

US confronts critical teacher shortage

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The United States is facing a critical teacher shortage. Every state has classrooms without teachers and face the problematic choice of eliminating subjects or increasing class sizes. Despite the well-established fact that class size is the most important factor in student achievement, classrooms are overfilled. States are lowering the professional standards for educators, inevitably reducing the quality of learning in public schools.

Nearly eight percent of teachers are leaving the profession each year. This is compounded by a 35 percent drop in college students entering teacher training programs between 2009 and 2014. The Learning Policy Institute noted that this means that 240,000 fewer teachers entered the classroom in 2014 compared to 2009.

Decades of defunding public education and the deliberate demonization of teachers by advocates of school privatization have had profound consequences for American young people. Today most US states provide less funding for elementary and secondary education than before the Great Recession of 2008; in some cases like Arizona and Alabama, funding has fallen by 20 percent.

The Education at a Glance 2017 report published last month by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that teachers in the US are now paid less than 60 percent of the salaries of similarly educated professionals in the developed world. The study found that American teachers had “the lowest relative earnings across all OECD countries with data” and that they worked longer hours than their counterparts around the world.

As most would-be teachers are forced to take on staggering levels of student loan debt in order to finish college, the prospect of these low-wage positions is unsustainable, dissuading them from choosing the career path.

While the shortage of teachers is worst within high poverty school districts, it is a national epidemic. In the 2015–16 school year, 48 states reported shortages in mathematics, 46 reported shortages for special education teachers, and 43 states reported shortages in science.

Since the beginning of the 2017 school year, over 500 Arizona teachers have left the classroom, many citing an overwhelming workload. The state has more than 1,300 classrooms to fill with teachers, with the demand increasing as teachers leave. The state has now enacted a tuition waiver for 236 students entering the Arizona Teachers’ Academy in a

feeble attempt to staunch the crisis.

In South Carolina, 6,500 teachers left the profession in 2016, a 21 percent increase from the previous year. Along with many other states, South Carolina has turned to international exchange programs for foreign teachers to fill vacancies. Nevada is recruiting heavily from the Philippines to fill special education positions.

More than 3,000 teachers are needed in Colorado where teacher education programs have graduated 24.4 percent less students over the last five years. On top of that, more than a third of the state’s teachers are 55 or older and nearing retirement.

According to a report on the crisis in the *Denver Post*, some teaching positions have gone unfilled for a year or more. Rural schools pay teachers an average of \$22,700 annually, barely subsistence wages.

The La Veta School District was short a math teacher for more than 18 months and the Revere School District went a full year without a music teacher. “This is as pure a crisis as we have in this state,” Mark Payler, the superintendent of Custer County schools which serves 360 students, told the *Post*. “There is no pool of teachers anymore, the candidates for jobs just aren’t there ... We advertise, we push out our job openings nationwide, and we are not seeing any apply,” he explained.

Nationally 145,000 teachers are needed, on top of the standard hiring numbers, to reduce the teacher-student ratio to pre-recession levels.

A veteran teacher from Detroit, Michigan described to the WSWs the difficult conditions created by the shortage: “In Detroit, we have a huge shortage of teachers, despite what [Superintendent Nikolai] Vitti says. We have very overcrowded classes. This means that it becomes difficult to differentiate our students and pay attention to their learning. It becomes more of a disciplinary situation. You fall behind in the lessons because of constant interruptions. It is very stressful dealing with behavior issues with that size of a classroom.

“I’ve been teaching 16 years and I don’t recall having oversized classrooms when I went to the district, but a couple of years ago it was up to 43 students. I love what I do, but the education environment has really diminished,” they explained.

“For an elementary teacher, dealing with all subjects, this is overwhelming. It’s like you don’t have a life. You don’t get paid for all those hours at home and going the extra mile. But I

love teaching that much. I've worked for the same salary for 10 years—who does that? At first it is all about your passion and then you realize you are being taken advantage of.

“Then they claim it's the teachers' fault. I have a BA in business and I know these things flow from the top down. The courts recently ruled there is 'no right' to read. In other words, the state is not responsible for providing a quality education for our children. Yet teachers are evaluated on student behaviors.”

In the new Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD), there are hundreds of vacancies in the classrooms. Substitutes, long-term subs and administrative personnel are filling in while class sizes continue at unteachable levels.

The embattled teachers of Detroit have been forced by the district, with the full collaboration of the Detroit Federal of Teachers (DFT), to make one round of concessions after another for nearly a decade. In 2009, the DFT agreed that teachers would “loan” the district \$10,000 apiece; despite the dissolution of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS), this money was not repaid. When the failed Educational Achievement Authority experiment was folded back into the DPSCD, senior teachers earning over \$60,000 were informed that they would be restarting their years served and entering at \$38,000.

Approximately 90 percent of teacher vacancies are created by teachers leaving the profession, most citing dissatisfaction with working conditions. Adding insult to injury, it is often impossible for teachers to maintain their seniority-linked pay scale and transfer between districts, so they often cannot improve their wages by seeking a better teaching position.

States and school districts are now watering down the requirements for teacher certifications in order to fill classrooms. When the DPS was dissolved last year and repackaged as a “Community District”, new language allowed non-certified teachers into the classrooms.

In 2016, Las Vegas recruited teachers from other states and issued provisional certifications without testing, filling almost 400 vacancies by lowering requirements.

Arizona introduced a bill this August actually dispensing entirely with teacher training. Any person with five years in a respective field can enter the classroom. There are now almost 2,500 classrooms led by people who are not trained or certified to teach.

In Illinois the state board of education cut back the required coursework and requirements for teachers in an effort to address between 1,000 and 2,000 missing teachers.

The Detroit teacher described to the WSWS how this process of dramatically lowering standards has evolved in Michigan, “A lot of this started in 2009-10 when the Emergency Managers walked in the door. They had no clue about education. These men came in and became richer than anyone in the district. Robert Bobb made over \$400,000. They changed the state laws to allow noncertified teachers into the district. They have already removed the cap on charter schools in the state; there is no limit.”

“I can see them using technology and moving to online schools,” they noted. “I can see them trying to privatize education, having us teachers working remotely and being paid less. Already Google, Microsoft, etc. are into the market including certificates to become a Microsoft Innovative Educator.”

The defunding of public education has been accompanied by the rise of “edu-business.” Charter schools, which are hailed as offering freedom of choice for teachers and students by Democrats and Republicans alike, are a move towards “subsistence education” for the working class that comes with a shoestring budget for teacher pay, supplies, and support staff. The wealthy elite, meanwhile, will have an entirely different education system based on well-funded private schools and small islands of “public” schools in well-off districts.

The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation has paid to expand charters and lobby for the use of Common Core standards in all 50 states. Real estate and insurance mogul Eli Broad now leads a group of corporate funders pushing a plan to move half of all K-12 students in Los Angeles into charter schools. The Walton family of Walmart created a \$1 billion campaign to promote charter schools across the nation and financier Carl Icahn has established a chain of charters in New York City.

The ruling elite is aiming at nothing less than the elimination of public education. Education is to be run for profit at the mercy of hedge funds and financiers, eliminating all the gains associated with hard-won democratic rights over more than 200 years.



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