A CALL TO ACTION

EDUCATION at a BREAKING POINT

Ringing the Alarm on the Historic Staffing Crisis Within Oregon’s Public Schools
Headlines across the state have been raising the alarm that during the first full school year back from remote learning, Oregon’s K-12 public schools are in an historic staffing crisis.

The impact of this crisis is far ranging. Student needs are not being met. At least one school has had to revert to temporary remote learning. In far too many districts, staff are keeping schools functioning through long working hours and sheer will. Schools are operating under a common goal to stay open at all costs. But this is not sustainable. Educators from school districts large and small, in every part of the state report that lack of adequate staffing is limiting their ability to connect and care for students’ needs and is pushing educators to the breaking point. The Oregon Education Association compiled surveys done in multiple districts and the results should ring alarm bells for district leadership and state policy makers.

A common thread runs through the surveys. Most educators say it is impossible to get their work done during the day no matter how hard they work, that they have more stress on the job than ever before and a significant number of educators say they are seriously considering leaving the profession altogether.

After 18 months of distance learning, Oregon educators are doing everything they can to make this school year a success for their students and keep schools open, which is a goal we all share. In fact, it’s essential for our student’s academic futures and for our communities. But extreme staffing shortages are taking a toll and have created an untenable and unsustainable situation that will not only have implications for this school year but for the future.

The 2021-2022 school year could be a turning point or a breaking point for Oregon. If district and state leaders rise to the occasion and invest in getting desperately needed additional resources in the classroom and take steps to reduce unnecessary workloads, students will have the academic, behavioral, and emotional support they need for the long-term and a massive loss of trained educators can be avoided. If not, things are only going to get worse.
How We Got Here

Oregon K-12 schools entered the pandemic short-staffed and under-prepared.

Coming out of the pandemic, school districts started the 2021-2022 year with significant vacancies. Portland started with 180 unfilled positions and as the delta variant swept across the state, things just got worse.

Oregon’s school staffing problems aren’t new.

- Due to low staffing ratios, Oregon still has some of the largest classrooms in the country, even after an historic investment in education in 2019. Oregon teachers earn 22% less in salary than they would in the private sector, and according to the most recent Oregon Department of Education Statewide Report Card, teacher salaries have remained flat for more than a decade adjusted for inflation, making recruitment even more difficult.

- Large class sizes, a lack of classroom supports, and overall fewer school resources has meant weekly or even daily events where students with high needs disrupted learning.

- Oregon’s chronic school nurse shortage remains critical. By 2020, after years of task forces and study, Oregon was supposed to have met a goal of 1 nurse for every 750 students. We aren’t even close. The nurse staffing ratio is 6 times that - 1 nurse for every 4,572 students.

- Oregon has had a special education teacher shortage for 25 years. The average turnover for this essential workforce is 46% higher than other teachers, and this is a student population that lost important facetime with educators during the pandemic.

- The National Association of School Psychologists recommends the ratio of school psychologists to students should be one psychologist per 500 students. In Salem-Keizer school district, the ratio is about 1 psychologist to 3,500 students, and most school districts fall far short of the ratio.

- Looming retirement shortages - 25% of the K-12 workforce is already eligible to retire. If they decided to leave tomorrow, the crisis would be unimaginable.

“Special education is a direct service. When our classrooms are not fully staffed due to teacher illness, mental health, or a need to care for their own children who have become symptomatic or are required to quarantine due to COVID-19; children who have great needs are left without full supports and thus impacts their success in school.”

Mercedes Muñoz, High School Special Education Teacher, Portland
Pandemic brought drastically increased need with fewer resources.

- Understaffed schools are faced with students who need more support than ever. As the global pandemic swept through our communities, it affected every part of a student’s life. Oregon’s students need increased academic, emotional and social supports that educators are striving to meet but it’s simply impossible with the current staffing crisis.

- Academically, Oregon 9th graders lost ground towards graduation, especially Latino, Indigenous and Pacific Islander students and to those learning English as a second language, and the Oregon Department of Education believes those disparities hit all grade levels.

- Students returned to the classroom with wildly different experiences through the pandemic. Some parents and caregivers were able to work at home, losing no income during the shut down. They were able to be there during remote learning, some were able to hire tutors or create pandemic learning bubbles. Other parents lost their jobs or were essential workers, coming home every day carrying the stress of the pandemic. Some older students were able to stay on a college track while others took jobs to supplement lost family income or filled in as child care providers. And while Oregon’s covid loss-of-life was lower than most states, infection and death rates were higher for people of color.

- Two years of lost classroom time and interaction with fellow students means serving students in crowded classrooms is even more difficult and stressful as students missed out on critical social and emotional development opportunities.

Disrupted learning issues have skyrocketed from already high levels.

- Students came back to the classroom this year with increased needs after 18 months of remote learning, social isolation, and familial pandemic stressors. Unfortunately, there aren’t enough adults in the classrooms to help meet their needs and help them succeed, resulting in disrupted learning, unnecessary setbacks and a very tense school environment.

- Reynolds Middle School recently shut down for 3 weeks due to student misbehavior and fights

- School psychologists say students are facing a mental health crisis that is affecting them and their fellow students.
Special education students are losing services.

- A dire shortage of special education educators is starting to lead to reduced classes and educational opportunities that are harming students and potentially violating federal law.

Other staffing gaps grew.

- **Substitute teachers.** At a time when substitute teachers are more important than ever to cover educators quarantined after covid exposure or on stress leave, the pool of available substitute teachers has plummeted from more than 8,000 to about half that. Lack of coverage has meant that full-time teachers and staff throughout the system become emergency substitute teachers, covering classes during their normal prep time for their own students, leaving them behind and scrambling. Students entered the classroom after more than a year of remote learning with higher needs, academically and socially. Often students who were already struggling had setbacks during the long time away from the classroom and the canyon-sized economic and racial disparities took a toll.

- **Bus drivers.** Across the state routes have been cut, sometimes with just a few hours or less notice to parents, because of the extreme staffing shortage in the state, leaving working families struggling to get their kids to school on time.

- Protocols to continue to keep everyone safe during COVID take extra time, planning and staffing.

  - In every school district, educators are responsible for teaching and implementing new safety protocols for their students which, while essential for keeping schools open, take extra time away from academics. Everything from proper mask usage to new seating charts to how to safely eat lunch.

  - There is a critical shortage of support for contract tracing in our schools, which means current school staff get pulled off the job whenever there is a covid case.

In spite of increased demands and staffing shortages, requirements have remained unchanged.

- The state needs to add flexibility to the in-seat minutes requirements for the 2021-22 school year that allows more time for family engagement and more flexibility for educator collaboration, professional learning, and planning to support school climate and student mental and behavioral health. In the longer term, flexibility for these requirements will allow more time for physical play, more time to eat meals, and more opportunities to meet students’ social and emotional learning needs.

- Schools should pause implementing new programs this school year. Starting new programs and ensuring their success takes significant time and focus. This is time educators should spend, right now, on connecting with students and focusing on building strong, supportive relationships and communities.

- Schools should suspend unnecessary district testing mandates. These tests take away from instructional time. Instead, districts should focus on using formative style assessments in the classroom that assess where students are academically and what supports they need from their educators.
"Acting out could be a lot of different things, from just sort of goofing off in class and making it a disruptive environment for the learning of others, or it could be more physical aggression. In some of the more extreme cases, we have students who are being physical towards staff: biting, kicking, scratching, and engaging in unsafe behaviors like fleeing from the campus."

Karyl Strouse, Bilingual school psychologist, Salem-Keizer

"We started off this school year with dozens and dozens of unfilled classroom positions. We’re using every available licensed staff person, like literacy specialists, behavior specialists, counselors, and instructional mentors to supplement our daily substitute needs. We have had a shortage for years, but the pandemic has exacerbated it considerably. If one of our staff gets sick or has to quarantine or use any kind of leave, we’re scrambling to find someone to take that class. At the elementary level, the worst-case scenario is that classes have to be divided up into several other classrooms for the day, which creates a lot of disruption for both the students and teachers.

Everybody is just doing the best that they can, but it’s not an ideal situation in so many ways. We’re exhausted. We’re afraid that this unsustainable workload is going to make us sick and add to the substitute shortage."

Tyler Scialo-Lakeberg and Maraline Ellis, Salem-Keizer EA President and Vice President

"Because of all of the tracking that we as school nurses have to do for COVID, I can’t do my regular job. I’m all-consuming with following up on reported cases and trying to notify students and families. I’m not able to do the follow-up with students and families about documentation I need to provide medical care. I don’t have time to send teacher notifications. I sometimes feel like my license is vulnerable because I don’t have the bandwidth to meet every obligation that I have to my students as a school nurse. It’s not a good feeling. I know I’m responsible for these kids, but COVID has become a full-time job. I don’t even know how many hours a week I work anymore. I work weekends and nights because I am constantly interrupted at work, and I can’t keep doing this. It’s exhausting. There are already so few school nurses; our schools can’t afford to lose any more to burnout."

Terrie Johnson, Multnomah ESD School Nurse
"During the summer, our transportation staff had a lot of hope that this school year was going to be a bit smoother compared to last year. We started the year off with 18 drivers, and but we’re down to half that number now.

We’ve already planned to eliminate two bus routes and absorb those kids into three different routes. That’s going to put a lot more demand on the driver. School bus drivers are representing our district in the community, and we have a responsibility to stay focused on the road. When you increase the number of kids on the bus, that becomes a lot harder. What we do takes skill. Replacing the years of experience and knowledge is not going to be an easy task."

Mike McQueen, Brookings-Harbor EA Treasurer and Bus Driver

Addressing the crisis will take action and working together.

Oregon Education Association members are taking the lead in a call to action for districts and the state and we stand ready to work on solving this crisis. We cannot continue a situation where students start each day not knowing if the bus will come, if there will be enough adults in their classrooms, if their teacher will get pulled in as an emergency substitute for a different class or if their lunch will be served. We must work now to reduce the chaos for our students and for K-12 staff. Some innovative moves have already been made:

- In October, for the first time ever, the state waived the bachelor’s degree requirement to get licensed as a substitute. While not ideal, such an action recognizes the extreme state of emergency we are in and that the current situation is not sustainable.
- Many school districts across the state have increased wages for bus drivers and paraprofessionals.
SOLUTIONS TO THE CRISIS

Principles:

The Oregon Education Association believes that any solutions to the current crisis must meet the following principles:

- Schools should remain open
- All students must be safe in the classroom and receive the academic, emotional, and social support they need.
- Educators must have time and capacity to serve their students and not be distracted by unnecessary time away from the classroom whether that’s meetings or the implementation of new programs.
- State and local leaders must come together and treat this like the emergency that it is.

Solutions:

We must prioritize the work for this 2021-22 school year by adding time, supporting students, and treating the situation like the staffing emergency that it is.

Add time:

While there are many programs that add value to students and the school setting, they are not essential to the basic supports students need and are creating additional stresses on a workforce and school system that is in crisis. There are a number of ways that school districts can approach providing more time for educators to be able to handle the increased workload and stress of the 2021-22 school year. More time preparing and planning for classes and instruction will require districts to clear away some of the current demands on educators’ time.

- Pause implementation of new programs so educators can focus on current work.
- Providing more flexibility on professional development requirements so that time can be used on current workload management and supporting students.
- Temporarily suspend time intensive evaluations for administrators and educators.
Suspend standardized summative assessments so students can focus on current learning goals
Create more flexibility to allow for longer lunch, recess, and other non-classroom time
Limit staff meetings and other non-essential group meetings
Bring in additional staff for programs for students who are the furthest behind and need the most support

Support Students through this unique school year:

Prioritizing the mental and behavioral health of our students is a critical need. Students are returning to the classroom with large amounts of trauma and behavioral problems that must be addressed to keep our schools safe.

- Increase unlicensed administrative staff assigned to support lunch and recess.
- Increase school mental health services through additional counselors, social workers, and other behavioral specialists.
- Reduce barriers to increased payments for part-time classified employees to provide additional students supports and monitoring
- Intensive outreach to increase parent and community volunteer hours to support teachers.

Emergency Staff Recruitment and Improved Retention:

Given the massive shortages around the state, school districts need to prioritize retention of staff and increasing the number of education professionals in all settings.

- Increase in wages and benefits at all levels especially in our substitute and transportation pools
- Bonus retention pay for educators who stay through the year
- Student debt relief for educators who remain in districts
- Reducing barriers for license educator license transfers from other states
- Probationary licenses for long-term education assistants and community college part-time faculty
- Speeding up background checks
- Compensation for training for all students and employees entering the profession
- Centralized job posting site for jobs throughout the state
- Financial and benefit incentives for retired school employees to return
- Signing bonuses for new employees

"My sixth graders haven’t been through a normal school year since third grade, so we can’t necessarily just dive right back into teaching content. Most of them haven’t been on a regular sleep schedule for almost two years, so they’re tired much more easily. They’re distracted much more easily. We’re spending a lot of time resetting expectations for what classroom behavior looks like and it can be really stressful and disruptive, both for students and educators.

We were experiencing a high level of educator turnover even before COVID, but it certainly hasn’t helped. Our teachers are burnt out. Educators are retiring before they normally would have planned to because this job has become so difficult. We already have a hard enough time recruiting people to come to work in our district because the wages are low and there is a lack of affordable housing in our area. People can’t afford to live and work here. There are lots of open jobs right now, but we can’t fill them."

Nick Courtnage, Brookings-Harbor EA President and Music Teacher