

Today, I stand before you to address a critical issue that threatens the foundation of our educational system: **the alarming shortage of teachers.** Unlike most problems in our country, this crisis has multifaceted origins, each contributing to the growing void in our schools. As we delve into the reasons behind this shortage, we will be taught why our beloved teachers left and what we need to do to counteract these bad grades.

First, I will examine why teachers are leaving the profession. **Those reasons are: Aging out/retiring, the COVID pandemic, student classroom behaviors, and parental overreach.**

To begin, one of the significant contributors to the teacher shortage is the aging-out phenomenon. Our veteran educators, who have tirelessly devoted their lives to shaping young minds, are reaching retirement age. As they depart from the classrooms, we find ourselves grappling with a void that is challenging to fill with the same level of experience and expertise. **According to a study published by the Institute for Educational Sciences, 8% of the teaching population retired in 2021-22 due to age.**

Add to that the number of educators who felt the relentless impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated the issue. Many teachers faced unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, juggling remote and hybrid learning, adapting to new technologies, and dealing with the anxieties of their students. The stress and uncertainty have led some teachers to reconsider their profession, creating a further strain on an already fragile system. ***The US News and World Report of March 2022 stated As of January 2022, 44% of public schools reported having at least one teaching vacancy, and 61% of them specifically identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a cause of those vacancies. Resignations accounted for 51% of the vacancies and retirements accounted for 21%.***

Another factor contributing to the exodus of educators is the increasingly challenging classroom behaviors. Teachers, who once found fulfillment in fostering a positive learning environment, now face disruptive behaviors that compromise the educational experience for both themselves and their students. This daily struggle takes a toll on their passion for teaching, prompting some to seek alternative career paths. ***According to an article in the Chicago Tribune written by Daniel Coupland, student behavior was the number one reason most teachers were opting out of the profession. Of the 615 respondents, 319 said they left for reasons related to student behavior.***

Equally concerning is the rising trend of teachers leaving due to interactions with parents. In an era where communication is instant and constant, teachers often find themselves subject to heightened scrutiny and, at times, undue interference from parents. The advent of instant communication through emails, messaging apps, and social media has led to an increase in the level of scrutiny teachers face. Parents may sometimes overanalyze or misinterpret situations, leading to unnecessary concerns or conflicts. Some parents may feel the need to micromanage their child's education, questioning teaching methods, grading decisions, and classroom policies. This level of interference can be counterproductive and undermine the teacher's authority. **The Merrimack Teachers survey taken in 2022 stated 45% of the teachers polled feel that parents and the public alike do not respect them**—A healthy teacher-parent relationship is built on trust and this cannot happen if the respect is not there. When teachers feel constantly questioned or second-guessed, it can erode the trust that is essential for effective collaboration. This interference not only affects the teacher's ability to manage the classroom effectively but also erodes the independence necessary for effective teaching. The lack of professional independence can hinder a teacher's ability to make decisions based on their expertise and experience, impacting their effectiveness in the classroom.

So, what can we do to reverse this trend and ensure a thriving educational system? Well now that we have discussed why teachers are leaving the profession we will discuss how we can keep them in the classroom. These points are: adequate compensation in the form of salary and in additional benefits, such as insurance. Additional support in the form of hands-on involvement from administration and counselors, and lastly, healthy parent/teacher boundaries that can be adhered to and enforced to protect the teachers and staff. First and foremost, we must address the issue of compensation. ***In the survey that was overseen by Educators for Excellence, seventy-eight percent of educators say that low pay is a serious issue.*** Increasing teachers' salaries is a crucial step in acknowledging the invaluable contribution they make to society. Adequate pay not only reflects the importance we place on education but also serves as a powerful incentive for talented individuals to enter and remain in the teaching profession.

Additionally, providing teachers with more paid time off is essential for their well-being. Burnout is a real and present danger, and offering educators the opportunity to recharge ensures they can bring their best selves to the classroom, benefiting both teachers and students alike. Even though teachers are allowed “time off” in the summer, many teachers fill in the roles for summer school, coaching, and professional development that’s required from their administration.

Improved health benefits are another critical aspect of teacher retention. As front-line workers in the education system, teachers deserve comprehensive healthcare coverage that acknowledges the physical and mental demands of their profession. Added benefits of part C dental coverage, vision insurance, or supplemental insurance can help lessen economic load the teacher faces instead of paying for those out of pocket.

Furthermore, we must prioritize providing teachers with the necessary support systems to counter disrespectful student behavior. One potential solution that benefits teachers is to increase communication between students, principals and counselors. Teachers constantly strive to build meaningful relationships with the students, but once trouble hits and administration needs to step in, this is where principals, vice-principals and counselors can have a profound impact on their student body. ***The American School Counselor Association stated that ensuring these relationships are well built gives the entire school the infrastructure needed to be successful curbing disruptive student behaviors and easing the teachers' stress load.***

Finally, it is imperative to reduce parental interference and allow teachers the autonomy they need to fulfill their roles effectively. While parental involvement is crucial, striking the right balance is essential to maintaining a positive and productive learning environment. Parents need to respect the 24-hour rule, which is a policy often implemented to allow them time to rationally think through a problem or complaint before they approach the teacher. If they still need to have a conversation with the teacher, the 24-hour wait period is to help the parent maintain control of their emotions and approach the situation rationally. Teachers need personal boundaries on Facebook, Snapchat, Tik Tok and other social media platforms as well, and parents and the public need to respect those boundaries.

In conclusion, the teacher shortage is a complex issue with roots in the aging-out of experienced educators, the impact of COVID-19, classroom behaviors, and parental interference. We can address these challenges head-on and implement measures such as increased pay, more paid time off, better health benefits, and enhanced support systems, we can create an environment where teachers are valued and empowered. Only through these concerted efforts can we hope to secure the future of our educational system and, by extension, the future success of our students.