

2.6 million US educators and staff quit public K-12 and higher education jobs during pandemic

Chase Lawrence and Renae Cassimeda
10 June 2022

Around 2.6 million educators and staff have quit public education jobs in K-12 and higher education during the pandemic, monthly figures from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS) show. Overall, there have been 4.8 million educators and staff total “separations” in public education during the pandemic which include layoffs (1.3 million), resignations (2.6 million), and other separations (771,000), including retirement, death, disability and transfers.

Significantly, data from the first four months of 2022 shows that the exodus from the public education industry is ongoing. In the first four months of this year, 734,000 total separations took place in the industry with the vast majority of those, 64 percent, or 474,000, being resignations.

In spite of this, the May 3 BLS *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary* showed state and local government education job openings actually declined by 43,000, the second largest sector-decrease behind decreases in transportation, utilities and warehousing at 69,000, suggesting substantial job cuts by school districts nationwide.

US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona lied to educators and staff in a recent interview on *Axios*, when he said, “Competitive salaries, good working conditions, and teachers’ voices are at the table when we’re talking about reimagining education. We’re fighting for you. But we also recognize what you’ve done in the last two years, especially.”

One would think that Cardona lives in another world. Such staggering statistics, in reality, depict public education in a state of breakdown. Compounded stress, overwork, stagnant wages, sickness and death exacerbated by the over two and a half years of an ongoing pandemic, rising inflation and the threat of war have resulted in a continued mass exodus of US educators and school workers and have further accelerated attacks on public education.

In K-12 public schools, recent data from an Institute of Education Statistics (IES) study entitled *The School Pulse Panel*, which collects information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from a national sample of public schools, reveals the impact of the pandemic on public education.

Almost half, or 44 percent, of public schools report having full- or part-time teacher vacancies. Sixty-one percent of public schools said that they had an increased number of teacher and staff vacancies in January 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with

only 22 percent saying that they did not. Further, 45 percent of schools noted that Special Education departments had the highest number of vacancies.

Another hallmark of the teacher shortage is the increasing tendency for teaching and non-teaching staff to be forced to work outside their intended duties. According to the IES survey, 57 percent of schools with one or more vacancies said they increasingly needed to use teachers for work outside their job descriptions.

The numbers are worsened by widespread absences, which have soared due to coronavirus infections and mental exhaustion from overwork. Three-quarters of districts reported needing to use non-teaching or teaching staff to act as substitute teachers. The IES survey noted that in January, 66 percent of staff expressed concern for the overall lack of substitute teachers at their site.

According to a recent *CalMatters* analysis, data from the state’s seven largest urban school districts for January showed that teacher and substitute vacancies were higher in low income areas. In low income districts on average, 42 percent of teacher absences were filled with substitutes, while higher income districts had 63 percent of their teacher absences filled with substitutes. For instance, in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest K-12 district in the US, schools in neighborhoods with the most low income students found substitutes for only 23 percent of absent teachers.

The IES survey also noted further actions that districts were taking to deal with the staffing crisis. Seventeen percent of schools reported they will offer fewer extra-curricular opportunities due to vacancies, and a quarter of schools will be increasing class sizes for the same reason. One in five schools is sharing teachers or staff to offset vacancies or absences.

The severe staffing crisis has caused many Head Start programs, federally funded preschool and early preschool programs for low income families, to close permanently. A recent survey of more than 900 National Head Start Association members showed that 90 percent of respondents’ programs have closed classrooms permanently or temporarily due to lack of staff, and nearly a third of staff positions are currently unfilled. Together with the baby formula shortage in the US, the closure of Head Start programs leaves countless low income families in a dire situation.

Additionally, the IES findings for April 2022 show that 70

percent of schools reported an increase in students seeking mental health services since the start of the pandemic, and 29 percent reported an increase for teachers. This exposes the lying claims by the Biden administration and corporate media that virtual learning and the closure of school buildings were responsible for the mental health crisis in schools. If this were so, it would be over now that children and teachers have been forced back into schools. In fact, the elimination of COVID-19 restrictions played a large role in the acceleration of the mental health crisis for teachers and students which was already present before the pandemic.

If the Biden administration had any intention of “fighting” for educators and students, there would have been efforts, backed by science and public health experts, to fight to stop the pandemic, ensure the safety of students and staff and to actually fund public education. Instead, Cardona and Biden have forced the reopening of schools alongside the teachers unions so parents could go back to producing profits for Wall Street.

The IES survey also noted that in January, 51 percent of staff are concerned for their physical health and safety, while 46 percent of staff are concerned about transmitting COVID-19 to immunocompromised family members. According to an unofficial tracker of US school personnel COVID-19 deaths which corroborates its total numbers with reports in news media, at least 2,367 educators and school workers in US K-12 schools have died since August 2020.

In California, COVID-19 deaths among current and retired educational staff in the state from March 2020 through December 2021 officially stand at 787, according to CalSTRS. Ninety percent, or 708, of these deaths were among retired staff, while 10 percent, or 78, were among active staff. The toll is likely an undercount given the substantial cover-up of reporting and lack of overall COVID-19 surveillance in US schools and general public.

At the direction of the Biden administration, billions of dollars in coronavirus relief money are being used for hiring incentives to address the staffing shortage. But trillions, which could have been used to better fund education, were given instead to Wall Street and for war with Biden and Congress supplying unlimited funds and armaments to Ukraine.

As the mass shortage of teachers continues to deepen across the country, districts are scrambling for last-minute solutions, which has further intensified attacks on public education.

Many districts have cynically resorted to meager one-time bonuses in attempts to retain teachers and staff. Sellout contract agreements reached by districts and education unions during the recent strikes of Minneapolis and Sacramento teachers and school staff offered paltry wage increases and one-time bonuses, which resulted in actual cuts to real wages given rising cost of living and runaway inflation. School districts in Texas, such as Dallas Independent School District (DISD), have given miserly bonuses for new hires in a bid to replace teachers who have left.

Other school districts across the country are removing a full day of school from each week because of acute staffing shortages and budget deficits.

Many Texas school districts have recently adopted a four-day week in a bid to reduce costs for the school district and boost student and teacher attendance. However, students and staff are

still required to make up lost instructional time.

In Tioga Independent School District in North Texas, a four-day school week is being proposed alongside an increase of 30 minutes per school day, as well as a lengthening of the school year by three weeks and shortening of the summer by the same amount. Similar increases are being implemented in Chico ISD and Mineral Wells ISD, both in North Texas. In another North Texas district, New Summerfield ISD, Fridays may be used for staff development and tutorials. In Wieser School District in Idaho, increases could range from 30 minutes to 55 minutes.

Online for-profit education companies have also profited off the crisis in education by partnering with school districts to fill teacher vacancies with virtual teachers for students in classrooms. Proximity Learning and Elevate K12 are two major online education companies which have grown rapidly during the pandemic. Proximity is used by 164 districts in the US and is expected to double its workforce to nearly 2,000 teachers by next school year. Elevate K-12 has seen a similar rapid growth and expects to double the number of school district partnerships to 500 and to more than double its teaching workforce to 3,000 by next year. The efforts by private companies to partner with K-12 districts work to drive down wages and deepen efforts at privatizing public education.

Pay for educators in Elevate K12 range from \$20 to \$50 an hour, while Proximity offers \$25 to \$30 an hour for part-time teachers. Proximity just recently created full-time positions with a \$40,000 salary, far less than the average estimated salary in Mississippi—which has the lowest average salary in the country at \$47,000.

The ruling elite sees the present staffing shortage as an opportunity to further privatize and gut public education. The only way forward for educators and staff is to unite with other sections of the working class, such as nurses who themselves are facing a crippling staffing crisis, and wage an independent struggle, incorporating demands for a vast redistribution of wealth to fund all the social rights of the working class, including the right to free, high quality public education.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact