

Staffing crisis in Florida schools intensifies as schools struggle to fill 9,500 vacancies

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State education officials in Florida have reported an alarming shortage of teachers and support staff heading into the start of the fall semester as counties struggle to fill thousands of vacancies. According to the Florida Educators Association (FEA), there are currently more than 9,500 empty teacher and staff positions across the state's K-12 schools.

In Southwest Florida, educators are reporting there aren't enough teachers to cover all classrooms or to maintain auxiliary functions in schools this week as the year-round period begins. A significant campaign has been launched to re-acquire former and retired teachers but low pay is dissuading many from returning. School districts of both Collier and Lee counties have more than 150 open teaching positions and officials have worriedly conveyed that the likelihood of filling a substantial amount is improbable.

The president of the Volusia United Educators union, Elizabeth Albert, told WESH2 news that the county is facing a shortage of 365 teachers for the fall.

The massive shortage has come principally from the breakdown of public education due to the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the premature back-to-school campaign demanded by the political establishment and sanctioned by the unions. This has infected hundreds of thousands of students and teachers during the past two years. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recorded a minimum of 796,000 infections among Florida's children ages 0-14 and at least 45 pediatric deaths among ages 0-15.

The emergence of COVID-19 precipitated a wholesale breakdown of public education, as educators have faced arduous workloads and schedules, unbearable stress and mounting fear and anxiety over contracting the disease while working in person.

Volusia County School District officials held a day-long job fair in April where 135 teachers had been hired following the county's adoption of starting pay at \$47,000, but this has proven to be an ineffective bandaid as teacher positions have remained stubbornly empty.

Among support staff in Volusia there are exactly 409 vacancies. Christy Mahaney, coordinator for recruitment and retention for the district, touted the raising of support staff pay to a minimum wage of \$15 this month as a tactic to lure in more workers. Such a miserable wage is only a few thousand dollars higher than Volusia's poverty threshold and barely enough to eke out a living given the soaring cost of inflation.

Both Miami-Dade and Broward counties, two of the largest

districts in the state, are facing severe shortages of teachers that parallel the numbers seen last year. Vickie Cartwright, the superintendent of Broward Schools, noted to CBS News that the district had a shortage of 502 teacher openings. Low pay is a major factor driving teachers away from the profession as South Florida represents one of the most expensive regions in the country, which has seen housing prices skyrocket in recent months due to inflation.

In Miami-Dade, school district officials revealed 475 vacancies for the upcoming school year with COVID-19 sickness and deplorable working conditions, along with pay, accounting for the shortage. Cartwright referred to a significant drop in morale among educators who have been forced to endure two years of psychological exhaustion and pandemic-related stress.

A recent nationwide survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers found that at the national level the number of educators satisfied with their jobs has dropped to a staggering 20 percent compared to 53 percent in June 2020. Seventy-nine percent reported they were "totally dissatisfied" with overall job conditions.

A post on Facebook referring to the staffing crisis in St. Lucie Public Schools went viral as educators expressed outrage over the worsening conditions in the schools. Many commentators noted the arduous and often unnecessary hoops prospective teachers needed to climb through to reach their positions.

Rachelle commented: "Well, the state keeps insisting on more and more specialty certifications that EVERY teacher must have—Elementary teachers must now have their own grade specific cert, ESOL cert, ESE cert, and READING endorsement!"

"All of these," she continued, "represent MANY HOURS of additional coursework for the already overburdened and 26 pt 'Marzano' scrutinized each and every year! Add this to no support from administrators."

Another angry reply noted: "You're going to have a lot more vacancies if all these new hires are paid more than current teachers. Then they have to take the special training on how not to tell accurate history and how to avoid acknowledging the gay population, pay for their own certifications, use all their 'extra money' for supplies, and cover 4 classes that aren't even in their grade level. Yes please sign me up for that nonsense. Our children are the ones who suffer and will not/are not getting a solid education with this mass exodus."

A notable part of Cartwright's comments was her declaration

that a major reason behind the inability to fill educator position was due to teachers being “more concerned about politics.” This is a statement echoing the far right, which has promoted a string of new laws designed by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis that amount to vicious attacks against democratic rights.

This includes the Parental Rights in Education bill, referred to by opponents as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” which forbids classroom instruction by school personnel on sexual orientation or gender identity in primary schools. The anti-LGBTQ measure enshrines discrimination and religion-based prejudice inside public schools.

Another reactionary education bill signed by DeSantis in April is the “Stop WOKE Act.” The bill’s purpose is to prohibit classroom instruction on concepts related to sexism, racism or nationality that bear a dissident character or challenge the status quo. Driving the bill is the desire on the part of fascistic Republicans to eviscerate any positive references to the struggle for racial, gender and other democratic rights in US history.

The far right has made it a mission to enforce censorship in schools along lines which boost the credibility of American capitalism, eliminate discussion of social inequality and promote nationalist propaganda in the name of celebrating American “patriotism.” This theme and the legal authorization for it has arisen throughout DeSantis’ tenure as governor since 2018. During this time he has sought to propagate an overtly and retrograde “patriotic” curriculum imbued with Christian and conservative tenets.

The FEA report noted that the dire staffing shortage continued last year, during which the organization projected that more than 450,000 Florida students had likely started the year without a full-time, certified teacher in their classroom.

In addition to the wide-ranging staffing shortage, the report references other statistics pointing to dismal prospects for the recruitment of educators in the coming years. The FEA report cited a survey of high school students which found that only 5 percent were interested in becoming teachers. The survey was administered four years ago, long before the worsening of conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. College prep programs aimed at recruiting teachers saw a 23 percent decline in participation between 2008 and 2016.

A significant factor deterring young people from becoming teachers and older educators from continuing the profession is the state’s abysmal pay. The average salary for teachers in Florida is \$51,167. This is far below the national average of \$65,293 and has stayed persistently low despite a recent insubstantial increase in the base salary for new teachers. Florida is ranked at the very bottom in teacher pay at 48th out of 50 states nationwide.

The FEA’s review of the abysmal conditions in schools accompanied several vague and, under the prevailing political circumstances, unrealistic proposals that Florida school districts, presided over by both big business parties, will never carry out.

These included hiring and developing new teachers, boosting Florida’s salaries to national levels, and extending contracts for “good performing” teachers, all of which have proven impossible throughout the pandemic. Instead of mobilizing rank-and-file educators in a united fight against what prevails on campuses, the FEA has issued a lukewarm appeal to the far-right DeSantis and

his notoriously anti-democratic Florida Department of Education to implement such measures.

Even attempts that have been made to improve the inadequate pay of educators have been drastically offset by acute budget cuts for most districts in the state. Many districts are reporting situations in which classrooms will have to “share” personnel. Rob Spicker, a spokesman for the Lancaster School District, told *WinkNews*, “Some classes, you know, will have to share, and some of the work staff that’s there may have to make up for, you know, the workers that aren’t there. We’re just in that position where we need staff, we need to fill these spots.”

The Florida Education Association, an affiliate of both the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers, both run by affluent bureaucrats with bloated salaries well over six figures, has led no serious effort to improve disastrous safety conditions facing schools due to COVID-19 or protect the health of teachers.

Early in the pandemic in the summer of 2020, the FEA resorted to issuing a threadbare petition and lawsuits to get DeSantis to recall the emergency Order issued by then-Commissioner Richard Corcoran requiring all school districts to open brick-and-mortar buildings. These appeals were rejected by DeSantis and the courts as the governor prepared to reopen schools.

Staffing shortages, the gutting of public education and the deadly conditions teachers face in schools from rising COVID-19 infections are the products of a rapacious ruling elite and its two capitalist parties. It has demanded that all funding and resources be subordinated to profit interests. Educators and staff must organize their struggle against poor working conditions and low pay by breaking out of the FEA straitjacket and forming independent rank-and-file committees, uniting with other educators across the US in a common fight to defend public education.



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