



DANIEL WUBAH
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Teacher shortages are real — in Pa. and nationwide

*“Never seen it this bad’:
America faces catastrophic
teacher shortage”*

*“Pa. teacher shortage
worsens as interest in teach-
ing falls”*

News headlines have been telling us since the summer about the teacher shortage in Pennsylvania and across the country. Schools

opened their doors as the teacher crisis persisted. Efforts to address this challenge range from reducing the hours students spend in the classroom, to asking parents to help in the classroom, to lowering the basic skills required for educators.

Teachers have been leaving the field in droves during the COVID-19

pandemic and districts are struggling to find replacements.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, 15,031 Instructional Level I teaching certificates — the most basic teaching credential awarded to graduates who pass their certification tests — were issued in the commonwealth in 2010-11. Since then, there has been a gradual decrease. In 2019-20, only 5,128 certificates were issued, which represented a 66% decrease over the decade.

What’s unclear is how many teaching positions are empty since the state Department of Education does not track vacancies. Predictably, districts that serve lower-income communities where teacher hiring and retention have

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always been challenging are hurting the most.

For instance, Upper Darby is a large suburban district in Delaware County with many low-income students. The teachers there have agreed to take on additional classes; however, the burnout level will be significant, and with a lack of substitutes, officials say if multiple teachers get sick, they will have to close schools.

In May, Millersville University held a Teacher Shortage Summit at The Ware Center in downtown Lancaster. This summit brought together teachers and administrators from more than two dozen school districts, as well as policymakers and university educators to discuss possible solutions to address this challenge.

The keynote speaker, Kelly Coash-Johnson, executive director of the American Association of School Personnel Administrators, said there are multiple reasons for the crisis: a declining interest in the profession, declining enrollment in teacher training programs and low teacher retention rate coupled with high turnover. She said the good news for Pennsylvania is that teacher salaries in this state are among the highest in the nation.

The summit addressed the larger question of what changes in current structures and policies should be put in place to alleviate the teacher shortage in central Pennsylvania. Among these are three legislative proposals that are

currently under consideration to address critical issues in the teacher shortage, namely:

- Making permanent the basic skills testing moratorium. That testing serves as an unnecessary barrier to entry for prospective teachers. Other states such as Ohio and Michigan have dropped similar requirements.

- Creating state reciprocity agreements that would allow the commonwealth to recognize teaching credentials from other states. Currently, Pennsylvania requires additional coursework and assessments for certified out-of-state teachers who move here.

- Providing teacher service loan forgiveness as an important incentive to prospective teachers.

There is good news: The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 provides \$170 billion for schools, of which \$122 billion will go to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. It will help to stabilize and diversify the educator workforce and rebuild the educator pipeline. This act includes provisions that help ensure that federal funds are used in addition to — and not in place of — state and local education funding.

As Coash-Johnson said at the summit, we need to shift our thinking. We need to move from just creating career pathways to reducing the barriers to careers in education. We must move from providing educators with more resources to designing comprehensive human capital

management systems. She suggested a move from increasing teacher salaries to establishing transparent and equitable total rewards systems. We must move from supporting employee wellness to strengthening educators' sense of purpose, belonging and connection. And we also need to shift from just promoting the profession to delivering exceptional employment experiences.

The summit discussions came up with ideas that we can use to move forward. Among these: creating an advocacy campaign to support the teaching profession and highlighting both new and experienced teachers and their extraordinary work impacting young people. We must invest in innovative models to attract and prepare diverse teacher candidates, including youth, paraprofessionals and other community members. Supporting early career retention models such as induction (the provision of professional support services to newly employed teachers), mentoring, affinity groups, career ladders, targeted professional development, cohort models and financial incentives will go a long way to help address this crisis.

In 1855, the founders of our institution were committed to developing a solution for preparing a new workforce of teachers. By the late 1920s, the institution became a comprehensive teacher's college. By the early 1960s, the college had grown into a multifaceted state college

with graduate degrees in various areas of advanced teacher preparation. The evolution in purpose and programming continued through the 1980s as the university grew and diversified its curriculum.

While we have added many programs over the years, our teacher preparation programs remain an important cornerstone of our university. And we continue to evolve as needs have changed. In recent years, we added new Master of Education programs and a doctorate in education in educational leadership. Our certification offerings and summer institutes have supported new and advanced teachers with cutting-edge content and pedagogy.

Similar to what our founders did, in response to the teacher shortage crisis, we are developing strategies to address the challenge. Among our efforts is a new program for emergency certification of professionals seeking an accelerated path to earn their initial teacher license.

Millersville has been part of the dialogue in K-12 education and how to meet the needs of our region and the commonwealth. There are no easy solutions to issues as complex and multifaceted as the shortage of teachers. It will take K-12, school boards, our legislatures and our communities to work together to meet the challenges. Millersville University is ready and able to be a partner in developing the ideas and strategies to meet the needs of our communities.