

Record attrition in Texas public schools exacerbates teacher shortage

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29 August 2022

Public schools across Texas are starting the new school year in the face of a massive shortage of educators and school staff. The Texas Education Agency (TEA), the state organization which administers primary and secondary education, reported a teacher attrition rate of nearly 12 percent over the 2021-22 school year, or nearly 43,000 teachers, the highest the agency has ever recorded. The attrition rate refers to numbers of teachers leaving the profession, relative to those who remain.

The teacher shortage crisis is not confined to Texas. According to the National Education Association (NEA) there is a shortage of more than 300,000 teachers nationwide heading into the school year, which is no doubt the result of the dire conditions inside public schools, rooted in decades of attacks against public education which have been accelerated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

For over a decade, teacher attrition in Texas has remained high. According to the TEA, the state has faced difficulty in retaining education staff since the 2011-12 school year, with attrition rates hovering around 10 percent every year except 2020-21, when it was 9 percent. Retirements also jumped to 8,600 in 2021-22, an increase of over 1,000 from the previous year.

Rather than responding with major investments in public schools or teacher salaries, officials are lowering standards for training and certification. In Texas, people without a degree in education can obtain a certification within a year under an alternative certification program. Even this is not managing to fill the state's needs. Despite hiring a record 43,000 teachers last year, districts have reported hundreds of vacancies. As of early August, Houston ISD had more than 800 and Fort Worth ISD had 230.

In addition, data from the Texas Education Association (TEA) shows that teachers hired through alternative certification programs are leaving the profession at much higher rates. A meeting of the State Board of Education in June noted that, "if teachers prepared in alternative certification programs were retained at the same rate as teachers prepared in traditional programs, over 3,700 fewer new teachers would have been needed last year." Most educators in Texas are currently certified through the alternative programs.

The lowering of educational requirements for new teachers

follows a national trend. In July, Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey signed a bill into law that slashes the requirement that new teachers hold a college degree. This summer the state of Florida, also facing a teacher shortage, began a program that similarly allows military veterans without college degrees to receive a five-year temporary certification. Many other states across the country are also seeking to band-aid teacher shortages by reducing certification requirements, essentially allowing anyone to stand in front of a classroom.

These moves demonstrate the contempt held by the political establishment for public education and show clearly that the return to in-person learning amid the pandemic was never about the "student's education" as claimed by both Democrats and Republicans. Instead, opening schools was an essential component of forcing workers back into unsafe workplaces amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The disregard for the social and educational welfare of students is further illustrated by the reactionary, far-right campaigns to arm teachers and ban books. With tepid opposition from Democrats, Texas Republican officials have sought to increase the number of armed school employees following the Robb Elementary massacre in May. This has little support among educators, with a recent survey by the Texas American Federation of Teachers finding that 76 percent of respondents did not want to be armed in school.

Meanwhile, public officials across Texas are engaged in an ongoing campaign to censor books and curriculum inside public schools. Most recently, officials in the Keller Independent School District removed 40 "challenged" books from the school libraries while the district "reviews" them. Included in the purge is an illustrated adaptation of Anne Frank's diary.

The past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have only worsened conditions facing educators and led to an increase in resignations and retirements. Already, thousands of educators and students across the US have died from COVID-19. A recent investigative report by the WSWS, based on state retirement data, estimates that across the US, approximately 8,000 active and retired educators died from the virus in 2020 and 2021. In Texas, the Teacher Retirement System of Texas produced a report in December 2021 which recorded 2,080

excess deaths during the pandemic.

The latest CDC guidelines, which remove recommendations for quarantining, testing and contact tracing, will be used to further justify the complete abandonment of even the most minimal mitigation measures in schools. The conditions are set for the 2022-23 school year to be even more devastating than the last two.

The deadly conditions in the schools take place on top of decades of cuts to public education in Texas. The state spends a paltry \$9,900 per student annually, compared to the national average of around \$13,000, according to the Education Data Initiative. Texas teachers, meanwhile, receive poverty wages, with an average salary of \$58,887 per year. With rampant inflation, many teachers are struggling to keep their heads above water and are forced to take second jobs.

The dire situation facing educators has led to widespread “burnout” among teachers across the state. According to a poll published August 8 by the Texas State Teachers Association (TSTA), an organization affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA), 70 percent of teachers in Texas are seriously considering leaving the profession entirely. In addition to low pay and benefits, the TSTA survey found that 87 percent of Texas teachers feel overburdened and undervalued for their efforts in the classroom.

Gordon Mock, a former elementary school teacher, who had been certified through an alternative program, left the profession after only two years, in 2018. Speaking to KERA News, he noted that the program left him unprepared and unsupported: “Why am I going to worry about 25 or 30 kids when I have my own family to worry about? The existential anxiety there is really kind of what drove me away.”

He conveyed the helplessness he experienced with kids coming to school hungry, and other children coming in with no shoes. “The classroom is really a microcosm of what’s going on outside.”

The situation inside public schools and the impact of two years of a pandemic have had a brutal impact among young people as well. Dallas high school social studies teacher Diane Birdwell also commented to KERA News, “Forget the learning loss. The mental health loss that we had with the kids and with the staff was just phenomenal this year. And the scope of it and the depth of it, how many kids I had just breaking down across, you know, in the hallways or crying in class because they just were used to not being at school for a year and a half.”

Like sharks frenzied from the smell of blood, Wall Street profiteers are seizing upon the crisis in order to further privatize public education. Hedge funds, edu-businesses and charter schools are setting their sights on the national annual budget of K-12 education, estimated to be approximately \$800 billion to \$3 trillion, where every dollar spent for public education is viewed by this parasitic layer as potential profits.

Far from fighting for teachers and public schools, the Democratic Party is an equal partner in the decimation of

public education. In major school districts led by the Democratic Party, including New York City, Oakland, Minneapolis and Chicago, budget cuts, school closures and layoffs are on the horizon.

The Democrats have been aided at every turn by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), who for years have strangled the opposition of educators to decades of attacks. This included their betrayals of the 2018 teacher strikes in Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia against cuts, low pay and benefits.

Throughout the pandemic, the AFT and NEA have played the criminal role of enforcing the demand for schools to reopen for in-person learning, first under Trump and then under Biden. Thousands of teachers walked out and staged sick-outs in districts across the country during the 2021-22 school year in the face of mass infection, record child hospitalizations and deaths during the Delta and Omicron surges. In response, the AFT and NEA worked to isolate educators and promote the fiction that schools were safe.

In the latest display of her contemptuous attitude toward the health and safety of educators and students, AFT President Randi Weingarten gave her full endorsement to the CDC’s latest guidelines, stating, “We welcome these guidelines ... COVID-19 and other viruses are still with us, but with multiple prevention and treatment options available, now is not the time for new mandates.”

Now, in addition to the continued spread of COVID-19, teachers and students face the additional threat of the monkeypox virus, which the political establishment and public health agencies have already allowed to spread uncontrolled.

The fight to defend public education and improve working conditions inside the schools cannot be left to the trade unions or the two corporate-controlled political parties. Educators need their own independent organizations that will link them with the entire working class in order to mount a unified struggle to end the pandemic and save public education.



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