

WHY IS THERE A TEACHER SHORTAGE? THE NEA HAS KNOWN WHY SINCE 2014

TEACHERS SAID THEY WANTED LESS POLITICS AND SENIORITY AND GOT MORE OF BOTH

If New Jersey wants more teacher candidates, maybe we should listen to what young teachers actually say about their profession.

Why is there a teacher shortage? It turns out the nation's largest teachers union, the National Education Association (NEA), knew the answer all along: young teachers were dissatisfied with the teaching profession and made their reasons very clear to the NEA in a 2014 report.

This information is highly relevant to New Jersey's current teacher shortage. There has been a lively public debate about the causes of the shortage, and it is essential to identify the causes if there are to be effective solutions. Some blame pandemic-related factors, but the steep decline in teacher candidates long predates the pandemic. Others blame policies enacted by Governor Chris Christie, but the teacher shortage is both regional and national, so New Jersey-specific policies cannot be the main cause. The Sunlight Policy Center of New Jersey - a New Jersey-based, nonpartisan research organization - asked: Is the nature of employment in the public school system, itself, part of the problem?

Sunlight wrote a [report](#) and a related *Star-Ledger* [op-ed](#) asking whether working in the current public education system appeals to today's younger generation. We cited research that shows that they value mobility and flexibility, and yet our current public school system provides neither. Rather, the current system is rigid and inflexible, with teachers forced into a union-dominated system where professional advancement, pay and job security are based on seniority, not merit. It's a static, bureaucratic system not a dynamic one, and it appears to be out of synch with the young people who make up the pool of potential teacher candidates.

To our great surprise, Sunlight discovered that the NEA, the national parent of the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), knew this all along. Since well before the pandemic, the NEA has known that younger teachers were frustrated with the bureaucratic, union-dominated public school employment system. These teachers told the NEA in clear, unmistakable terms in a 2014 NEA report entitled "[Rock The Union: An Action Plan to Engage Early Career Teachers & Elevate the Profession](#)". As one of the largest and most active state affiliates of the NEA, it is highly likely the NJEA knew as well.

So now we know that younger teachers were dissatisfied with the public school system as it was – and currently is – structured. They expressed this dissatisfaction in detail. They identified the obstacles and made recommendations for change. But change has not come and the system remains largely the same as it was. Its union-negotiated contracts continue to disadvantage young teachers, restrict mobility and flexibility, and

favor seniority over merit. Surely this is relevant when looking for the causes of New Jersey's shortage of teacher candidates.

The 2014 NEA Report

During the early 2010s, the teaching profession was in the throes of a generational transition, with Baby Boomers retiring and a younger generation succeeding them. But this newer, younger generation of teachers were the “least likely to be involved in unions” (p. 9). In an effort to determine why these early career teachers – generally with less than ten years’ experience - were disengaged from the union and what the NEA could do about it, the NEA partnered with Teach Plus on a project entitled “[Rock The Union: An Action Plan to Engage Early Career Teachers & Elevate the Profession.](#)” The NEA selected a diverse group of 50 early career teachers for a year-long fellowship to “advise the NEA on ways to strengthen participation among incoming teachers and to amplify the voice of that group in the direction of the union” (p. 6). The Fellows devised an action plan to address disaffection among early career teachers.

Young teachers focused on students and instruction. These teachers laid out a vision of what they wanted the teaching profession to be: focused on students and improving the profession. The union that they saw was not. Teachers described how In union meetings “we will not hear the word ‘student’ uttered at all.” They wanted access to expert practitioners who were still teaching and to be “part of a professional association in which ... expert practitioners are the visible leaders” (p. 11).

But the teachers found that the union did not share this approach. Colorado teacher Michaela Kovacs captured the essence of the group’s view:

“I want to be surrounded by the best instructors in the business” but there is a “clear distinction” between the best instructors in the business and “our most active union members and building reps” (p. 10).

The teachers wanted “quality-driven profession”... “with clear, high standards” (p. 11). The components of a such profession included:

- fair, rigorous evaluation system;
- differentiated compensation;
- effective, teacher-led professional development;
- rigorous, selective teacher preparation; and
- career pathways that reward excellence.

NEA more focused on politics. But the union was not focused on these issues. Rather the teachers found that “the NEA places far greater emphasis on ‘bread and butter’ issues and broader political advocacy than instructional issues” (p. 12). They noted that the NEA spends twice as much money on fending off attacks on member rights and union strength than on improving student learning, enhancing professional

practice and collaborating with school and community stakeholders to shape the future of education.

California teacher Lisa Alva:

“I would be more engaged with my union if they had a professional focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment, students and school culture, and focused less on ‘fighting the district’” (p. 12).

Likewise, Washington teacher Evin Shinn:

“New teachers didn’t go into teaching to spew indignant words. I went into education to teach grace and compassion to students who desperately need it” (p. 13).

Antiquated, bureaucratic system that rewards seniority, not merit. Many of these teachers were frustrated with the career path presented to them. With a deep-seated, bureaucratic culture, the system did not provide opportunities for advancement based on merit rather than seniority. Importantly, these early career teachers “operate with shorter time horizons for career development and place greater value on skills/knowledge over years of experience” (p. 14). But the union had “existing practices and norms that often discourage early career teacher leadership in the NEA ...” (p. 15).

The teachers cited two major obstacles to advancement:

- Egalitarianism, or the lack of differentiation based on skills, knowledge and professional achievement.
- Seniority: “Deference to experience at the exclusion of performance” (p. 15); and a “wait your turn’ mentality” (p. 18).

Washington teacher John Prosser:

“One obstacle to next-generation teacher engagement is the feeling among us that the union is only an advocacy group that focuses more on veteran teacher issues” (p. 11).

The report described what confronts these younger teachers: “Faced with an antiquated system that values seniority, egalitarianism early career teachers choose to disengage rather than try and fight an uphill battle against the values largely embraced by current union structures and programs” (p. 16).

For these early career teachers who “value performance and operate with short lead times for making an impact, the effect of a largely ‘experiences-based’ system when it comes to leadership selection is particularly negative” (p. 20).

California teacher Emilie Hill:

“I would be motivated to become more engaged if I felt invited to the discussion, or even tolerated, instead of feeling like I am fighting the long-established norm of seniority outranks all” (p. 21).

Recommendations. The report recommends that NEA modernize its policies and programs with a “focus on a quality-driven profession: career pathways, fair and teacher-led evaluation system, differentiated compensation, effective professional development, and rigorous teacher preparation” (p. 17).

Proposed Solution to the Shortage: Listen to the Young Teachers

The NEA’s findings are highly relevant to today’s teacher shortage. Potential teacher candidates – whether a college graduate or a career-changer – will naturally focus on the early career years. The teachers in the report speak of the “shorter time horizons” of younger teachers. They are not thinking about a 35-year career. They are thinking about the next ten years, the early career years. So the views of early career teachers can indeed inform our views about the teacher shortage.

Teachers want more academics and merit, less politics and seniority. What is so striking about the report is that these younger teachers made very clear that they found the system as mediated by the NEA and its state and local affiliates (like the NJEA) to be rigid, bureaucratic and dominated by seniority and political advocacy. They identified obstacles they faced and proposed a path to modernizing the teaching profession. To their great credit, the teachers were focused on improving student achievement, upgrading the quality of instruction, rewarding merit, and redirecting the union’s efforts away from political advocacy.

The current NEA and NJEA: more politics and seniority. But in the ensuing years, the NEA and NJEA have not changed the basic structure of the public education system. Seniority continues to control leadership positions, pay and job security. And when it comes to redirecting focus away from political advocacy, the NEA and NJEA have moved in the opposite direction. The NEA has taken the lead in what it calls “[Education Justice](#),” and is urging teachers to push for radical education policies in their local districts. And, in accord with the NEA and as detailed in Sunlight’s two most recent reports ([here](#) and [here](#)), the NJEA says “Teaching is Political,” and is training teachers to become political activists in their local districts. Teacher preparation requirements have been loosened. Testing and evaluations have been watered down. Merit pay is dead. The views and recommendations of these young teachers have essentially been ignored.

So Sunlight’s hypothesis has been confirmed by these younger teachers’ own words. The NEA and NJEA didn’t listen to their own teachers. The system remains the same. Is it any surprise that the younger generation does not find teaching to be an attractive career?