to teach, and parents want to send their children, is a good first step. We must stop working from a deficit model in this country and start providing every child with the resources they and their educators need to succeed.

Unions must create strong partnerships with communities and parents to understand and support issues within their schools

Decades of research show the importance and positive impact of ongoing and authentic community engagement. Creating mechanisms for family and community engagement, led by welcoming and culturally informed teachers and school staff, can strengthen the school community, build positive relationships and school climate, and improve student outcomes on many measures, including attendance, discipline and academic achievement. The school system, for its part, gains important advocates as families and community members understand and support strategic goals and see themselves as vital partners in schools' success.⁵⁷

The national focus on family and community engagement is increasing, including the engagement requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act⁵⁸ and the Department of Education's promotion of the Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships.⁵⁹ However, building the capacity of educators and school staff must be a prerequisite for designing and implementing effective engagement strategies. So, too, must be building relationships of trust and respect between home and school, particularly in schools in culturally diverse or low-income neighborhoods.⁶⁰

The effectiveness of family and community engagement programs depends on the quality of the policy design and implementation.⁶¹ High-quality family engagement doesn't happen by chance. It is the result of policy choices, resource allocations and technical assistance that support both staff capacity and student participation. Building on efforts from our partners at the national, state and local levels—to engage parents, families and communities as allies for public schools—must be a priority for our union.

» Implementation Strategies

To create a culture that supports all workers,

The federal government should:

- **Increase ESSA funding to reshape education systems**—ESSA Title II, Part A, funding has a wide array of allowable uses that will help schools to focus on teaching and learning. These uses include supporting and maintaining roles of paraprofessionals, requiring collaboration with paraprofessionals in development of state and local plans, advancing the professional development of paraprofessionals, and providing collective bargaining protections.
- **Pass laws that support student and educator well-being—**
 - **Fund Community Schools**—Invest robustly in the Full-Service Community Schools Program, which provides schools an opportunity to respond to the immediate needs of students and families, support educators, and help meet the goal of 25,000 community schools.
 - **Expand and fund access to mental health care**—Congress can defend and fund comprehensive mental health care for all and expand access to mental health facilities. Specifically for schools, Congress can increase funding for states so they can hire more counselors, nurses, school psychologists, social workers and other health professionals in schools, building a pipeline for these critical staff, with an emphasis on schools serving underserved students.
 - **Protect schools and communities from gun violence**—Pass laws limiting access to firearms through universal background checks.
 - **Prohibit discrimination**—Congress can increase funding for vigorous enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects students from discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin or English learner status, and other civil rights laws that protect students from gender or disability status.

States should:

- **Support community schools**—Coordinate among agencies as well as regional and local leaders

(such as county offices of education, state boards of education, and local education agencies) to provide technical assistance for district community school initiatives and wellness programs. Technical assistance in this context includes the various supports needed to launch and sustain these efforts at scale, such as professional development and coaching for district and school staff, support for strategic planning, and partnership development that brings resources to schools (e.g., direct staffing, service provision and funding). States should also work in collaboration with state coalitions of stakeholders to develop their technical assistance framework and policy for funding supports.

- **Support bullying prevention**—Continue to support legislation that protects staff and students from discrimination and bullying.

Local governments should:

- **Support community schools**—Pass resolutions in support of community schools and aligning city and county resources to assist with integrating mental and physical health services and programs for students and staff to make accessing such resources easier.
- **Develop education environment standards**—Review and track the quality of the learning environment in every school. Without agreed-upon standards, this review is pointless. Cities and jurisdictions must be held accountable for the educational environments they provide every child.

School districts should:

- **Enable and support stakeholder collaboration**—Welcome and create space for genuine collaboration and coordination among staff, families, administration and community partners. Local school boards can pass resolutions in support of community schools and establishing site-based response teams and wellness programs. Districts and local unions should work together to develop procedures and contract language regarding these policies. Local policies must reflect the data gathered from assets and needs assessments done in partnership with the community and staff and include professional development and staffing needs.

- **Enact school discipline models that support students**—
 - **Disrupt the school to prison pipeline**—Adopt responsive or restorative justice models and avoid involving law enforcement or the court unless no other alternative is possible.
 - **Avoid punitive discipline practices**—Educators should be trained to use crisis prevention intervention and restorative justice techniques to address disruptive or unsafe behavior whenever possible. Punitive discipline practices are not in the best interest of students and are not in keeping with the values of school districts.
 - **Provide guidance on difficult conversations**—Have clear guidance on how to handle difficult parent or student interactions in disciplinary situations and in any other challenging circumstances.
- **Provide mental health counseling**—Fully staff every school with qualified mental health counseling to identify and intervene before students reach a crisis point.
- **Use allocated funds from the American Rescue Plan**—Many school districts received federal funding to support operations after the pandemic. Much of this money has not been spent, and districts should use funding to make needed investments in up-to-date ventilation systems, in needed mental health supports, and other safety measures.
- **Provide professional support and guidance on teaching sensitive topics**—Educators have the training and professional judgment to develop instructional plans that are best for their students. District and school leaders should provide ongoing training and support to educators to ensure they are continually improving their instruction, and they may also need additional support on addressing potentially sensitive or challenging topics when needed.
- **Advocate for community schools and wellness programs**—Leverage their power to advocate for and ensure the formation and implementation of wellness programs, site-based response teams, and community schools, and ensure that these strategies meet the needs of all education stakeholders and are carried out with fidelity.
- **Address working conditions**—
 - **Bargain for working conditions**—Address working conditions through collective bargaining agreements. We should use CBAs to ensure there are adequate staff and reasonable workloads. Staffing ratios are an important working condition that affects all educators and students. Schools must establish appropriate staffing ratios based on industry standards of best practice. Staffing levels of custodial workers, bus drivers, and paraprofessionals should all be implemented with safety, equity and efficiency in mind.
 - **Codify language around working conditions**—Codify health and safety language, committees and processes to address unsafe working conditions.

Create a System That Provides Workers with Trust, Time, Tools and Training to Do Their Jobs

Along with creating positive school cultures, restructuring schools also requires addressing the day-to-day functions of teachers and school staff workers. The AFT heard from countless members about how important it is for them to be trusted by policymakers, administrators and community members to make decisions relevant to their jobs and to their students; to be given the time in their workday to plan and prepare for their instruction or other duties; to collaborate with colleagues; and to meaningfully assess their students' work and needs; to be given the tools and resources they need to do their jobs without being overburdened by paperwork or large class sizes; and to be given ongoing, job-embedded training that allows them continuous growth and opportunities to develop within their career or between roles.

These changes will also benefit students by ensuring that the people who work with them can exercise their professional judgment to make the best, most-informed decisions regarding teaching and learning. Students will benefit when all adults who work with them are able to work together and share information about student

Unions should:

- **Work collaboratively with all stakeholders**—Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels, and with leaders and members to advocate for best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working to using creative ways to address obstacles.

needs and strategies to meet those needs. Reduced paperwork and smaller class sizes allow educators more time with students and more opportunities to give individualized attention. Educator and staff training directly impacts students when that training is timely and relevant to student needs.

Provide opportunity for a stronger voice within the profession from rank-and-file workers and allow them to have authority in their day-to-day decision-making

For too long, decisions about how schools are run have been made by individuals whose teaching or schoolwork ended years ago or who never had classroom experience. Instead, those decisions should be made by the people who are closest to the students. School administrators have important roles in leading and managing schools, but they must provide opportunities for teachers and other staff to lead, too, based on their knowledge, experience and professionalism.

All school employees need a voice in their workplace—not simply by having input on day-to-day school functions, but also by having substantial control over their time, the curriculum, instructional tools, assessments and resources. Teachers and school staff express higher levels of satisfaction—and less burnout and stress—when they are involved in decision-making, and they feel more like professionals when they are trusted and have autonomy over their work.⁶² Members of society have more respect for workers when they recognize and acknowledge the expertise it takes to make those professional decisions. However, research indicates that a majority of teachers and school staff feel that their voices are not heard, with slightly more than half of teachers responding that their opinions are considered at the school level and fewer still who do not believe their voices are heard at the district, state or national levels.⁶³ This lack of respect is a significant contributing factor to the teacher and support staff shortage we are experiencing.

High-performing school systems rely on all stakeholders to work together to improve student learning. Top-down management and accountability do little to develop educators as professionals or to build human capital within the school and district. Respectful and trusting building leadership is crucial for teachers and staff feeling like they have a meaningful voice in their schools. Principals are key in setting the tone and culture of the school, in creating structures that foster team-based as well as individual decision-making.

Teams should be made up of all who work with children, including teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as service providers. Students will benefit when all staff are able to share their expertise and perspectives with each other. Distributed leadership, where staff and school boards participate in roles and responsibilities in collaborative ways, can contribute to improvements in school outcomes.⁶⁴ There needs to be a space within schools, within unions, within districts, and within governments for educators to share their thoughts and expertise in a meaningful way. When decisions are made about public education, we need to have educators in the room making those decisions.

Reduce standardized testing and empower teachers to use authentic assessments that measure what students know and can do

For too long, our public schools have been subject to test-and-punish accountability that discourages educational innovation, demoralizes teachers, narrows instruction and, most importantly, 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. Tests should first and foremost be about supporting student learning and providing teachers and staff with data that helps inform their practice.

Although there is a growing understanding that we need better assessment systems that build the capacity of educators and schools to improve student knowledge and skills, students still spend way too much time preparing for and taking assessments that fail to authentically represent the skills and abilities we want students to develop. Some school districts spend a month or more of school time on test preparation and testing, starting as early as third grade.⁶⁵ Rather than spending time on tests that have no impact on student learning, educators should be freed to assess their students in meaningful ways that will provide them with timely data they can use immediately to support their students.

Aside from failing to effectively provide educators with information they need to support student learning, testing can have additional negative consequences on students. Testing can have the unintended consequence of harming students' physical and emotional well-being.⁶⁶ The pressure and preparation can lead to stress and illness. Teens often feel anxiety about the impact of standardized tests on their future—either getting into

college or getting a job. Younger students understand the consequences of testing on educators and schools and have expressed fear that their test performance may cause harm to their teachers.⁶⁷

Teachers and support staff know what is best for their students; they want to have agency when it comes to testing and curriculum. No students are simply the sum of their standardized test scores. No two students are alike; they all come from different backgrounds with different personal circumstances. Educators need the flexibility and trust to do what is best for each student and classroom. They also need to be able to spend their instructional time on actual instruction. Having to focus so much of their school year on testing can lead to dissatisfaction and stress for teachers; more than half of teachers surveyed in a 2019 PDK poll stated that they would vote to strike over issues of standardized testing.⁶⁸ Early-career teachers are more likely to face frustration and have higher turnover rates when there are more testing requirements.⁶⁹ School disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic have also led to a new need for educators to support students in making up lost instructional time. In a recent Rand Corp. survey, nearly half of teachers ranked supporting academic learning as a top-three cause of job-related stress. Allowing educators the autonomy and support they need to address each of their students' academic needs will help alleviate some of that stress.⁷⁰

Systems must change so that teachers are empowered to exercise their professional judgment to design and use performance assessments and curriculum-embedded formative assessments. These assessments will give students opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to organize information to solve problems, to frame and conduct investigations, to analyze and synthesize data, and to apply learning to new situations. Experiential learning and project-based assessment could provide a more well-rounded assessment of a student's capabilities over the narrower high-stakes standardized assessments prevalent in our system today.

By using high-quality, relevant and timely formative assessments, teachers can use those results to modify, refine and individualize instruction to better meet students' needs.

Focus educator and staff development and evaluation systems on the growth of students and educators

A fair and equitable teacher development and evaluation (TDE) system can be the cornerstone to a strong school culture where students and the workforce

feel supported and a growth mindset prevails.⁷¹ Sadly, in many schools the staff, including principals, report that the TDE system feels burdensome, bureaucratic and unfairly administered. We know from experience that where a district labor-management team is engaged in monitoring and tweaking the system, based on feedback from the evaluators and those being evaluated, staff feel empowered and engaged. The result is higher staff retention rates, more engaged staff and higher student achievement.

Teacher and staff evaluations can be used for two main purposes.⁷² Formative evaluations provide staff with strategies to improve teaching and job performance through meaningful feedback coupled with corresponding skill-building professional development opportunities. Summative evaluations are used to support employment decisions such as salary, tenure and dismissal for cause. Both are needed and work in tandem to properly assess how a teacher or support staff person is performing and how to best address any areas of deficiency (or areas to reward for success). However, especially over the past several decades, most states' evaluations have been only summative, making student growth data a "significant factor" in evaluation rather than creating systems that are aimed at improving the performance of all teachers, staff and students. This has been especially challenging for those who are new to the profession and still developing their expertise.

Research indicates that student achievement data itself does not provide adequate information to improve teacher practice and should not be used for employment decisions, but many laws have done just that.⁷³ These test scores are not being used to guide interventions, so the impact of these reforms is extremely limited. Standardized test results are used mainly as a point value in an appraisal resulting in high-stakes decisions, such as salary changes and the possible firing of teachers. Teachers receive little actionable information or guidance about how these test results can improve the quality of their teaching.

Other countries give greater weight to using performance data to guide intervention, reveal best practices and identify shared problems; in the U.S., however, performance data is often used purely for accountability purposes.⁷⁴ True professional accountability systems hold teachers accountable to the standards of practice and to other teachers—those who know and understand what the teacher does every day. In Ontario, Canada, for instance, teachers are partners and work together to improve their practice. Similarly,

Japanese teachers employ lesson study, a method used throughout their careers to design, practice, and improve lessons and teaching strategies. Some countries successfully combine professional accountability and administrative accountability. But tests are used in combination with other measures, and evaluations are used to reward or improve teaching—not to punish or fire teachers.

On top of efficacy concerns, the U.S. education system spends a great deal of time and resources to evaluate the staff who work in our schools. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has developed the Carnegie Cost Calculator⁷⁵ to help district leaders and members of the broader K-12 community understand and estimate time and financial resources involved in evaluation. For example, an evaluation system offering three, 30-minute formal observations in a district of 600 teachers would take 9,000 hours for teachers and 2,100 hours for principals, with a cost of \$1,130 per teacher evaluation and a total cost of \$677,757 for the district.

School support staff—from bus drivers learning behavioral management techniques to food service workers learning more about federal nutrition standards and school social workers learning best practices in group counseling techniques—need dedicated, tailored professional development opportunities with district and state support that is comparable to that offered to their teacher colleagues (e.g., scheduled into working hours, no-cost, high-quality and aligned with their role).

One type of evaluation system used in some districts that are typically geared toward new teachers are peer assistance and review programs,⁷⁶ which involve support, reflective practice, and growth for teachers. PAR programs are directly aimed at improving teacher quality by having expert teachers mentor and support both new and struggling teachers. These programs are expensive but can have long-term positive impacts on the performance and retention of new teachers.

Development systems must have connected professional development, but all teachers and staff must be provided with ongoing, job-embedded professional learning opportunities throughout their career. The AFT has recognized the responsibility of the union to go beyond traditional issues and provide our members with evidence-based, customized professional learning opportunities for members to meet diverse teaching and learning needs.⁷⁷ Teachers and school staff should not have to spend valuable time in professional development that is not relevant to their needs or

the needs of their students. They should be provided with training that gives them the tools, resources and strategies they need to be successful.

Increase planning time and opportunities to collaborate meaningfully with colleagues

A myth that has limited the progress of American education for years is the false belief that teachers are not working if they are not providing instruction in front of students. This belief has prevented teachers from having the necessary time to properly prepare lessons, differentiate instruction, and provide meaningful feedback to students. Just like other professions, teachers and school staff need time to prepare to do their jobs well. American teachers provide 40 percent more instruction per week, teach more non-native speakers, more students with special needs, and more students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes than their international peers.⁷⁸ And yet they have less time to plan during the week than educators in other countries. Without a successful effort to provide teachers with more planning time, all other school reform efforts are likely to fail.

Effective educators also need dedicated time to collaborate with other teachers and support staff who work alongside them. The traditional structure of schools has led to a silo effect, where subjects, teachers and departments are separated and not always encouraged to collaborate.⁷⁹ Teachers might also feel discouraged from collaborating in meaningful ways because the emphasis on high-stakes testing means teachers often must focus on test preparation, leaving them with little time for anything else within the school day. Research and practical experience have shown that students can be more successful in developing critical thinking and real-world skills when teachers are given opportunities to work together with each other and with the support staff in their classrooms.⁸⁰ Collaboration and input in school decision-making create a better school climate, which supports student learning and reduces teacher turnover.⁸¹

Collaborative work and teams specifically support new teachers and staff by engaging them quickly in the core work of the school and providing them opportunities to meet regularly with and learn from their colleagues. New employees vary on the level of support they receive from their administrators and colleagues, but often they do not feel like they get enough or have regular opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicate that it is rare for teachers to teach together in

the U.S.⁸² Without regular collaboration, new teachers find it more challenging to fit into existing school structures and culture.

International research indicates that collaborative practices among teachers are a key driver of school improvement “because they lead to innovations in teaching and learning.”⁸³ In Singapore, for example, schools focus on professional learning communities (PLCs) to allow teachers and support staff to work as professionals and share their expertise with each other. Unfortunately, in many places in the United States, PLCs have been mishandled and teachers do not see them as supportive, but in practice an effective “PLC is a community of practitioners who collaboratively engage in continuous cycles of inquiry-based teacher learning.”⁸⁴ This form of teacher-led professionalism should provide teachers with ongoing opportunities to share knowledge with their colleagues and engage in professional growth as a group. These opportunities should be embedded within the school day. In Japan, for instance, new teachers work with more experienced teachers to design and practice lessons.⁸⁵ This process is a regular and ongoing part of every teacher’s career.

Teacher and staff collaboration directly helps students. A study of over 9,000 teachers in Florida public schools found that teachers and schools that engage in quality collaborative activities have better gains in math and reading.⁸⁶ The findings offer support for the use of instructional teams that work together, such as a PLC, and how those teams support not only student learning but also teacher development. One study also reviewed several large-scale studies about teacher collaboration and found similar positive connections between collaboration and student achievement.⁸⁷

Collaborative environments require leadership and trust from school administrators. Administrative support is a key driver in educator and support staff retention.⁸⁸ If teachers and staff members do not have positive relationships and open communication with their principal, they will not want to stay in their school. Administrators must recognize the needs of their staff and provide opportunities within the school day for collaboration. They must respect teacher and staff collaborative time and resist the temptation to take over planning and collaboration time by scheduling overly prescriptive uses of the time unrelated to planning and collaboration.

Collaboration must also include labor-management cooperation. Researchers suggest that formal labor-management partnerships at the district level lead to

greater collaboration at the school level; greater school-level collaboration improves student performance; and collaboration reduces voluntary teacher turnover—particularly in high-poverty schools.⁸⁹

Reduce paperwork

The negative impact of burdensome paperwork must not be underestimated. AFT membership surveys show that required, unproductive paperwork was a top area of concern for teachers and staff alike and that the amount of paperwork required by their schools, districts and states has grown to a point that it interferes with their ability to teach students or complete their daily work. Teachers and school staff across the spectrum see too much valuable class, preparation, and work time lost to data collection and writing worthless reports.

As part of a trend to hold teachers accountable and to document classroom activities, administrators have required teachers and other school staff to provide an increasing amount of data and written reports that are not helpful. The obsession with data has created a work environment in which teachers and school staff are required to use either instructional or planning time to provide administrators with data and reports they want for their administrative work. Data collection and reports should not interfere with teachers’ ability to teach their students, or school employees to do their jobs. Data collected for administrative reports and other districtwide processes should not be the responsibility of the teacher. Technology that automatically collects the data and creates reports should be developed so the disruption of burdensome paperwork can be significantly reduced.

This fixation on data and endless reports hits specialized instructional support personnel especially hard. Teachers who work with special populations are required to complete hours of paperwork each day. Reporting protocols for teachers and staff who work with special populations of students have become onerous and unwieldy. Each day, important instruction and support time is lost to data collection and filling out unnecessary reports. All levels of government and school administration must find ways to reduce the required paperwork that special population teachers and staff members must fill out to meet local, state and federal legislative mandates.

Lower class size

The debate over appropriate class size typically includes two main arguments: research that estimates the impact of class size on test scores versus meeting the

diverse and growing social and emotional needs of students. If the only goals of schooling were math and language arts tests scores, a cost/benefit analysis might make sense. But the goals of education are much more than simply a math and reading score. Lower class size addresses the needs of students both academically *and* socially. Reducing class size to its impact on test scores fails to consider the importance of student well-being and fails to treat students as whole people.

The last two years have shown that for all students to thrive, they need help with academics and with support for their emotional and social well-being. Both needs can only be addressed when class sizes are reasonable. In far too many schools today, class sizes are too high. No primary class (grades preK-3) should have more than 20 children, with fewer than 20 even better. Classes in intermediate school and middle school (grades 4-5 and grades 6-8, respectively) should not exceed 23 students. And high school classes should be limited to no more than 25 students. Of course, there will be exceptions, but only if the exceptions are in the best interest of the students. For example, music or other performance classes may benefit from larger class sizes. Conversely, students who struggle will do better in even smaller classes.

An effective way to address class size is to create classroom teams of teachers and paraprofessionals. 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 while ensuring the social and emotional needs of all students are being met.

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

Often, teachers and school staff must leave the classroom or their work site to increase their salaries. Many times, this leads staff who are working effectively with students to seek other opportunities. We must allow teachers and school staff to assume leadership roles and remain in the classroom. We need a career ladder that teachers and school staff can follow to retirement that does not require them to give up working face-to-face with students. We need to establish pathways that allow master teachers to continue working with students while spending more of their time working to help develop newer staff. We need to establish roles where support staff can move

toward becoming “lead” or “mentor” or “senior” staff. Bonus structures should be created for staff who take on additional duties or who work in hard-to-staff schools or subject areas.

These leadership roles must be significant and include the authority to make decisions that impact the quality of education schools provide. Leadership roles in curriculum development, enhanced instruction, classroom well-being, addressing the needs of special populations, culturally responsive teaching, formative assessment, and many others are positions where practicing teachers and school staff would excel. Taking these roles out of the central office will benefit educators, staff and students. As research clearly shows, one of the most powerful ways to increase student performance is when teacher leaders work with their classroom peers.

Unlike the failed attempts to develop individual pay programs, such as the “merit pay” systems of the ‘80s, ‘90s, and even today that identify a few teachers based on a principal’s ratings or student test scores, career ladders are focused on leadership and additional responsibilities. Rather than focusing simply on improving test scores or some other arbitrary threshold, career ladders allow education staff to assume meaningful leadership roles in the district and in the profession. Teachers and staff can be incentivized by opportunities to contribute to their school and students in new ways, based on the needs of the district.

By focusing on the development of instructional leadership, ladders avoid many of the detrimental factors that plague failed systems such as not contributing to organizational growth, rewarding teachers and staff in the wealthiest schools, creating morale problems by fostering competition in a profession where cooperation and collaboration are critically important, and perceptions that favoritism rather than quality was driving the system.

Career advancement for support staff does not have to be the traditional paraprofessional-to-teacher pathway. We should be looking for innovative ways to build advancement opportunities into our profession that don’t require an employee to make a wholesale job change. Creating a pipeline to become a teacher more easily if you are a para or to become an administrator if you are a teacher is valuable and should not be discounted. We should also advocate for opportunities for employees to advance within their current job classification.

» Implementation Strategies

To create a system that provides workers with time, tools, trust and training to do their jobs,

The federal government should:

- **Modify student testing requirements—**
 - **Reduce the burden of testing time on students.**
 - **Encourage the use of innovative assessment demonstration—**Reduce barriers to implement high-quality performance assessment initiatives.
 - **Allow states more flexibility in how they use standardized test scores—**Multiple measures that are connected to the curriculum are required to make fair, valid and comprehensive evaluations of staff and students.
- **Expand support for class size reduction—**Expand federal support for class-size reduction through Title I and other federal programs. In addition, Congress should strongly consider adding language to Title I and other federal programs that set a minimum amount of planning time for teachers who work in these programs.
- **Remove from education legislation all paperwork requirements that do not directly help teachers and school staff support their students—**Immediately review all education legislation, especially the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and remove paperwork requirements that do not directly help teachers and school staff support their students. A pilot program to develop technology that will collect classroom data without requiring teachers or other school staff to input data should be funded as part of the U.S. Department of Education budget request for next year. In Addition, the department should immediately convene a paperwork reduction task force and make its recommendations part of the department's work with the states.
- **Support career ladder programs—**Invest in resources for states and districts to develop career ladder programs in the schools. These programs must be a joint effort of teachers unions and administrators that include real roles for

teachers and staff, and develop realistic plans for sustainability when the federal support ends. The Teacher and School Leader Incentive grants program is one federal offering that could help districts to fund recruitment, retention and compensation initiatives.

States should:

- **Modify student testing requirements—**Reduce or eliminate standardized assessments on top of those that are federally required; provide diagnostic assessment tools; and create sufficient supports for performance assessments so that the validity, reliability and comparability requirements can be met under ESSA.
- **Ensure educator evaluators are trained—**Require an evaluator certification to ensure every evaluator has high-quality, long-term (to ensure inter-rater reliability) training on how to properly evaluate evidence and provide staff with appropriate feedback.
- **Review class sizes and set appropriate limits—**Immediately review the actual class sizes in all schools. This information should be published on the state's website. Many times, the real number of students in each class is hidden behind budgeting ratios such as full-time-equivalents or FTEs. States should consider legislation that limits actual class size in all grades and subjects.
- **Review required paperwork and set appropriate limits—**Immediately conduct an audit of paperwork requirements in their state. Working in partnership with teachers in their state, state legislators should consider legislation that reduces the amount of required paperwork from teachers and school staff by removing what is redundant or unnecessary. States should investigate using technology to collect and analyze education data without burdening teachers or staff and by streamlining what tools are used.
- **Convene a career ladder committee to help develop strong programs—**Immediately convene a statewide career ladder committee consisting of unions, administrators, parents and community members to investigate what roles teachers and school staff can assume while ensuring these educators can remain, at least partially, in the classroom. The committee's only task will be to

share best practices and to help facilitate career ladder programs with both technical support and significant financing.

- **Fund professional development**—Expand funding and access to high-quality professional advancement opportunities.

Local governments should:

- **Work collaboratively with all stakeholders**—Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels, and with leaders and members to advocate for best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working; stakeholders should use creative ways to address obstacles.
- **Work with local schools to set class size and planning-time goals**—Work with local school departments to ensure educational resources focus on smaller class size and increased planning time. The city or local jurisdiction should set goals for both class size and planning time and publicly report on the progress toward these goals.
- **Consider local policies around paperwork limits**—Review local policies that may add to the amount of unnecessary paperwork. Working in partnership with teachers, city leaders should consider legislation or local policies that limit the amount of paperwork from teachers and school staff.
- **Convene a career ladder committee to help develop strong programs**—Encourage the development of mutually agreed-upon career ladder programs in their city or jurisdictions. Cities or local jurisdictions should meet with teachers unions and discuss the opportunity of developing career programs in their schools. Programs that encourage and support teacher and staff leadership should be part of budgets for the foreseeable future.

School districts should:

- **Provide all staff with training on teacher development and evaluation systems**—Provide staff with training on how the TDE system works and provide timetables and forms.
- **Work with local unions and stakeholders to set class size and planning-time goals**—Work

collaboratively with their union partners and other stakeholders to create long-term plans to reduce class size and increase planning time. These plans should be memorialized in agreements that outlast changes in leadership at the district or the union.

- **Review required paperwork and set appropriate limits**—Immediately convene stakeholders to reduce the amount of paperwork in the district. This effort should clarify what paperwork is necessary and what paperwork will no longer be required. The district should also work with teachers, staff and administrators to determine what role the district's local technology can play in providing the necessary data that the administration wants to collect without adding additional work for teachers or school staff.
- **Work with unions to consider career ladders programs**—Districts should reach out to their local teachers unions and investigate the possibility of developing a career ladder program. Although these discussions may not necessarily lead to a career ladder program, it is critical that everyone understands the commitments that will be necessary to make a career ladder system work. In addition, other structures, such as supporting schedules that allow cohort groups of experienced teachers to pursue certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards should be considered. Most importantly, school districts must accept that teachers and school staff will assume some leadership in decision-making in the schools and district. Without this understanding and acceptance, career ladder programs have no chance to succeed.
- **Develop grow-your-own programs as career advancement opportunities for paraprofessionals**—These opportunities allow paraprofessionals to work in schools while obtaining their degree or teaching certificate, which means they are building in-school experience before becoming a teacher of record.
- **Establish a ratio of instructional time to preparation time at a minimum of 2:1**—This ratio, although still lower than found in many high-performing countries' school systems, will go a long way to ensure teachers have the time they need to create engaging and well-developed lessons for their students. Moreover, providing teachers with no less than one hour of prep time for every two hours of teaching will allow teachers to work

collaboratively with their peers and share best practices—a strategy research shows is one of the most effective in raising student achievement.

- **Diversify roles within bargaining units with expanded responsibilities and compensation**—This can include teacher leaders, specialists, department heads, peer mentors/coaches, lead educators, or master educators and staff. School systems should seek more direct engagement with active teacher and school support staff members to get a better sense of the type of programs they would find useful as they navigate their own career pathways.

Unions should:

- **Educate stakeholders on educator evaluation systems**—Ensure that the educators on labor-management teams are well versed in teacher evaluation and the reasons for the system to be focused on growth and job-embedded professional development opportunities delivered by the union.
- **Provide information on working conditions to stakeholders**—Have accurate information on these critical working conditions in their district, the factors that influence them, and a commitment to protect and improve them at the bargaining table and throughout the year.
- **Convene a paperwork reduction committee**—Convene a paperwork reduction committee to catalog the amount of data and reports that the union's members are required to submit. This catalog will help unions advocate for reducing the amount of paperwork members are required to complete.

- **Advocate for innovative teacher leader programs**—Teacher and educator leadership programs can help to develop leaders who can support their colleagues to raise the overall quality of the educator workforce and provide all students with equitable access to the most effective educators. Since 2011, the AFT's Teacher Leaders Program has helped prepare teachers and support staff to facilitate discussions of policy issues that impact the profession both locally and nationally.⁹⁰ The program has brought together and coached cohorts of teachers and other school staff to take active leadership roles in their individual schools, districts and local communities. As teacher leaders, these educators have served as catalysts to build the profession and strengthen not just the union but also its connection to the community as a way to generate support for and better understanding of public schools.
- **Leverage the power of collective bargaining so every teacher, staff member and student has the tools, time, structure and other conditions necessary for their success**—Unions must have a research basis for their requests and can use the standards as they modernize their bargaining philosophy to include the collective good.

Provide Sustainable and Commensurate Compensation and Benefits

When teachers and school staff ask for higher pay, the public may perceive them as wanting to take money and resources away from students, as selfish, or suggest that they knew about the pay when they joined the profession. That narrative, however, does not accurately represent the situation that faces many teachers and school staff: Many are not paid a living wage; they must take on a second or even third job to afford necessities; they are burdened with the high costs of healthcare; and they have unimaginable student loan debt. It is true that most people do not enter education professions expecting to become rich, but they should have the expectation that they will not have to go into debt to take a job, that they will be able to start and support a family, and that they will be compensated for their education and for the job that they do.

It is evident that compensation and benefits will support teachers and school staff directly, but these packages are also associated with student performance. Increased pay leads to worker retention, and students benefit when there are experienced educators in their classroom and even in their building.⁹¹ Numerous studies show a positive correlation between teacher pay and student achievement, and pay also has been found to lower student dropout rates.⁹² Retention rates of non-classroom-based school staff will also be impacted with higher pay, leaving students with adults around them who are experienced, supported, valued and respected. Money matters. We must make sure that base compensation packages are sufficient to attract and retain trained and motivated professionals.

Here are several ways we can improve pay and benefits and ensure education jobs are not only sustainable for those already in the profession, but also more desirable to those considering the profession:

Relieve student loan debt for teachers and school staff so that they are not overburdened by debt at the start of their careers

Teachers and school staff take on significant costs to do a job that is not only difficult but often also fails to provide adequate compensation to justify the large upfront expense. From the cost of meeting initial education requirements, providing fees for certification and testing, fees associated with maintaining those

certifications or attaining new endorsements, and the yearly cost of providing supplies or materials for themselves and their students—the personal cost associated with a career in education can add up quickly. And these costs reinforce the feeling that teachers—at every point in the process—are the ones doing the supporting rather than being supported.

The first expense comes from participating in a preparation program. Many educators start their careers with significant student loan debt. Rising tuition costs make college less affordable for many students across the country, and students studying for education careers are no exception. For teachers, college costs along with low salaries and high interest rates have led to an average outstanding student loan debt balance of \$58,500, with 1 in 8 owing more than \$105,000.⁹³ Paraprofessionals and school administrative staff are even more likely to have college debt.⁹⁴ Further, Black educators and school staff are more likely than their white counterparts to have taken out student loans, providing an even greater barrier for them to enter a low-paying education career.

Following completion of a bachelor's degree, teachers are typically required to take at least one test as part of their licensure requirements. The combined core academic Praxis exam costs \$150, and as with tests for other professions, many test-takers do not pass on their first attempt.⁹⁵ A test preparation class like the ones offered by Stanley Kaplan can cost upward of \$400.⁹⁶ Providing transcripts and completing paperwork all have associated costs as well. Finally, the license application typically costs hundreds of dollars; Illinois, for example, charges an out-of-state applicant \$150 to apply for a teaching license.⁹⁷

The costs continue even after becoming a teacher. The Learning Policy Institute has documented that a teacher adding subject-area endorsement in high-need areas like math, science and CTE can pay between \$9,000 and \$15,000 in some states because of coursework requirements. That is before other fees.⁹⁸ All of this is in addition to the out-of-pocket costs teachers incur for basic supplies, let alone for learning and enrichment materials and even food and clothing for their students.

These costs are a deterrent for many, but in particular for lower-income candidates. This means that the teaching workforce is robbed of the very diversity that research shows is needed in our schools. Paraprofessionals and other school support staff who want to move into teaching are often not paid enough

to begin the necessary coursework, and if they are able to jump the financial hurdle, they often lack the necessary paid time off to begin their studies, all but ensuring they are locked out of life-changing career advancement opportunities.

Increase compensation to ensure all workers receive a living wage

Many of the staffing challenges facing public education can be linked to inadequate pay—specifically, the tradeoff between pay and increasing demands on educators' and staff's working conditions. Teachers and school staff, like all workers, ask themselves the same question as they commit and recommit to their jobs: *Are the demands of the job worth it for the pay?* Too often, our teachers and school staff answer that question, "No." High school students rank low pay as the top reason for not being interested in a career in teaching.⁹⁹ The problem of low pay is even more pronounced in support staff roles, with many support staff unable to earn a living wage. Some districts pay so little that even their full-time support employees are eligible for government assistance programs like food stamps and rent subsidies to meet basic family needs.

Pay for teachers and school staff has fallen behind comparable non-education jobs. The Economic Policy Institute has for many years tracked the "teacher pay penalty," which refers to the disparity between teacher pay and the pay of college-educated nonteaching peers. EPI's 2020 analysis found that teachers earn about 20 percent less than nonteacher college-educated peers if only accounting for salary/wage compensation. Because nonwage benefits constitute a larger share of total compensation for teachers (29.3 percent) compared to nonteacher college graduates (21.4 percent), the "total compensation penalty" is smaller but still sizable at 10.2 percent. Given the range of job titles under the school support staff umbrella, there is less data available, but many of the same patterns hold.

The issue of low pay took center stage in 2018 during the wave of #REDforED strikes and demonstrations. Many of the strikes took place in states with Republican government trifectas and public education systems marked by long-standing and systemic underfunding and low pay. That moment was significant not only because it spread throughout the country, but because it spotlighted what underfunding looks like. A *Time* magazine cover from fall 2018 encapsulated the moment with a quote from a teacher that read: "I have a master's degree, 16 years of experience, work two

extra jobs and donate blood plasma to pay the bills. I'm a teacher in America."¹⁰⁰

Low pay for educators and school staff is in large part a reflection of the general underfunding of public education. Per-pupil spending on public elementary and secondary schools only increased 4 percent between 2009-10 and 2017-18, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.¹⁰¹ And the story for educator and staff pay is even grimmer. Over that same period, the average teacher salary after adjusting for inflation was 4.3 percent lower in 2017-18 than 2009-10. While there were some improvements in 2018-2020, the average teacher salary was still lower than it was during the 2009-10 school year in inflation-adjusted dollars.¹⁰²

A similar pattern can be seen for paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, and in many cases their wages were just too low to begin with. The median pay for food service workers in schools in 2020 was \$13 an hour. Most of the 340,000 workers in this category would get a raise if the minimum wage were increased to \$15 an hour. Median pay for bus drivers is (\$16.36 an hour); building and cleaning workers (\$15.34 an hour); and school administrative and support workers (\$19.50 an hour). On top of the low wages, many school support staff workers are intentionally not hired to work enough hours each week to receive any health or retirement benefits.¹⁰³

The Economic Policy Institute computes the cost of a basic family budget in every county in America. It includes child care, housing, food, transportation, taxes and other necessities. Median pay for teacher assistants in 2020 was \$30,970 per annum. In most counties in America, \$30,970 is insufficient either to support a single-parent family with one child or cover half the costs of a family with two children and two working parents. This unlivable average wage earned by teacher assistants in America means they are constantly struggling to pay for even the most basic necessities each month.¹⁰⁴

If pay was inadequate before COVID-19, the pandemic confronted educators and school staff with a new host of job responsibilities and risks—new technologies, new instructional settings, and too often, inadequate health and safety protections. A 2021 Rand study found that among teachers who left due to COVID-19, "insufficient pay to merit the risks of stress" was the top reason for their departure. Teachers under age 40 were more than twice as likely to select this factor as

their top reason for leaving, highlighting the challenge school systems have with recruiting and retaining younger teachers and school staff.

The funding inequities across districts exacerbate this problem in districts with lower revenues and higher student poverty. The base salary in high-poverty districts is on average \$5,600 lower than low-poverty districts, a difference of nearly 10 percent. Differences in salary have implications for school systems' ability to recruit and retain staff. A 2021 study of the educator labor market in Washington state examined job openings statewide and found that shortages are nearly two times higher in high-poverty districts.¹⁰⁵

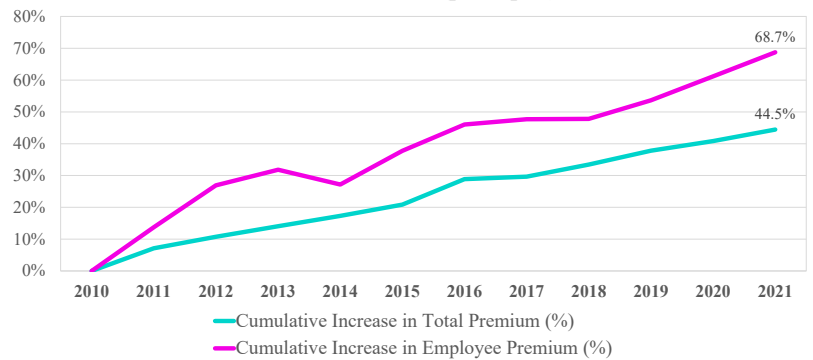
School systems must close the pay gap between educators and staff and their non-education peers. Using compensation to address the staffing crises means making teaching and school staff jobs more competitive with comparable jobs in the private sector.

Provide workers with affordable healthcare options for themselves and their families

The rising cost of commercial healthcare insurance strains school district budgets and diverts resources that could be used for other purposes, including higher wages and salaries. At the same time, to control healthcare spending, school districts have shifted costs onto school workers by raising premiums and out-of-pocket costs like deductibles, copays and coinsurance. This pattern of rising costs and more cost shifting to workers is true of both the public and private sectors, but unlike the private sector, school districts have limited flexibility to raise revenue to offset higher spending on health insurance.

Public data on healthcare spending for public schools provides clear evidence illustrating this pattern of rising costs and shifting costs to workers. From 2010 to 2021, the total cost of family coverage for public school workers (employer and employee premiums) increased to \$20,600 from \$14,200 per year, an increase of 45 percent (compound annual growth rate of 3.4 percent), more than twice the rate of general inflation over the same period.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the average employee premium for family coverage increased 69 percent from 2010 to 2021 (\$4,400 and \$7,400) underscoring how school districts have addressed rising healthcare costs by shifting them onto workers.

Figure X. School District's Cumulative Increase in Average Health Insurance Premiums (per capita), 2010-2021



The truth is that there are few viable options available to school districts and unions through collective bargaining to control healthcare spending that do not involve cutting benefits or passing costs onto employees.¹⁰⁷ This system is unsustainable. School districts and unions can only do so much to stem the tide of rising healthcare costs. Many districts, through no fault of their own, lack the size and sophistication needed to negotiate favorable rates in a market dominated by big insurers and healthcare providers that have the market cornered.

The implication is that states and the federal government have a large role to play helping districts control healthcare spending. Some states have taken steps in the right direction, but states and the federal government need to find more ways to make healthcare spending affordable and sustainable. In a few states like New Jersey, for example, the state provides school districts with the option to participate in state-administered group plans offered to state employees, allowing districts to take advantage of their larger group size and lower premiums.

Expand access to paid family leave

Teachers and school staff are still forced to choose between taking care of a baby or loved one and drawing a salary. Paid family leave benefits may provide some relief to the higher rates of turnover among younger teachers and school staff who are more likely to be in the prime of their family formation years.

The dearth of paid family leave benefits is an embarrassing fact given the high percentage of women in education jobs and the nature of education work. Emily James, a New York City school teacher, puts it well: "The irony is glaring: We dedicate our lives to other people's children, but when it's time to have our

own, we have to fend for ourselves.”¹⁰⁸ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only one-quarter of teachers and school staff in public education have access to paid family leave benefits, not significantly different from private non-education sectors.¹⁰⁹ This more than likely overstates the impact of existing paid family leave benefits because the data do not account for important differences in benefit levels, including the length of paid time off and the wage replacement rate. Moreover, many family leave policies are based on outdated notions of the family structure and use language that may exclude fathers or other types of parents in some family structures. Among teachers, 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.¹¹⁰

While the U.S. is the only wealthy nation without a national paid leave policy, several states have implemented paid leave policies that cover some segments of the workforce. Those states provide a natural experiment to study what effect paid leave policies have on workforce turnover. One study found that in states with paid-leave policies, there was up to a 50 percent reduction in the number of female employees who left their jobs within the first five years after giving birth.¹¹¹

» Implementation Strategies

To provide sustainable and commensurate compensation and benefits,

The federal government should:

- **Pass legislation that ensures teachers and school staff do not go into debt to join the profession—**
 - **Cancel existing student debt**—Cancel student debt, up to \$50,000 for all borrowers of federal student loans.
 - **Support Public Student Loan Forgiveness**—Make meaningful changes to the PSLF program.
 - **Fund and expand the TEACH Grant Program**—The TEACH (Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education)

Grant Program provides up to \$4,000 annually for a maximum total of \$16,000 in grant aid to undergraduate and post-baccalaureate students who plan to become teachers of high-need subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, special education, foreign languages, bilingual education and reading). In addition, current teachers or retirees from high-need fields are eligible for \$4,000 per year, for a maximum of \$8,000, to pursue master’s degrees, also with a focus on high-need subjects.

- **Provide funding to states to support teacher pay**—Continue federal efforts to provide for equitable education through full funding of both Title I and IDEA.

States should:

- **Create and pay for robust, speedy loan forgiveness programs**—The federal PSLF program has helped a growing number of teachers to have their debts forgiven, thanks to the Biden administration’s efforts to make the program effective. But PSLF requires a teacher to make 10 years of on-time payments while performing a public service role. There are many state programs, but they are often provided little support and are limited in who can participate.¹¹² States should create programs that either pick up those payments after the fifth year, essentially providing PSLF in half the time, or provide payment support while the teacher is working in a public school in the state.
- **Create a salary floor so all workers are paid a living wage**—States should set a living wage standard by county or metro area and use it to create a salary floor for every worker in their public schools and colleges.

School districts should:

- **Establish loan assistance benefits**—Districts must underline their commitment to education for students and staff. One way that employers can help is to provide more support to help workers qualify for Public Service Loan Forgiveness.
- **Establish compensation systems that align with the needs of current and future teachers and staff**—While many of the compensation issues

facing public education can be traced to inadequate funding, districts and unions nevertheless must align compensation to reflect the needs of current and future educators. Punitive pay-for-performance compensation systems are too often ineffective and arbitrary. And while bonuses and other one-time payments are appreciated, they are unreliable and not a replacement for increases to salaries and wages and benefits.

Revenue Code, Educational Assistance Programs, employers can provide up to \$5,250 in educational assistance to employees tax-free annually. These plans can also be established to allow employer-paid financial assistance for student loan debt. The Albuquerque Teachers Federation recently negotiated a student debt reimbursement benefit with the district.

Unions should:

- **Negotiate reimbursements for job-related education expenses**—Negotiate or advocate that districts reimburse teachers and school staff for many of the job-related education expenses that educators incur. Under Section 127 of the Internal
- **Negotiate for career pathways**—These pathways should include appropriate paid time off and financial support to allow existing staff to advance their careers (for example, education related sabbaticals/ partnership programs with local colleges in which the district pays tuition costs, etc.).

Utilize the Collective Voice and Strength of Our Union to Impact Change at All Levels

The AFT and our members have been advocating for our professions, and for the people we serve, for more than a century. Many of the ideas and much of the research we have put forth in this paper have already been said by us, by researchers, and by other organizations. But shortages in our professions still exist. The union will continue to advocate and use our collective voice and expertise to ensure public schools thrive, that they are places where people want to work and students are able to learn. We will continue to do what we have been doing every day, and we will continue to engage other stakeholders to do their part to ensure school systems change for the better. To do this, we must continue to leverage our collective knowledge and power.

Unions benefit workers through negotiating pay and benefits, resources, working hours, safety issues and professional development. Research indicates that the professionalization of teaching through union negotiation and advocacy (including their work for higher compensation, better preparation and training, and elevating the overall status of the profession) also benefits students. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which administers an international benchmarking assessment that compares performance of students in different countries, “the higher a country is on the world’s education league tables, the more likely that country is working constructively with its unions and treating its teachers as trusted professional partners.”¹¹³

Here are strategies that will help teachers and school staff to utilize the collective voice and strength of our union to impact change at all levels:

Expand access to and scope of collective bargaining

The best way to ensure all public school teachers and education workers have a significant and real voice in their personal and professional lives is through collective bargaining. Data shows that collective bargaining can be a powerful tool to improve the lives of education workers, ensure students have the supports they need to learn, and build better infrastructures within the school community.

Only about 50 percent of America’s public school teachers, and even fewer school staff, work under a collective bargaining agreement. This current lack of collective bargaining severely limits the ability of teachers and school staff to meaningfully advocate for themselves or their students. Many of the factors contributing to the shortage of teachers and staff are typically part of a collective bargaining agreement, including salaries, benefits, working and learning conditions, and much needed supports for students. In addition, in too many places, collective bargaining is restricted by laws that limit what issues teachers and staff can negotiate. When professional workers do not have the right to advocate for any or all of their working conditions or their students’ learning conditions, they feel disrespected and powerless.

The importance of collective bargaining cannot be underestimated. 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 the services necessary for overall well-being of the entire school community. Collective bargaining requires strong unions; and strong unions require active members who understand the needs of their students and who are willing to advocate for what their students and schools need.

The AFT should advance a national campaign to promote public schools and highlight the positive impact of educators and school staff

Media portrayals of teachers, school staff, and public schools in general ebb and flow from laudatory to derogatory. Too often, they have leaned negative. It is imperative that the union takes a role in lifting up public schools with positive, truthful, and inspiring stories and images. If we as educators know of the challenges in attracting people to our professions, and retaining them, we have a duty to use every avenue to generate the respect and understanding that school workers deserve.

Teachers have been attacked for decades and held responsible for many problems that are out of their control. School support staff often do not feel seen, heard or respected even by people in their own communities. These workers are the union, and they are central to the changes that will improve their professions. All the recommendations we have set forth support the empowerment and sustainability of those working in schools, and our own actions must do that too. We know the value of public schools and public workers, and we must make sure all are respected.

» Implementation Strategies

To utilize the collective voice and strength of our union to impact change at all levels,

Congress should:

- **Pass federal collective bargaining language**—Immediately pass the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act (H.R. 6238). The only way to have collective bargaining for public service workers in every state is through a federal law that protects workers’ rights to organize and collectively bargain for their profession and the people they serve.

States should:

- **Pass state collective bargaining language**—Immediately pass legislation that guarantees all public service workers have the right to collectively bargain. Further, these laws must not arbitrarily limit the scope of collective bargaining.

Local governments should:

- **Allow all workers to collectively bargain**—Provide all public service workers with the right to collectively bargain. Local collective bargaining laws can expand on federal and state bargaining laws and provide workers with additional rights that may be unique to the local jurisdiction.

School districts should:

- **Engage in collective bargaining**—Welcome and productively engage in collective bargaining with all district employees. A strong collective bargaining agreement provides the framework and policies that drive successful, results-oriented collaboration and increases professionalism that leads to student success.

Unions should:

- **Work collaboratively with all stakeholders**—Unions must be open to working collaboratively across all levels, and with leaders and members to advocate for best practices outlined here, even if it means challenging long-established ways of working and using creative ways to address obstacles.
- **Continue collective bargaining and expand the issues we support**—Leverage the power of collective bargaining to ensure the prosperity of their members, the success of their students as well as the collective good of the community. Modern collective bargaining is no longer only about bread-and-butter issues, but places the needs of students and the community at the center of its work.
- **Advance a public campaign to highlight the positive contributions of teachers and school staff**—Teachers and school staff need a way to share their experiences, their expertise, and their impact in ways that not only lift up their work for all to see, but also show the power of public education. Such a campaign could take various forms at local and national levels. And unions should welcome community, business, philanthropic, and media partners in the effort.

Conclusion

The working and learning conditions in countless American schools are unacceptable. Too many teachers and school staff must work two or three jobs just to make ends meet. And when they are at school, they face a headwind that makes teaching and learning a challenge each day. And the word has gotten around. Fewer and fewer people are pursuing careers in education, and more and more are leaving the profession. American teachers and school staff are literally here today, gone tomorrow.

The adage “teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions” has never been more relevant. The effects of long-term neglect, never-ending austerity, misguided policy, lack of respect, concerns about health and safety, political attacks, combined with a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic have made schools a very tough place in which to work and learn. Large class sizes, inadequate time for planning and collaboration, obsessing over standardized tests, too few support staff and bus drivers, and obsolete or scarce learning materials not only affect teachers’ and school staff’s ability to do their jobs, but these things also negatively impact student learning.

Teachers experience twice as much stress as the general population. Although educators’ passion to serve their students remains strong, the deteriorating working conditions are taking a heavy toll. We will not be able to recruit or retain educators and school staff in a broken system.

The current situation is not sustainable. Things must change. Yes, in the short-term, but with the long-term in mind. Most important, the wisdom and ideas of teachers and school staff in all roles must be central to both designing and implementing solutions. These solutions, grounded in the realities facing teachers and school staff, are not new—they are what educators and their unions have been seeking for decades.

The charge of the task force was simple, but the implementation of recommendations will be far from easy. This report represents a road map of solutions and actions stakeholders must take to reverse the trajectory of working and learning in America’s schools. It is a comprehensive approach to ensuring all schools are places where teachers want to teach, students want to learn, and parents want to send their children.

The challenges and recommendations identified in this report reflect the experience and expertise of the task force, made up of AFT state and local leaders representing more than 500,000 members; AFT members directly consulted through listening sessions in locals across the country and a nationally representative survey; and top education researchers who provided data and analysis. The task force debated numerous recommendations and possible steps needed to address the problems and assigned implementation strategies to all levels of government and to unions themselves. This report stands as recognition that teacher and school staff shortages have been caused by a long-term disinvestment in schools, and there is not one simple solution to restructuring the school system to reflect the needs of its workers and learners. It stands as an acknowledgment that all students, and all educators and staff, have unique needs. As we move into the new school year, and throughout the next few years, the AFT will continue to use this report and its action steps to proactively improve the working and learning conditions for everyone in our schools.

Summary of Hart Survey of AFT Members

March 2022

The survey shows teachers, paraprofessionals and school staff are in agreement on staffing shortage. In March 2022, Hart Research conducted a nationally representative survey of AFT K-12 members. The results confirmed that the effects of the national educator and school staff workforce shortage are widespread and directly impact school and educator capacity. The survey also explored members' perceptions of the cause of the crisis and solutions they thought would be most effective. Here are some of the findings.

The vast majority of AFT members agree on the national shortage: 90 percent believe a shortage of qualified educators and staff is a serious problem for them and their co-workers; 53 percent said it is a "very serious problem"; and 92 percent said that staffing shortages should be a high priority for the AFT.

The effects of these shortages are widespread, including 74 percent of members who were taking on more work due to the shortages; most of them said the extra work was "a very serious problem."

Education has long been considered a "helping" profession. People do not go into it for the money—but they need a decent salary (93 percent of the respondents said this was vital).

However, educators and school staff want cultures and climates that support their goals of helping students and making a positive difference, and they need to make a living. This is reflected by the top three choices teachers and paraprofessionals made concerning what actions would improve staff recruitment and retention:

- 95 percent said less paperwork and fewer non-teaching duties that take away from student needs;
- 93 percent said pay raises; and
- 91 percent said more respect and support from administration.

As has been extensively documented, the current climate and conditions facing educators and school staff are tough—indeed, 71 percent have seriously considered leaving their job in the past few years, and 2 in 5 said they expect to leave their job in the next few years. Of those who plan to leave, only about a fifth will do so for normal retirement.

The burnout and lack of necessary supports for school staff have a large impact on how they feel about their profession. When asked for the words that most describe how they feel about their work, the top answer for K-12 members (at 62 percent) was "overwhelming." The other top answers were "challenging" and "frustrating." And 75 percent of teacher members said they would not recommend teaching as a profession to young people today, a terrible indictment of the conditions being faced.

The staffing shortage only makes working conditions tougher, but it also negatively impacts students. In addition to members overwhelmingly agreeing that addressing staffing shortages would improve staff morale and well-being, 92 percent said addressing staffing shortages would improve student learning, and 91 percent said it would improve student well-being.

As has been reported, the solutions cannot simply be hiring more people, there aren't enough people to fill the roles; this was also reflected in the survey—75 percent of K-12 members said their school has had trouble filling vacancies.

Here is a sampling of solutions more than 80 percent of teachers and paraprofessionals thought would be effective to improve staff recruitment and retention:

- Less paperwork and non-teaching duties that take away from student needs;
- Pay raises;
- More respect and support from administration;
- Increased latitude to teach the way students need;
- Smaller class sizes;
- Larger role in decisions related to the profession;
- Shift in culture: value collaboration and communication; uplift educator and staff voices;
- Additional resources to meet professional responsibilities and student needs;
- More supports for students (counselors, etc.);
- Better mental health supports or health insurance for staff; and
- Less standardized testing.

The survey reflects what we have long known to be true: Teachers and school staff are facing extraordinary challenges. And because teachers' and staff's working conditions are students' learning conditions, those challenges negatively affect students.

Task Force Members

- Randi Weingarten—president, American Federation of Teachers
- Michael Mulgrew (co-chair)—president, United Federation of Teachers (New York City)
- Carl Williams (co-chair)—president, California Federation of Teachers Council of Classified Employees and the Lawndale Federation of Classified Employees
- Nick Archuleta—president, North Dakota United
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- Leslie Blatteau—president, New Haven Federation of Teachers (Connecticut)
- Kesler Cameese-Jones—president, Jefferson Federation of Teachers (Louisiana)
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- Lincoln Stocks—president, East Detroit Federation of Teachers
- Jessica Tang—president, Boston Teachers Union
- Nancy Vera—president, Corpus Christi American Federation of Teachers (Texas)
- Tina Williams—president, Fairfax Federation of Teachers (Virginia)

Task Force Meeting Schedule

- Dec. 16, 2021—Virtual Meeting
- Jan. 27, 2022—Virtual Meeting
- Feb. 15, 2022—Virtual Meeting
- March 4-6, 2022—Representative Survey of AFT Members
- March 10, 2022—In-person Meeting (Washington, D.C.)
- April 14, 2022—Virtual Member Listening Session (Illinois)

- April 23, 2022—In-person Member Listening Session (Jacksonville, Fla.)
- April 23, 2022—In-person Member Listening Session (Toledo, Ohio)
- April 23, 2022—In-person Member Listening Session (PSRP Conference, St. Louis)
- April 30, 2022—In-person Member Listening Session (New York City)
- May 4, 2022—In-person Meeting (Washington, D.C.)

The AFT would like to thank the following experts for their guidance and support:

- Linda Darling-Hammond—president and CEO, Learning Policy Institute and Charles E. Ducommun Professor Emeritus, Stanford University Graduate School of Education
- Tara Kini—chief of staff and director of State Policy, Learning Policy Institute
- Andrew Hargreaves—director, CHENINE (Change, Engagement and Innovation in Education) University of Ottawa; professor, Boston College Lynch School of Education, and honorary professor, Swansea University.
- Richard Ingersoll—professor, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education
- Jal David Mehta—professor, Harvard University Graduate School of Education
- John Papay—associate professor, Brown University
- Heidi Shierholz—president, Economic Policy Institute

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- | | |
|---|---|
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| • Rob Weil (lead), Educational Issues | • Emily Kopilow, Educational Issues |
| • Robin Vitucci, Educational Issues | • Evan Lundeen, AFT PSRP |
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| • Jason Edwards, Educational Issues | |
| • Sarah Hager Mosby, Communications | |

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