

Addressing the alarming NJ teacher shortage, by Julio Mendez

Julio Mendez For The Press

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A shortage of teachers is creating problems in New Jersey and nationally. The alarming trend started in New Jersey about 10 years ago and continues.

The cause of the problem is twofold. On the one hand is a dramatic decrease of college students pursuing teaching careers, and on the other is an increasing number of teachers leaving the profession.

The reduction in New Jersey college students seeking teaching degrees is concerning. Ten years ago, 5,000 students were seeking education degrees. The number is now about 3,000, data from New Jersey Policy Perspective show.

Teacher shortages are severe in math, science, bilingual education and special education. School districts are having a difficult time filling positions. The shortage is even greater in urban districts.

The crisis is compounded by existing teachers leaving the profession. The available pool of certified teacher candidates is dwindling. Fewer qualified teachers are available as substitutes.

Fortunately, New Jersey policymakers are proposing solutions to address the problem.

Teaching is an honorable profession.



Mendez
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Teachers nurture the lives of their students, shaping not just academic knowledge but also character and values, and preparing students for their futures. Teachers should be honored as extraordinary public servants, in the same way first responders and veterans are recognized.

But teachers are leaving the profession due to burnout, low salaries and challenging working conditions. Teachers are often caught in the middle of culture wars.

The problem is so dramatic that the state established a Legislature's Joint Committee on Public Schools to address the issue. The governor also appointed a task force.

The task force, organized in late 2022, was established by Gov. Murphy's executive order to develop recommendations to address teacher shortages in school districts across the state. The 25 members conducted hearings and made a series of comprehensive recommendations.

Efforts to attract and retain talented educators, improve working conditions and offer competitive compensation are critical to address the decline.

Encouraging students to pursue teaching careers is essential. The task force recommendations include providing scholarships, loan and tuition forgiveness programs as well as providing stipends to candidates while they are completing student teaching.



New Jersey expanding student loan forgiveness for teachers amid shortage

Offering alternative ways into a teaching career for people coming from other fields and streamlining the certification process are excellent initiatives.

Recently, Murphy signed a law doing away with basic skills testing requirements for alternate route teachers. The law authorizes the issuance of a provisional teacher certificate to an alternative route teacher candidate, and after four years on the job, they can obtain the standard certification.

One significant concern is not to sacrifice quality for the sake of increasing numbers of teachers with the proposed relaxation of testing requirements. Importantly, the law has a five-year sunset provision, which will allow for an assessment of this initiative.

Recently, the New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority and Stockton University's School of Education collaborated to roll out and highlight **two excellent programs**.

These include a loan forgiveness program for teachers who commit to working in eligible school districts, forgiving \$5,000 in student loans; and a student teacher initiative that will provide a \$3,000 stipend to teacher candidates during completion of student teaching requirements.

The New Jersey Teacher Loan Redemption Program offers partial student loan redemption for recently hired teachers in high-need fields within eligible schools. Teachers can receive up to \$5,000 per year and up to a maximum total of \$20,000 in student loan redemption.

The other initiative was the new Student-Teacher Stipend Pilot Program. Under this program, HESAA issues \$3,000 stipends for student-teachers. Thirty-seven Stockton students completing their student teaching this semester are getting the stipend.

Both programs are excellent public policy initiatives and an important part of a comprehensive set of steps the state of New Jersey is taking to address the problem.



Murphy announces \$52M for preschool expansion at NJEA convention in Atlantic City

Better pay will increase the number of students going into education and remaining as teachers. The teaching profession is often at a disadvantage compared to fields that can offer better wages, flexible schedules and less pressure in the workplace.

Teachers aren't paid commensurately with people in other professions who have a similar education.

The solutions are not only about spending money but changing societal attitudes about the profession. A sustained public relations campaign to showcase successful teachers through media campaigns would enhance the public perception of the teaching profession.

Addressing the declining perception of the teaching profession, the immense demands placed on teachers and the lack of competitive compensation are paramount to reverse the trend.

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