Pandemic-driven teacher shortage in US reaches crisis levels as school year begins

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As schools in the United States open for the 2022-2023 academic year, a teacher shortage more than a decade in the making has hit crisis levels, dramatically worsened by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

A sampling from various states and school districts across the country gives a glimpse of the disaster unfolding in public education. Florida, with most school systems opening last week, has an astounding 8,000 open teaching positions, up from 5,000 at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. Arizona has more than 2,000 general teacher vacancies and over 800 special education teacher openings. As of early August, Nevada had 3,000 unfilled teaching positions.

In January, the Illinois Association of Regional School Superintendents found that 88 percent of school districts in the state had "problems with teacher shortages." At that time, 2,040 teacher openings were either empty or filled with a "less than qualified" hire. In the Houston area, the five largest school districts reported a combined 2,236 vacancies as of August 1. In Baltimore City, the school system's chief of staff estimated that, as of the beginning of August, there were 600 to 700 teacher vacancies.

While working-class communities are undoubtedly the hardest hit, the shortage extends to wealthier school districts serving more middle-class and upper middle-class communities as well. As of last week, Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the 20 wealthiest counties in the country, has 157 teacher positions open, 367 support staff openings (for paraprofessional educators and front office employees), and 16 bus driver openings.

Fairfax County, Virginia, one of the ten wealthiest counties, held a hiring event on August 4. After the event, David Walrod, president of the Fairfax County Federation of Teachers, told the local ABC affiliate, "There are still hundreds of positions open." With schools set to open on August 22, the school system's official "Instructional Vacancy List," still shows hundreds of vacancies.

"We've had teacher shortages before in the past, but this is a year like no other," Susan Lugo, president of the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association, told the local CBS affiliate. "I've been in human resources for 12 years and they are truly at crisis level, especially for our special education teachers."

"I have never seen it this bad," Dan Domenech, executive director of the School Superintendents Association, told the *Washington Post*. "Right now it's number one on the list of issues that are concerning school districts."

While the pandemic has hastened the exodus of teachers, the shortage is not new. In 2016, the Learning Policy Institute issued a report titled, "*A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.*" The researchers noted that since the 2012-2013 school year, the demand for teachers exceeded supply, with the deficit growing each year. The supply deficit went from 20,000 in 2012-2013 to 64,000 in 2015-2016, with a projected gap of 110,000 in 2017-2018.

This trend has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are at least 280,000 fewer public school teachers than there were before the pandemic.

Underscoring the shortage, according to *Education Week*, between the 2008-2009 and 2018-2019 academic years, the number of students completing a teacher-education program declined by about 33 percent. Not only are college students less interested in pursuing teaching careers, but many who start out in teaching quickly leave the profession. According to the Maryland State Department of Education, during the 2021-2022 school year, 55.4 percent of Maryland teachers with less than five years' experience resigned.

Reasons for teacher disaffection are not hard to find. Teachers are woefully underpaid, with the average public school teacher receiving $65,090 during the 2020-2021 school year, and as low as $49,583 in Florida. Large and growing class sizes, long hours, inadequate resources, mandatory rote testing of students, and a general deterioration in working conditions are also causes of the crisis.

The pandemic has only accelerated the departure of teachers. When most schools shut down at the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, school systems were largely unprepared, thrusting the burden on teachers to continue to educate students online with little or no support.

Then, in the course of 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, as more and more school systems reopened for in-person learning, and as mitigation efforts were increasingly abandoned, teachers were forced to risk their health and very lives to teach.

While the US government keeps no statistics on the number of school workers who have lost their lives to COVID-19, the Twitter page "School Personnel Lost to Covid" has documented that, at a minimum, 2,403 school workers, including teachers, support staff, and bus drivers have died.

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With staffing shortages, the teachers who remain face even greater responsibilities, further exacerbating the already sky-high stress levels for teachers. Many teachers returning to in-person teaching during the pandemic also had new duties to take on, including COVID testing of students, regulating mask wearing (when it was still mandated), creating assignments for students in quarantine, and extra tutoring to help students who had fallen behind during the pandemic.

A June 2021 RAND survey found that more than three-quarters of teachers reported experiencing frequent, job-related stress, compared to 40 percent of employed adults overall and 25 percent of teachers reported symptoms of depression, compared with 10 percent for the adult population as a whole.

In response to the teacher shortages, school systems are filling vacancies in ways that will leave students with a woeful education. In Florida, reactionary Republican Governor Ron DeSantis recently signed a bill allowing military veterans to teach without a bachelor's degree. In Tucson, Arizona, the school system is considering using virtual math teachers from an online education company to fill in for 24 math teacher vacancies. In Texas, two districts, the Mineral Wells Independent School District and Chico Independent School District, are reducing the school week to four days due to staff shortages.

Numerous districts plan on filling teacher vacancies by using administrators to work as substitutes, combining multiple classes together in large spaces such as auditoriums or gymnasiums, offering paid student teaching positions, using substitutes for longer term assignments and using teachers to teach outside their areas of certification.

In an August 15 press release, Baltimore City schools acknowledged that "it will be challenging" to have enough teachers at every school. "In lieu of a teacher, some students may have a paraprofessional, a long-term substitute, a retired teacher, a reassigned teacher-leader or central office former teacher on the first day of school," the press release continued.

Other school districts, from Osceola County in Florida to Phoenix, Arizona, are turning to teachers from Mexico, South America and the Caribbean, bringing them in on temporary visas to fill in some of the teacher vacancies. Undoubtedly, the foreign teachers will be underpaid even in comparison to their dramatically underpaid American counterparts.

In a series of teachers' strikes since 2018, starting with a wildcat strike by West Virginia teachers, educators around the country have waged courageous fights to reverse the abysmal conditions in schools, pushing for higher wages and reduced class sizes, among other demands. During the pandemic, teachers have waged numerous struggles calling for remote learning and other necessary public health measures. However, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have systematically isolated and worn down each job action, urging teachers to "remember in November" and vote for the Democratic Party.

After Joe Biden was elected president in November 2020, his administration immediately pushed for the reopening of schools where they remained fully remote, largely in Democratic-controlled areas. Backed by the teachers' unions, which have done nothing to protect teachers during the pandemic, public school systems are now fully open for in-person learning, with even basic mitigation measures, such as mandating masking and improved ventilation, almost completely non-existent, and virtual learning options nearly non-existent.

Now, with schools reopening across the country, the unions either ignore the pandemic or promote the pseudo-science of the Biden administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In a press release in response to the Montgomery County teacher shortage, the union did say not a single word about the pandemic and the unsafe conditions facing teachers as they return to school.

More damning, in an August 11 press release, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, whose last reported annual salary of $426,327 puts her comfortably in the top 5 percent of income earners, wholeheartedly endorsed the latest unscientific guidelines from the CDC on COVID-19, stating "We welcome these guidelines."

The guidelines, announced no doubt in anticipation of school reopenings and a new massive surge of cases, remove or reduce recommendations for quarantine, isolation and testing of exposed and infected individuals. No doubt hundreds or even thousands more students and teachers will die as a result of this AFT-endorsed policy.

Weingarten's press release is ripe with dishonest and hypocritical claims. After calling for a "safe and welcoming learning environment," she disavows any public health measures, including a mask mandate, that would actually promote a safe learning environment. Echoing the Biden administration and its right-wing public health advisors, the only measures she calls for are "vaccines, testing and masks (and no stigma for those who mask)."

The pandemic has definitively proven that the unions offer no way forward for teachers. Instead of pushing for all necessary health and safety measures to protect teachers' lives, the unions have done all they can to force teachers back into unsafe classrooms, sacrificing the lives of thousands of students and teachers in the process. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all teachers who want to protect lives and end the pandemic to join the Educators Rank and File Committee today.

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