



Minnesota Schools at a Breaking Point: Pandemic Stories From Educators Across the State

Tawnya Heinsohn
Mara Borges-Gatewood
Michael Floersch
Rachel Erickson
Arial Elling
Karissa Ouren
Jeanette Delgado

Christina Meline
Jeanne Fox
Anne J. Hennessey
Katie Angel
Geneva Dorsey
Brooke M. Malek
Laura Loppnow

Tracy Laneis Ivy
Lesley Greene
Sierra L. Lindfors
Sarah J. Henning
Linda Azure-Big Day
Tom Gallaher
Andrea Lemon



Table of contents

What is EPIC?	1
EPIC Advisory Team	2
Introduction	5
<i>Table 1: Teacher Perspectives on Media Coverage of School-Related Issues</i>	7
Context of Study	10
<i>Figure 1: Educator Perceptions of Student Learning Rates</i>	11
Educator Attrition in Minnesota: A Growing Crisis	14
<i>Table 2: Teacher Job Satisfaction, a National Perspective</i>	14
<i>Table 3: Teacher Confidence in Career Choice, a National Perspective</i>	15
<i>Table 4: Minnesota Licensed Educators by Race and Ethnicity</i>	16
<i>Table 5: 2022 Public School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (Federal Definition)</i>	17
Data Collection	18
Methodology	20
<i>What is happening in Minnesota's schools? Why are educators leaving?</i>	21
Theme #1: Workloads are unmanageable	22
<i>Table 6: Minnesota Educators Identify Supports Needed to be Effective During the 2021-2022 Academic Year</i>	22
Theme #2: Educators lack a voice in decision making	28
<i>Table 7: MN Teachers Identify Desired Change in Educational Settings</i>	29
Theme #3: Student mental and social emotional health is at a crisis level	34
<i>Figure 2: Elements of Adolescent Mental Health</i>	35
<i>Table 8: Demographics at Higher Risk of Pandemic-Related Mental Health Challenges</i>	37
<i>Table 9: Compounding Factors Increasing the COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Crisis</i>	38
<i>Figure 3: Digital Divide by Racial Demographics</i>	39
<i>Table 10: Youth Mental Health Risk Factors during the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	40
<i>Table 11: Addressing Student Social Emotional Development During COVID-Related Transitions</i>	43
Theme #4: Educators are reporting extraordinarily high levels of concern related to their own physical and mental health	44
<i>Figure 4: Top Challenges Facing Minnesota Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	45

Theme #5: Education Support Professionals feel disrespected and exploited.....	48
<i>Table 12: Compensation Rates for Minnesota ESPs 2020-2021</i>	48
<i>Figure 5: ESP Average National Earnings 2011-2021, Adjusted for Inflation</i>	49
<i>Figure 6: Top Challenges Facing Minnesota’s ESPs during the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	50
Theme #6: Educators are exhausted by a lack of meaningful support and continuous toxic positivity.....	54
Theme #7: State and federal governments continue to fail special education students and the educators who serve them	57
Part II: Where do we go from here?.....	59
Policies that make a difference.....	63
<i>Figure 7: Integrating Social Emotional Development Learning throughout the School Day</i>	65
<i>Table 13: U.S. Department of Education Supports and Recommendations for Mental Health in Schools</i>	66
The Marshall Plan for Teaching (Linda Darling-Hammond).....	67
Endnotes.....	69
References.....	71

What is EPIC?

The Educator Policy Innovation Center, or EPIC, is the practitioner-driven think tank of Education Minnesota. EPIC brings together teams of experienced educators to provide research-proven solutions to the challenges facing Minnesota schools. Each EPIC team performs a comprehensive review of academic literature on a given issue and adds to our understanding by sharing classroom experiences. After discussing the academic literature and its real-world implications for students, the educators recommend policies to meet the challenge. The coupling of sound academic research with actual classroom experience means EPIC's policy recommendations are uniquely valuable because they combine the best from academia and real-world practical experience.

The EPIC research teams are open to all members of Education Minnesota because although practicing educators are the experts when it comes to education policy, the voice of the educator has often been absent in education policy discussions. Academics, politicians, and CEOs proclaim what is best for education, often with no grounding or experience in how their proposals affect real classrooms with actual students. As a result, our schools are hampered by disjointed, inefficient and at times harmful state and federal policies.

Educators see every day how these policies affect Minnesota's children. EPIC ensures policymakers will now have access simultaneously to the best academic research as well as to the thinking of front-line educators on the most pressing issues in education.

This report can be found online at

<https://educationminnesota.org/advocacy/epic/epic-reports>.

Email edissues@edmn.org for more information about this paper, the EPIC program, or to obtain permission to use images or large sections of this report.



EPIC Advisory Team

Tawnya Heinsohn is a school readiness teacher in Elk River Public Schools. She holds a B.S. in Elementary Education from the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. Tawnya also serves on the board of directors for the Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health. She contributes to early childhood education blog posts for PBS Media. Tawnya is also an expert igloo builder.

Mara Borges-Gatewood is an English language learner teacher for White Bear Lake Area Schools. Mara is a member of MinneTESOL, TN TESOL, and the Organization for Teachers in Brazil. She holds an Ed.D. in education, leadership and policy studies from the University of Memphis, M.A. degrees in English as a second language and reading from Fairleigh Dickinson University and Christian Brothers University, respectively, and a B.A. degree in elementary pedagogy from University Catholic of Brasilia. Mara's research was awarded first prize for student research at the University of Memphis, and she won a scholarship from Brazil Public Education System.

Michael Floersch is an AP statistics and tech math teacher for Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public Schools. He holds a B.A. in math from the University of St. Thomas, and an M.S. in educational leadership from the Minnesota State University, Mankato. He was a finalist for the Presidential Award of Excellence for Math and Science Teacher, has been awarded the Education Hero Award by the Minnesota Twins organization, and has been named Reader's Choice "Best Teacher" by the *Sun Current* newspaper. Mike has been a soccer coach for almost 30 years.

Rachel Erickson is a high school science teacher for New Prague Area Schools. She holds a B.A. in math and physics from Macalester College and an M.A. in teaching from Hamline University.

Ariel Elling is an early childhood special education teacher and early interventionist for Hutchinson Public Schools. She has an A.S. in early childhood education from Ridgewater College, a B.A. in special education from Western Governors University, and is currently pursuing an M.S. in special education with an emphasis in early childhood from Minnesota State University, Moorhead.

Karissa Ouren is a pre-kindergarten teacher for Columbia Heights Public Schools. She holds an M.Ed. in early childhood and early childhood special education from the University of Minnesota, and she is pursuing an education leadership specialist degree with principal licensure and special education director licensure through the University of St. Thomas. She was a nominee for Minnesota Teacher of the Year in 2020, 2021, and 2022, and is a dean's list and scholarship recipient at the University of St. Thomas. Karissa also supports ongoing teacher professional development in Haiti, helping host summer seminars for teacher leaders in a small rural village north of Port-au-Prince.

Christina Meline is a fifth-grade teacher for Mounds View Public Schools. She holds a B.S. in elementary education from the University of Northwestern and an M.A. in elementary education from Winona State University. In her spare time, Christina enjoys performing music in a band with an up-and-coming songwriter and performer based in Nashville, and she loves to share her joy with music with her students and community.

Jeanne Fox is a high school English learner education support professional for the Osseo Area School District. She holds a high school diploma and is certified as a highly-qualified education support professional. Jeanne is also the lead mentor for education support professionals in the Osseo Area School District.

Anne J. Hennessey is a third-grade teacher for St. Paul Public Schools. She holds an M.A. in education with an early childhood minor from Ashford University and a pre-K certificate from Metro State University.

Katie Angel is a preschool and early childhood and family education teacher for the Jordan Public School District. She holds a B.A. in fine arts/photography from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, an M.A. in education policy and leadership from American University and attained elementary licensure from Western Colorado University. Katie spent two years as a special education paraprofessional and is a part-time gymnastics coach in St. Louis Park.

Geneva Dorsey is a high school dean for the Minneapolis Public Schools. She holds a B.S. in health and human services from St. Mary's University. She has also studied public policy at the University of New Mexico, conflict resolution at William Mitchell, and community circle training with the Minneapolis Public Schools. Geneva is the chairwoman of Education Minnesota's Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee and the chairwoman of the Human Rights Award committee. She also volunteers with Moms Demand Action and sits on the board of the Close to Our Hearts Foundation.

Brooke M. Malek is a licensed school nurse for the Morris Area Schools. She holds an A.S.N. in nursing from Excelsior College, a B.S. in biology from the University of Minnesota, a B.S.N. in nursing from the College of St. Scholastica, and she is currently pursuing an M.S.N. in nursing education from Western Governor's University. In her free time, Brooke is also a fitness instructor.

Laura Loppnow is a third-grade teacher with South Washington County Schools. She holds a B.S. in elementary education from Concordia College, St. Paul, and an M.A. in education from Hamline University.


Tracy Laneis Ivy is a high school American Sign Language teacher for Minnetonka Public Schools. She holds a B.S. in education from the Rochester Institute of Technology, an M.S. in American Sign Language/secondary education from Rochester Institute of Technology, and she is currently pursuing an Ed.D. at Hamline University. Tracy is also active in statewide education policy forums.

Lesley Greene is an elementary autism spectrum disorder teacher for St. Paul Public Schools. She holds a B.A. in theater arts from Beloit College, an M.A. in teaching from National Louis University, and is licensed in elementary education, specific learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disorders, and autism spectrum disorders.

Sierra L. Lindfors is a teacher on special assignment in elementary curriculum and instruction for the Rochester Public Schools. She holds a B.S. in elementary education and an M.S. in educational leadership, both from Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she also trained as a specialist in educational leadership.

Sarah J. Henning is a K-5 music specialist for the Robbinsdale Area Schools. She holds a B.A. in music education from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and an M.S. in urban education from Metropolitan State University. She is currently pursuing an Ed.D. in education policy, organization, and leadership from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Linda Azure-Big Day is a school social worker with the Minneapolis Public Schools. She holds a B.S.W. from Brigham Young University and an M.S.W. from the University of Utah Graduate School of Social Work, and an M.A. of public health from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Linda is a member of the American Indian Parent Advisory Committee for the Minneapolis Public Schools. She has also presented at the International School Social Worker Conference in Stockholm, Sweden; Auckland, New Zealand; and Ulaanbataar, Mongolia.



Tom Gallaher is an eighth grade global studies teacher for the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public Schools. He holds a B.A. in history and secondary education from the University of St. Thomas and an M.A. in special education from St. Mary's University. Tom serves his local as a building worksite representative and is a baseball coach for Apple Valley High School.

Andrea Lemon is a care and treatment teacher for fifth-12th grade students and teaches math, language arts, and social studies in North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale Public Schools. She holds a B.A. in elementary and special education from Minnesota State, Moorhead and an M.A. in education and educational leadership from Concordia University, St. Paul. Andrea also owns and operates a sober living home for women in recovery and works as a certified peer recovery specialist. She is a certified practitioner of CRAFT-Community Reinforcement and Family Training and volunteers her time and facilitates support groups for Thrive! Family Recovery Resources.

Introduction

The academic years spanning from March 2020 until June 2022 will forever be some of the most difficult public school educators in Minnesota have ever faced. In particular, countless members of Education Minnesota have indicated that the 2021-22 academic year, the third year of schooling during a global pandemic, brought forth unforeseen obstacles coupled with even more divestment by state and federal governments. All of this created a perfect storm that only exacerbated the structural and financial problems that had long hindered the learning and working environments of students and educators. Minnesota's public school system was in distress long before COVID-19, but the pandemic further aggravated a system that is quickly reaching a breaking point.

We can now safely say that we are fighting two pandemics, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the pandemic of mental health crises facing U.S. adolescents and U.S. public school educators.

It is hard to fully account for the collective trauma educators and students faced in the last few years. In an interview with the National Education Policy Center, Dr. Elizabeth Dutton offered this apt description of the collective pain many are feeling:

Some children are mourning loved ones who have died of COVID-19 or are grappling with the fear that an ill family member may not get well. Many have seen one or both parents lose their jobs and felt the impact of compounded economic hardship. Further, we know that none of these impacts have been equally distributed. Communities of color are disproportionately taking the brunt of this pandemic in the US, for reasons embedded in centuries of systemic oppression. The pain and grief that students of color are carrying... is further magnified by the ongoing murders of Black people that are fueling crucial recent protests against police violence and amplified movements for anti-racism and systemic change. (National Education Policy Center, 2022, p. 2)

We can now safely say that we are fighting two pandemics, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the pandemic of mental health crises facing U.S. adolescents and U.S. public school educators. The situation is so dire in the United States that the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association joined together "to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health" (American Academy of Pediatrics, October 2021). The members of these organizations cited their firsthand witnessing of soaring mental health crises that far exceeded levels seen before 2020, and they credited not only pandemic stress but also the "inequities that result from structural racism" as the cause of these trends. These health experts emphatically argued that the situation facing U.S. children is unparalleled, and they called on all levels of government to immediately respond with tremendous resources and financial supports.

The last two and a half years have been challenging, but it must also be stated public educators went above and beyond to protect the fundamental right of all children to a free, quality public education. Since March 2020, we have obtained countless stories of public school educators rising to this unprecedented moment in public education. Education Minnesota members drove meals, administered mental health care, provided lessons through new digital channels, drove to students' homes to deliver technology and instruction through screen doors, rewrote curriculum, located students, and preserved as much stability as possible in an otherwise chaotic world. They did all of this as they tried to not contract or spread a deadly virus and often while serving as the

public face of unpopular policies about masking and COVID mitigation strategies. The members of Education Minnesota rose to the occasion despite being exhausted, underappreciated, and overlooked.

The members of Education Minnesota cannot be thanked enough for their service to students during this tragic global pandemic. We issue this paper for two purposes. First, and most important, we want to lift up the stories and resilience of our members. A reading specialist and elementary teacher in South Washington County explained:

I had to teach 27 first graders in three different modalities (hybrid September-January, online January-March and full day/regular model March-June). This was a try hard, fail/recover, find a way mission. If it weren't for the strong support of the team of teachers on my grade level, I would not have been even close to successful. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Our members collaborated and did their best to try and make school a positive experience for students. But far too many have reached their breaking point, and Minnesota is quickly losing the educators we need to keep our schools open.

Education Minnesota members drove meals, administered mental health care, provided lessons through new digital channels, drove to students' homes to deliver technology and instruction through screen doors, rewrote curriculum, located students, and preserved as much stability as possible in an otherwise chaotic world.

Second, we write this paper because we want people to better understand the barriers and obstacles our members confronted. Nationally, educators are reporting that they feel even more ignored, silenced, and disrespected than before the COVID-19 pandemic. The staff of the EdWeek Research Center, in collaboration with researchers at Merrimack College, have verified this trend among educators. These researchers conducted a national teacher survey from January 9 - February 23, 2022 gathering perspectives from 1,324 teachers. Their survey, which was released in April 2022, replaced the annual *Survey of the American Teacher* formerly conducted by MetLife. The EdWeek researchers utilized similar questions and methodologies as the previous MetLife surveys in order to accurately track historical trends and changes in the working conditions of public educators. This first annual *Merrimack College Teacher Survey* provides valuable insights about the health of the teaching profession. Table 1 uses data from the survey to provide a snapshot of the issues educators feel mainstream media is failing to cover. Not surprising, poor working conditions, school funding, and mental health concerns top the list of missed media topics.

Table 1: Teacher Perspectives on Media Coverage of School-Related Issues

Respondents were provided this prompt: *Some educational issues always seem to be in the news. Other educational issues never seem to be in the news, but should be. Which of these issues deserve less or more attention?*

Issue	Percentage selecting "topic should get more [media] attention"
Teacher working conditions	85%
School funding	78%
Student mental health and trauma	68%
Disrupted learning/academic success	58%
Inequities tied to race or poverty	56%
Teaching about race/racism	36%
Standardized testing	36%

Source: (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 9)

We can tell the public that this was the most challenging year for most every teacher in Minnesota, but we have to do more to paint a complete picture of public education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our obligation to lift up the voices of our members in order to provide context and concrete evidence of the struggles hampering public education. State lawmakers, the voting public, and concerned administrators **MUST** pause at this crucial moment and ask the questions: *what made the 2021-22 school year, and the two school years prior to this one, unlike previous years? And what have we learned about how to improve and enhance the work lives of educators and the learning environments of students?*

State lawmakers, the voting public, and concerned administrators **MUST** pause at this crucial moment and ask the questions: what made the 2021-2022 school year, and the two school years prior to this one, unlike previous years? And what have we learned about how to improve and enhance the work lives of educators and the learning environments of students?

In January 2021, a team of Education Minnesota members released an EPIC paper titled, *Disrupted Learning, COVID-19, and Public Education in Minnesota*. In that paper, Education Minnesota members presented the early interventions educators needed to keep offering high-quality educational experiences during a global pandemic. They reminded Minnesotans that:

COVID-19 is not the cause of the inequities within the public school system; it is merely the flashlight that is illuminating the problems we always knew existed. The pandemic is certainly intensifying the structural problems that disadvantage too many students, especially students of color, but neither it nor educators are to blame for students being “so far behind.” Federal and state governments have been slowly divesting from public education for decades, leaving educators and districts with inadequate resources. Problems caused by underfunding have always existed; the pandemic made things worse and lifted the veil to show the problem to the rest of the world. (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2021, p. 7)

The pandemic, while tragic and sad, brought formerly-ignored problems into the public spotlight, and, for a brief moment, there was hope we might achieve profound, systemic change. Unfortunately, systems and politicians stymied any attempt to bring the full-throttle systemic change too many schools desperately need.

The Education Minnesota members who advised our first paper about the pandemic named “five concerning trends” facing public education. They provided this list as a starting place for policymakers to begin making changes. Without question, these Education Minnesota members offered extremely accurate predictions of what would happen if the state embraced inaction and status-quo approaches over proactive solutions. Unfortunately, state lawmakers, primarily the Republican lawmakers in the state Senate, failed to provide this team, and all educators and students in Minnesota, with the tools they needed to build schools worthy of all students and educators.

We also want to make a sharp distinction among the Legislature as a collective body, individual legislators, and the leadership of the Legislature. We are thankful for the many champions of public education serving in the state House and Senate. They have been extremely responsive to the needs of educators. In addition, Gov. Tim Walz and his administration have raised the voices of teachers and pushed back on public attacks to our public education system. We do not criticize the work of our friends who fight for public education at every turn.

We fully understand that our allies in the House, Senate, and governor’s office have less levers available to enact change due to the current political realities in St. Paul. We thank them for what they have been able to accomplish. It is our hope that all legislators, especially those that publicly claim to care about public schools while they move legislation that further divests from education, will pay attention to the voices of our members. Educators and students can no longer wait for change and we hope all legislators will work to build stronger schools for all students in Minnesota.

Education Minnesota members are not the only experts who have offered warnings and proposals to decision makers. At the national level, DePaoli, Hernández, and Darling-Hammond (2020) noted:

The events of the day are contributing to a collective and individual trauma that has deep implications for youth learning and wellness. They are also causing many to reflect on our traditional way of “doing school”—holding a mirror to how educational systems have contributed to the inequities and problems facing our society. While the current moment is wrought with crises and difficult reflection, it also presents significant opportunities for schools to redesign their structures and practices so as to pave a more equitable path forward. (DePaoli, Hernández, & Darling-Hammond, 2020)

In March and April of 2020, there was, if even for a brief, fleeting moment, a sense that the pandemic could be a time of transformational change, but too many with the power to initiate change chose complicity over innovation. In her interview for this study, another Education Minnesota member summarized the approaches taken as **“reactive and not proactive,”** and she further lamented that **“we only add Band-Aids to what is happening at the moment”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

It is fair to say we have not done enough at the national, state, or local levels to help educators correct for the collective trauma brought forth by the pandemic caused by COVID-19, and it is time to change course before it is too late.

Context of Study

We publish every EPIC paper as an attempt to interject the absent voices of educators and practitioners into important policy conversations that impact their work lives and the learning environments of students. This paper not only serves this purpose, but we also offer it to lift up the resilience, power, and creativity of our membership. The last three years have been filled with immense sadness, but there are stories of hope and kindness that were too often overlooked. In many ways, this EPIC team hopes to celebrate the contributions and labor of the membership of Education Minnesota.

We want to lift up the resilience, power, and creativity of our membership.

The last three years have been filled with immense sadness, but there are stories of hope and kindness that were too often overlooked.

In addition, we write this paper at a very unique moment for public education in this state. For the last seven years, our members have used EPIC papers to alert the public and policymakers to problematic trends facing public education. In addition, Education Minnesota has used multiple channels to remind Minnesotans that the public school system in this state is hampered by two interrelated forces, (1) systemic racism and (2) chronic underfunding. A previous EPIC team stated:

The dual crises of racial disparity and educator attrition expose a soft underbelly of public education in Minnesota. Chronic underfunding of our schools has created a racialized system of haves and have-nots. And underfunding has left teachers under-resourced and driven many out of our classrooms because these professionals simply do not have the tools to do their job effectively. (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019)

Since that previous EPIC report, four years and one election cycle have expired while some state leaders still struggle to harness the political will in Minnesota to bring forth sweeping change. This remains the case even after a deadly pandemic has left countless Minnesotans dead or permanently ill.

We will be focused on how systemic failures have created unsafe, under-resourced working and learning environments that are exacerbating educator attrition and stifling student learning. To be direct, we are using this paper to give voice to our membership and to highlight the severity of the situation facing students and educators.

In this paper, we will be focused on how systemic failures have created unsafe, under-resourced working and learning environments that are exacerbating educator attrition and stifling student learning. To be direct, we are using this paper to give voice to our membership and to highlight the severity of the situation facing students and educators. Researchers with the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development and the Minnesota Department of Education collaborated to produce multiple versions of the Minnesota Safe Learning Report in 2021-22. These researchers conducted a year-long collaboration resulting in a scientifically significant snapshot of the conditions in which educators and students were operating during the pandemic.ⁱⁱ

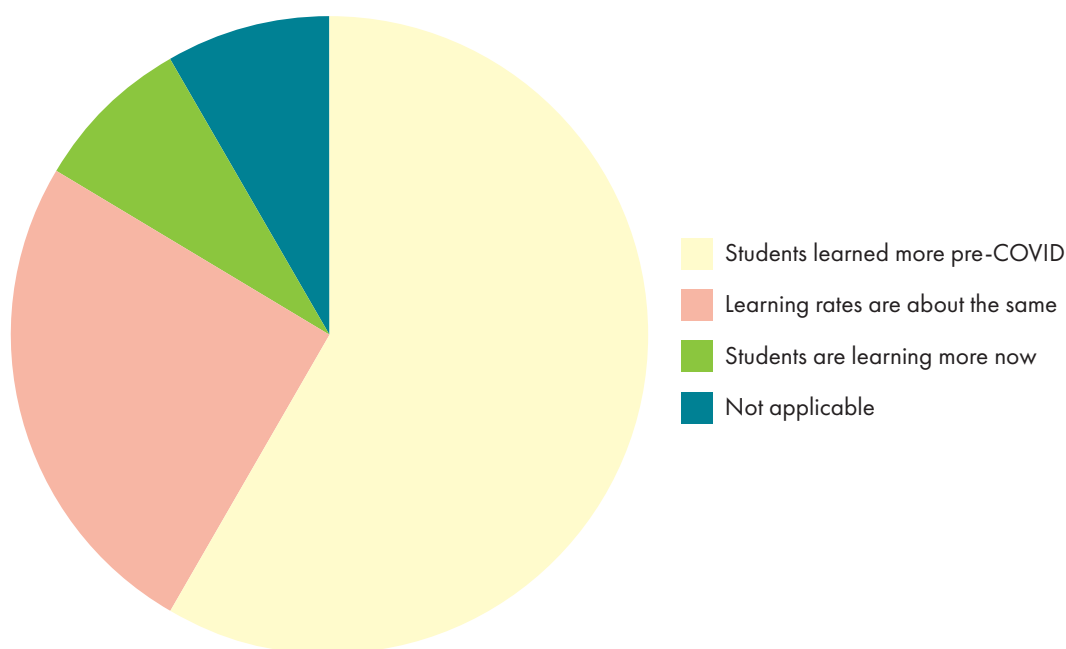
Figure 1 shows that 58% of teachers felt their students were learning more in school pre-pandemic. In addition, other government agencies continue to document that educators, particularly educators of color, are fleeing the profession at record rates.

Our state has some of the worst achievement gaps between white students and BIPOC students in the nation. In addition, our school system is still rooted in practices of white supremacy that have allowed zip codes and skin color to continue to be the primary determinates of the type of education a child receives.

Some may be quick to point fingers and place blame for these problems, but this does not solve the underlying issues. We must also remember that attrition and learning loss are merely symptoms that point to the real problems. Systemic racism and government divestment from public education, which are difficult to untangle from each other, have starved the public school system in Minnesota. These factors have led to educators fleeing their careers and leaving students with fewer opportunities to achieve their full potentials.

Figure 1: Educator Perceptions of Student Learning Rates

Educators were asked to compare the learning rates of their students during the 2021-22 academic year to the learning rates of students before the pandemic. Researchers framed the question as: Ho



In addition, the learning and resources gaps are also not felt proportionately across populations of students. There is a wide disparity in the way students in Edina Public Schools receive public education as compared to their peers in Red Lake. Our state has some of the worst achievement gaps between white students and BIPOC students in the nation. In addition, our school system is still rooted in practices of white supremacyⁱⁱⁱ that have allowed zip codes and skin color to continue to be the primary determinates of the type of education a child receives.

We are not alone in naming the racist practices that plague Minnesota's school system. In 2016, the Minnesota Education Equity Partnership asked lawmakers to repay the "educational debt" that has produced an inequitable education system for BIPOC students. They wrote, "the cumulative effect of generations of social, political and economic injustice creates an unpaid 'education debt' from society that results in larger percentages of students of color and American Indian students persistently achieving less than their white peers" (Minnesota Education Equity Partnership, 2016, p. 19). We are sad to report that little has been done by the state Legislature to address these horrific inequities.

Experts can draw a connection between underfunding and government divestment to most all problems facing public schools, especially academic performance concerns.

We are also not alone in naming the mismanagement of public dollars by some factions within all levels of government. Experts can draw a connection between underfunding and government divestment to most all problems facing public schools, especially academic performance concerns. Economists estimate that it would take anywhere from an \$8-9 billion initial investment followed by high levels of sustained funding to just begin repairing the damage that has been done to public schools in this state. In 2019, our members sounded a warning alarm for Minnesota's leaders when they wrote:

Intentionally or unintentionally, Minnesota lawmakers created a system where a basic, inflationary increase in education funding was and is "historic," not because it's the amount of resources that schools need to meet these demands, but because the bar was set so low in the first decade of the 21st century that even a basic amount of funding is now seen as a major investment .(Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 6)

Unfortunately, the Minnesota Legislature has not been able to pass meaningful funding, despite the efforts of DFL leadership in the house, because some members of the body have continued to prioritize other matters and continued to underfund public education in this state at embarrassingly low levels.

Economists estimate that it would take anywhere from an \$8-9 billion initial investment followed by high levels of sustained funding to just begin repairing the damage that has been done to public schools in this state.

In addition, legislators in the 2022 legislative Session had the opportunity to spend a \$9 billion surplus on public projects. House majority Leadership did propose robust spending on education, but they were unable to move the same priorities through the Senate. At the end of session, the speaker of the House, the Senate majority leader, and the governor agreed that at least \$1 billion of this surplus should be directed to one-time school investments. This agreement never reached the finish line due to the inactions of a few senators, and students and educators will now have to wait another year to see any infusion of funds.

The problems our members highlight in their narratives of the pandemic will often speak of material needs. Please know that many of our problems can be solved if some of the leaders in the state Legislature would simply prioritize the wellness and education of children over the financial privileges of corporations and billionaires.

***Many of our problems can be solved if some of the leaders in the state
Legislature would simply prioritize the wellness and education of children
over the financial privileges of corporations and billionaires.***

Educator Attrition in Minnesota: A Growing Crisis

Just 12 percent of teachers, the survey found, are very satisfied with their jobs, with more than four in 10 teachers saying they were very or fairly likely to leave the profession in the next two years (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 2).

We know that funding shortfalls and racist practices have led to horrific inequities for students, but those same structural problems have sustained a growing labor shortage in public education for the last five years. The Merrimack College Teacher Survey has confirmed that nationally more educators than ever are experiencing extreme dissatisfaction with their profession. Table 2 presents historical data from 1985 to the present. When researchers asked educators in 2022 if they were “satisfied with their job”, only 12% responded they are “very satisfied.” This is a historic low and an extreme drop in morale from previous years. In addition, Table 3 shows that more and more teachers are regretting their decision to become public school educators.

Table 2: Teacher Job Satisfaction, a National Perspective

Respondents were asked to rate overall job satisfaction. This table shows the percentage of teachers that responded “very satisfied” from 1985 to the present.

Survey Year	Percentage responding “very satisfied”
1985	44%
1995	54%
2005	~57%
2010	~45%
2022	12%

Source: (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 4)

As we and other experts have confirmed, educator attrition will not be solved by quick fixes that simply attempt to boost educator recruitment. Yes, we need to do everything we can to attract new, energetic minds to the profession. However, our recruitment efforts will always fall flat if we simultaneously do little to improve the working conditions of those educators already in classrooms.

Table 3: Teacher Confidence in Career Choice, a National Perspective

Respondents were asked: *What is the likelihood you would advise your younger self to pursue a career in teaching?*

Response	Percentage selecting response
Very likely	16%
Fairly likely	30%
Not too likely	29%
Not at all likely	26%

Source: (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 24)

In 2019, Education Minnesota members told the state Legislature:

In addition to the deeply entrenched inequities built into our education system, Minnesota, like most states in the nation, is facing a crisis in the form of a mass exodus of teachers from the profession. In our state, one out of every three teachers leaves the profession in the first five years of employment. (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 15)

The same members also warned state leaders that BIPOC educators are exiting the classroom at a 24% higher rate than their white peers.

***It is time to build and sustain an educator workforce that mirrors
the diversity of the students in Minnesota classrooms.***

We know from decades of research that having one BIPOC teacher in an entire K-12 experience can be correlated with positive academic and life outcomes for both white and BIPOC students. Unfortunately, the people with power have chosen to ignore this reality at the same time they blame unions and educators for failing students of color. Table 4 provides a snapshot of the racial demographics of Minnesota's licensed teachers, and Table 5 offers the most recent racial demographics of the student population of Minnesota. These two visuals show that there is a wide gap between the racial identities of our students and the individuals leading the classrooms in which they learn. It is time to build and sustain an educator workforce that mirrors the diversity of the students in Minnesota classrooms.

Table 4: Minnesota Licensed Educators by Race and Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Tier 1	Percent of Tier 2	Percent of Tier 3	Percent of Tier 4	Percent of All Licenses
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2.55%	2.72%	0.94%	0.95%	1.00%
Asian	3.48%	3.00%	2.18%	0.94%	1.09%
Black, Not of Hispanic Origin	7.07%	6.04%	1.90%	1.24%	1.45%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.12%	0.20%	0.05%	0.04%	0.05%
Hispanic	5.91%	7.07%	2.46%	1.14%	1.41%
Multiple Categories	1.97%	2.25%	0.92%	0.58%	0.65%
White, Not of Hispanic Origin	49.13%	61.78%	50.16%	81.07%	78.27%
No Race/Ethnicity Provided	29.78%	16.94%	41.38%	14.04%	16.08%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers	21.09%	21.28%	8.46%	4.89%	5.64%

Source: (Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021, p. 16)

Table 5: 2022 Public School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (Federal Definition)

Race/Ethnicity	Count	Percent
Hispanic or Latino	91,601	10.5%
American Indian or Alaskan Native (Federal Definition)	14,901	1.7%
Asian	60,461	6.9%
Black or African American	101,388	11.6%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	890	0.1%
White	549,237	63.1%
Two or more races	52,028	6.0%
All Students	870,506	100.0%

Source: (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022) Minnesota Department of Education. (2022, February 3). Minnesota Report Card. Retrieved from rc.education.mn.gov.

Finally, we must stress that these attrition numbers have only grown since our earlier reports, and many national experts report that we could witness 8% of the current educator workforce not returning for the 2022-23 school year. If that number rings true, there will be some districts that may not have enough staff to provide the required services and compensatory education to which all children are entitled.

We could witness 8% of the current educator workforce not returning for the 2022-23 school year.

Data Collection

Our team collected data between February 1 and March 31, 2022. We limited our universe to only Education Minnesota members. Education Minnesota represents approximately 86,000 licensed teachers, education support professionals (ESPs), and higher education faculty across the state. We are the largest labor union representing public school employees in Minnesota.

The member policy team that advised this paper held its first meeting on January 22, 2022. This group defined the purpose of the study and built the online tool for collecting data. The form opened with approximately five demographic questions about the survey participants: (1) membership status in Education Minnesota, (2) preferred methods of communications, (3) position in their district, (4) racial identity, and (5) gender identity. Participants then responded to the following statements with a 1-5 Likert scale (1: strongly agree, 2: agree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: disagree, 5: strongly disagree):

1. I considered leaving the field of education or retiring early before the pandemic.
2. My interest in leaving the field of education or retiring early has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. As an educator, I feel/felt supported by the state government during the pandemic.
4. As an educator, I feel my voice is heard and respected by decision makers and lawmakers.
5. Minnesota should use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to correct for past inequities in public education.

Next, survey participants were then given a space, with no word-limit minimums or maximums, to respond to this prompt:

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has been a major disruption for public education, but there have also been shining moments of individual resilience and perseverance, and educators have learned a great deal. Our goal is to capture as many narratives as possible that document what happened in public education. Please take a moment to reflect on your experiences, the experiences of your colleagues, and the experiences of your students. Then, consider sharing a story (or two) that illustrates either one of the great struggles or one of the glimmers of light that you have seen during your experience. The most powerful tools we have are your specific stories, stories that show what this pandemic has looked like through the eyes of you—our educators.

We are most interested in hearing reflections and narratives. Our goal is to show what has happened and what needs to change.

Here are some questions to get you thinking.

- What unique difficulties did you, your students or your colleagues face during the pandemic? What would you like lawmakers to know? What resources would have helped mitigate some of the issues?
- Did you have hope that COVID would present the opportunity to rethink public education? Do you feel we have taken that opportunity? Why or why not?
- Did you witness any moments of resilience or perseverance? Was there a moment of hard work, innovation, or human compassion that you feel should be preserved for other educators?

Think of a story that illustrates the theme, the frustration, the loss, or the win that you want to illuminate. Tell us that story (making sure not to include any real student names).

Each participant was promised anonymity. Only staff of Education Minnesota working directly with the EPIC program could connect an individual name to a response. **In addition, staff that work with the EPIC process contacted every member quoted in this paper (1) to confirm the accuracy of their quotation and (2) to ask permission to include the citation in the final report.** We did not quote any member of Education Minnesota without their direct knowledge and expressed consent. In addition, we have removed all names and any other information that might allow a third party to trace a direct quote back to an individual member. It is our hope that this will preserve the privacy of all members who participated in this study.

We found our participants through chain sampling conducted across multiple communication channels only available to members of Education Minnesota. Each member of the research team was responsible for directly sending our collection tool to members in their regions of Minnesota. In addition, Education Minnesota staff used our all-member email list, social media channels, affinity space distribution lists, and other databases of union activists to recruit participants. We also encouraged participants to share our link with other members of Education Minnesota.

The research team met to analyze the data on February 26, 2022. Staff organized the responses into four groupings based primarily on where the survey participant lived and worked. All personally revealing data was removed from each individual submission, so our research team members only read the open-ended responses.

The staff also analyzed the demographic breakdown of the first round of responses. At the February 26, 2022 meeting, the team found that 191 members of Education Minnesota had responded. The members: spanned 24 districts and included 171 respondents who identified as white. The participants also skewed female (74% to 26% who identified as either male or non-binary) and were heavily tilted toward classroom teachers (117 participants identified as classroom teachers initially).

These breakdowns were both troubling and not surprising. Minnesota's educator workforce is primarily white and primarily female. However, the team was rightfully uncomfortable moving forward with an analysis that only included a handful of BIPOC voices. Thus, the team returned to field in March and directly targeted BIPOC members in their locals and regions. This resulted in an additional 17 respondents from BIPOC members, both licensed educators as well as ESPs and paraprofessionals.^{iv}

The EPIC member team read through each response and collectively generated a list of common themes found in the narratives. They also used the process of qualitative, narrative inquiry to analyze the responses and rank order the themes most present. We expand on our analytical process in the next section.

Methodology

Readers familiar with our previous EPIC papers will notice that this project is slightly different. We have always used the EPIC process to produce papers that elevate educator voices in policy discussions, and we certainly hope that some of the narratives we highlight in this paper will move lawmakers to make the needed policy and funding changes that can bring real relief to public education. However, our intent is much more than an attempt to move lawmakers. We know that Education Minnesota members have felt isolated, alone, and unheard through the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is our attempt to let our members know (1) they are valued, (2) they matter, and (3) they are not alone. We hope, at the very least, our members in classrooms across Minnesota will find solace and solidarity from reading the narratives of their union brothers and sisters.

Our team analyzed our collection of narratives through our own version of what some researchers have called qualitative, narrative inquiry. Josselson (2011), Prosek and Gibson (2021) have defined narrative inquiry as “a form of qualitative methodology that conceptualizes and explores human experience as it is represented in textual, oral, and/or written form” (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 171). We chose this approach because we hold to the belief that “people story their lives...personal narratives, often explain the teller’s own or others’ past, current, and/or future behaviors. The structure of story aids individuals in exploring and assigning meaning of experiences in their lives” (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 171). Our team understands that the story is what a participant provides, and it is our job as researchers to provide the narrative “which involves interpreting the story, placing it in context, and comparing it with other stories”. (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 171)

Teacher voices hold weight for their colleagues. When teachers tell a story of a positive experience...they are showing that it is possible.

This type of analysis will allow us to provide the necessary context and background, to accurately reflect the opinions and perspectives of all our survey participants. Prosek and Gibson (2021) explained this approach to research by writing:

a narrative inquiry research question could be, “What are the experiences of sixth-grade school counselors providing telemental health counseling during 4 months of an international pandemic?” Constructing this reality within relational and social contexts and within the parameters of the researcher’s question allows for some narrative interpretation (Mishler, 2004). More explicit to the context of the narrative, researchers who explore the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts of the narratives may capture more accurately the meaning within the story (Hoshmand, 2005). The experience described by the researchers includes the context and details of how the story is elicited and told by the individual. In the research question above, using a sample of specific grade level counselors within the same school division provides a similar context and history that can provide a storied experience with the phenomenon.” (Prosek & Gibson, 2021, p. 172)

Much like the hypothetical participants in the experiment described by Prosek and Gibson, our participants all share a common history and context. Each is a member of Education Minnesota. Each worked in public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, and each has a unique vantage point from which they reflected on the state of public education. It was our job as researchers to weave these stories into a unified narrative that reflects how our members shared a lived reality. As we do this, we also hope to honor the unique perspective of each individual participant.

Finally, we chose this type of analysis because stories hold specific significance for educators. One of our stated goals was to use this project to help our membership feel less isolated and ignored. Rosen (2018) has discussed the important and necessary meaning narratives bring when shared by educators, for other educators. She has argued,

Teacher voices hold weight for their colleagues. When teachers tell a story of a positive experience...they are showing that it is possible. "Stories, particularly those that are concrete and readily identified with, are particularly powerful for transferring knowledge rich in tacit dimensions" (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001, p. 105). When teachers share their stories with each other, they create a reality based on concrete possibility. (Rosen, Spring 2018, p. 303)

Our narrative inquiry is an attempt to do just what Rosen described. The stories shared by Minnesota's educators illustrate the crisis our state educational system is facing. These stories show us the depth of the problems, and they show us, again and again, that solutions will have to be far bolder than waiting out the pandemic.

What is happening in Minnesota's schools? Why are educators leaving?

Our inquiry pointed immediately to seven themes that reflect the current crisis:

1. Workloads are unmanageable.
2. Educators lack a voice in decision making.
3. Student mental and social-emotional health is at a crisis level.
4. Educators are reporting extraordinarily high levels of concern related to their physical and mental health.
5. Education support professionals feel disrespected and exploited.
6. Educators are exhausted by a lack of meaningful support and continuous toxic positivity.
7. State and federal governments continue to fail special education students and the educators who serve them.

What follows is a detailed discussion of each topic, followed by recommendations for the kinds of policy changes our education system needs now.

Theme #1: Workloads are unmanageable

Unmanageable workloads rose to the top of the concerns raised by educators during the pandemic. *The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey* reports have consistently shown that impossible workloads are the most critical concern educators have when asked about the supports they need in order to be effective. Table 6 provides the combined responses from both licensed educators and teachers to the question: *What are the top three resources you need to be effective this school year?* Authors of the survey stated “perhaps not surprising, given the multiple modes of teaching/learning, the top needed support among teachers and support professionals was a more manageable workload” (Potter, et al., 2021, p. 28). But before we look at this problem through the eyes of educators during the pandemic, it is important to note that none of this is surprising, and it is certainly not new.

Table 6: Minnesota Educators Identify Supports Needed to be Effective During the 2021-22 Academic Year

This table reflects the **combined responses of licensed educators and education support professionals** to the question: What are the top three resources that you need to be effective this school year?

Category of Support	Responses by Percentage
Manageable workload	28%
Supports to re-engage highly disengaged students	16%
Mental health supports for students/families	15%
Mental health supports for myself	13%
Services/supports for specific student populations	8%
Academic supports for students/families	8%
Curricular resources	3%
Access to reliable internet	2%
Clear grading expectations	2
Access to technology: hardware	2
Access to technology: software	2
Informational resources	1
None at this time	1

Source: (Comprehensive Center Network, February 2022, p. 26)

Before the pandemic, educator workloads were overwhelming. Teacher workloads lacked appropriate planning time and included extremely limited opportunities for collaboration and professional learning. In fact, “teachers in the United States taught more hours and had less planning and collaboration time than most teachers around the world” (Darling-Hammond, 2022). In addition, education support professionals were rarely included in even the most basic planning and professional development activities held in schools.

In a study examining the working conditions of teachers in the 35+ countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED), Linda Darling-Hammond has shown that teachers in the U.S. are tied with Chile in having less planning and collaboration time than all other OCED countries. Teachers in the U.S. have less planning, professional learning, and collaboration time than teachers in Brazil, Mexico, Abu Dhabi, Estonia, Portugal, Finland, the Slovak Republic, the United Kingdom, Croatia, Latvia, Belgium, Iceland, Denmark, Korea, Spain, Poland, France, Australia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Israel, Czech Republic, Japan, Sweden, Italy, Singapore, Malaysia, Netherlands, Cyprus, Romania, and Norway (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022).

“Teachers in the United States taught more hours and had less planning and collaboration time than most teachers around the world.” – Linda Darling-Hammond

In addition to the lack of planning and collaboration time that was already in place before the pandemic, our very model of education meant that educators were overwhelmed and unable to meet the needs of students. The factory model of education we have, especially in middle and high schools, where large numbers of students come to each classroom for 45-50 minutes at a time, leads to a workload crisis for any educator who wants to recognize and meet the unique needs of each student. As Darling-Hammond has pointed out, these structures, “do not allow students to be well-known or well-supported” (Darling-Hammond L. , Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools, 2022). Given the trauma students bring to school that is caused by so many factors, chief among them the fact that the United States has by far the highest child poverty rate in the industrialized world and our own unique system of racial inequity, student needs cannot be met when teachers have no time to collaborate with other teachers or other professionals in the school (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022).

Educator workload problems have, of course, been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. Teachers were asked to switch teaching modalities, without training or the necessary collaboration or planning time. Teachers were asked to switch back and forth from in-class teaching to remote teaching and back again, with little to no warning, requiring ever more planning time that was never available. And perhaps most damning, teachers were asked to teach in-person and remotely at the same time.

It is also important to note that teacher attrition, which has been a growing problem for over two decades, leads directly to more severe workload problems for educators who remain in the profession. Before the pandemic, one out of every three new teachers in Minnesota left the profession within their first five years on the job (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 15). That is an attrition rate unmatched by other professions requiring similar levels of education. When schools cannot find educators to fill positions, positions that are already designed to lack sufficient planning, professional learning, and collaboration time. The expectation for other remaining staff increases, with staff constantly being asked to do more with less.

Educator workload problems have, of course, been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic. Teachers were asked to switch teaching modalities, without training or the necessary collaboration or planning time. Teachers were asked to switch back and forth from in-class teaching to remote teaching and back again, with little to no warning, requiring ever more planning time that was never available. And perhaps most damning, teachers were asked to teach in-person and remotely at the same time. Paraprofessionals were asked to help students they could not always find, and they were asked to move to remote learning, also without training, planning time, or in many cases, the required technology.

Paraprofessionals were asked to help students they could not always find, and they were asked to move to remote learning, also without training, planning time, or in many cases the required technology.

Educators were asked to cover other educator absences, laying waste to the tiny amount of prep time they had, and forcing educators to work in fields for which they had no training or expertise. Teachers and ESPs drove buses, kept track of which students were in proximity to which students at any given moment of the day and for how long, enacted constantly-changing COVID protocols, prepared food, faced hostility, blame, and anger from parents for COVID decisions beyond their control, drove to student homes to teach on front porches, delivered food to families, drove mobile hotspots to areas where students otherwise had no internet access, cleaned bathrooms, and served as substitutes in almost every imaginable way. As soon as it became clear that the pandemic was long-term, educators started to leave at alarmingly higher rates than anything we have ever seen.

As the number of educators leaving the profession skyrocketed in late 2020 and has continued to increase in the months since, the smaller and smaller number of staff left in buildings were expected to do their own jobs and take on additional responsibilities, which increased their stress and inability to respond to student needs, both of which led to greater and greater attrition. A teacher in South Washington County wrote, **“I no longer feel joy when I go to work. I am mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted. My co-workers feel the same way. Teachers are quitting mid-year, taking leaves of absence, and contemplating early retirement. The students are out of control. We are short staffed in every area”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A common refrain from educators throughout Minnesota is that instead of changing to meet student needs, districts just kept piling on additional work. Instead of pivoting, they added. A teacher explained:

We have been required to teach our exact same content with the same expectations (not enough prep time, class sizes over 35 students, attending IEP meetings, plus teaching 7 classes back-to-back all day without a bathroom break) but with the new obstacles of teaching during COVID. These included teaching and singing with masks, constantly sanitizing shared materials, creating new spacing and seating arrangements in spaces that are too small, and creating work for both asynchronous and synchronous lessons at the same time. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

The workload crisis in our schools is felt by staff throughout each building, from bus drivers to nutrition services staff, from English language teachers to ESPs to classroom teachers, school nurses, school social workers and counselors, and so on. A teacher of multilingual learners, explained:

At the beginning of the pandemic, as an English language teacher, I became the connection between school and many multilingual families. I spent countless hours messaging students to try to contact them to ensure they had access to the internet, devices, food, support in their academic classes, tutoring on how to use technology. As it became clear that [the pandemic was going to last two years], it became unsustainable. After all, I still had courses to prepare materials for, I had to redesign lessons to be available online, create multiple video tutorials, deliver lessons, and grade assignments. I found myself burnt out. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

A school nurse wrote, **“The pandemic has quadrupled my workload for a full 2 years and taken an enormous toll on my own mental and physical health due to unprecedented stress levels for such a long period of time. I am definitely contemplating my options and sadly considering leaving a profession I once loved”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). A District 196 bus driver explained that the shortage of staff meant that even office staff and mechanics had to drive routes. The mechanics were asked to work 10-12 hour shifts in order to cover all the routes and keep the buses running (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A school counselor with a caseload of nearly 400 (national recommendations are 1:250) reported days working with 2-3 students with suicidal ideation, traditionally high-achieving students earning Cs' and D's, and a dramatic increase in the percentage of students who need help navigating school with stress, anxiety, and depression. In her school, the number of students who entered a mental health treatment program quadrupled during the pandemic (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). A kindergarten teacher wrote about having to staff a school that served as a short-term health center, a primary source of food for families in poverty, and a mental health center, all without appropriate staffing, and on top of the already unrelenting requirements of teaching without appropriate student supports (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A testing coordinator, responsible for coordinating all PSAT, ACT, preACT, STAMP, MCA, SAT, and other tests for over 400 students, wrote about getting pulled in to cover when teachers were absent and no substitutes could be found: **“I was summoned frequently, many times with little notice. On some days, educators would ‘drop like flies throughout the day,’ potentially doubling the number of teachers absent on an already overwhelming weekday of absences”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A science teacher explained that by the end of the day, she felt like “whiplash” occurred: **“The volume of students, the volume of questions asked at once, answering individual questions, trying to communicate with students that skip often and are behind, directing class at large, overseeing labs and class behaviors, repairing lab equipment—and then add onto that COVID contact tracing seating charges, so that on any given day, I could tell you which student sat near another student and for how long, managing student work groups when students are in school one day and gone the next. I’m drowning”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Of course, the need to implement new and changing COVID-19 protocols required more planning, and given that educators lacked adequate planning time before the pandemic, the new requirements made an already overwhelming job that much less manageable. A classroom teacher describes the kind of planning that was needed despite the failure of districts to offer any. She wrote:

Every single part of the way we did our job changed. There was no road map. Nobody knew how to help us. Experts gave us Band-Aids for an arterial bleed...at best. The planning and preparation took so many, many hours because we never knew when a student would need to learn from home, and we needed to be ready just in case to provide the same level of instruction and meet the required expectations. Protocols changed. Expectations changed. Routines changed. The students did not. Their need for stability, social and emotional support, care, and community always remained the same. I saw behaviors I have not seen in my 15 years of teaching, indicative of stress our students were facing. Their cries for were for needs going unmet. I simply could not provide the counseling and support needed by my students and their families. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

A Rochester ESP with decades of experience wrote that though she was confident, based on her experience, that she could manage the required changes, **“very little planning time was given to prepare for all that was involved”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Educators across the state are exhausted, stretched beyond their capacity, and see little to no light at the end of the tunnel. Instead of supporting schools to better meet student needs and to support educators such that they can function, Minnesota has simply piled greater and greater expectations onto educator shoulders. Educators did everything possible to keep the lights of their classrooms turned on each day, but they were constantly stifled by the substitute teacher shortage, mass retirements, and people literally walking off the job knowing that they could risk losing their professional licenses. The leaders of Education Minnesota have received countless reports that there is a collective feeling of hopelessness among educators. We know that too many educators are asking themselves why they remain in a career that brings emotional pain, physical abuse and exhaustion and no promise or hope that help is on the way.

As districts face declining enrollments, many are now forecasting major cuts in the already weak supports in place for students. When we most need to embrace a fully-supported education system, we are starving it even further, either without the awareness that such changes will drive educator attrition to higher and higher rates, or without a concern about what high educator attrition rates mean for student outcomes. **“I have trained for seven years,” said one teacher with a Master’s degree, “to get into my own classroom, and I have felt a high level of disrespect from society. I work very hard, and feel much more stress [than my peers in other professions]. There is no support beyond administrators. School district actions gaslight our efforts in the classroom, and policies made by politicians make these issues worse. I feel taken**

advantage of for having a passion to help students, and I'm not going to do it like this any longer" (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Perhaps the most powerful indicator of the workload problems faced by educators right now comes from a primary teacher in South Washington County, who wrote about the stress caused by wanting to fill out our survey: **"My anxiety is through the roof [while I write this] because I also need to be planning for my week, finishing report cards, preparing for an IEP meeting, reading the rest of the book for my PLC, preparing my 45-minute lesson plan for my observation coming up, and calling the many parents who are upset about the student who continues to hit, push, and kick their children. There is more I can add to the list, but I won't, for fear of laying down in a fetal position and giving up"** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). Another classroom teacher from northern Minnesota explained the expectations educators now carry: **"We are to be their in-person teacher, online teacher, therapist, counselor, doctor, nurse, caretaker, parent, and the list goes on. It feels as though the government, administrations, and parents expect us to do everything. Fix everything. Be everything"** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

According to a recent survey of 25,000 teachers nationwide, before the pandemic, teachers who left their positions reporting those positions requiring an average of 49 hours per week. That is higher than the average number of hours required for teachers who indicated they were not leaving before the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, the average work week included 42 hours of work. But during the pandemic, that number skyrocketed, and when Rand surveyed teachers during the pandemic, one third of them reported working 56 hours or more (Diliberti, 2021, p. 10).

That the pandemic pushed so many out of the profession should come as no surprise. This is what happens to a system required to do more and more with less and less. Eventually, the system breaks.

For over two decades, public educators in Minnesota have been watching districts make difficult choices that do not support equitable and high-quality public education because they are not being properly funded by state and federal governments. These district leaders have made decisions that have remove any opportunity for collaboration, professional development, planning, and assessment, expecting them to be able to meet the changing needs of students without any professional time to plan or reflect or learn from colleagues. That the pandemic pushed so many out of the profession should come as no surprise. This is what happens to a system required to do more and more with less and less. Eventually, the system breaks.

Theme #2: Educators lack a voice in decision making

Educators should be the first stakeholders invited to discussions about education reforms. This must be corrected.

Educators have long felt ignored and disregarded by the administrators who make decisions and the elected officials who allocate resources. In our data, we found countless examples of educators being silenced or ignored by district level leadership or elected officials. It is troubling that our members have to spend so much time simply fighting for a place in the room in which important conversations are happening that they have very little time left to change the conversation once they arrive.

Educators should be the first stakeholders invited to discussions about education reforms. This must be corrected. Our findings were also corroborated by the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey*. Researchers asked licensed educators to rank which “area of change” they would most like to see in future academic years. Not surprising, the first three identified areas were staffing, mental health, and academic supports. However, more inclusion in decision making rose to fourth place on the list showing that it is a top priority for educators. Table 7 shows the options educators were given as well as the percentage of educators who selected each option as one of their three top priorities.

Table 7: MN Teachers Identify Desired Change in Educational Settings

Licensed educators were asked to identify the top three changes they would like to see moving forward for public education. Researchers received responses from 5,017 educators. This table reflects their collective desires from most to least popular as well as the percentage of educators who selected each item as one of their three responses.

Category of Change	Rank	Percentage selecting this category
Staffing, workload, working conditions	1	69%
Social and emotional wellbeing/Mental health	2	55%
Academic support for students	3	44%
More decision making in education systems	4	33%
Equity	5	25%
COVID-19 protocols	6	21%
Student and family engagement	7	20%
Academic and extracurricular programming	8	11%
Learning format (distance, hybrid, in-person)	9	6%
Technology (hardware, software, internet)	10	5%

Source: (Comprehensive Center Network, February 2022, p. 38)

Some public officials have heard the previous concerns of our members and have discussed needing to do more to increase “teacher voice,” but little has happened. We can draw a direct correlation between high educator attrition and lack of professional agency, and we know that we can mitigate the exodus of public school teachers if we allow them to have leadership positions within their learning communities and a seat at decision-making tables. The problem is that few districts are willing to make this move.

We can draw a direct correlation between high educator attrition and lack of professional agency, and we know that we can mitigate the exodus of public school teachers if we allow them to have leadership positions within their learning communities and a seat at decision-making tables.

We also know that the COVID-19 pandemic was a moment in which the public school system desperately needed to listen to teachers. Some districts had no choice but to rely on the expertise of their educators because of the new demands presented by distance learning. As you will see in the stories, those districts witnessed positive change. Unfortunately, other districts did not follow suit, and the Education Minnesota members from those areas have reported that from 2019-22, they have felt even more isolated and ignored than normal.

We need to be very direct with what we mean by “voice” and “agency.” Yes, it is true that educators have the ability to protest, to strike, and to express their displeasure with decisions. This is not the type of voice to which we are referring. Educators have voice and agency when they feel that their professionalism is respected, that their expertise is honored, and that their needs are, at the very least, acknowledged.

Education scholars have given a plethora of definitions for voice and agency, so it is vital that we (1) define what “teacher voice” means and/or (2) listen to the voices of practitioners who are the victims of the policies that limit their professional input. We know that educator voice and agency matter a great deal to the future of public education because they are tied directly to the crisis of teacher attrition, but we have not always done the work to clarify what these critical concepts mean. In this section, we try to correct for this by offering a working definition of teacher agency and voice as well as illustrations of how Education Minnesota members, most of whom did not feel heard before the spring of 2020, felt silenced and ignored during the pandemic.

Educators have voice and agency when they feel that their professionalism is respected, that their expertise is honored, and that their needs are, at the very least, acknowledged.

Educators are, by definition, agents of change. They are trained professionals who give young minds the ability to critically think and constructively contribute to society. U.S. citizens trust educators with our most precious of national resources, the future generation. But Minnesota, both complicity and implicitly, fails to honor the true expertise of these professionals. Our constructed systems of education have for too long prevented educators from exercising their professional skills and creative energy to improve the life outcomes of children.

Teacher voice can be directly linked to the social scientific concept of agency. This term, as scholars from many fields would define it, refers to the capacities, including material, relational, and structural capacities, individual actors have to approach problems and implement change. Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) have used the work of several other scholars to define teacher agency as a construct that “emphasizes the capacity for doing the work of teaching given the resources and limitations of the working environment as well as considers teachers’ personal beliefs, values, and attributes” (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020, p. 240). Thus, voice and agency, in their most simple forms, both refer to the ability an educator has to voice a need, request a resource, implement a change, and simply be treated as a career professional with the necessary skills to perform their jobs.

Ingersoll and his colleagues have long charted the direct connections between teacher voice and workplace satisfaction. They recently wrote:

this perspective of school reform has come and gone under different banners, including school-based management, teacher empowerment, site-based decision-making, and distributed leadership. Regardless of the label, the common theme has been to give more “voice,” autonomy, and authority to school faculty, and to allow and encourage teachers to have input into decisions on key issues in their schools that impact their teaching and work. (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, October 2017, p. 6)

Most importantly, Ingersoll and others have shown through “advanced statistical analyses...that teacher leadership and the amount of teacher influence into school decision-making are independently and significantly related to student achievement, after controlling for the background characteristics of schools, and this is so for both mathematics and ELA” (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, October 2017, pp. 12-13). Teacher voice matters, and we cannot afford to keep silencing the voices of practitioners who know how to meet the needs of their individual students.

“Many teachers like me are searching for someone to listen to their concerns, I’ve been met with a deafening silence.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty (2017), explain the critical role of educator agency:

In our explanation, at the crux of the role and of the success of teachers, as the men and women in the middle, is their level of authority over tasks and issues for which they are responsible. On the one hand, if teachers have sufficient say over the decisions surrounding those activities for which they are responsible, they will be more able to exert sufficient influence to see that the job is done properly, and in turn, derive respect with administrators, colleagues, and students. On the other hand, if teachers’ authority over school and classroom policies is not sufficient to accomplish the tasks for which they are responsible, they will meet neither groups’ needs, and sour their relationships. The teacher who has little control and power is the teacher who is less able to get things done, is the teacher with less credibility. Principals can more easily neglect backing them. Peers may be more likely to shun them. And, based on our analysis of the TELL data, students’ academic achievement will suffer. (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, October 2017, p. 15)

We know that granting educators greater agency and a seat at decision-making tables will yield positive results for students. A kindergarten teacher offered just one example of how trusting educators to be professional change agents can lead to successful outcomes. This educator faced the daunting task of instructing approximately 25 kindergarteners, via Google meets, as the world transitioned to distance learning. The teacher confirmed that this setting seemed fraught with problems at first because **“it was hard to really connect, when you could only have one child talk with pauses, technology difficulties and keeping children’s attention as well as trying to teach content so that the children would not be too far behind”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

However, the kindergarten teacher quickly transitioned to a new format and found new methods of making learning an engaged process. The educator told us:

The positive side of Google Meets was that I had parents present some very fun and real world presentations to my class, and I had comments from many parents that their child and even siblings enjoyed the presentations. It was a great way to get parents involved and sharing their work and world. Some of the presentations: Bee Keeper, showing us his hives outside, honey, etc., a dad who works on building elevators took us inside an elevator and all its workings. A mom who is a pediatrician explained some of what she does and her tools. We had a mom show us how to milk a goat! It really was a great thing! At least something positive happened. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

This teacher took an otherwise impossible situation and reimagined the way she engaged students. She is just one example of how freedom and trust can yield positive learning experiences for students.

“I wish the spirit of innovation with which we started this pandemic teaching era could be sustained, and that more leaders could effectively convince some of the loud naysayers in the community that we’re working, really working, to make education better.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Not all of our respondents were granted the same authority and freedom. One educator reported that she felt it was not even possible for her to advocate for her own safety or her own ability to make curricular choices. She wrote:

Wearing a mask when it is not mandated has now alienated teachers and created a negative narrative behind their motivations for the mask. This politicization of masking has also fueled questions of curriculum because the assumption behind motives for masking is now linked to political parties and assumptions of teachers’ personal beliefs. Teachers are being accused of indoctrinating students with extremist views on topics such as CRT and gender or sexuality. Teachers have been asked by parents to provide copies of their lesson plans ahead of time as well as having their school emails and documents turned over to the public for them to investigate if CRT is being taught in schools. This also led to the suggestion that cameras are installed in our classrooms and at this point, I almost support it given how many false claims are presented. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Educators face enough obstacles at their sites that are unavoidable, so it is unconscionable that we would place even more scrutiny and pressure on them by vetting and criticizing their curricular decisions. In addition, an educator should never be ridiculed for simply engaging in an act meant to protect their own physical well-being, such as wearing a mask or other PPE.

Many of our other respondents also offered similar concerns as these previously quoted members. One teacher provided this overview of how teacher agency has been, and continues to be, stalled during and before the COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher expressed disillusionment that resulted from district leaders returning to old ways, rather than leading the community to understand teachers' creative changes:

I wish the spirit of innovation with which we started this pandemic teaching era could be sustained, and that more leaders could effectively convince some of the loud nay-sayers in the community that we're working—really working!—to make education better, even while we are making changes. I also feel like I have been disrespected more by my district's choices, the community's voices and the national narrative about education in the last school year than in all the years previous of my career. While I struggle on, trying to figure out how to be a good teacher in these new times, I also find great relief in knowing that retirement is within reach. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Another educator explained that she feels so stifled by district leadership that she now questions her original decision to become an educator. She wrote:

Our school board is disinterested in hearing teacher and staff view points...Our staff, especially teachers are not viewed as stakeholders in how the COVID money is spent. Our voices have not been heard or taken seriously. We have had to beg our district to see how funds are spent. My library para[professional] is now doing all my work, the work I spent over \$40,000 in debt to get a Master's in. She knows my kids, what they are reading and runs the whole program. Many of the staff in my building refer to her as the real librarian. I am simply shoved aside to cover preps.... If I could go back 25 years and tell that person then what I know now I would say do not go into teaching, run fast, run far. I would not advise any student going to college to become a teacher. We are the most disrespected, underfunded field. School staff, medical professionals, and veterinarians went into our fields because we had a gift, a passion and desire to do it. We are often the most disrespected professionals when we give so much to our communities to make them safe healthier and happier. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Finally, another teacher, who completed a graduate degree at the moment we began distance learning in 2020, summarized a very common feeling many of our other respondents echoed. He wrote:

I graduated with my Master's in May of 2020, feeling hopeful and excited to start using my skills in my own classroom. I quickly realized that most of the educational sphere does not truly care about supporting teachers or students. Throughout the pandemic, I have seen and heard arguments for the following: cameras to monitor classrooms, unqualified National Guard members as substitute teachers, anti-responsive classroom backlash, a push to continue standardized tests (despite the pandemic), lower salaries, blatant disrespect for teachers and paraprofessionals, and blame games about learning loss. All of these unbelievable topics are being peddled by non-educators, people with no skin in the game. Many teachers like me are searching for someone to listen to their concerns, I've been met with a deafening silence. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

We cannot afford to continue to omit the voices of educators from building-level and district-level decisions. When educators recognize student needs and are unable to meet them because they have no seat at decision-making tables, we will continue to lose educators.

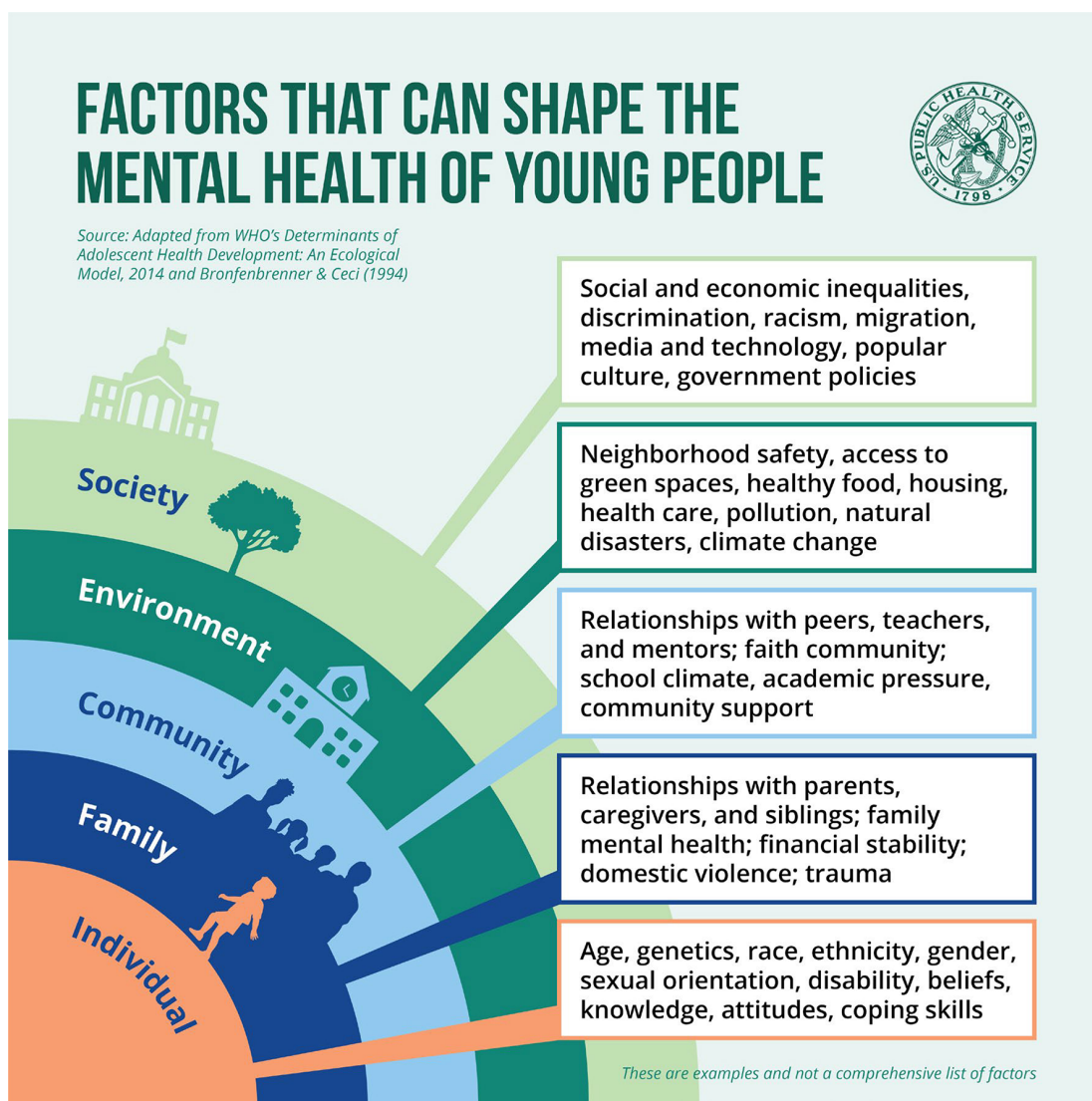
Theme #3: Student mental and social emotional health is at a crisis level

Educators polled for the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey* have made it clear that over the past two-and-a-half years that student mental health, as well as the lack of social-emotional development of students, are at crisis levels that surpass anything they have seen before. Figure 2, reproduced from the research of the staff at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Surgeon General's Office, depicts the overlapping and interconnected layers that shape the mental health of young people. Though the problem has been made far more acute by the disruptions, inequities and the trauma of the pandemic, the issue itself has been a growing problem in our schools for years. And instead of addressing the problem by providing adequate supports, budgets have been so starved that districts maintain fewer counselors, social workers, and other staff needed to address the mental health needs of students.

“Rates of childhood mental health concerns and suicide rose steadily between 2010 and 2020” and “by 2018 suicide was the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association, 2021)

By 2015, the United States had far exceeded all other industrialized countries with the highest levels of child poverty (Darling-Hammond L., 2022). In 2019, five million children in the United States were living in poverty, and by 2021, that number had risen to six million (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). At the same time, the state legislature has been steadily disinvesting in public systems and social safety nets for decades, leaving not just schools starved for operating resources, but straining and depleting resources for social services, including affordable housing, basic health care, and access to healthy food, all of which could otherwise support families.

Figure 2: Elements of Adolescent Mental Health



Source: (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2021, December, p. 7)

U.S. students are facing what many medical experts have termed a “student mental health pandemic.” A joint declaration by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association has declared a national state of emergency in children’s mental health. That declaration explains that, “Rates of childhood mental health concerns and suicide rose steadily between 2010 and 2020” and “by 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24” (American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association, 2021).

“It’s estimated that as of June 2021, more than 140,000 children in the US had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19.” – U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murphy, M.D., M.B.A.

The pediatric and hospital associations are not the only agencies sounding the alarm about student mental health. In December 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murphy, M.D., M.B.A. issued this advisory on youth mental health:

During the pandemic, children, adolescents, and young adults have faced unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed their world, including how they attend school, interact with friends, and receive health care. They missed first days of school, months or even years of in-person schooling, graduation ceremonies, sports competitions, playdates, and time with relatives. They and their family may have lost access to mental health care, social services, income, food, or housing. They may have had COVID-19 themselves, suffered from long COVID symptoms, or lost a loved one to the disease—it's estimated that as of June 2021, more than 140,000 children in the US had lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19.

Since the pandemic began, rates of psychological distress among young people, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, have increased. Recent research covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms. Negative emotions or behaviors such as impulsivity and irritability—associated with conditions such as ADHD—appear to have moderately increased. Early clinical data are also concerning: In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to the same time period in early 2019. Moreover, pandemic-related measures reduced in-person interactions among children, friends, social supports, and professionals such as teachers, school counselors, pediatricians, and child welfare workers. This made it harder to recognize signs of child abuse, mental health concerns, and other challenges.

During the pandemic, young people also experienced other challenges that may have affected their mental and emotional wellbeing: the national reckoning over the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police officers, including the murder of George Floyd; COVID-related violence against Asian Americans; gun violence; an increasingly polarized political dialogue; growing concerns about climate change; and emotionally-charged misinformation. (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2021, December, p. 9)

The Surgeon General further offered a comprehensive account of risk factors and structural barriers that disproportionately impact certain categories of students. Table 8 provides a summary of how different categories of students faced unique challenges, and Table 9 adds an additional lens accounting for intersectional identities, discrimination, and COVID-19 transmission. Finally, Table 10 offers the nine risk factors that can be correlated with COVID-related mental health deterioration in youth.

Table 8: Demographics at Higher Risk of Pandemic-Related Mental Health Challenges

Category of student	Reason for an increased risk of mental health challenges
Youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities	Some may have found it difficult to manage disruptions to school and services such as: special education, counseling, occupational therapy, and speech therapy.
American Indian and Alaska Native youth	Many faced challenges staying connected with friends and attending school, due to limited internet access. Native Americans were disproportionately impacted by the digital divide more than any other racial demographic.
Black youth	More likely than any other demographic to have lost a parent or caregiver to COVID-19.
Latine ⁱ youth	Reported high rates of loneliness and poor or decreased mental health during the pandemic.
Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander youth	Reported increased stress due to COVID-19 related hate and harassment.
LGBTQ+ youth	Lost access to school-based services and were sometimes confined to homes where they were not supported or accepted.
Low-income youth	Faced economic, educational, and social disruptions (for example, losing access to free school lunches).
Youth in rural areas	Faced additional challenges participating in school or accessing mental health services, often due to limited internet connectivity.
Youth in immigrant households	Faced language and technology barriers to accessing health care services and education.
Special youth populations	Youth involved with the juvenile justice system, or child welfare systems, as well as runaway youth and youth experiencing homelessness.

ⁱ We recognize and honor the conversation within the Latino and Latina community regarding a proper label that honors both the linguistic heritage of all Latino/Latina people. In previous reports, we have used the gender neutral term "LatinX," but we have adopted to move away from this term because it imposes the letter "x" which is seen as a letter from a colonizing language that is being placed upon people who identify with the Latino/Latina community. In addition, we know that only about 5% of U.S. Latino/Latina citizens acknowledge Latin(x) as an appropriate label. We will use the term "Latine" throughout this document. Anguka (2021) has explained Latine "is also a gender-neutral alternative to Latino, but as opposed to Latinx, it is easier to pronounce in Spanish" (Anguka, 2021).

Source: (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2021, December, p. 11)

Table 9: Compounding Factors Increasing the COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Crisis

Consideration	Reason for an increased risk of mental health challenges
Intersectional identities	Many young people are part of more than one at-risk group, which can put them at even higher risk of mental health challenges. For example, children with IDD who lost a parent to COVID-19, or Black children from low-income families, may require additional support to address multiple risk factors.
Discrimination	Some groups of youth and their families, such as people of color, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, may be more hesitant to engage with the health care system (including mental health services) due to current and past experiences with discrimination.
Elevated risk of transmission	Children with mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder, as well as schizophrenia spectrum disorders, are at elevated risk of severe COVID-19 illness.

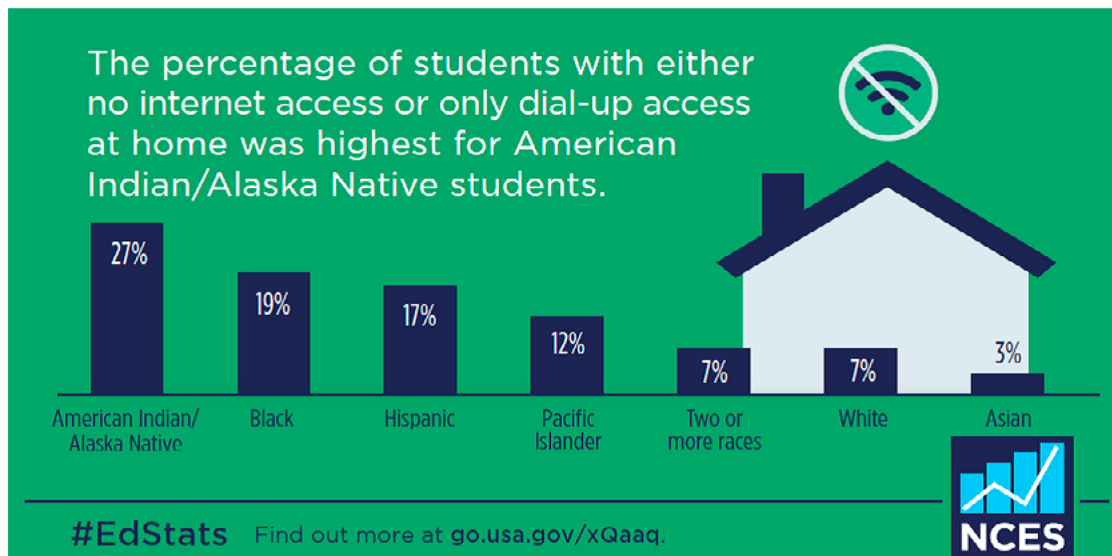
Source: (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2021, December, p. 11)

Unfortunately, state and federal leaders have not provided educators with the necessary resources to help improve student mental health. In our public schools today, it is estimated that there is one school psychologist for every 1,381 students (the nationally recommended ratio is 1:500-700 students), there is one school counselor for every 482 students (the American School Counselor Association recommends 1:250), and only 39% of schools in the United States have full-time nurses (Strauss, 2022, pp. 3-4). Our schools were facing a crisis in student mental health before the pandemic. Now, that crisis has exploded, and our schools, unequipped to support these students before the pandemic, are crippled by the need now.

As Minnesota's student mental health rates increased, the legislature decided that instead of better preparing educators to meet those needs, it would instead address the teacher shortage by removing requirements for any preparation at all, thereby offering students with greater needs educators with fewer resources, less or no preparation. The 2017 legislative overhaul of teacher licenses created a pathway to become a fully licensed teacher in Minnesota without any teacher preparation—no content-specific training and no pedagogical training required—despite the fact that student needs are more, not less, complex, and despite knowing that teachers without preparation lead to lower student academic achievement and are the most likely to leave the profession.

The problem of increased student needs and no support to meet those needs, a problem that pushes educators out of the profession, is not one to be solved by efforts to simply get more bodies in the door more quickly. Such efforts simply make the attrition problem worse. The students in Minnesota who are most likely to have teachers who lack pedagogical and content-specific training and who are in buildings that have the highest attrition rates, are our students of color and our students living in poverty.

Figure 3: Digital Divide by Racial Demographics



Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (with Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson, P. W., Jr., Griffith, M., Klevan, S., Maier, A., Martinez, M., Melnick, H., Truong, N., Wojcikiewicz, S.). (2020). Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. (p.5).

This material was adapted and reproduced from the above cited source. The full report can be found online at <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restarting-reinventing-school-covid>. We have reproduced the material in accordance with the work's license under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

*No changes, alterations, or reproduction of materials from the original report suggest that the original creators of the material endorse or support or use of the information in this document. The use of this material solely reflects the opinion of the EPIC program at Education Minnesota.

Table 10: Youth Mental Health Risk Factors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

This table presents selected risk factors from the U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. For a complete list, see the full report at [hhs.gov](https://www.hhs.gov) (The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2021, December, p. 10).

Risk Factors Contributing to Youth Mental Health Symptoms During the Pandemic	
Having mental health challenges before the pandemic.	
Living in an urban area or an area with more severe COVID-19 outbreaks.	
Having parents or caregivers who were frontline workers.	
Having parents or caregivers at elevated risk of burnout (for example, due to parenting demands).	
Being worried about COVID-19.	
Experiencing disruptions in routine, such as not seeing friends or going to school in person.	
Experiencing more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) ^y such as abuse or neglect.	
Experiencing more financial instability, food shortages, or housing instability.	
Experiencing trauma, such as losing a family member or caregiver to COVID-19.	

Source: adapted from (The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2021, December, p. 10)

Throughout the surveying process followed by the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey*, which has published four reports since April 2021 highlighting results from surveys of educators, families, and students, student mental health has consistently remained near or at the top of the list of concerns identified by administrators, educators and families (Parr, et al., 2022, pp. 25-27).

Despite watching the increase in student mental health problems over the past 10 years, and despite watching the exponential increase in student mental health problems in the first years of the pandemic, many educators assumed that the return to in-person learning would come with new supports, assumed that schools knew that they had to better support students. But, as one teacher explained, **“as we came back to teaching this year, we came back as if it was business as usual. Same bell schedule, no additional mental health supports, less support staff, and large class sizes of students with higher needs in academics, social emotional learning, mental health, need for connection, and time to be in community. As a result, we have witnessed increased reactions between students, bigger emotions, increased students reporting headaches and going through hard emotional situations”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Another classroom teacher described the return of students to in-person learning to be **“messy and chaotic,”** as students jockeyed for attention. In addition, a secondary teacher in the Robbinsdale Area Schools writes, **“There is NO discipline in our school. Violence against students and staff has escalated to an extreme that I have never seen in my 27 years of teaching. There are few resources for the mental health of our students or staff”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A preschool teacher described the consequences of student mental health and loss of social emotional development for our youngest learners: **“Some children have never been to the grocery store, the library, the zoo, never had a playdate. These children are behind socially and emotionally. They have not learned skills of coping, regulating their emotions, interacting with adults appropriately, or interacting with other children appropriately. Districts should be hiring more support staff, school counselors, early childhood counselors”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

However, as districts face budget shortfalls linked to enrollment declines and a failure of the Minnesota legislature to fund schools, in many districts, the coming years will include not more such hires, but reductions in the positions that already exist. A middle school teacher explained that, “many of my eighth-grade students are acting like fifth or sixth graders” because they have not been able to experience the social development expected during those years of growth (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

“As we came back to teaching this year, we came back as if it was business as usual. Same bell schedule, no additional mental health supports, less support staff, and large class sizes of students with higher needs in academics, social emotional learning, mental health, need for connection, and time to be in community. As a result, we have witnessed increased reactions between students, bigger emotions, increased students reporting headaches and going through hard emotional situations.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

A speech language pathologist in a school in southwestern Minnesota wrote: **“I have students failing class after class because they struggle with attention and initiation because of their ADHD diagnosis or their mental health”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). A school counselor with over 20 years of experience wrote, **“I have never witnessed anywhere near this degree of students who are struggling with anxiety and depression. The number of students I had who entered a mental health treatment program in the past year has more than quadrupled. With caseloads of over 400 students, it is very challenging to be as proactive as we would like to be with the mental health needs of students. There have been days this year during which I have met with 2-3 students because they had indicated having suicidal thoughts”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Educators cite a lack of support for student mental health and social emotional development needs over and over again when asked why they are considering leaving the profession. A secondary teacher in the south metro wrote that “with this extreme increase in mental health concerns, there has been miniscule support from the district and state levels outside of sending some links in email. Our students are in dire need, and we are doing a disservice to them by not providing additional mental health supports. The pandemic has opened our eyes to the needs of these students, and yet, we are failing them” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Another educator working in an elementary settings spoke of suicides in her school and her concern that too many children are academically delayed and lack social skills due to the constant disruptions caused by COVID-19 (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

“With this extreme increase in mental health concerns, there has been miniscule support from the district and state levels outside of sending some links in email. Our students are in dire need, and we are doing a disservice to them by not providing additional mental health supports. The pandemic has opened our eyes to the needs of these students, and yet, we are failing them.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

A teacher from northern Minnesota pointed out that expectations from administrators and families that teachers fix all of this without additional supports is nonsense. The teacher said, **“not only are we expected to transition back” but also “stay on top of which students are quarantining, help those students that are quarantined, help our students with the dramatic decline in mental health and the dramatic increase in student behaviors, we are somehow supposed to magically help our students ‘catch up’”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

A behavior and mental health paraprofessional added to this sentiment by saying, **“We need more mental health professionals in our schools”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). Another educator commented, **“Teachers are in an uphill battle right now to find a way to support student mental health, social development, and academic progress with the same funding, supplies, and resources [that we had] prior to the pandemic. I understand that our district has received funding to cover some of the materials and resources required to create a safe environment. As classroom teacher, what I have access to has not changed in any way. More things are being asked of teachers for the sake of student needs without increased support”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Teacher attrition rates are of no surprise when we look at the unmet student mental health needs through the eyes of our educators. Scholars who have been studying teacher attrition over the past several decades have pointed out again and again that teachers are more likely to stay in the field when they believe they can make a difference in student lives. Table 11 provides recommendations from the Learning Policy Institute on how to address student mental health needs during periods of transition and change. The items presented in that list offer places Minnesota lawmakers can start helping educators combat many disturbing trends they are witnessing in their classrooms.

Table 11: Addressing Student Social Emotional Development During COVID-Related Transitions

Put it Into Practice: Addressing Students' Developmental Needs During Transition

Students go through many transitions from early childhood to young adulthood, such as the annual return from summer break or the transition from middle to high school. What happens during these transitions, and the degree to which students' developmental needs are met, influence their social and emotional competencies and long-term success. To help students with the important transition into this coming school year, identify ways to meet their developmental needs. For example:

- **In early childhood programs:** Provide young children with simple strategies for exploring, discussing, and regulating their emotions. Read-alouds offer an easy way to prompt conversations about how big changes make them feel.
- **In elementary school:** Support students in developing relationship-building and conflict-resolution skills by helping them co-create shared agreements for their new class or distance learning environment.
- **In middle school:** Offer adolescents an opportunity to reconnect and create a sense of closure from the previous school year, such as by writing letters to their former classmates or teachers, or discussing with peers how the last few months will impact their perspectives as they enter a new grade.
- **In high school:** Provide older students with a way to reflect on and document their experience and what they've learned about themselves during the pandemic, either through journal writing, artwork, music, or other creative outlets.

For more practices, review the SEL Providers Council website.

Source: (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020, p. 36). CASEL. (2020). An initial guide to leveraging the power of social and emotional learning as you prepare to reopen and renew your school community.

This material was adapted and reproduced from the above cited source. The full report can be found online at <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restarting-reinventing-school-covid>. We have reproduced the material in accordance with the work's license under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

**No changes, alterations, or reproduction of materials from the original report suggest that the original creators of the material endorse or support or use of the information in this document. The use of this material solely reflects the opinion of the EPIC program at Education Minnesota.*

In a recent poll funded by the National Education Association, a poll about the current "five-alarm crisis," in which we are facing "an exodus as more than half of our nation's teachers and other school staff are now indicating they will be leaving education sooner than planned," 94% of educators said increased mental health supports for students is necessary in order to mitigate burnout (GBAO and The National Education Association, 2022, p. 3). And yet we have no reason to be surprised. We have watched the steady increase in student mental health problems for well over a decade, and failed year after year to fund schools so that they might meet those needs.

Theme #4: Educators are reporting extraordinarily high levels of concern related to their own physical and mental health

While 10 percent of the general population reported symptoms of depression, when we isolate teachers, that percentage almost triples to 27 percent.

Educators are making it clear that their health and well-being are severely impacted by current conditions in our schools. The results of the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey* confirmed that mental well-being topped the list of personal concerns for licensed educators, as shown in Figure 4. We know that educator burnout is at an all-time high. According to the 2021 RAND survey report, based on a national survey, job-related stress threatens the teacher supply, teachers experience greater levels of stress and symptoms of depression than the general population:

In January 2021, teachers experienced more frequent job-related stress than employed adults nationally. Forty percent of employed adults reported experiencing frequent job-related stress, compared with 78 percent of teachers. More teachers also reported experiencing depressive symptoms than did the general population. (Steiner, 2021, p. 6)

While 10 percent of the general population reported symptoms of depression, when we isolate teachers, that percentage almost triples to 27 percent. To make the point more specific to Minnesota, one of the telling findings of the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey*, repeated over its various reports, is that educators are now identifying their own mental health as one of their top three concerns (Parr, et al., 2022, p. 4). In our own survey data, this finding is validated again and again. A secondary teacher on extended leave from a school in a metro-area suburb described the connection between conditions in the schools and the well-being of educators:

The massive amount of work and the lack of rest time during the first two years of the pandemic affected my health in many ways, to the point that I couldn't even make time to see my grandkids for a few hours on weekends or engage in leisure activities. I couldn't make simple decisions outside of my work duties and would panic if anything happened during off hours that would keep me from continuing lesson planning or checking student work and progress online. I made the difficult decision to leave, and my leave of absence may be a permanent exit from the profession, an early retirement from teaching. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

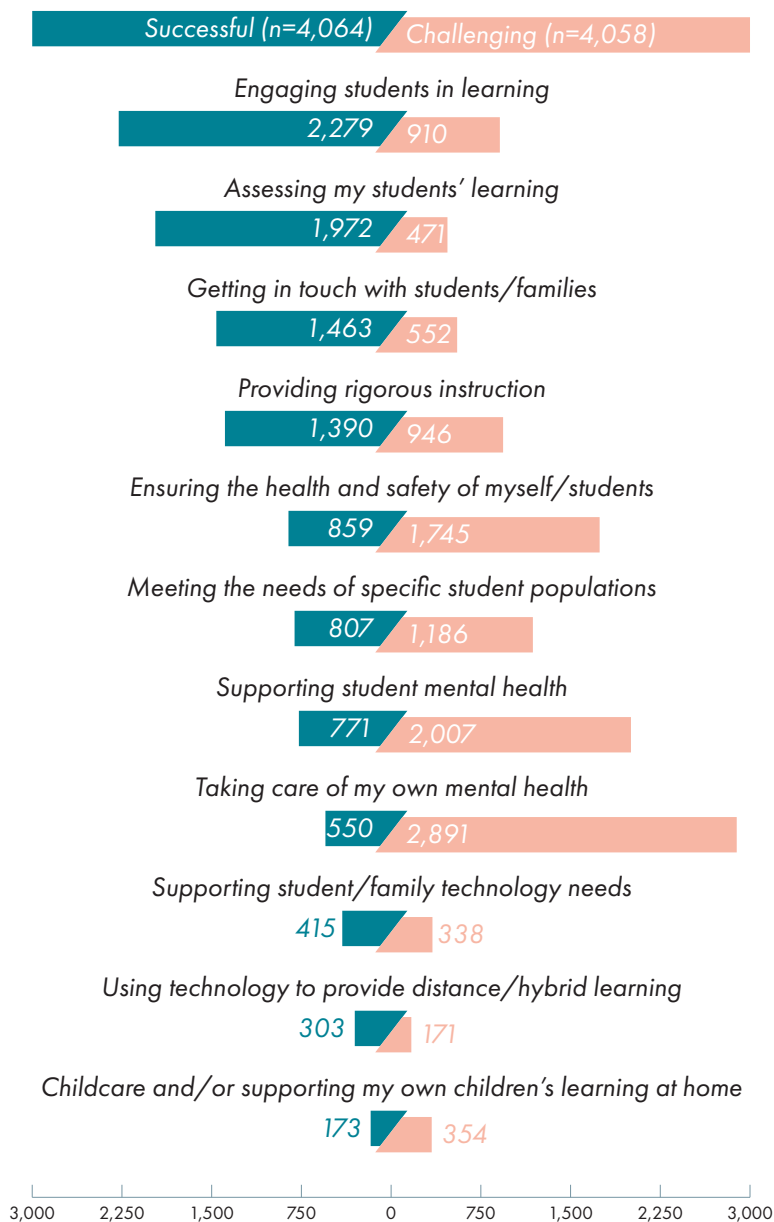
An elementary teacher from southeast Minnesota echoed a similar refrain:

I have sacrificed countless nights and weekends that I could have been with my family because I thought it would make me more effective as a teacher. I can't do it anymore. I have my own two children, who have gotten a shell of a mother because teaching has taken everything from me—my time, my energy, my money, my confidence, my heart, my passion, my sense of purpose, and my physical health—even my will to live. For the first time in my life, I contemplate suicide on a weekly basis. I am on medication for anxiety and depression and have gained over 50 pounds due to the stress of teaching. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Figure 4: Top Challenges Facing Minnesota Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Teachers most frequently reported *engaging students in learning, assessing their students' learning, and getting in touch with students/families* as their top three areas of success. The top three areas of reported challenge among teachers were *taking care of their own mental health, supporting student mental health, and ensuring the health and safety of themselves/students*.

Teachers: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month. **Taking care of their own mental health** and **supporting student mental health** were the top two challenges reported by teachers.



Source: (Comprehensive Center Network, February 2022, p. 20)

A school nurse in southern Minnesota explained how working conditions impacted her own health:

Prolonged chronic stress throughout the pandemic has taken a serious toll on my own physical and mental health as well as many of my colleagues. After over a year of quadrupled workload and heightened stress levels, the Omicron spike was the straw that broke the camel's back. I believe my autoimmune condition flared due to chronic stress and I developed chronic migraines for months and suffered immensely. The workload was so intense that I lost my strength and resilience and became completely burned out. I hope and pray I can regain my health and passion to serve again. I served on a community wellness committee a few years ago and was blown away by all the incredible resources and support in the corporate world for their employees. I believe we should have the same in public education, the backbone of society. How can we expect high quality outcomes when our employees are facing unmanageable workloads, are completely burned out, struggling with their own well-being and often don't feel fully supported? (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

A special education teacher from the metro area wrote, **"we are overworked, overwhelmed, and extremely stressed. Almost every day, I consider leaving the profession altogether"** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

The political landscape that created and nurtured community anger around masking and other COVID-19 protocol requirements, curricula, remote learning, and more, have led to disastrous and untenable conditions for teachers, who have very little to no say in decisions related to any of these critical matters, but who nevertheless take the blame from parents and community members. This dynamic is not new, but it has worsened exponentially. A classroom teacher from northern Minnesota explains that during her previous 18 years of teaching, she had ONE negative interaction with a parent. However, in the 2020-2021 school year, she wrote, she was **"sworn at, screamed at, accused of not teaching/doing my job, and threatened. When you have nothing left to give, you cannot continue to fight. I do not have that fight any longer. I am a shell of the person I was two years ago"** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

"Simply put, things are not good; teachers are not well."
(EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Over and over again, respondents to our survey wrote about the impact of working conditions on their well-being. It is a problem that is so severe that many cannot even finish out the school year. A high school teacher in the south metro area explained: **“I am leaving the profession. I have never been so stressed in my life as I am right now. The anxiety that envelopes my chest daily as I enter my building is overwhelming.”** Another teacher echoed this sentiment by saying, **“Simply put, things are not good; teachers are not well”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Teacher stress in the United States is higher right now than ever before, as far as is measurable. According to RAND’s recent survey of 1,000 former public school teachers nationwide, not only were teachers teaching far more hours than before the pandemic; they were also sleeping less. Before the pandemic, 74 percent of teachers slept less than eight hours per night. During the pandemic, “this increased to 83 percent of teacher leavers” (Diliberti, 2021, p. 10). The report’s title in itself is telling: *Stress Topped the Reasons Why Public School Teachers Quit, Even Before COVID-19*. The working conditions were already bad, with teachers lacking the resources, including time, to make a difference in the lives of their students. The pandemic “seems to have exacerbated what were high stress levels” (Diliberti, 2021, p. 1). Stress, say the authors of the RAND report, “was the most common reason for leaving public school teaching early” (Diliberti, 2021, p. 1).

Theme #5: Education Support Professionals feel disrespected and exploited

Minnesota's education support professionals (ESPs) provide vital services to their school communities, and they often spend as much, if not more, time providing direct services to students than licensed staff. Unfortunately, they earn less than workers in professions in food service and retail and many have walked off the job during the pandemic because they have been silenced and forced to work in dangerous conditions by administrators and districts. Table 12 presents the most recent data on the average salary for Minnesota's K-12 ESPs, and Figure 5 provides a visual to understand how ESP compensation has been far outpaced by inflation. In short, Minnesota's ESPs are underappreciated and undercompensated.

Table 12: Compensation Rates for Minnesota ESPs 2020-2021

Total ESPs working in MN K-12 schools: 40,451

Average salary for ESPs working in MN K-12 Schools: \$32,859

Earning Category (annual salary)	Percentage of MN ESPs in this Category
Under \$15,000	12.4%
\$15,000-\$24,999	30.6%
\$25,000-\$34,999	23.1%
\$35,000-\$44,999	14.4%
\$45,000 +	19.6%

Source: Adapted from (NEA Research, April 2022)

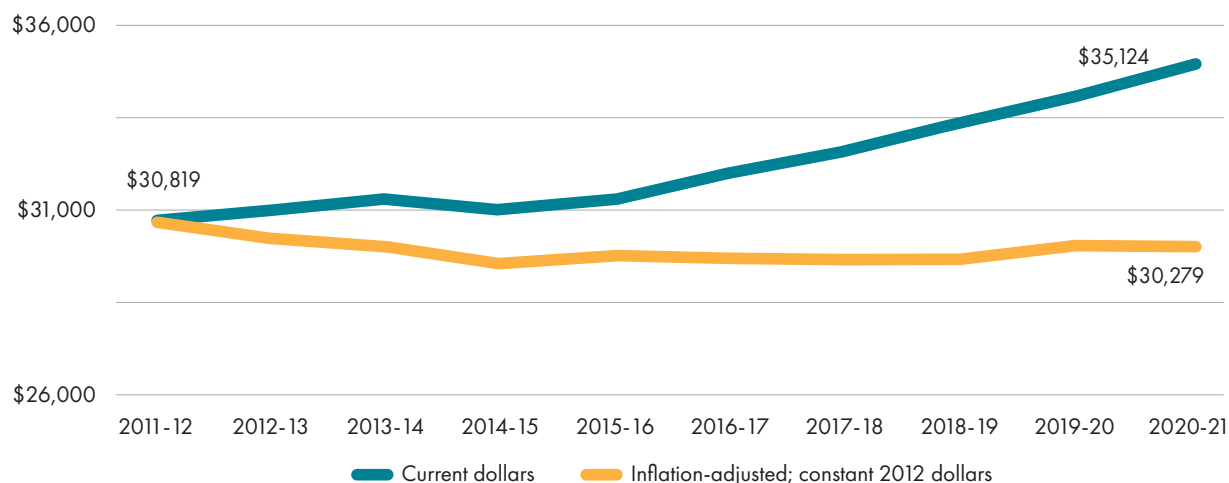
Total ESPs Working in Minnesota K-12 schools: 40,451

Average Salary for ESPs Working in Minnesota K-12 Schools: \$32,859

ESPs are especially critical to the delivery of special education in the state of Minnesota. We have written in other papers that, "in special education settings, ESPs are often the professional staff providing most of the direct support for students. Unfortunately, many ESPs work for minimum wages. Many schools experience high ESP attrition because they can make better wages at fast food establishments in their community" (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 43).

ESPs are quickly leaving education for other fields because of how little respect they receive from peers and policymakers. We have now reached a crisis point in Minnesota. Some metropolitan school districts have hundreds of ESP positions that have stayed empty the entire pandemic. As you will see in the following stories, we know why ESPs are fleeing education. We also know how to stop the attrition of ESPs. Unfortunately, we have yet to act on this knowledge, and this is causing even more problems for the students of Minnesota.

Figure 5: ESP Average National Earnings 2011-2021, Adjusted for Inflation



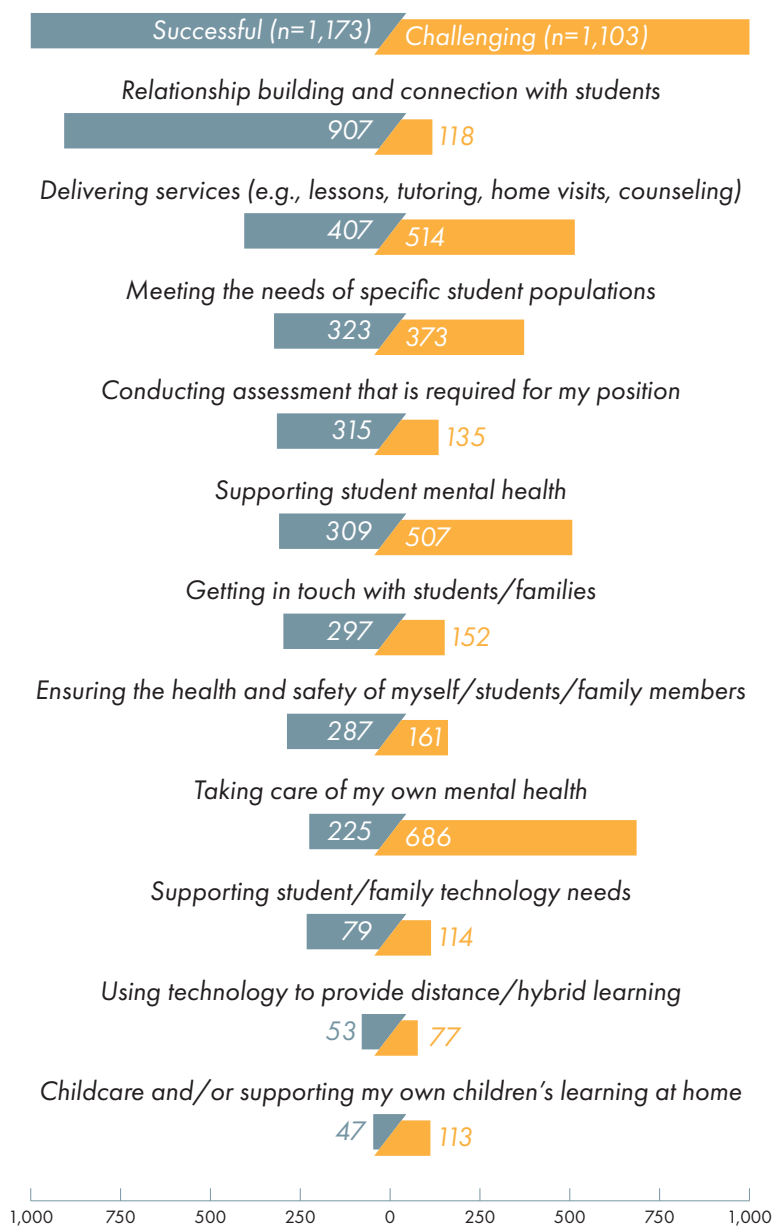
Source: Adapted from (NEA Research, April 2022)

We want to contextualize the voices of ESP by situating their experiences among what we know from the scholarly literature. We must first acknowledge that ESPs receive less attention in the academic literature than licensed educators. Thus, it can often be difficult to speak to known retention strategies that work. However, there has been a recent uptick in ESP research, and we can now more confidently speak to known measures that will improve the careers of these important educators. For example, the researchers who conducted the *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey* directly asked Minnesota ESPs about their “top challenges” in the workplace. Figure 6 provides a summary of their responses, and it should be noted that they too listed “taking care of my own mental health” as one of their biggest challenges.

Figure 6: Top Challenges Facing Minnesota's ESPs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Support professionals' top three reported successes were *relationship building and connection with students*, *delivering services (e.g., lessons, tutoring, home visits, counseling)*, and *meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)*. The top three challenges support professionals reported were *taking care of their own mental health*, *delivering services (e.g., lessons, tutoring, home visits, counseling)*, and *supporting student mental health*.

Support professionals: Choose three areas that were the most successful and three that were the most challenging for you in the past month. Most support professionals reported **relationship building and connection with students** as their top success, while **taking care of their own mental health**, **supporting student mental health**, and **delivering services** were their top three challenges.



Source: (Comprehensive Center Network, February 2022, p. 21)

We want to provide a brief review of this research before we jump to the unique voices of our ESP members since there has been a recent uptick in research on these important educators. Scholars have been documenting the dwindling pool of applicants for ESP positions for the past decade. Giangreco (2010) and others have written, “recent studies reiterated findings from earlier research, suggesting that it remains challenging for some schools to hire and retain a sufficient number of ESPs with desired qualifications. Reasons include lack of respect, training, and administrative support as well as poorly defined job descriptions, low pay and benefits, and limited opportunities for advancement” (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010, p. 44). These conditions did not improve during the global pandemic, and Minnesota schools are now operating without enough ESP support.

We can also directly tie ESP attrition to school finance. A lack of ESPs only exacerbates the funding crises facing school districts. Ghore & York-Barr (2007) have reported on:

the hidden financial and educational costs associated with paraprofessional turnover, including the personnel time devoted to recruiting, screening, interviewing, orienting, and ongoing job embedded training. Turnover can adversely affect students’ educational programs and have a disruptive effect on relationships among team members as well. These recent studies offer suggestions for hiring and retaining qualified paraprofessionals by improving working conditions and treating them as valued members of collaborative teams. (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010, p. 44)

Thankfully, researchers have also given us concrete, simple interventions, some of which are low-cost or no-cost options that can halt ESP attrition. Giangreco and colleagues have found “six interrelated themes that highlighted the strong desire by [ESPs] to feel valued including (a) nonmonetary signs of appreciation, (b) compensation, (c) being entrusted with important paraprofessionals responsibilities (e.g., instruction), (d) noninstructional responsibilities, (e) the need to be listened to, and (f) orientation and support” (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010, pp. 46-47). Districts can stop ESP attrition, but the legislature will need to provide the funds to assist in this process.

We know that Minnesota ESPs want to be part of anti-racism work, and it is time to move these educators off the sidelines and give them the training they need to help everyone close the opportunity gaps that plague public education in this state.

Scholars have also found that lack of professional development opportunities also increases the likelihood that ESPs will leave education for other jobs. Proper training and supervision of ESPs is directly linked to student success and employee satisfaction. Reddy, Lewka, and Glover (2020) reported that ESPs “without effective supervision often provide unclear or inaccurate explanations to students, engage in limited monitoring of student understanding, and offer low-quality feedback to students which have been associated with poor achievement gains” (Reddy, Lekwa, & Glover, 2021, p. 644). Education support professionals “may be among the most marginalized employees in schools as indicated in the studies on respect and appreciation” (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010, p. 50). A lack of development or training only adds to feelings of disrespect. The stories we highlight from our data set provide living examples of how Minnesota can reverse the troubling trend of ESP attrition.

Finally, before we turn to the data from our ESP members, we want to highlight the recent work of Lichte and Sheef (2022), who surveyed a large sample of current ESPs working across the nation and found that “an interest in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) was the most commonly desired area of training identified by survey respondents.” They reported that “81 percent of participants” in their survey said “that they would like initial or additional training regarding CRP” (Lichte & Scheef, 2022, p. 12). Educators across Minnesota are being met with hostility and resistance as they try to embed CRP and other social justice lenses to classroom instruction. We know that Minnesota ESPs want to be part of anti-racism work, and it is time to move these educators off the sidelines and give them the training they need to help everyone close the opportunity gaps that plague public education in this state.

We start this section by reporting a second-hand story from one of our ESPs. One licensed teacher provided this story that she felt speaks to “the voice of the paraprofessional staff who remain silent, because they are afraid to speak the truth.” She offered:

When the pandemic began no one could have anticipated that it would have gone on as long as it has. It has and continues to bring out the ugliest in people. It has also brought to light the lack of respect and value school districts have for their paraprofessional staff....It was decided that paraprofessional staff were expendable and their safety and the safety of their loved ones was not as important as teachers or administration. This is so not right!! Many of them had to make some very hard choices over the past two years. It is sad that we are losing so many hard-working people due to the lack of respect for what they do in our schools. That too many they are just considered to be child care workers and not people who help our future generations learn. Many of them do this job and continue to do it, even though the pay is so bad that they have to work multiple jobs to be able to be a paraprofessional. If that is not dedication, then I don't know what is. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Other ESPs have echoed similar concerns. For example, many respondents reported feeling ignored and overlooked by both teachers and administrators.

Other support professionals explained what it felt like to be used as buffers for administrators and licensed staff during the pandemic. Here is how one described her experiences:

As a paraprofessional, I had many COVID-related challenges in my work. Paraprofessionals were truly on the frontlines and, in many cases, were put in positions where COVID exposure was much more likely. When COVID first became an issue and our district went to distance learning in the spring of 2020, I was assigned to work in the role of emergency child care. I was working with staff and students from a variety of schools. The students were not required to wear masks and we had very little guidance related to COVID and how we should proceed with the emergency child care. Almost all other district staff were working remotely, but we were on the frontlines. (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

The respondents to our questionnaire consistently reported that ESPs were treated as more expendable than other district employees.

Finally, we lift up the voices of two members who encapsulate the reasons we must do better to support and sustain our ESPs. We will never solve the equity crises facing Minnesota schools if we do not support these vital educators. One member wrote,

“I am a para in a high school setting. The pandemic really made it difficult for the students that I worked with. The problems ranged from lack of food, no parental help, technology problems, depression, lack of motivation. These are just some of the problems. Even though the pandemic is improving, it is still having a negative impact on my students. It seems, as in most things, the less advantaged get hurt the most and just puts them further behind. There are no easy answers to this problem. I have been impressed by the dedication of the teachers I work with in their commitment to doing all they can to help their students. And our administration did all they could do to help, in my opinion.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

Another paraprofessional wrote,

“I was fairly confident that with my working knowledge and vast experiences in education I could handle the educational twists of the pandemic. It soon became obvious this was going to be more of a challenge than I thought. First, very little time was given to prep for everything that was involved...Overall, providing the necessary supports for students during the pandemic was a huge challenge causing me to question my role and ask if I was equipped with all the necessary tools. I felt overwhelmed much of the time...I look forward to school days of calm for students and staff. Our students are our future. I want them to learn and grow to reach their individual potential. This is possible when our educators are at their best.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

ESPs are a vital part of public education, and we cannot afford to ignore this reality. We must treat these educators with respect, and we must empower them to help all of us eradicate the inequities in our school systems.

Theme #6: Educators are exhausted by a lack of meaningful support and continuous toxic positivity

Toxic positivity is the dismissal of suffering with false reassurances rather than empathy.

Often, in schools, toxic positivity takes the form of districts telling educators to be well even as they create working conditions in which it is simply impossible to be well.

Educators throughout Minnesota appreciate the kindness and collaboration of administrators who do what they can, but districts have precious little support to offer. There is also a great deal of toxic positivity embedded in district communications with educators. Toxic positivity is the dismissal of suffering with false reassurances rather than empathy. Often, in schools, toxic positivity takes the form of districts telling educators to be well even as they create working conditions in which it is simply impossible to be well.

Health experts from The Psychology Group of Fort Lauderdale, Florida define toxic positivity as “the overgeneralization of a happy, optimistic state that results in the denial, minimization, and invalidation of the authentic human emotional experience” (Quintero & Long). Experts have warned that “just like anything done in excess, when positivity is used to cover up or silence the human experience, it becomes toxic. By disallowing the existence of certain feelings, we fall into a state of denial and repressed emotions” (Quintero & Long). Many educators explained that toxic positivity showed up in many forms over the previous school years too often masking real hurt and pain.

Alvarez (2021) has warned “for educators, toxic positivity takes on various forms, including posters in the break room that say, ‘tomorrow is a new day’ or ‘good vibes only,’ administrators setting up a self-care session (during planning time!), or a table full of free, sometimes stale doughnuts to show teacher appreciation. And some educators are tired of it.” Our research confirmed that Minnesota’s educators have reached their fill of empty, pseudo supports.

Insisting that educators feel good while maintaining impossible working conditions sends a powerful message that invalidates educators’ lived experiences. Current working conditions in our public schools are appalling. There is no need to try to put a positive spin on what’s happening in our schools. There is every need, however, to change the way we fund and build them.

A school social worker from a metro suburb described facing dramatic increases in student mental health problems while her building is understaffed, as well as learning that her district nevertheless cut back on school social work positions and eliminated several school nursing positions. While her social work duties are higher than ever and she has fewer and fewer colleagues on hand to help students cope, she is expected to do more and more, beyond the realm of social work, every day. The expectations her district has for her include working from home and beyond work hours, taking on administrative duties such as handling disciplinary and investigation issues, responding to all walkie talkie calls regardless of their relation to school social work issues, and “**watching my**

peers cry DAILY.” And against this backdrop, the district reminds their staff to **“take care of yourselves,”** and **“remember, you have to feel good so that you can do better with students!”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).


Insisting that educators feel good while maintaining impossible working conditions sends a powerful message that invalidates educators’ lived experiences. Current working conditions in our public schools are appalling. There is no need to try to put a positive spin on what’s happening in our schools. There is every need, however, to change what’s happening in our schools.

The public discourse around education is dishonest, and it uses educators as scapegoats for problems far beyond their control. Education policy in the U.S. in general and Minnesota in particular has for over a decade upheld the narrative that the problem with education is that we have bad teachers. States like Florida and Texas have attempted to “solve” this unquestioned problem by making it increasingly easy to fire teachers. But because the problems are so much larger than the abilities of one teacher over another, such measures have not led to any increase in student achievement or decrease in racial gaps representing student opportunity and outcomes. Of course they haven’t. Though student outcomes vary widely depending on the quality of the teacher, a teacher’s effectiveness and willingness to stay in the profession are powerfully correlated to how supported they are. And the failure to fully fund our education system, both at federal and state levels, has led to a crisis in the profession.

As it turns out, public schools exist in communities whose social services have also been underfunded by legislatures year after year. This is all happening against the backdrop of an economy that values wealth at the very top over any public good. This leads to a magnitude of problems for many schools, and politicians too often look for an easy scapegoat. Some of the politically expedient policymakers too often point to educators as the problem. This is entirely dishonest, and it supports a narrative that stops us from having an honest statewide conversation about what’s happening in our schools.

“The amount of disrespect toward teachers slightly improved at the beginning of the pandemic, then took a staggering plunge the longer it went on, despite the fact that teachers did not have any influence over the decisions being made.” (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022)

At the start of the pandemic, communities rallied around their teachers. As one elementary teacher from rural Minnesota explained, **“the amount of disrespect toward teachers slightly improved at the beginning of the pandemic, then took a staggering plunge the longer it went on, despite the fact that teachers did not have any influence over the decisions being made”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). And then politicians saw an opportunity to distract public attention from systemic failures by creating misleading narratives about both the pandemic itself and what happens in classrooms. Politicians have sought to direct public anger away from the systems they have failed to fund and toward individual educators who have no control over the decisions being made. The pandemic created stress for everybody. Related to education, families harbored anger COVID protocols and lack thereof, anger at the fast-growing and inexcusable racial gaps in our education system (as well as our economic and social systems), anger at a system that required parents to report to work but did not have a solution for their kids when schools had to operate remotely, anger that many families do not have the internet access to make distance learning possible.



Others wrote of being made to feel like **“punching bags,”** and about families expecting them to change or ignore COVID protocols, demanding in-person learning when there was no safe way to provide it. A secondary teacher from southeastern Minnesota wrote **“I had hoped that people would begin to understand the vital role that schools and educators play in students’ lives when we first went into distance learning, and for a while, many were appreciative, but once businesses and families were inconvenienced for an extended period of time, we became the target of their frustrations and negative emotions.”** An elementary music teacher wrote that the public rancor around schools has been **“debilitating”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Some politicians know it is far easier to convince families that the problems they are facing with schools, no matter how complex, how inequitable, or how damaging, are rooted in bad teachers rather than in their own decades-long policy of underfunding schools. Indeed, we know that the quality of the teacher is among the top predictors of student success. We also know, as should every politician, that when we fail to support education, even the best teachers cannot make the difference in student lives that they intend to make. We need to be smarter than that, and we need to demand better from those who represent our districts.

Theme #7: State and federal governments continue to fail special education students and the educators who serve them

The pandemic placed extraordinary pressure on special education students and the educators that serve them. Education Minnesota members have raised the funding, staffing, and workload problems that plague the successful delivery of special education services in the state of Minnesota. We refer everyone to our previous EPIC paper, *Improving Special Education Services in Minnesota Schools*, which was directed by a previous iteration of the Special Education Taskforce of Education Minnesota. In that paper, our members defined terminology specific to special education, dissected the decisions that have created the special education cross-subsidy, reported on the tremendous workloads that crush special education case managers, and offered three opportunities for change as well as six immediate solutions to improve special education services in the state.

As has been the case with other stressors on educators leaving to our current staffing crisis, the problems endemic to special education have been growing for years.

- The state and federal government have never met the promise and legal mandate of fully funding special education. The U.S. federal government promised to fund special education services at the rate of 40% when IDEA was passed. It has never even met half of this promise. Federal funding for mandatory special education services fluctuates between 12%-18% annually. State and local governments are required to meet the gaps left by the federal government and provide the additional 60% that the federal government does not cover.
- Special education positions are the hardest to fill. Many districts in rural Minnesota struggle to find applicants, especially applicants with the appropriate licensure, to fill open teaching jobs, and most special education students have teachers who either have no preparation at all or who have training in other licensure areas and are teaching in special education on out-of-field permissions.
- Special education teachers are leaving the profession at rates that far surpass their general education colleagues.
- Special education ESPs are often given difficult assignments and very little training which can lead to injury or poor educational settings for students. This causes many special education ESPs to walk off the job.
- Special education case managers are carrying workloads that are the equivalent of 2.0. Districts are required by state statute to set a minimum caseload for special education teachers, but this requirement has not changed practice. Most districts simply adopt a policy that says "caseloads are at the discretion of the Superintendent." We have districts in the state of Minnesota in which special education teachers would have to work 80 hours a week, every week of the year, just to meet the direct service hours students are entitled to in their IEPs.

We have created an unsustainable work environment for our special education teachers in this state. The stories we gathered show that the pandemic only exacerbated the problems that existed before COVID-19. There is no more time for inaction if we hope to meet the needs of special education students and educators.

We received several responses from both special education teachers and special education ESPs. However, educators in special education are held to an even higher standard of privacy as it relates to student data due to the specific nature of their work. Thus, very few of our survey respondents wanted to be quoted directly for fear of being identified or accidentally identifying a student. This is a position we wholly respect. In this section, we will paraphrase some general themes we heard in order to respect the privacy wishes of our members.

Here is a list of special education-related themes that we gathered from the larger data set:

- Many educators felt their districts were worried about financial resources, and they reported feeling pressured to go as minimal as possible on recommendations for student support services. Some members hypothesized that administrators were worried about the cost of additional services, so they pressured IEP teams to keep financial constraints in mind.
- Other educators working in special education felt they were scared into recommending fewer interventions with false information. Some districts claimed that any additional make up service would fall directly on the backs of the special education teachers recommending the services. These members felt caught between naming what their students needed and having very few resources to meet those needs.
- Special education teachers lamented the fact that administrators do not account for grade level differences when assigning caseloads. Most respondents noted that elementary evaluations normally take significantly longer than evaluations of secondary students. However, our respondents said these variations in work time were rarely accounted for even as caseloads rose as staff numbers dwindled.
- Itinerant special education teachers reported that districts too often fail to account for the extra burden “indirect service time” places on them. For example, an itinerant special education teacher may need to conduct evaluations in as many as nine different buildings which requires significant travel time. These travel restrictions leave less time for the actual evaluation or paperwork associated with evaluation, and the educators end up spending nights and weekends on their due process work. The educators are rarely compensated for these extra hours.
- Special education teachers in their first five years of service wrote to us with unique concerns. We heard from teachers that would start every workday early, always skipped lunch, and always stayed late and worked weekends. This obviously took tremendous tolls on their personal lives, mental health, and physical well-being.
- Some special education teachers reported that their caseload levels pushed them to such high levels of burnout that they had to seek full-time mental health treatment.
- Finally, multiple special education teachers lamented the extreme shortage of paraprofessional support and due process ESPs which led to even more work for overworked case managers.

The general public would be shocked if they knew how starved special education teachers are for help and resources, and how few teachers of record in special education assignments have the training required by federal law to be in those assignments.

Educators working in special education settings worked under conditions that are inexcusable. They were thrown between learning modalities. One respondent stated: **“two weeks ago, our elementary staff embarked on our fourth ‘first day of school’ after rolling with model change after model change. With every change in guideline, every IEP change, every new cleaning procedure, our teams have risen to the challenge”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022). Another educator pointed out that before the pandemic, the shortage of special education teachers meant her district had decide to increase caseloads by 7-10 students per teacher, and then when the pandemic hit and new special education requirements were put in place, that dramatically increased the time spent on paperwork. She finished her story, **“I intend to quit. I feel taken advantage of”** (EdMN Data Set, pandemic stories, Spring 2022).

Part II: Where do we go from here?

If Minnesota is to make meaningful policy changes with the intent of salvaging the teacher attrition crisis, we will need to remember that the teacher shortage was well-established and increasingly problematic before the pandemic. The teacher shortage has been exacerbated by the conditions wrought by the pandemic, to be sure, but Minnesota was already in a crisis created and driven by policy.

First, we have to solve the educator attrition crisis. This will require policymakers to abandon the idea that simply lowering licensure requirements will bring more people to the field of education. If Minnesota is to make meaningful policy changes with the intent of salvaging the teacher attrition crisis, we will need to remember that the teacher shortage was well-established and increasingly problematic before the pandemic. The teacher shortage has been exacerbated by the conditions wrought by the pandemic, to be sure, but Minnesota was already in a crisis created and driven by policy. To address this problem, it would be a waste of precious time to pretend that the problems will go away with the easing of pandemic restrictions. This is a crisis we created long ago. To fix it, we will have to acknowledge the problems are deeply imbedded and have the courage to address those issues.

In order to move in a direction that will make any significant headway toward improving teacher retention and the student achievement that comes with a stable workforce, we need to reframe the discussion around the shortage, which for 10 years has focused myopically on simply getting bodies into schools by eliminating any expectations for quality or knowledge or expertise at the level of hiring and licensure (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). Because of the recession, the U.S. laid off teachers between 2008 and 2014. As the economy improved, the demand for teachers to replace those whose positions had been eliminated during the recession was high. But the supply of teachers had already started to wane, and the supply has continued to decrease ever since.

In 2016, the Learning Policy Institute estimated that by 2018, the gap between the number of teachers necessary to staff the nation's public and charter schools and the number of teachers available would reflect a shortage of over 100,000 teachers by 2022 (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). And indeed, by 2018, there were over 100,000 positions in the U.S. that were either filled with emergency hires lacking preparation or teachers who were otherwise not professionally credentialed, or that were simply unfilled (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). Education Minnesota's Educator Policy Innovation Center published a report, *Smart Solutions to Minnesota's Teacher Shortage*, pointing to how bad the problem had already become in 2016 (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016). Since that time, the disparity between supply and demand has continued to grow (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022).

Shortages around the country and in Minnesota have been most acute in special education, STEM, and English as a second language fields, and career and technical education. Teacher preparation enrollment declined by 35% from 2010 to 2018, and that includes a decline in the numbers of candidates of color and Indigenous teachers (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). This fact is borne out by the numbers of currently licensed teachers in Minnesota being almost twice the number needed to fully staff our state's schools (Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021, p. 14). But the decline in teacher enrollment combined with the number of teachers who leave the profession within the first few years has led to a crisis in Minnesota unlike anything we have seen before.

The correlation between a stable teacher workforce reflected by high retention rates and student achievement has been well documented (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016, p. 16). As teaching and learning happens at the intersection of the relationship between educator and student, teacher turnover has a multitude of deleterious effects on student outcomes (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2018).

And the shortage of teachers of color and Indigenous teachers in Minnesota is appalling, given that 38.03% of students in Minnesota schools are student of color and Indigenous students, and only 4.3% of our teachers are teachers of color or Indigenous teachers (Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2021, p. 17). Minnesota once prepared more teachers than Minnesota needed, though since the landmark Supreme Court case known as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, we have never prepared equitable numbers of teachers of color and Indigenous teachers. Nationally, teacher preparation enrollment between 2010 and 2018 reflected a 26.46% decrease in Black candidates, a 26.54% decrease in Hispanic or Latinx candidates, a 32.57% decrease in Asian candidates, and a 57.64% decrease in Native American or Alaskan Native candidates. Teachers from diverse racial backgrounds have also been leaving the profession at higher rates than white teachers, a trend that has been growing for over 20 years (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2019, p. 23).

The correlation between a stable teacher workforce reflected by high retention rates and student achievement has been well documented (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016, p. 16). As teaching and learning happens at the intersection of the relationship between educator and student, teacher turnover has a multitude of deleterious effects on student outcomes (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2018). Long before the pandemic, we were building a crisis for the teacher workforce, one that was especially acute for teachers of color and Indigenous teachers. And long before the pandemic, evidence that high rates of teacher turnover lead to worse outcomes for students was ample and well-known.

In order to address the crisis facing Minnesota's schools, we need to be honest about the fact that our own policies have created this crisis. Yes, the pandemic greatly exacerbated the problem of teachers fleeing the profession, and throughout this paper, we have attempted to illustrate what how that dynamic has played out. But almost all of the problems we have identified during the pandemic were created and nurtured long before the pandemic. It is critical to note that none of these problems were created without the influence of education policy.

But almost all of the problems we have identified during the pandemic were created and nurtured long before the pandemic. It is critical to note that none of these problems were created without the influence of education policy.

Other countries treat the teaching profession far differently. Despite the pandemic, places like Canada, most European countries, Singapore, and so many more have attrition rates far lower than ours. According to Linda-Darling Hammond, many of these countries have attrition rates between 3-4%, "which means that most teachers come in and stay in the profession for a career" (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). In the United States, our teacher attrition rate is close to 9%, but Minnesota in particular suffers from an even higher attrition rate (Darling-Hammond, 2022). The problem of teacher attrition is a uniquely American problem, and it is not difficult to find the policy trends that have led us to our current crisis.

As Darling-Hammond points out, and has pointed out again and again, if the United States had a teacher attrition rate comparable to so many other countries, an attrition rate between 3-4%, our supply would meet the demand. If we stop the insanity of trying to fill the leaking bucket of teachers by simply lowering expectations in order to get more bodies in the door and can instead support the profession as a profession, we would not be in our current crisis, one that promises to get worse in the coming years if we do not change the direction of our policies.

The more Minnesota turns to the throwing away of expectations for teachers at the front end, the more damage we do long-term. The teachers most likely to leave the profession are teachers who are teaching in fields outside of their licensure and preparation area, and teachers working without preparation at all. In fact, we know that teachers who are unprepared leave within the first year at two to three times the rates of those who are comprehensively prepared to teach, and that sets up this churn" (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). Lower licensure requirements "may get more people into the profession, but they also lead to higher attrition rates," that do more damage in the long term (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016, p. 26).

The victims of such policy decisions are the students in the most high-poverty, linguistically and culturally diverse schools. These students are the most likely to experience a revolving door of teachers, and they are most likely to be taught by teachers who are teaching outside of their licensure field or with no preparation at all (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016).

To summarize, teacher attrition has been largely ignored in the last decade of Minnesota's policy decisions, despite it being a crisis both national organizations and Education Minnesota have been pointing to for years. As we have pointed out, "retirements generally constitute less than one-third of those who leave teaching in a given year" (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016, p. 10). Of those who left before the pandemic, "most list[ed] some type of dissatisfaction as very important or extremely important in their decision to leave," and of the reasons behind the noted dissatisfaction, a lack of support was the most commonly mentioned motivation for leaving (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016, p. 4).

We will not turn a corner and move closer to having our schools fully staffed until we address how to fill them with teachers who are prepared in ways that will allow them to stay in the profession for the long haul.


Minnesota lawmakers, superintendents, principals, and other education stakeholders need to stop attacking this problem simply by lowering expectations in order to get people in the door: "nine out of 10 vacancies every year are the result of teacher turnover," with only a third being due to retirement" (Darling-Hammond L. , Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools, 2022). We will not turn a corner and move closer to having our schools fully staffed until we address how to fill them with teachers who are prepared in ways that will allow them to stay in the profession for the long haul.

Policies that make a difference

When we compare the United States education system to that of other OCED countries, we find that our teachers have dramatically less time for collaboration, planning, reaching out to families and students, assessment, professional development, and innovation (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). We find that the United States has, by a wide margin, the highest level of childhood poverty, and we know that poverty accounts for a great deal of the trauma that students carry in schools that interferes with their social, emotional, and academic development. We learn that teachers earn far less than similarly educated professionals in other fields, and that this gap is growing (Darling-Hammond L. , 2022). All of these problems need our attention if we are serious about a public school system that works for our students.

In early 2022, EdPreLab hosted a webinar focused on the teacher shortage crisis. As a panelist on that webinar, Linda Darling-Hammond laid out the characteristics of schools that keep teachers, which, by no coincidence, are the schools with the highest graduation rates and student academic achievement. When we find schools that reimagine themselves to foster the following characteristics, we find schools that have no trouble finding teacher candidates or keeping teachers once they get there. We need to reimagine and rebuild our school system so that Minnesota students attend schools that are designed to meet student needs as we now understand them to be. These school characteristics include:

- Strong relationships among students, teachers, and families, such as those fostered in community school models that are built and refined according to a cyclical community needs assessment. Figure 7 provides examples of how socioemotional development can be embedded through the school day helping to create and sustain these vital connections between educators, students, and the communities in which they work.
- Teams with time to collaborate around students and subjects. In the U.S. teachers spend 27 hours per week teaching. Teachers in the United States are tied with teachers in Chile for having the least amount of time for collaboration, planning, time to reach out to individual students and parents, and professional development. The average number of hours teachers throughout OCED countries spend teaching is 19, which leaves teachers with ample time for these essential elements of the profession. United States teachers have precious little time for the elements that lead to better teaching and learning that are collaboration, reaching out to individual students and families, planning, and professional development. Collaboration time increases teacher efficacy, satisfaction, and their ability to use innovative practices.
- Democratic decision making. An earlier EPIC paper explored in depth the importance of teacher input at decision making tables and teacher autonomy in meeting student needs. Schools that do both, that include teachers in decisions related to academic, social, and emotional development and allow teachers a significant degree of autonomy to pivot when the needs of their students demand it have far lower attrition rates (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2016, pp. 29-30)
- Authentic learning opportunities such as those we find in project-based projects. We know that curricular projects that allow students to meet standards by exploring the world through their own experience leads to far greater academic achievement, satisfaction, and deeper learning.
- Explicit attention to social and emotional learning and supports, including trauma-informed and restorative practices. Despite current and unexamined political assertions, social, emotional, and academic learning are completely intertwined, both for students and teachers. Students who are not regulated because of the trauma they carry cannot process new literacy, math, music, or science skills. The return of students from long



periods of time spent in remote learning environments shows us every day how much the loss or delay of social development impacts their ability to make academic progress. Table 13 offers recent recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education on how to build social-emotional supports into school systems for students and staff alike.

- Integrated student supports, such as the wrap-around services we find in full-service community schools (Darling-Hammond L. , Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools, 2022). An earlier EPIC paper explores in detail the benefits of designing schools based on community needs, which include far higher student achievement and far lower teacher attrition rates (Education Policy Innovation Center, 2015, p. 6).

Figure 7: Integrating Social Emotional Development Learning throughout the School Day



Source: (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2020, p. 38)

This material was adapted and reproduced from the above cited source. The full report can be found online at <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restarting-reinventing-school-covid>. We have reproduced the material in accordance with the work's license under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

*No changes, alterations, or reproduction of materials from the original report suggest that the original creators of the material endorse or support or use of the information in this document. The use of this material solely reflects the opinion of the EPIC program at Education Minnesota.

Table 13: U.S. Department of Education Supports and Recommendations for Mental Health in Schools

Challenges	Recommendations
Rising mental health needs and disparities among children and student groups	Prioritize wellness for each and every child, student, educator and provider
Perceived stigma is a barrier to access	Enhance mental health literacy and reduce stigma and other barriers to access
Ineffective implementation of practices	Implement continuum of evidence-based prevention practices
Fragmented delivery systems	Establish an integrated framework of educational, social, emotional, and behavioral-health support for all
Policy and funding gaps	Leverage policy and funding
Gaps in professional development and support	Enhance workforce capacity
Lack of access to usable data to guide implementation decisions	Use data for decision-making to promote equitable implementation and outcomes

Source: (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, October, p. 35)

Because it provides an incredibly important and well-researched plan, we point to the Learning Policy Institute’s “Marshall Plan for Teaching.” This is the time, perhaps our best opportunity, to completely reinvest in and reimagine our school system. The schools we inherited were built on far less information than we now have about how students develop and what it takes for teaching and learning to thrive. Our old system has now reached such a crisis point that people are no longer attracted to the profession of teaching, and the teachers we already have are leaving at rates unmatched by any other. If this is not the time for a dramatic new investment and redesign, it will not be because we did not know the damage being done. It will be because the people with the power to reinvest and reimagine failed.

The Marshall Plan for Teaching (Linda Darling-Hammond)

1. **Recruitment:** “If you will teach, we will pay for your education.” We need TEACH grants and public service loans that are fully repaid with service.
2. **Preparation:** Universal access to high-retention preparation that focuses on learning and development, with a full year of clinical practice in partner schools that instantiate equitable, culturally responsive practices.
3. **Mentoring:** All beginning teachers are mentored by expert veterans. Matching grants to districts and mentor training to support universal, high-quality mentoring programs for beginners, and stipends for Nationally Board Certified Teachers working in high-need schools.
4. **Professional learning:** Readily available professional learning throughout the career. Funds for professional development attached to standards ensuring sustained, collegial, content-rich, job-embedded approaches, including regular collaboration and learning time.
5. **Leadership development:** Career pathways that enable the sharing of expertise. Proactive recruitment of teaching and the retention of teachers (we cannot fire our way to Finland). We have to actually develop our teachers.
6. **Compensation:** Competitive and equitable compensation. Federal tax credits for teachers, scaled to reward teaching in high-need districts; state funding reforms like those in Connecticut and North Carolina that prioritize equitable investments in teachers.
7. **School redesign:** Schools designed for personalized and supportive teaching and learning. Regulatory relief and grants to design relationship-centered schools with wraparound supports that support personalized teaching and recovery (Darling-Hammond L. , Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools, 2022).

Darling-Hammond’s Marshall Plan is designed as a nationwide effort, and it offers a roadmap to follow if we want the kind of education system that our federal and state laws and constitutions claim our students deserve. But none of the initiative laid out by Darling-Hammond is impossible to make happen on a state level. It is far past time for Minnesota to invest in and reimagine our schools based on what we have known is better practice but have chosen to ignore. The crisis has our schools at a breaking point. The time to be courageous and think boldly, that time, is now.

Minnesota pays teachers far less than they can earn in other fields with the same level of education. The fix to this problem is not unknown. We simply need the courage and commitment to the public good to doing better.

If Minnesota is serious about teacher recruitment, mitigate the cost of teacher preparation and making sure all state-approved programs are high-retention programs that are steeped in equity based, student-centered learning.

If Minnesota is serious about developing teachers and keeping them, send districts the money needed to pay for robust mentoring for every beginning teacher, mentoring that comes from veteran, expert teachers who are paid and given time for this important work.

If Minnesota is serious about developing teachers and keeping them, send districts the money needed to allow teachers time for collaboration, planning, reaching out to students and families, professional development, and innovation. None of these things, all necessary for teacher retention, can happen without funding.

If Minnesota is serious about developing teachers and keeping them, invest in professional development pathways so that expert teachers are incentivized to continue to grow, and so that they have opportunities to share their expertise with their colleagues.

If Minnesota is serious about developing teachers and keeping them, fund districts so that they can appropriately compensate educators. Minnesota pays teachers far less than they can earn in other fields with the same level of education. The fix to this problem is not unknown. We simply need the courage and commitment to the public good to doing better.

And if Minnesota is serious about developing and keeping its teachers, then encourage and support school redesign so that we can leave behind the old factory model school that we inherited and nurture schools that put best practice into place.

The pandemic has given us a chance to see what happens to a neglected system under pressure. It is time to build what we know serves our state far better. It is time to invest in public education.

As pandemic restrictions wane, our vision must be bolder than the quiet hope of returning to a normal that was itself a system that created vastly inequitable opportunities for students. The old “normal” was a system that demoralized and failed to support teachers to such a degree that massive numbers are leaving and college students once aiming to be teachers are changing plans. It is incumbent upon all of us in the education stakeholder circle, including Minnesota legislators, administrative associations, teachers, support professionals, and communities, to be honest as we assess the problems and recognize that they didn’t spring from the pandemic and will not go away with it. The pandemic has given us a chance to see what happens to a neglected system under pressure. It is time to build what we know serves our state far better. It is time to invest in public education.

Endnotes

- i The first annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey “has a margin of error of 3 percentage points, with a 95 percent confidence level” (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 2).
- ii In this report, we rely heavily on the strong research produced by the Comprehensive Center Network that resulted in the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey. The researchers provided this description of their year-long study:

As the 2020-2021 school year began, the Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center (WMCC)—working with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and housed at the University of Minnesota’s (UMN) Center for Applied Research & Educational Improvement (CAREI), the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC), and Education Analytics (EA)—determined that surveys of educators, students, and families over the course of 2021 would be prudent to capture the experiences of these key groups, learn from this unprecedented time, and plan for the future. This survey, the Safe Learning Survey, was developed to get a true picture of how those being most impacted by the MDE’s Safe Learning Plan experienced it. The survey was deployed at three intervals, Winter (February), Spring (May-June), and Fall (October-November) 2021, with statewide reports following the conclusion of each survey window.

The first Safe Learning Survey, which sought respondents’ feedback for the first half of the 2020-21 academic year, was conducted from February 8 to February 26, 2021. Over 23,000 respondents, including 9,333 educators, 2,988 students, and 11,651 family members completed this first iteration of the survey in the winter of 2021. At that time, key findings included that all respondent groups felt that students were learning, although to a lesser extent than pre-pandemic. In addition, respondents reported concern for and support needed in the area of mental health, successes and challenges in the new instructional models, and feeling good about the safety precautions taken for COVID-19.

The second Safe Learning Survey was conducted from May 5 to June 18, 2021 and sought respondents’ feedback over the second half of the 2020-21 academic year. Over 10,500 respondents, including 2,844 educators, 1,685 students, and 6,004 family members completed the survey this spring. The key findings from the survey covering the second half of the 2020-21 academic year found educators, families, and students felt more learning was taking place in comparison to the spring of 2020 when the state was entirely in distance learning. Respondents continued to cite mental health as a concern, ranking it among the top three challenges in all respondent groups. All groups reported both challenges and successes when it came to engagement, along with successes in areas like technology, COVID-19 safety measures, connectedness, and communication.

The third and final distribution of the survey was conducted in the fall of the 2021-22 school year from October 18 to November 24, 2021. Over 18,651 people responded, including 6,737 educators, 1,939 students, and 9,975 family members. This was a much higher response rate compared to the spring survey, though the percentage of respondents in each category remained relatively consistent. In this survey, and really across all three surveys, concerns regarding mental health continue to rise to the top as concerns in all respondent groups. Learning, a key concern among so many, was also reported as happening more than in previous surveys; however, families, students, and educators also reported that increased academic support for students was a top need. Unique to this survey were questions about what changes

respondents wanted to see moving forward. The most common areas in need of change reported by respondents included COVID-19 protocols, with opinions far ranging; school infrastructure, like flexible scheduling; more inclusion in decision making; and a greater focus on equity. (Comprehensive Center Network, February 2022, pp. 2-3)

- iii As previous EPIC teams have clarified, “There is a difference between identifying the ‘white supremacy’ that drives systemic oppression and calling an individual a white supremacist.” Following the work of MnEEP and other researchers, we use this frame to speak of the ways policies and systems have benefited white Minnesotans at the expense of other demographics. Like MnEEP and several critical race scholars, we do not believe all white people are part of a monolithic group. Nor do we believe that “all white people have conscious beliefs that espouse white supremacy or act with intentionality to maintain and strengthen white supremacy” (MnEEP, 2016, p. 21). Instead, we argue that decisions rooted in white supremacy have benefited all white people, although some white people have garnered greater benefits than others have (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019).
- iv Some districts use the term paraprofessionals and education support professionals as interchangeable terms. However, the term paraprofessional refers to a category of ESP. We use the ESP to refer to the collective of our non-licensed staff. At times, readers will notice that some of the individual participants in our study self-identify as a paraprofessional. Readers will also take note that some researchers use the terms interchangeably and will be seen in the direct quotes we rely on in this paper.
- v See two previous EPIC reports for a more comprehensive discussion of Adverse Childhood Experiences and their connections to student mental health: (1) Educator Policy Innovation Center (2019): *Interrupting Racism, Strengthening Communities and Accelerating Student Learning: The Need for Restorative Practices and Trauma-Informed Schools in Minnesota* and (2) Educator Policy Innovation Center Educator Policy Innovation Center (2017) *From Exclusionary to Restorative: An Intentional, Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Interrupting Racial Disparities, Reducing Violence, Strengthening Communities, and Accelerating Student Learning*.

References

- Álvarez, B. (2021, January 5). When too much of a good attitude becomes toxic. *NEA Today*. Retrieved from: nea.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). *Census report: Child poverty rate increases to 16.1% in 2020*. AAP News.
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (October 2021). *A declaration from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association*. Itasca. Retrieved from aap.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association. (2021). *A declaration from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Association*. American Academy of Pediatrics.
- Comprehensive Center Network. (February 2022). *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey: Fall 2021 survey of Minnesota educators, families, and students*. Minneapolis: Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center; the Minnesota Department of Education; the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement; the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Wisconsin Evaluation Analytics, and Education Analytics. Retrieved from cehd.umn.edu
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2022, January 25). *Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools*. Retrieved from EdPreLab: <https://edprelab.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/EdPreLab-Policy-Summit-1-25-22.pdf>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2022, January 21). *Addressing Teacher Shortages: Investing in a Strong Educator Workforce*. Retrieved from EdPreLab Summit: <https://edprelab.org/events/2022-edprelab-policy-summit>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., Edgerton, A. K., Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson, P. W., . . . Wojcikiewicz, S. (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from learningpolicyinstitute.org
- DePaoli, J., Hernández, L. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020, August 6). *Supporting a restorative opening of U.S. schools*. Retrieved from Learning Policy Institute Blog: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/>
- Diliberti, M. K. (2021). *Stress topped the reasons why public school teachers quit, even before COVID-19*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.
- Education Policy Innovation Center. (2015). *Our communities, our schools: Closing the opportunity gap in Minnesota with full-service community schools*. St. Paul, MN: Education Minnesota.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2016). *Smart solutions to Minnesota's teacher shortage: Developing and sustaining a diverse and valued educator workforce*. St. Paul, MN: Education Minnesota.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2017). *From Exclusionary to Restorative: An Intentional, Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Interrupting Racial Disparities, Reducing Violence, Strengthening Communities, and Accelerating Student Learning*. St. Paul: Education Minnesota.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2018). *The merits of teaching preparation grounded in equity: Critical components for developing and retaining educators who are responsive to Minnesota's diverse and complex communities*. St. Paul, MN: Education Minnesota.

- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2019). *Building and equitable school system for all students and educators*. St. Paul, MN: Education Minnesota.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (May 2019). *Interrupting Racism, Strengthening Communities and Accelerating Student Learning: The Need for Restorative Practices and Trauma-Informed Schools in Minnesota*. St. Paul: Education Minnesota.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2021). *Disrupted Learning, COVID-19 and Public Education in Minnesota*. St. Paul: Education Minnesota. Retrieved from educationminnesota.org
- GBAO and The National Education Association. (2022). *Poll results: Stress and burnout pose threat of educator shortages*. GBAO.
- Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., & Doyle, M. B. (2010). Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools: A Review of Recent Research. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20, 41-57.
- Gudmundsdottir, G. B., & Hathaway, D. M. (2020). "We Always Make It Work": Teachers' Agency in the Time of Crisis. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 28(2), 239-250.
- Ingersoll, R. M., Sirinides, P., & Dougherty, P. (October 2017). *School Leadership, Teachers' Roles in School Decisionmaking, and Student Achievement*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, University of Pennsylvania.
- Ingersoll, R., May, H., & Collins, G. (2019). Recruitment, employment, retention and the minority teacher shortage. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3714>
- Johnson, S. (2006). *The Workplace Matters: Teacher Quality, Retention, and Effectiveness*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association Research Center Department. Retrieved from nea.org
- Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy. (2022, April). *1st Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey 2022 Results*. Bethesda: EdWeek Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.merrimack.edu/academics/education-and-social-policy/merrimack-college-teacher-survey/>
- Minnesota Department of Education. (2022, February 3). *Minnesota Report Card*. Retrieved from rc.education.mn.gov
- National Education Policy Center. (2022, February 24). The Student Mental Health Pandemic. *National Education Policy Newsletter*. Retrieved from nepc.colorado.edu
- NEA Research. (April 2022). *Education Support Professionals Earnings Report*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association.
- Parr, A., Potter, L., Pekel, K., Gibbons, K., Schantz, J., & Evenson, A. (2022). *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey Fall 2021 survey of Minnesota educators, families, and students*. Minneapolis: CCNetwork Region 10 Wisconsin Minnesota.
- Potter, L., Parr, A., Pekel, K., Gibbons, K., McKeve, N., Schantz, J., & Evenson, A. (2021). *Minnesota Safe Learning Survey: Winter 2021 survey of Minnesota educators, families, and students*. Minneapolis: CCNetwork Region 10 Wisconsin Minnesota.
- Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board. (2021). *2021 Biennial report: Supply and demand of teachers in Minnesota*. St. Paul, MN: Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board.

- Prosek, E. A., & Gibson, D. M. (2021). Promoting rigorous research by examining lived experiences: A review of four qualitative traditions. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 99, 167-177.
- Quintero, S., & Long, J. (n.d.). *Toxic Positivity: The Dark Side of Positive Vibes*. Retrieved from The Psychology Group, Fort Lauderdale: thepsychologygroup.com
- Reddy, L. A., Lekwa, A. J., & Glover, T. A. (2021). Supporting paraprofessionals in schools: Current research and practice. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58, 643-647.
- Rosen, T. (Spring 2018). Storytelling in Teacher Professional Development. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 11(2), 303-318.
- Shuls, J. V., & Flores, J. M. (2020). Improving Teacher Retention through Support and Development. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 4(1).
- Steiner, E. D. (2021). *Job-related stress threatens the teacher supply*. Santa Monica: RAND.
- Strauss, V. (2022, April 6). Did we really learn anything about schools in the pandemic? *The Washington Post*.
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from learningpolicyinstitute.org
- The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. (2021, December). *Protecting Youth Mental Health*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from hhs.gov
- U.S. Department of Education. (2021, October). *Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs*. Washington D.C. Retrieved from ed.gov
- Wilder Research in collaboration with PELSB. (2019). *2019 Biennial Minnesota Teacher Supply and Demand*. St. Paul, MN: Wilder Research.

[illegible]





2022, Vol. 7, No. 1