

Addressing Virginia's Teacher "Shortage"

Lately, the conversation is unavoidable and laced with words such as crisis, alarm, and critical shortage. A sense of urgency exists for good reason as Virginia experiences significant difficulty ensuring K-12 students are taught by fully qualified teachers, in every classroom, in every community.

We are a country that prides itself on educating every child, affirming that a free and appropriate public education is a right and not a privilege. While the United States justly educates all children, regardless of ability and income, we now find that we cannot educate all children with fidelity because we cannot place qualified educators in all classrooms. Educators and education have been neglected (and maligned) to the point that teaching has become an unattractive career choice. The pipeline and supply of K-12 teachers have been starved. This is, indeed, a situation that calls for alarm.

Statistics surrounding teacher employment are startling. The Wall Street Journal reports that in 2018 teachers left education at the highest rate on record. In 2017, the number of unfilled teaching positions in Virginia's public schools was 40% higher than 10 years earlier, hovering around 1,000, according to the Virginia Department of Education. Turnover rates are as high as 30% in some Virginia divisions. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult to attract teachers to the profession. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has dropped significantly in the last ten years. Concerns also exist around diversity as the approximately 80% white educator population serves Virginia's majority-minority student population.

While vacancies exist across the Commonwealth, they are not evenly distributed. In Virginia, high-poverty, high-minority, and low achieving schools have a disproportionate number of teaching vacancies. Underqualified and inexperienced teachers are more prevalent in special education, English as a second language, math, and science classrooms. The Learning Policy Institute reports that teachers with inadequate training are two to three times more likely to leave the profession than their adequately prepared colleagues. These statistics perpetuate the cycle of instructional instability across Virginia, placing our most vulnerable learners in classrooms with our most vulnerable teachers.

In the conversation, compensation statistics cannot be ignored. Virginia is the 12th wealthiest state in the U.S. but ranks 32nd in teacher pay, according to the Virginia Education Association. The Education Law Center ranked Virginia 49th (of 51) in U.S. teacher pay competitiveness in 2015.

A lack of support for new teachers, challenging working conditions, inadequate compensation in relation to required college degrees, and better career opportunities are reported as key reasons for leaving the profession. Each of these challenges reflects an absence of necessary resources. With an interesting perspective, Peter Greene notes in Forbes magazine (September

2019) that the term “teacher shortage” is a misdiagnosis of the problem. Greene asserts that there is no shortage of people who have the ability to teach. Instead, there is a shortage of people willing to teach under the conditions that currently exist in education.

It is time to create conditions that equip Virginia’s classrooms with highly qualified educators. It is time to fund the resources necessary to provide quality instruction for all children. Attracting and retaining people with the heart and skills for teaching requires a serious look at teacher preparation and support, working conditions, and compensation. The Virginia Public Education Coalition (VPEC) calls on Virginia to invest in K-12 learning environments.

VPEC* is a group of twelve education-invested professional organizations. Since the mid-1990’s VPEC has provided a unified voice in advocating for and improving public K-12 education in Virginia. The Coalition strives to ensure that policy and funding structures are in place to promote best practices for K-12 education across the Commonwealth.

At VPEC, we believe that resources today do not align with the expectations placed on public education. We believe that dedicating sufficient resources to public education must be a priority. We believe that today’s economic realities and the need for all students to be prepared for tomorrow’s educational and workforce demands challenge Virginia to reconsider its investment in public education. We believe this can be accomplished, in part, by supporting those who dedicate their careers to students.

VPEC’s recent *Strategies to Address Virginia’s Teacher Shortage* document serves as guidance for Virginia’s citizens, including voters and those who have been voted into office. VPEC offers a multi-pronged approach for attracting qualified teachers to Virginia’s classrooms, improving teacher induction, and ensuring teacher retention. The plan focuses on three key aspects of public education: teacher compensation, preparation and support, and working conditions. The proposed strategies will promote the sustainable conditions missing in Virginia’s schools.

How can the disastrous decline of high potential teachers be interrupted? Talk to policymakers about your expectations for public education in Virginia. Many candidates in Virginia’s recent elections included a commitment to education in their campaigns. Let decision makers, both those who make policy and those who fund it, know that the education of Virginia’s children is a non-negotiable priority. We believe that citizens, elected state representatives, and education organizations across Virginia should openly talk to each other about their goals for Virginia’s students and the role well-educated students play in the economic advancement of the Commonwealth. VPEC organizations are unified in calling upon Virginia’s leaders to dedicate resources that create sustainable conditions in education. We ask you to join the discussion, as well.

* VPEC member organizations include Virginia Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals, Virginia Association of School Superintendents, Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals, Virginia Association for

Supervision and Curriculum Development, Virginia Congress of Parents and Teachers, Virginia Counselors Association, Virginia Education Association, Virginia Middle School Association, Virginia School Boards Association, Virginia School Counselor Association, and Virginia Professors of Educational Leadership.

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