



A Union of Professionals

Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?

What America Must Do to Attract and Retain the
Educators and School Staff Our Students Need

Executive Summary



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[Our Mission](#)

The American Federation of Teachers is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Executive Summary

Educators and school staff are drawn to their professions because of their love for children, their passion for helping them to learn and grow, and their desire to make a positive difference in society through their work.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses, guidance counselors, teachers, support staff and bus drivers were facing disrespect and de-professionalization, stress and lack of support, low pay relative to other professions and daunting workloads. Many educators are leaving long before they had planned, and the number of people entering the profession has plummeted. These shortages and the conditions contributing to them imperil the future of public education, the quality of the education our children receive and our democracy itself. The AFT is not just studying the problem, we also have laid forth in this report specific remedies necessary to address this crisis.

Every child deserves to have people in their schools who are well-trained, well-supported and excited to work with them every day. We need an overhaul in all aspects of the profession to ensure people want to enter and stay in school careers. The future of public education depends on it; the future of our democracy depends on it.

The AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force brought together 25 leaders from our state and local unions across the country who worked intensively with leading researchers in the field, surveyed our membership, and sought frontline input from many of AFT's 1.7 million members. They identified four key areas that need to change if we are to reverse the teacher and school staff shortages: climate, culture, conditions and compensation.

Below is an abridged list of the recommendations of the task force. Read the full list of recommendations, as well as the research to support them in the full report: <https://bit.ly/shortagereport>.

1. Revitalize the Educator and School Staff Pipeline

- **Improve identification and recruitment of educators and staff**
Increased work to identify or target potential teachers and school staff should be done before they enter preparation programs, for example, through career and technical education course sequences for education careers and through Grow-Your-Own (GYO) programs, which are based locally and target candidates, often paraprofessionals, assisting them with the funding and mentoring they need to complete the requirements to become teachers.
- **Strengthen preparation programs and residencies**
The AFT has offered extensive recommendations for aligning and elevating teacher preparation and the teaching profession. They must provide teacher candidates with a strong foundation in subject-area content along with instruction in relevant, dynamic and differentiated pedagogical practices.

Preparation programs should provide candidates with extensive clinical experiences alongside skilled practitioners over a significant period of time, ideally an entire school year. Preparation programs require candidates to receive on-the-job training, but one way to provide candidates with thorough, paid classroom experience is through yearlong educator residencies that include a commitment to teaching in the district for several years.

- **Support new employees through induction and mentoring programs**

All new school employees should receive comprehensive support as they transition to the workplace. Research suggests that support for new teachers through mentoring and induction has a positive impact on teacher retention, teacher instructional practices, and student achievement, yet many new teachers AFT spoke to experienced weak or ineffective induction and mentoring programs.

- **Ensure students are taught and supported by a diverse workforce**

More than 80 percent of teachers are white and female, while students of color make up more than 50 percent of the student population in public schools. Ethno-racial and culturally linguistic students are sitting in America's classroom; teachers should also reflect this diversity—barriers to student debt, licensure, hiring, and retention of teachers of color must be closely examined.

2. Restructure Schools to Create Positive Working and Learning Conditions for All

- **Create a culture that supports all workers and learners**

More than half of the nation's school children—about 25 million—live in low-income households. Many suffer food insecurity, homelessness and inadequate healthcare.

A recent study by the Rand Corp. found that teachers and principals reported worse well-being than other working adults, and that well-being and poor working conditions are associated with an intention to leave their jobs.

Schools should be community hubs that serve the needs of the whole child and the whole family.

State, local and district resources for social services need to be coordinated to provide more effective and efficient support; every school should have a comprehensive, well-staffed support program with immediately available resources to address the well-being of students and staff.

- **Ensure school sites are safe and welcoming for all**

Every state has standards for student learning content and for teaching; it is time to have standards for the places where they learn. AFT teachers and school staff believe that improved workplace safety is an important strategy for recruitment and retention. This can include healthy environments, quality of physical spaces as well as safety from violence and equitable treatment for all. Not only are these the working conditions of our members, they are also the learning conditions of our students. Neither educators nor students should be asked to work or learn under conditions that are unsafe or unhealthy.

We need all school employees along with community members to work together to find a way to create positive school discipline practices, conflict resolution strategies, and behavior

management structures for all students. Educators need training so they are equipped with the tools and skills to support students and their families. We must further investments in social emotional learning and support teams for students to address behaviors quickly and effectively.

Some topics or issues can be more sensitive or challenging to teach, made all the more difficult by the harmful politicization by some stakeholders. Educators must be allowed to exercise their professional judgment and have a responsibility to provide their students with developmentally and age-appropriate materials that develop their literacy, skills, grow their knowledge, and expand their intellectual horizons. This means teaching honest, accurate history and opposing any campaign to ban books or censor the written word in schools and libraries. Schools must be welcoming of diverse people, backgrounds and beliefs.

- **Strong partnerships with school staff, families and communities**

Creating mechanisms for family and community engagement, led by welcoming and culturally informed teachers and school staff, can strengthen the school community; build positive relationships and school climate; and improve student outcomes on many measures, including attendance, discipline and academic achievement.

High-quality family engagement does not happen by chance. It is the result of policy choices, resource allocations, and technical assistance that support both staff capacity and student participation. Building on efforts from our partners at the national, state and local levels to engage parents, families, and communities as allies for public schools—must be a priority.

3. Create Systems That Provide workers with Time, Trust, Tools and Training to Do Their Jobs

- **Provide opportunity for a stronger voice within the profession from rank-and-file workers and allow them to have authority in their day-to-day decision-making**

Along with creating positive school cultures, restructuring schools also requires addressing the day-to-day functions of teaching and school staff workers. The AFT heard from members about how important it is to be trusted by policymakers, administrators, and community members to make decisions relevant to their jobs and to their students; to be given the time in their workday to plan and prepare for their instruction or other duties, to collaborate with colleagues, and to meaningfully assess their students' work and needs; to be given the tools and resources they need to do their jobs without being overburdened by paperwork or large class sizes; and to be given ongoing, job-embedded training that allows them continuous growth and opportunities to develop within their career or between roles.

Teachers and school staff express higher levels of satisfaction—and less burnout and stress—when they are involved in decision-making, and they feel more like professionals when they are trusted and have autonomy over their work.

- **Reduce standardized testing and empower teachers to use authentic assessments that measure what students know and can do**

By using high-quality, relevant and timely formative assessments, teachers can use those results to modify, refine and individualize instruction to better meet students' needs.

We must replace test-and-punish accountability systems that rely on low-quality, high-stakes, time-consuming standardized tests with systems that include educator-led, curriculum-linked assessments that give students opportunities to demonstrate their abilities to organize information to solve problems, frame and conduct investigations, analyze and synthesize data, and apply learning to new situations.

- **Focus development and evaluation systems on support and improvement**

In many schools, the staff (including principals) report that the evaluation system feels burdensome, bureaucratic and unfairly administered; the evaluation system should support the workforce, assess performance and provide support—including connected professional development—for addressing any areas of deficiency. We know from experience that when a district labor-management team is engaged in monitoring and tweaking the system, based on feedback from the evaluators and those being evaluated, staff feel empowered and engaged. The result is higher staff retention rates, more engaged staff and higher student achievement.

Educators and staff must have ongoing, job-embedded professional development.

- **Increase planning time and opportunities to collaborate meaningfully with colleagues**

Teachers need time to properly prepare lessons, differentiate instruction, provide meaningful feedback to students, and collaborate with other teachers and support staff who work alongside them. Just like other professions, teachers and school staff need time to prepare to do their jobs well.

American teachers provide 40 percent more instruction per week, teach more non-native speakers, more students with special needs, and more students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes than their international peers. And yet they have less time to plan during the week than educators in other countries.

The ratio of instructional time to preparation time should be no more than 2:1. For every two minutes of instruction, educators should have one minute of planning time for individual and collaborative work.

- **Reduce paperwork**

In a March 2022 Hart Research survey, 95 percent of AFT K-12 members chose “less paperwork and fewer non-teaching duties that take away from student needs” as a top answer for how to fix the shortage crisis. Paperwork audits must be conducted, and ways for increased efficiencies must be explored.

- **Lower class size**

Lower class size addresses the needs of students both academically and socially. Reducing class size to its impact on test scores fails to consider the importance of student well-being and fails to treat students as whole people.

No primary (grades preK-3) class should have more than 20 children, with fewer than 20 even better. Intermediate school and middle school (grades 4-5 and grades 6-8, respectively) should not exceed 23 students. And high school classes should be limited to a maximum 25 students.

An effective way to address class size is to create classroom teams of teachers and paraprofessionals. The supportive role of paraprofessionals in American classrooms should be widely developed and expanded beyond a few classrooms in each school.

- **Develop innovative ways to build advancement opportunities into education professions to give all employees a chance to lead and grow**

We must allow teachers and school staff to assume leadership roles and remain in the classroom. We need a career ladder that teachers and school staff can follow to retirement that does not require them to give up working face-to-face with students. We need to establish pathways that allow master teachers to continue working with students while spending more of their time working to help develop newer staff and take on other leadership roles in curriculum development, enhanced instruction, classroom well-being, addressing the needs of special populations, culturally responsive teaching, formative assessment, and many other areas in which practicing teachers and school staff would excel. Research shows one of the most powerful ways to increase student performance is when teacher leaders work with their classroom peers.

We should also advocate for opportunities for other employees to advance within their current job classification.

4. Provide Sustainable and Commensurate Compensation and Benefits

- **Increase the compensation of teachers and school staff**

Too many teachers and school staff must work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, and too many are burdened with heavy debt. In a March 2022 Hart Research survey, when asked for their top three choices for what actions would improve recruitment and retention, 93 percent of AFT K-12 members answered “pay raises.” We will never successfully recruit and retain enough diverse, highly qualified teachers until we significantly increase the compensation of American teachers. Here are some ways to increase compensation and ease burdens:

- Relieve student loan debt for teachers and school staff so they are not overburdened by debt at the start of their careers.
- Ensure all workers receive a living wage.
- Provide workers with affordable healthcare options for themselves and their families.
- Expand access to paid family leave.

- **Expand the scope and reach of collective bargaining**

Some districts do not have collective bargaining; others limit its scope. Collective bargaining is the best way for teachers and school staff to have a voice to advocate for what their students need and for what they need as professionals. It is the best way to solve problems, and truly change conditions, climate, culture and compensation to ensure that educators have the tools, time, trust and training to help all our students have the brighter futures they need and desire.



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