

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

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted public schools in Minnesota. The academic years from March 2020 until summer 2022 brought unforeseen obstacles that too often seemed insurmountable, even for veteran educators.

The members of Education Minnesota drove meals, administered mental health care, taught with new digital channels, delivered instruction through screen doors, located missing students, and preserved as much stability as possible in an otherwise chaotic world. They did all of this while often serving as the public face of unpopular policies about masking and mitigation strategies.

We issue this EPIC paper to insert the firsthand accounts from our members into important policy conversations, from which educators are often excluded. We also want to lift up the resilience, power, and creativity of our membership.

## Why is this EPIC report unique?

Our advisory team landed on recommendations through a qualitative research process conducted 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.

## *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?

- **Educators feel ignored and silenced and are reporting unseen levels of job dissatisfaction.** The first annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey indicated only 12% of educators are “very satisfied” with their job. This is more than a 30-point drop from previous years.
- **Student mental health was further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Unfortunately, Minnesota schools still lack 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.** 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.
- **Minnesota’s public schools are still chronically underfunded.** Economists estimate that it would take an \$8-9 billion initial investment followed by high-levels of sustained funding to begin repairing the damage that has been done to public schools in this state.
- **Educator attrition is a statewide crisis.** 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).

## 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 our proposed interventions will work. In addition, we recommend the Learning Policy Institute’s “Marshall Plan for Teaching” as a roadmap for policymakers.

### *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.

Read the full report at [www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/epic/epic-reports/](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/epic/epic-reports/)