



Testimony of

Kate Dias
Connecticut Education Association

Jan Hochadell
American Federation of Teachers – Connecticut

Fran Rabinowitz
Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents

Before the
Appropriations Committee

Re:

SB 396 AAC REVISIONS TO THE TEACHERS' RETIREMENT SYSTEM STATUTES

March 18, 2022

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Kate Dias, President of the Connecticut Education Association. I am testifying today on behalf of educators represented by Jan Hochadel, President, American Federation of Teachers - Connecticut, and Fran Rabinowitz, Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents. Together we represent over 50,000 educators and superintendents in every local and regional school district in the state.

We testify in support of SB 396 AAC Revisions to the Teachers' Retirement System Statutes. We also testify requesting that the Teacher's Retirement System be amended to include incentives for attracting and retaining educators, especially in our most financially distressed communities. The attached Hartford Courant article features a recent teacher of the year, Sheena Graham, leaving the profession prematurely saying that "pandemic stress was the final straw." A survey at the beginning of the school year indicated that 38% of Connecticut teachers were more likely to leave the profession or retire early. A more recent national survey noted that 62% of Black and 59% of Hispanic/Latino teachers are ready to leave the profession earlier than planned. Additionally, the Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace indicates that 61% of teachers report high levels of stress, and 45% of new teachers leave the field with 5 years. The crisis is here, and it is impacting Alliance Districts and financially distressed communities the most.

Across the country, states are considering innovative ways to encourage teachers to stay in the classroom. Some have provided stipends or retention bonuses using federal funds. Georgia recently

passed an income tax credit for teachers. And while we believe incentives such as these are wise and should be under consideration in Connecticut, we want to share with you another approach.

Our teacher retirement system requires educators to work for 37 ½ years in order for them to receive maximum benefit – an amount that is not supplemented by Social Security (because teachers are exempt). For many, this is a light so far at the end of the tunnel, they opt for other paths.

AFT, CAPSS, and CEA propose the following reasonable incentives to promote recruitment and retention of educators in financially distressed communities, and to address attrition and disincentives in the teachers' retirement system. We propose:

1. **Pandemic Service Credit:** The awarding of 2 years of credited service for each full year worked during the 20-21 and 21-22 school years. This could be done this year in a way that would help educators in the long run without a significant need for appropriations.
2. **Bonus Service Incentive for Financially Distressed Communities:** Creation of a task force to study the impact of providing bonus credited years of service to educators in financially distressed communities. The prospect of providing bonus credited service offers to attract and retain educators in districts that see shortages resulting in poor staff ratios, high rates of attrition that undermine continuity for students, and turnover that costs districts for recruitment and training.

We stand ready to assist lawmakers in developing each of these proposals and thank you for your consideration.

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"My concern for the profession is going to be, if there isn't a way to address [the challenges], we're going to see a lot more educators leave." — Sheena Graham, Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year, now retired

Teachers: More needs to be done

Shortages mount as hardships lead to resignations, early retirements

By Seamus McAvoy
Hartford Courant

Before the pandemic, Sheena Graham was planning to teach for at least another five years, "if not 10."

She's healthy and still active. Her passion for teaching — part of what earned her recognition as Connecticut's Teacher of the Year in 2019 — hadn't waned in nearly 40 years. But in January, Graham retired early.

Most recently a choir and

performing arts teacher at Harding High School in Bridgeport, Graham said the last two years have been "demoralizing." Like teachers across the state, Graham endured the ebbs and flows of COVID-19 while adapting to new safety protocols and near-constant disruptions to instruction.

Graham said she wasn't sleeping, instead racking her brain for ways to help her students, who she could tell were also struggling.

Finally, after seeing her class through the end of the semester, Graham retired. That night, she slept. But she's not totally without worry, particularly for the future of teachers in the state.

"My concern for the profession is going to be, if there isn't a way to address [the challenges], we're going to see a lot more educators leave," Graham said.

Graham's sentiments are reflected in national surveys,

which indicate that feelings of burnout and frustration among teachers are becoming pervasive.

About 55% of teachers surveyed by the National Education Association in January said they now planned to leave the profession earlier than expected due to the effects of the pandemic — an increase from 37% in the fall. Numbers were higher among teachers of color.

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Sheena Graham, Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year, retired at the end of January, years before she expected, due to a mix of COVID-19 issues and other built-up tensions. MARK MIRKO/HARTFORD COURANT

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Kate Dias, president of the Connecticut Education Association, says that sentiment has begun to play out in "disconcerting" ways. "Even if [teachers] haven't yet put their resignation letters in, the conversations we're having with educators is them looking at options, looking at other spaces they could be viable in the workforce," she said.

Staff and teacher shortages nationwide prompted the American Federation of Teachers to launch a task force in December to investigate causes and propose solutions.

The trend is impacting districts in Connecticut. The Hartford Public Schools district is operating at around 75% of its typical staffing level, including vacancies among teachers, staff and in the district's central office team.

The district saw "more retirements than we expected to see" at the end of last school year, Superintendent Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez said.

Dr. Alan Bookman, superintendent of Glastonbury Public Schools, said that two teachers have already indicated they will leave, but not retire, at the end of the school year. "That certainly is something that is most unusual for us," he said.

Other districts continue to struggle with shortages among substitute teachers and other school staff, even in places where teacher retirements aren't up.

According to the state Teachers' Retirement Board, 950 teachers retired in June 2020, and 892 retired last June.

COVID-related concerns last year "caused many experienced teachers with chronic but well-managed health concerns to retire or resign prior to their previously anticipated dates," Mary Yordon, vice president of PreK-12 educators with AFT Connecticut, said



After speaking with a group of teachers, Sheena Graham leaves the Mark Twain House on Tuesday. Graham, Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year, retired at the end of January, years before she expected. MARK MIRKO/HARTFORD COURANT

in an email

"Fears of transmission have interfered with the well-established patterns of cycling in recent retirees to fill substitute positions, and interfered with the pool of other support staff who play a vital role in our school," Yordon wrote.

Mid-year retirements

More than 100 teachers have already retired so far this school year, even though it is rare to see teachers leave in the middle of the year.

"Educators don't like to leave in the middle of the school year, so to see those middle-of-the-year resignations really is an indication of burnout, and frustration and disappointment," Dias said.

It was hard for Graham, too, but she didn't leave a class in the middle of the year. Harding High changed

to half-year instruction — a move Graham didn't support — meaning that she would have received a new group of students for the second half of the school year.

Last fall did bring some solace: Graham was once again able to teach in her own classroom, which she says students used to refer to as "the sanctuary."

The room, brightly decorated with handmade posters, was a place where students could feel good "regardless of what's going on in the rest of the building," Graham said.

That changed before the fall of 2020, when Harding decided to create student cohorts to minimize COVID-19 transmission. Instead of kids moving from classroom to classroom, teachers like Graham rotated classrooms filled with a pre-selected group of students.

This rotation presented a safety concern for Graham,

who carries an EpiPen for a latex allergy and had to be sure each new classroom didn't pose a risk.

Cohorting also meant Graham found herself teaching choir to students who never signed up for it. "Not only did [the students] lose the space they would have been in, but we lost each other," she said.

This January proved to be dizzying for teachers and school staff across the state. Daily COVID-19 positivity rates soared above 20% and stayed there for weeks as students, teachers and other school-based staff stayed home with illness.

Staff shortages forced some districts to close. In others, threadbare staff took on extra loads to cover for their colleagues.

In mid-January, Connecticut teachers dressed in black for a "walk-in" protest before school to call attention to their concerns over coronavirus safety. Access to

COVID-19 tests and masks was sporadic amid surging demand, and educators called for a remote learning option.

Not just COVID

Despite the onslaught of pandemic-related challenges dating to 2020, not every point of frustration comes back to the virus. "Most of what was going on was present before the pandemic. It just wasn't as loud," Graham said.

Graham notes tension with her administration, and a general lack of respect for the profession from members of the public who began to take the work of educators for granted. "Teachers were heroes for about three weeks," she said. "Then we were the enemy."

Those tensions pile on to the stresses built into the profession, one that historically underpays its work-

ers and was already battling with staffing shortages prior to the pandemic.

And during a time of unprecedented mental health challenges among students, educators are being asked to do far more than just teach.

Dias is pleased to see movement in the state legislature on policy that would add more mental health supports in schools, helping to relieve the pressures on teachers.

Senate Bill 1, introduced by Democratic leaders in mid-February, includes more funding for school social workers and supports the expansion of school-based health centers.

The bill would also include funding to support recruitment efforts for attracting teachers of color, who are underrepresented in Connecticut schools despite the diversity of the state's students.

The state Department of Education is already working on a number of initiatives to attract qualified and diverse teachers. Nineteen districts participate in Educators Rising, a program aimed at informing high school students about careers in education, and TEACH Connecticut provides resources for would-be teachers pursuing their certification.

The department's talent office has continued to recommend policy changes to break down the barriers to certification, and several other programs aim specifically at increasing teacher diversity.

"Education is an investment in our communities and our economy, and we need to look at it that way," Dias said. "The optimist in me says we can turn this corner and come out stronger, but it's going to take a whole lot of working together to make that happen."

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