Opinion: Oregon is experiencing an education workforce crisis

Published: Dec. 12, 2021, 6:00 a.m.
Oregonian

In another school year of unprecedented challenges, Oregon’s educators are doing everything we possibly can to make this school year successful, supportive, and safe for our students. But the workforce crisis, a decade in the making, has finally reached a tipping point. As the gap widens between the needs of our students and the staffing available to meet those needs, the impossible demands of educators compound to drive more people out of the profession, even mid-year. To keep our school doors open for our students, we need to stabilize our workforce.

We’re not just experiencing a workforce shortage, we’re experiencing a workforce crisis. And our students are the ones who are suffering the most.

Like all aspects of the pandemic, some schools and students have been hit even harder than others. The burnout and turnover rates for teachers and paraprofessionals working in special education is so high that some school districts throughout the state have switched special education instruction to online classes, have increased class sizes for special education teachers, or have cut classes altogether. In short, our staffing crisis has made it so difficult to provide an education for our students that some of our schools are violating federal civil rights laws.

Our understaffed schools are navigating one of the most significant challenges ever faced by America’s public education system. Our classrooms, already some of the largest in the nation, are filled with students who had radically different experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has created a spectrum of individualized needs for our students that is so broad, it is impossible for educators to provide each student with the support they need to thrive, given the shortage of teachers and support staff.

At the same time that educators are facing unprecedented challenges trying to meet the wide range of student academic needs, we are also witnessing an explosive growth in disrupted learning incidents in our schools. Students have experienced the trauma of the pandemic just like the rest of us, but a return to “normal”-- including large class sizes, a focus on testing, and inflexible school schedules-- denies students the time, space, and resources they need to process the trauma of the pandemic. The need for additional trained professionals like therapists, counselors, and social workers has grown exponentially.

Moreover, the already-too-few mental health professionals who work in our public schools are frequently not enough to support our students. Instead, many of them are being asked to act as substitutes in classrooms where there is not a teacher available. When the social and emotional needs of our students aren’t being met, they are likely to either disconnect from their learning, or act out in a way that disrupts the learning of their peers. We have seen an alarming increase in fighting, harassment, and other unsafe behaviors in our schools. These incidents have become so
prevalent that one district in our state shut down in-person instruction for several weeks, because the district no longer felt they could provide a safe learning environment for students.

The simple fact is educators are giving everything they’ve got to try and provide our students with the education they need and deserve this year. But at the end of the day the obstacles we’re being asked to overcome or—more often, to simply ignore—are too great. The “this is fine” mentality that state and district leaders continue to apply to Oregon’s public schools this year ignores the fact that many of our schools are in complete crisis—our students are experiencing the impact of that crisis every day.

Addressing this crisis isn’t going to be easy. As with other challenges we’ve faced throughout the pandemic, we’re going to have to work together, and we’re going to have to get creative. We cannot continue to operate under a system where students and parents start each day not knowing if the school bus is going to arrive, or if there will be a teacher in the classroom.

We all chose careers in education because we believe in students and in the promise of public education. We believe that a school must be more than a place—it can and should be a community where students are safe, nurtured, and supported. We owe it to our students to be honest about the crisis we are in, and find sustainable solutions that allow beloved educators to continue in this profession—throughout this year and for the long haul.

Elizabeth Thiel, President, Portland Association of Teachers
Jodi Ketchum, President, North Wasco County District #21 Education Association
Lindsay Jansen-Hostetler, President, Greater Albany Education Association
Mark Nevala, President, Klamath County Education Association
Adrienne Mitchell, President, Lane Community College Education Association
Sabrina Gordon, President, Eugene Education Association
Zachary Melzer, President, Parkrose Faculty Association
Sarah Andrews, Co-President, Northwest Education Association
Edward Nichols, President, South Coast Educational Council, North Bend Education Association
Joshua Kurtz, Certified Co-President, South Wasco Education Association
Jill Golay, President, Hillsboro Education Association
Alison Conner, President, Wy’East Education Association
Sarah Barclay, President, Bend Education Association
Peter Lohonyay, President, Lincoln County Education Association
Brenda Roland, President, Oregon City Education Association
Becky Crane, President, Coos Bay Education Association
Alison Stolfus, President, Silver Falls Education Association
Stephanie Myhre, President, David Douglas Education Association
Tim Hart, President, Sheridan Teachers Association
Cindy Dougharity-Spencer, President, John Day Education Association
Peri Swetzof, Co-president, Clackamas Education Service District Education Association
Benjamin Gorman, President, Central Education Association
Maureen Lundy, President, Klamath Falls Education Association
Juliet Safier, President, Vernonia Education Association
Rowena Poirier, President, East Multnomah County Uniserv
Wendy Burkhardt, President, High Desert Educational Association
Lisa Griffith, President, Reynolds Education Association
Natalie Wassom-Paul, President, Burns-Hines Education Association
Mónica Bergmann Perez, Vice President, High Desert Education Association
Edie Buchanan, President, Association of Salem-Keizer Education Support Professionals
Torrine Dowdy, Co-President, Gladstone Teachers Association
Serena Mullen, Co-President, Gladstone Teachers Association
Jonathan Gault, President, Springfield Education Association
Tammy Fisher, President, Hermiston Association of Teachers
Sara Schmitt, President, Beaverton Education Association
Amy Szelliga, President, Southern Oregon Education Service District
Andrea L. Rapp, Co-President, Clackamas ESD Education Association
Alicia Brown, President, Centennial Education Association
Mary Johnson, Co-President, Multnomah Educational Service District Education Association
Marla Rethwill, Co-President, South Wasco Education Association
Mikka Irusta, President, Hood River Education Association
Erika Ingraham, President, Woodburn Education Association
Sarah Cox, President, Culver Education Association
Melinda Ryan, President, North Clackamas Education Association
Amy Tregoning, President, Siuslaw Education Association
J. Robin Dumouchel, Co-president, Rainier Education Association
Sylvia Brock, Co-President, North Wasco School District 21