



Testimony to the House Education Committee - Wednesday, January 18, 2023

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Topic: Critical School Staff Workforce Shortages

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to your committee on the current status of workforce shortages in public education. There are significant workforce needs across all sectors in Vermont. While the education sector is not unique in need, it is unique as a foundational block for all other industry workforces. Ensuring fully staffed and high-quality public schools is a vital strategy for the social and economic growth of Vermont as a whole. As mentioned in VSA testimony on January 17, 2023, workforce development is one of three key focus areas for the Association this biennium (along with mental health and facilities).

First, we would like to call your attention to a collaborative brief by VSBA, VSA, and VPA submitted to the Senate Education Committee and House Education Committee leadership on March 3, 2022 titled, "[Concepts for Strengthening and Supporting the Educator Workforce in Vermont](#)." The brief, though framed to address how ESSER funds might be utilized to address workforce challenges, still provides relevant recommendations and shares promising strategies from other states to be considered by state lawmakers, state and local education agencies, and higher education leaders. You will notice that some of these suggestions were acted upon in the last biennium – thank you for your support.

We will reiterate a few of the concepts from the brief in this testimony, as well as provide recent data, examples, and anecdotes from superintendents.

Exploring the Problem

In July of 2022, VSA conducted an informal data collection of educator and staff vacancies and hosted an all-member virtual meeting to discuss the data and status of

workforce shortages in Vermont. That point-in-time data, while limited in scope and precision, provides some insight to the problem. A total of 50 of 54 systems responded. Some larger systems did not complete the survey. In addition, because the survey was informal and relatively hastily administered, it was noted, after the fact, that some specific categories were absent from the data collection, including driver education, music and art teachers, and bus drivers. In that collection, superintendents indicated 1,226 vacancies at that time. Instructional assistants made up the largest category of vacancies with 266 unfilled positions.

The data did not capture the number of educators on emergency or provisional licenses. One superintendent said, "It would be interesting to note how many emergency or provisional licensed positions we have too. We have recently filled several positions with unlicensed individuals who will require emergency or provisional licenses (including our two principal hires). We see this as another important data point in that the positions are being filled by (potentially) underqualified individuals. What will this mean for us going forward?"

A superintendent, for the purpose of this testimony, shared the results of studying qualifications of educators over time in the school district they serve. In the 2019/2020 school year, 87% of teachers in that system were working with the appropriate educator licensure. That number is 70% for the current school year. Similar statewide data might be useful in understanding whether this is a statewide trend – we suspect that it is.

Another superintendent, when asked to share recent experiences for the purpose of this testimony said, "We have 20% of our teaching staff on emergency or provisional licenses. I am in the process of meeting with 28 different teachers who are struggling to meet requirements to gain licensure. We are in the process of requesting waivers from the Licensing Board for several of these positions as a number of our staff on these licenses cannot pass the Praxis Exam despite graduating from the local teacher prep programs. However, we do not have applicants to replace these teachers with."

Other key observations from the July 2022 survey and meeting included:

- There are increasing difficulties in obtaining short-term substitutes even with rapidly increasing wages. In some cases, wages have begun to outpace the hourly rates for other full time positions in the district causing additional challenges.
- There is concern about the relative quality of hires compared to previous years.

- There is concern about the impact of national political pressures, lack of respect for the profession, as well as increasing demands on educators on retention and wellbeing.
- Housing, childcare costs, and rising cost of living are significant barriers to hiring.
- There are concerns about the sustainability of positions that are funded with ESSER dollars. Many of those positions are to support student wellbeing and mental health, such as social and emotional learning coordinators and coaches.
- Two superintendents from smaller, more rural school districts highlighted declining enrollment, small class sizes, and a need to reexamine the education delivery system.

Workforce shortages and turnover are prevalent in administrative positions as well. In the transition between FY22 to FY23, there were 18 superintendent transitions, 12 of which were entirely new to the position.

Turnover of educators and administrators has a significant impact on student learning and overall school district climate. It is imperative that we tackle the challenges together.

Highlighting Promising Practices and Helpful Temporary Solutions

There are a number of promising practices in workforce development across the state that are worth examining. Providing the resources to scale successful pilot programs and promising practices is a potential way in which the General Assembly might be able to help address the problem.

- Some superintendents and special education administrators are turning the shortage of instructional assistants and special educators into an opportunity to examine how their systems support struggling students and have used it as an opportunity to better align with the best practices in inclusive education and tiered supports highlighted in Act 173. While a silver lining, it is important to understand that this approach requires careful consideration by skilled administrators of state and federal requirements in the provision of special education services.
- The Vermont NEA has established Grow-VT Ed, through State support, to support individuals on provisional or emergency licenses who are going through the [alternative route to licensure process](#).
- Modeling the Vermont NEA program, at least one district has hired a "licensing navigator" to help coach teachers with emergency and provisional licenses to complete the alternative route to licensure process.
- A number of districts have utilized virtual services/teachers (special education, speech and language pathology, as well as proctored classrooms where a

teacher zooms in from another school). There are some expressed concerns about the quality of some of these services, but the strategy has been useful in addressing acute crises.

- Other programs, such as Champlain College’s Teacher Apprenticeship Program (TAP), provide a path to licensure in as little as eight months; however, these programs often present significant financial and logistical barriers to access. Partnerships between higher education and LEAs should focus on supporting individuals interested in transitioning to the teaching profession by allowing them to still earn an income while pursuing licensure. For example, [Delaware’s Masters Plus Certification Program](#) allows individuals with Bachelor’s degrees to earn teacher certification in Delaware while working as a paraprofessional full-time in year one and a teacher full-time in year two.
- School districts are paying significant attention to teacher retention and wellbeing. Further testimony from superintendents on this subject can be provided at a later date.

Potential Avenues of Action for the General Assembly

Addressing the educator workforce crisis will take a collaborative effort from the General Assembly, state-level stakeholders, district leaders, and community members. Below are some potential areas to consider in addition to those provided in “[Concepts for Strengthening and Supporting the Educator Workforce in Vermont](#).”

- Gather some additional information from key stakeholders, such as:
 - ◆ Additional statewide data related to provisional licenses and other key information, likely from the Agency of Education.
 - ◆ [The Vermont Rural Education Collaborative](#), led by retired superintendent John Castle, has developed a proposal to pilot a **Grow Your Own** professional development program in the Northeast Kingdom.
 - ◆ Explore retention and educator wellbeing efforts around the state.
 - ◆ Request an update from the [Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators](#) on what challenges they are seeing and problems they are currently addressing. Insights into who they are granting waivers for most frequently may illuminate some potential needs for revisions to requirements.
 - ◆ Learn how state higher education programs are supporting and/or contributing to workforce shortages.
- Consider technical solutions to licensing barriers. The licensing process needs greater flexibility and accessibility to create opportunities for more people to attain licensure and/or additional endorsements, while maintaining a

well-prepared and high-quality workforce. Innovative solutions in this area could include, but are not limited to: leeway for career-changers and emergency use of educator license, reducing cost barriers, multilingual access, and increased ease for state reciprocity. As a state, we should be asking ourselves, what skills and competencies do we value in our educators? Do our current licensing standards align with these values?

- Include a concerted emphasis of supporting a diverse and inclusive workforce in any actions that you take.
 - ◆ Utilize the results of the [Diversifying Educator Workforce](#) report to support the suggestions outlined for recruitment and retention efforts.
 - ◆ Invite professional groups from around the state such as the Vermont Educators of Color Association (Resource: [Sustaining Educators of Color](#)).
- Invest state resources into Grow Your Own Programs, Loan Forgiveness, and CTE Programs for Aspiring Educators (described in [Concepts for Strengthening and Supporting the Educator Workforce in Vermont](#)).
- Carefully consider new initiatives that place new burdens on educators.
- Use your platforms to celebrate the amazing work of educators.

Thank you again for taking the time to learn more about this important topic. VSA looks forward to ongoing conversations to collaborate towards a sustainable future for the Vermont educator workforce.