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Prince George's County Needs to Address the School Staffing Crisis – Now



By Dr. Donna Christy and Justin Robinson

The writers are, respectively, president of the Prince George's

County Education Association and a teacher in the county public school system.

Earlier this year, the National Education Association released an alarming report, finding an unprecedented staffing crisis across every job category' across the country. We've certainly reached a breaking point here in Prince George's County. Our educators are in crisis, and that, in turn, affects student learning and performance.

In the state's second largest school district, we are struggling with a variety of staffing issues, including widespread vacancies, and a lack of prospective teachers. The impact is palpable, disrupting school operations and what's happening — or not happening — in the classroom.

Throughout the county, schools have turned to using more teachers as well as non-teaching staff outside of their intended duties to address the shortage. It has meant increased class sizes and crushing workloads for educators and staff.

Right now, there are at least 800 educator vacancies throughout the Prince George's County school system, including 770 empty classroom teacher slots. We are currently averaging about 850 resignations and retirements per year. For context, there are almost 11,000 educator positions in total.

The staffing crisis isn't new, but it was certainly exacerbated by the pandemic.

Overcoming the shortage is just the latest challenge educators tackle every day, as they struggle to provide our students with a high-quality education and the needed social and emotional supports to help them succeed.

That's why as members of the Prince George's County Educators' Association, we see the next labor agreement as an opportunity to address the staff shortage at its root and advance key safety and equity issues. Our aim is to advocate for the needs of students post pandemic and beyond, so that all our classrooms inspire curiosity, and accelerate learning.

The proposals we've advanced during negotiations with the school board focus on establishing further supports for social-emotional learning and for student mental health, increasing supports for multilingual learners, improved access to inclusion and special education services as well as advocating for much needed improvements to facilities as the district addresses both the health and safety of our students and staff.

As educators and professionals who prepare Prince George's County's 135,000 students for success in school and in life, we want to make sure we use this moment of reckoning and infusion of resources to fundamentally change the trajectory of our school system.

When our members sat across the table from school administrators to negotiate a new contract, our vision was clear: we needed to bring our schools from pandemic to promise, re-imagining the ways our schools can live up to the potential that we've always known them to have. We introduced proposals that would enhance the experience of working as an educator in Prince George's County by humanizing working conditions and improving salaries. Historically, most salary increases are less than inflation, and the district's offer this year was no different.

Unfortunately, the district is refusing to see the dire retention situation in front of them. With the number of educators in the county cratering, you would think that the district would do anything in its power to retain the educators we still have and incentivize other educators to come teach in Prince George's County. Instead, the district has responded with anemic proposals on these critical issues, suggesting they want to make changes at the margins, while effectively maintaining the status quo.

After the district did not move on a single outstanding issue at the June 9 bargaining session, our union made the difficult decision to declare negotiations with PGCPs at an impasse. This was not an action made lightly. Our members are eager to ratify a new contract as quickly as possible. But the district's refusal to budge on critical matters of workload and compensation has made it impossible for us to continue to bargain.

Our member educators have their eyes on the prize – winning the resources we need to deliver the best education possible for our students. We know that part of that means educators who are fairly compensated and able to maintain a work/life balance.

Since it was passed in 2021, PGCEA has been calling on the school district to invest the funds outlined in the Blueprint for Maryland's Future to recruit and retain more educators. This landmark legislation is meant to raise pay and standards across the state, and PGCPs has the opportunity to use these funds accordingly, but are choosing not to.

While the district's stubborn stance is disheartening and

demoralizing, our members will not stop fighting for what educators, students, and our community deserve in our public school system. United, we stand for equity and excellence.

Photo: *The Prince George's County Public Schools headquarters in Upper Marlboro. Photo by Danielle E. Gaines./Maryland Matters*

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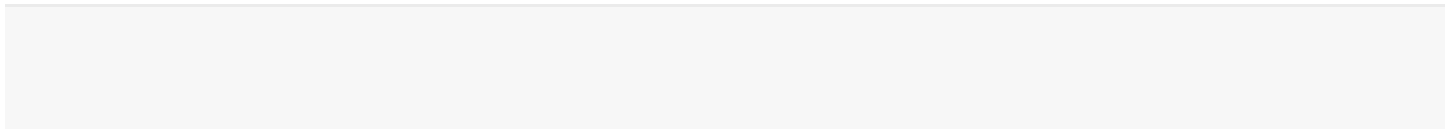
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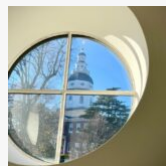
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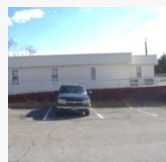
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