

To Florida's Commissioner of Education Manny Diaz, Jr.

In the media, it is common to hear teaching referred to as a calling. Something intrinsic in the minds of those interested in the profession makes them capable and compassionate. My mom, many years ago, would tell you this is true. I would have to. I remember the day my mom learned she had been accepted to teach at a school. The way she ran through the house mimicked the gleeful sounds of her soon-to-be students playing at recess. But as the years turned into a decade and the excitement of what could be turned into the reality of what is, the calling my mom heard faded. What replaced it was anxiety; and unfortunately, it is not just her. At the end of each year, her school says goodbye to countless educators. Some who have just joined and whose hopes to change the minds of youth were quickly dismantled; but even more shocking were the resignations of veteran teachers. Ones that were consistently sought after. Whose experiences were marked by plaques labeling them "teacher of the year." Some go to other schools but many seem to leave the profession altogether.

This is a trend plaguing America. One survey sent out in late January 2022 found that 67% of educators see burnout as a very serious issue, and another 90% claimed it to be a serious or somewhat serious issue (GBAO). Through research, first-hand experience in the classroom as a student, and witnessing my mom's experience, I can see three definitive reasons adding to the educator shortage and general dissatisfaction within the community.

1. Educators Are Overworked

A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education found that while full-time public school teachers are required to work 38.4 hours, the average teacher spends 52 hours (Will). At my mom's school in particular sessions start at 8 am and release at 3:30 pm. However, these times do not mark when educators start and stop working. Many come in

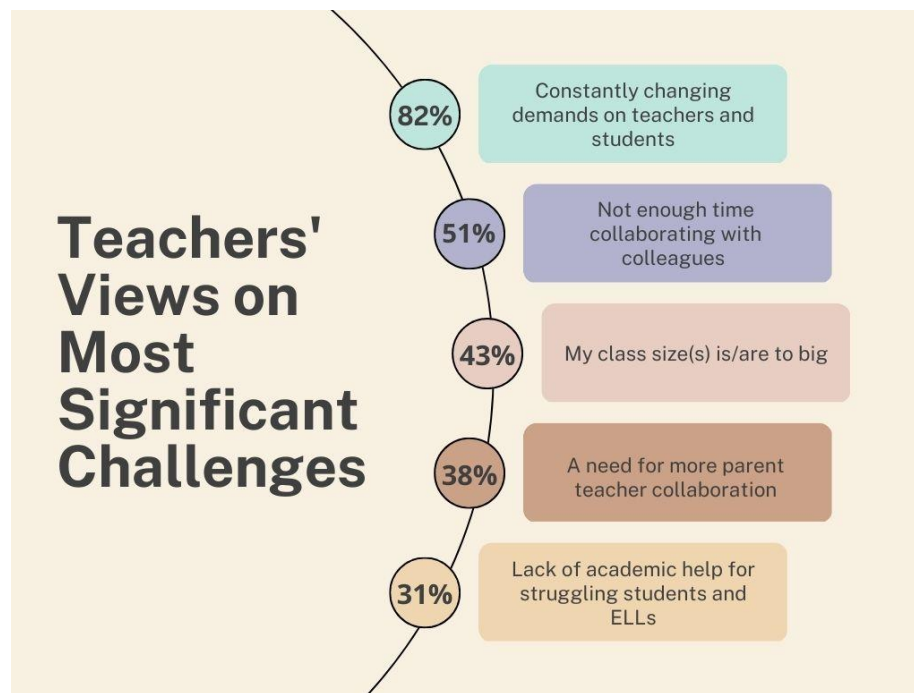
early to prepare for the day's activities and then go home to grade papers, make lesson plans, etc. From viewing my mom's experience I know many of these hours are also spent on weekends.

2. Educators Are Understaffed.

At the very beginning of my moms' professional career, she introduced herself to different schools by working as a teacher associate - someone who works with teachers and aids them in classroom activities. Later, when she began to teach she had an associate in her classroom, but due to shortages, many associates began to be pulled from classroom to classroom. Currently, the remaining associates have begun to substitute rather than assist. Yet, without their extra support, teachers are forced to take on a larger role adding to an intensive workload. Over 50% of public schools reported feeling understaffed entering the 2022-23 school year.

3. Educators Are Underpaid

One study reports that teachers make 21.4% less than comparable college graduates. This wage penalty gap has grown 7.3 percent since 1979 (Allegretto) despite the rise of economic inflation. An article posted to Education Week analyzed the average salary of a teacher in a certain country compared to that respective country's per capita gross domestic. They concluded that the "United States was among the 93 percent of countries in which educators make less than the local per capita GDP" (Heubeck). This divide between pay and cost has resulted in many teachers sourcing out a second income. In my mom's case, she attempts to make extra money working after school hours as an aftercare counselor. Often, however, my mom mentions that soon another source of income will be necessary. This is true for most teachers as 83% report currently or previously working multiple jobs (Sherratt).



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Other challenges teachers face on a daily bases

Teachers being overworked, understaffed, and underpaid are only some of the more widely researched challenges of being in the field. Statistics can not provide an accurate depiction of the mental health of these workers. The compounding effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of safety concerns, and the ever-changing demands of school curriculums can only result in a build-up of anxiety. This is not even taking into concern the role of teachers to act as social and emotional guides for their students. Working with children is no easy feat. It requires patience and empathy. There are nights when my mom takes home the burdens that a school day results in. Each student is someone new whose life she cares about. Who she wants to see succeed. Becoming a teacher means experiencing your students' triumphs and their defeats along with them. However, it is not enough to care, just as it is not enough to feel a calling. Only 12% of teachers say they're "very satisfied" with

their jobs, a 27% decrease since 2012 (Will). As teachers' happiness continues to decline so will the ability to ignore the grievances they face

What Can You Do

While there are two obvious solutions to these issues, increase pay and increase funding for schools to seek out new staff, the reality is that these are hard to enact. Especially because in the state of Florida, issues such as pay are controlled at a district-to-district level rather than statewide. However, there are still solutions that can be implemented and urged by the Florida government.

1. Offer teachers the opportunity to be part of the discussion. Their voices are the most important in this crisis and they are the ones that can most effectively describe the struggles and possible remedies that come with teaching. Julie Belanger an education analyst at Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development stated that "Those who get to participate and collaborate have a higher feeling of value." A survey she conducted showed that teachers who are included in decisions feel more valued and have higher levels of job satisfaction (Barshay).
2. Create resources and communities for teachers to reflect on their mental health. By encouraging open conversation on how the staff is feeling as well as providing resources for them if they are struggling, morale will increase as teachers feel respected and valued.
3. Set a pay standard. I think it is important that there be a basic level of financial security allotted to teachers. While the issue of pay can remain a

district decision, the state government should ensure that teachers' wages are fair in comparison to the economy.

These requests are not small and they are not ones that can be implemented overnight. However, if the teaching crisis is to ever end, they are necessary. Change is needed and no one is in a better position to set a precedent than the Florida government.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Maxine Martinez

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