



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

## *Executive Summary*

Tawnya Heinsohn  
Mara Borges-Gatewood  
Michael Floersch  
Rachel Erickson  
Ariel 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



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

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted the public school system in Minnesota. Practically every member of Education Minnesota, even veteran educators nearing the end of their careers, have indicated that the academic years from March 2020 until summer 2022 brought forth unforeseen obstacles that too often seemed insurmountable.

The members of Education Minnesota cannot be thanked enough for their service to the students during this tragic pandemic. Our educators, even while they felt hopeless at times, 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 missing 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 while often serving as the public face of unpopular policies about masking and COVID mitigation strategies.

The members of Education Minnesota rose to the challenges brought by the pandemic despite being exhausted, underappreciated, and overlooked. We issue this EPIC paper, *Minnesota Schools at a Breaking Point: Pandemic Stories From Educators Across the State*, for two reasons. First, we want to insert the firsthand accounts from our members into important policy conversations, from which they are too often excluded, about resources and programs that directly affect their work lives and the learning environments of their students.

Second, we also 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 also stories of hope and kindness that were too often overlooked.

In the report, we weave academic research together with the words of our members to show 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.

Our advisory team landed on recommendations through a qualitative research process administered in the spring of 2022. We collected detailed narratives from other members about public education in the time of COVID-19 and found seven consistent themes echoed across the entire state of Minnesota. Table I summarizes each theme which is explored in detail in the full report. We built policy recommendations from the direct accounts of educators because when teachers share their stories with each other, they create a reality based on concrete possibility (Rosen, Spring 2018, p. 303).

For years, our members have used previous EPIC papers to alert Minnesotans that systemic racism and government divestment from public education, which are difficult to untangle from each other, are the forces that have most starved the public school system in Minnesota. The last few years have been very hard on students and educators, but we should not pretend like the current problems facing public education are all by products of the COVID-19 pandemic. Minnesota's public school system was in distress long before COVID-19. The pandemic merely aggravated a system that was already quickly reaching a breaking point. The voices of our members show this to be truer now than at ever before.

State lawmakers, the voting public, and concerned administrators MUST pause at this crucial moment and ask three questions:

1. What do we know?
2. How did this happen?
3. What can we all do to build schools worthy of ALL students and ALL educators?

*Figure 1: Themes From Education Minnesota Membership Accounts of School During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

- **Workloads are unmanageable.**
- **Educators lack a voice in decision making.**
- **Student mental and social emotional health is at a crisis level.**
- **Educators are reporting higher levels of physical and mental health concerns.**
- **Education Support Professionals feel disrespected and exploited.**
- **Educators are exhausted by a lack of meaningful support and continuous toxic positivity.**
- **Lawmakers continue to fail special education students and the educators who serve them.**

## What do we know?

We have long known the constraints facing public education, but the pandemic made many of these barriers exponentially more menacing. Our team confirmed the following realities about public schools in the United States and Minnesota:

- **Educators feel ignored and silenced and are reporting unseen levels of job dissatisfaction.** National researchers released the first annual *Merrimack College Teacher Survey*<sup>i</sup> and educators, both paraprofessionals and licensed teachers, lamented that news reports do not properly account for educators' poor working conditions, the school funding crisis, or the mental health crisis facing educators and students. Researchers asked educators if they were "satisfied with their job" only and 12% responded they are "very satisfied." This is more than a 30-point drop from previous years.
- **The mental health crisis among U.S. adolescents was further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.** The situation is so dire in the United States that the American Academy of Pediatrics joined with partner organizations<sup>iii</sup> "to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health" (American Academy of Pediatrics, October 2021). These health experts emphatically declared that the situation facing U.S. adolescents is unparalleled and will take tremendous resources to confront. Unfortunately, Minnesota schools still lack the minimum number of school-based, mental health professionals to meet national staffing recommendations.
- **Policies rooted in systemic racism have led to Minnesota reporting some of the worst achievement gaps between white students and BIPOC students in the nation.** BIPOC children are also too often the victims of discriminatory disciplinary practices, and BIPOC families, especially Native and Indigenous families, were disproportionately harmed by the digital divide. All of these problems grew larger during the pandemic.
- **Minnesota's public schools are still chronically underfunded.** We can draw a direct connection between government divestment and 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.
- **Educator attrition is increasing to levels that are likely to leave many districts without enough adults to provide educational services to students.** We know that 40% of educators have reported they were very likely or fairly likely to leave the profession in the next two years (Merrimack Winston School of Education and Social Policy, 2022, April, p. 2). In our state, one out of every three teachers leaves the profession in their first five years of employment, and BIPOC educators are exiting the classroom at a 24% higher rate than their white peers (Educator Policy Innovation Center, 2019, p. 15). Finally, many national experts report that we could witness 8% of the current educator workforce not returning for the 2022-2023 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.

## How did this happen?

Some may be quick to point fingers and place blame for these problems, but this does not solve the underlying issues. Yes, Minnesota is currently governed by split-party rule, and there has been little compromise on fundamental issues impacting schools and students. However, we cannot blame our way out of this situation. Minnesota's state leaders have allowed corporate profiteers and special interests starve the public school system for decades, and we are now witnessing the aftermath of those decisions.

Many have argued that funding cannot be the only answer, and there may be some truth to that statement. However, we have yet to live in a world in which we give the education system what it actually needs to improve the life outcomes of students. In addition, Minnesota lawmakers, intentionally or unintentionally, created a system where a basic, inflationary increase in education funding is celebrated as "historic," not because it's the amount of resources that schools need to meet 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 (Education Minnesota EPIC Policy Report, 2019, p. 6).

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 to spend at least \$1 billion of this surplus on 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.

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.

## What can we all do to build schools worthy of ALL students and ALL educators?

In the full report, we provide detailed explanations of specific policy proposals as well as peer-reviewed proof that these interventions will work. These are great places to start, but we will never see substantial change unless each of us demands the state government finally invest in students and public education. We must also vigilantly push back on rising acts of white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, and hate that further disrupt school environments.

Because it provides an incredibly important and well-researched plan, we point to the **Learning Policy Institute's "Marshall Plan for Teaching," as displayed in Table II**. 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. All of these initiatives laid out by Darling-Hammond are possible to implement if state leaders would direct financial resources to school districts and state agencies.

Table II: The Learning Policy Institute’s Marshall Plan for Education

Strategy	Rationale
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.
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.
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.
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.
Leadership development	Career pathways that enable the sharing of expertise. Proactive recruitment of teaching and the retention of teachers. We have to actually develop our teachers.
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.
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.

\*Information adapted from: (Darling-Hammond L., Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools, 2022)

In addition, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) recently convened a taskforce of educators to study rising educator attrition. These educators published a report, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? What America must do to Attract and Retain the Educators and School Staff our Students Need*, which includes a list of both immediate and long-term policy changes that can reduce turnover. The AFT recommendations mirror the work of the Learning Policy Institute and our own EPIC research, but the AFT also directs policymakers to address the growing teacher pay penalty.

The work of the AFT taskforce further highlights the problematic fact that teacher salary/wage compensation is consistently 20% lower than their college-educated peers working in non-education careers (AFT, 2022, p. 32). Too many educators “are not paid a living wage” and “must take on a second or even third job to afford necessities” (AFT, 2022, p. 31). According to economists with the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) (2022), Minnesota teachers are compensated at a rate of 25.9% lower than comparably trained professionals (Allegretto, p. 9). This trend must be reversed if we hope to stop attrition and increase student wellbeing.

We direct our readers to the recent reports from the AFT, the EPI, and the Educator Pay Report produced by the National Education Association for more information on this concerning trend in educator compensation.

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. Inaction will only cause the structural problems to grow. We can no longer pretend we did not know the damage being done. It will be because the people with the power to reinvest and reimagine failed.

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 adequately support educators or students. It is incumbent upon all of us in the education stakeholder circle, including all 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.

Progressive change requires collective action and collaboration. One educator in our study lamented **“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.”** We know educators are trying to implement change, but they alone cannot repair all the harm, especially as we continue to stifle their efforts with low funding. Educators and students need our help to succeed.

The pandemic has afforded 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 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, higher education faculty, retirees, and student teachers. We are the largest labor union representing public school employees in Minnesota.

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 paraprofessionals and ESPs.

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.

- ii The staff of the EdWeek Research Center, in collaboration with researchers at Merrimack College produced the First annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey. 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.

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).

- iii The partner organizations include: the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association.

## References

- Allegretto, S. (2022, August 16). *The teacher pay penalty has hit a new high: Trends in teacher wages and compensation through 2021*. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute. Retrieved from [epi.org/251657](https://epi.org/251657).
- 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.
- American Federation of Teachers. (2022, July). *Here today, Gone tomorrow? What America must do to attract and retain the educators and school staff our students need*. Report from the AFT Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force. Retrieved from [AFT.org](https://www.aft.org).
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2022, January 25). *Addressing teacher shortages by (re)building the profession and redesigning schools*. Retrieved from EdPrepLab: <https://edpreplab.org/sites/default/files/2022/01/EdPrepLab-Policy-Summit-1-25-22.pdf>.
- Educator Policy Innovation Center. (2019). *Building and equitable school system for all students and educators*. St. Paul, MN: Education Minnesota.
- 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>
- National Education Association. (2022, April 26). *Educator pay and student spending: How does your state rank?* Retrieved from [nea.org](https://www.nea.org).
- Rosen, T. (Spring 2018). Storytelling in Teacher Professional Development. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 11(2), 303-318.





2022, Vol. 7, No. 1