

# Mass exodus of South Carolina teachers continues

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With the 2018-2019 school year scheduled to begin on August 20 in South Carolina, the state is facing the prospect of an even greater shortage of teachers than at the start of the previous school year. Poor working conditions and salaries far below the national average have driven teachers away for years in what has been called a “mass exodus” from the state and, in many cases, from the profession.

The average salary for South Carolina teachers is \$48,769, close to \$10,000 below the national average. The starting salary for new hires was until recently \$30,113. The 2018-2019 state budget will give them a raise, bringing their salary to a still inadequate \$32,000.

In addition to low pay for teachers, overall funding for schools is criminally low. State law mandates \$2,959 in per pupil spending each year. The state has failed to meet that requirement for almost a decade. During the 2017-2018 school year, per pupil spending by the state stood at \$2,425. The new budget for 2018-19 adds \$60 per pupil. With 727,513 students anticipated during the 2018-2019 school year, that amounts to about 345 million legally mandated dollars the schools will not receive.

A study published in January by the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement (CERRA) provides a sense of the teaching crisis produced by these conditions.

CERRA found that by the end of the 2016-17 school year, 6,705 teachers left their jobs. While some went to work in other South Carolina school districts, about 4,900 of these teachers were no longer teaching in any South Carolina school. Twenty-two percent of first-year teachers left at some point during or at the end of their first year and are no longer working in South Carolina public schools.

The 2017-2018 school year opened with 550 teaching

positions vacant statewide, an increase of 16 percent over the year before. CERRA reports that one third of those vacant teaching positions were concentrated in the Pee Dee region where many districts “have high rates of teacher turnover and extreme levels of poverty.” This region is home to many of the districts which make up South Carolina’s notorious “Corridor of Shame,” a poverty-stricken area along Interstate 95 where the schools are literally falling apart and receive even less funding than other parts of the state.

The exact number of teacher vacancies for the 2018-2019 school year is still unknown, as not all of South Carolina’s 82 districts have reported their statistics. But there is every indication the amount will be greater than in previous years. There are currently 160 vacancies just in the counties of Richland and Lexington. Twenty-one positions remain open in Beaufort County. There are 9 in Kershaw County, where school superintendent Frank Morgan warned earlier this year of “large storm clouds gathering” and the potential for teacher walkouts to hit the state as they had in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

Exacerbating the teacher shortage crisis is the decision of the state government to end the Teacher and Employee Retention Incentive (TERI) program. Initiated in 2001, the TERI program was intended to retain more-experienced teaching staff and make up for the lack of sufficient numbers of new teachers graduating from South Carolina colleges and certification programs. The TERI program allowed teachers to officially retire while continuing to work in their old positions for the same pay for up to five years. During this time, their retirement benefits were saved in a “TERI account.”

The TERI program ended on June 30. Teachers who continued to work past retirement were forced to abide

by salary caps for public employees that would prevent retired teachers from earning more than \$10,000 per year while working. The State Department of Education predicted that the end of the program would lead to the departure of as many as 3,400 educators.

The end of TERI pushes out many of the state's most experienced, veteran teachers, demonized in the State House and local media for "double dipping"—receiving salaries and retirement benefits from the state simultaneously—to make way for new hires who will earn far less.

In 2017, the department of education established the Educator Retention and Recruitment Study Committee to investigate the cause of the teacher shortage and recommend a plan to increase teacher recruitment. In the course of their investigation, the committee used an online form to request feedback from teachers. They have now published this feedback in a PDF file 260 pages long. The comments reveal the level of exploitation forced on teachers.

One teacher, a single parent of a two-year-old, commented: "My paycheck is \$958.00 every two weeks, which is barely enough money for child care, car payment, and modest grocery shopping. Doctor bills, student loans and living expenses remain on the back burner. Fortunately, my parents have been supportive and have allowed my daughter and me to live with them until I have reached a solution. The irony is that I decided to attend college at University of South Carolina to avoid being in this exact predicament."

A first-grade teacher complained of the amount of unpaid work she and other teachers perform: "Many teachers, in order to be effective with regards to instruction and to complete requirements and responsibilities that aren't related to instruction, work from well before the school work hours to well beyond. Often, teachers come to work 30 minutes or more prior to students and the expected arrival time for teachers; and then they work for 2-3 hours beyond the work day at their respective schools. Even with this type of devotion, teachers are often bringing more work home in order to simply keep up."

A teacher with 13 years on the job in Calhoun County called for a significant increase in teacher pay: "I have experience and a Masters Degree and it is necessary that I have a second job to help support my family and

plan for the future of my 3 children. A 2% pay raise every couple of years is not enough."

On May 19, a sign of growing opposition to these conditions appeared when hundreds of teachers gathered to protest at the State House in the capital city of Columbia. The rally took place just days after 20,000 teachers marched through the streets of North Carolina, part of the wave of teachers' strikes and walkouts making its way through the country. Organizing the rally, however, was the South Carolina Education Association (SCEA), the state affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA).

SCEA leaders sought to minimize the impact the protest would have. They called the rally on a day when neither schools nor the state legislature were in session. Teachers were told to "remember November" and vote for legislators who were "friendly" to education.

Teachers at the rally complained that the event had been poorly promoted. SCEA communications director Skot Garik himself admitted to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the first press release for the rally went out little more than a week prior to the event. North Carolina teachers also complained on social media that had they only known about the rally, they would have come down in droves to stand with their colleagues. This kind of solidarity, with its potential to lead to a broader unified struggle of teachers, is precisely what the unions hope to prevent.

To carry the struggle forward, it is vital that teachers in South Carolina draw the appropriate lessons from the SCEA sabotage and the role of the NEA and other teachers unions in suppressing the strikes organized by rank-and-file teachers and other public school workers. New organizations must be built to take the fight out of the hands of the unions and the Democratic Party politicians they promote. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges teachers in South Carolina to contact us for assistance building such independent rank-and-file committees.



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