

Testimony

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Witness

United States Senate

Committee on Education, Health, Labor, and Pensions

Hearing:

The Immediate and Long-Term Challenges Facing Public School Teachers: Low Pay, Teacher Shortages, and Underfunded Public Schools

June 20, 2024

9 a.m. EDT

Thank you, Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Cassidy, and distinguished Members of the Committee,

I am grateful for the opportunity to share this snapshot of my profession and my story with you today. My name is John Arthur, I am a National Board Certified Teacher, the 2021 Utah Teacher of the Year, and a proud member of the National Education Association. I have spent the last 11 years educating and uplifting children at Meadowlark Elementary, a Title I public school in Salt Lake City, and I can honestly say that despite the difficulties we face, I am still madly in love with teaching.

As we consider the challenges facing public school teachers today, there is one statistic that worries me the most is the majority of American parents *do not* want their kids to become teachers. In 2018, the percentage of parents who said they would like one of their children to become a public school teacher in their community fell below 50% for the first time in the U.S., and in 2022 that number dropped down to 37% (PDK International, 2022). As someone who has dedicated his professional life to public education, these numbers trouble me because we cannot sustain a healthy, effective public school system when so few parents want their kids to join me and my friends in the classroom. I am still hopeful that many of our youth will still choose teaching as their profession despite their parents' objections because I, too, was once that kid. My mom, who used to work here in the gift shop in our nation's Capitol, did not want me to become a public school teacher. Suka Arthur immigrated to the U.S. from Korea shortly after marrying my father, Alan, a West Point graduate patrolling the DMZ. Like so many immigrant parents, my mom wanted me to grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer. Finally, in my late-twenties, I worked up the courage to tell my Omma that I was going to graduate school to become a teacher. After a long pause, she asked, "Doctor Teacher?"

I said, "No, Omma...elementary school teacher."

In Korea, teachers hold a position of high respect and esteem, rooted deeply in cultural and historical values. My mom recognized that here in the United States, public school teachers are treated differently, and more than anything she didn't want her son to have, what she considered, a hard life. And the fact that my mother was so desperate for me to become a doctor or lawyer tells you everything about how we as a society view those professions. Prestige. High pay. Respect.

That is what my mother wanted for me, and honestly that's what I want for myself and every other teacher in this country. I want that for my two little girls, who I desperately want to become public school teachers. I tell my daughters and every other kid who walks into my classroom that they ought to become teachers one day. I have this saying that I repeat constantly in my class:

“Children are the best people, teaching is the best job, and there's no better way to spend a day than in a classroom with kids!”

My 6th graders get excited (most days) when I get hyped about teaching and learning, which translates into their own higher quality and more joyful work. As public school teachers, we often squander the ultimate homecourt advantage when it comes to recruiting our nation's top talent, our best and brightest students, into our profession. We have them in our classrooms for 13 years; posters promoting the teaching profession should hang on every wall, and our children should be hearing all the reasons we decided to become public school teachers every single day. And yet, like my mom, we often don't because we want to protect our children from what we know can be, even on the best of days, a hard life. That's why 52% of the teachers in our classrooms today wouldn't advise a young person to join our profession (Lin et al., 2024).

I recently presented at a special education conference, and in my keynote I told the teachers the same thing I tell my students:

“Children are the best people, teaching is the best job, and there's no better way to spend a day than in a classroom with kids!”

Afterward, a teacher approached me and said, “There is a part of me that resents your joy. I don't want to bring you down, but I'm going to ask this anyway—how are you thriving when I'm barely surviving?” His words broke my heart, and I know he's not alone. In 2022, only 12% of teachers reported being very satisfied with their job (Will, 2022). This year, the number of very satisfied teachers jumped up to 33% (Lin et al., 2024). And while that increase in job satisfaction might sound like good news, it belies the truth: satisfaction amongst our teachers isn't going up, dissatisfied teachers are walking out the door. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2022, there were 567,000 fewer educators in public schools than there were before the pandemic (Jotkoff, 2022). I have watched Rock Star teachers leave the profession brokenhearted because they love their students, but they just cannot endure the low pay and disrespect any longer. One of them, a friend who earned his Master of Arts in Teaching with me, now works for an educational technology company. He recently walked into my classroom, not knowing it was mine, to show my grade-level team how to better use his product; when he saw me, his face went pale, and when he was leaving he told me he was afraid I'd be

disappointed in him for having chosen more money and better working conditions over working with our kids.

“How are you thriving when I’m barely surviving?”

I had to think long and hard about that question before I found my answer. I think there are four things teachers need in order to thrive, even in these difficult times:

Compensation

Community

Respect

Room to Grow as Professionals

First, compensation.

The #1 reason teachers leave education is the pay. The #1 reason parents do not want their children to become teachers is the pay. That is why the first necessary step in revitalizing our teaching workforce must be increasing the pay for all teachers. We cannot continue to run our public education system on the backs of saints and martyrs. We must raise wages to the level at which we can successfully recruit and retain the talent we need to effectively educate all children, regardless of zip code.

You used to be able to raise a family in this country on just a teacher’s salary. Now, I can afford to be a public school teacher because my wife makes much more money than me. If it wasn’t for her, I would have long since joined the exhausted 20% of teachers who work a second job during the school year (Walker, 2019). Without her, I would look to the exit like the 48% of educators planning on leaving teaching due to compensation, or I would follow the 42% who already left for the same reason (Bryant et al., 2023).

I appreciate the attention that the Chairman has brought to raising teacher pay, and leaders in Utah have recognized the same need. In 2020, a report called *A Vision for Teacher Excellence* was released that called for average new teacher salaries in Utah to start at \$60,000 annually and grow to \$110,000 a year over the course of a career (Envision Utah, 2020). Envision Utah, a nonpartisan organization composed of our state’s top community, business, and governmental leaders, declared that improving teacher compensation is likely the single-most effective and impactful strategy for better preparing Utah students for the future, and the same holds true for all our nation’s children.

Second, Community

When I became a teacher, I knew I wanted to plant deep roots and teach in the same school, serving the same neighborhood, for the next 30 years. At Meadowlark Elementary, I found that home. Besides working with my students, my favorite thing about teaching are the relationships I have developed with their parents and families. The relationship between teachers and parents is the cornerstone of a child’s educational experience. I cherish the shared goals, open communication, collaboration, mutual support, and celebrations I get to share with my

students' parents every year, and it's the community we have built together in my classroom that keeps me running back to school each fall.

Teachers who also connect with supportive communities of educators are more likely to remain in the teaching profession. As a first-year teacher, I was inspired to join the Salt Lake Education Association (SLEA), and thereby the Utah Education Association (UEA) and National Education Association (NEA), after watching teachers in my own district selflessly step outside the comfort of their classrooms to fight for greater funding and opportunities for the students in mine. I soon joined them in leading marches and speaking at rallies. In 2019, we rallied against a change to our district's salary schedule that would have increased starting salaries, but cost our teachers hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of our careers. In 2020, I delivered a speech to over 1,500 UEA members who had marched up the steps of our state capitol to insist our legislature raise our per pupil funding by 6%. And they did. The thrill of those actions taken together in community with my fellow public school teachers continues to inspire me and keeps me motivated in my work with students today.

I also draw inspiration from another community I am proud to belong to. When I pursued my National Board Certification, I was immediately embraced by our country's most accomplished educators, without whose support and guidance I might not have made it through the pandemic. No teacher thrives alone or survives in isolation. To strengthen the teaching profession, we must support the communities and organizations that make teachers strong.

Number 3: Respect

A few years ago, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. As scared as she was, my mom was most worried about my sister, who was in her mid-thirties and single at the time. Afraid my sister might end up alone forever, my mom asked me if I knew any single men in the DC area for her to date. I told her that a close friend of mine, the 2021 Washington DC Teacher of the Year, was a great guy and newly single. My mom thought about it, then said, "No." It took me a moment to realize what was wrong—even facing death, my mother still didn't want her daughter dating a teacher.

While teachers in the U.S. are appreciated by the majority of Americans, there is a negative narrative of the profession that is impacting our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified educators into the profession. One way to counter this negative perspective and boost the level of respect our public school teachers receive is to shine a spotlight on our best and brightest educators, thereby elevating excellence within our profession. I am the Co-Director of the Teacher Fellows, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization committed to developing the next generation of Utah teacher leaders. On our monthly podcast, we feature incredible classroom teachers and give them a platform to highlight the work they do with students and other educators they think the whole world needs to hear about. Amplifying stories like these is an easy way to flip the script on what it means to be a teacher in America.

Fourth: Room for Professional Growth

The last thing teachers need to thrive is room to grow as professionals. We are professionals. Driven by the need to be better for the children and families we serve, public school teachers everywhere pursue advanced degrees and additional credentials.

During my Master of Arts in Teaching program, I began working with a student with dyslexia and another identified with an emotional disturbance. I quickly realized I didn't have the tools to meet their needs, so I decided to add a second Master's degree in K-6 Mild/Moderate Special Education to my program. I am also certified to work with multilingual learners, and currently I am pursuing my Doctor of Education degree in Policy and Leadership—all so I can be a more effective 6th grade teacher.

I am also National Board Certified as a middle childhood generalist. National Board Certification is a voluntary, advanced certification that shows a teacher is an instructional expert in their subject and age range. It requires teachers to demonstrate a deep understanding of the content they teach by subject and age, the ability to meet individual student needs, develop strong relationships with students, families and colleagues, and maintain ongoing critical reflection of their practice. Similar to board certification in medicine, National Board Certification assures policymakers, parents, and the public that teachers have met the profession's highest standards. Over a decade of research has demonstrated that students taught by National Board Certified Teachers learn more than their peers. National Board Certified Teachers are also more likely to remain in the profession, leaving the classroom at just one-third the average rate. Over 137,000 teachers have achieved board certification in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, nearly half in high-need schools. I also mentor other teachers of color pursuing their National Board Certification, ensuring that, like me, they have the opportunity and support necessary to improve their practice and advance their careers.

We teachers are also taking the lead in bringing new teachers into the classroom. For example, in collaboration with the Salt Lake Education Foundation, I have helped start a pilot program at Meadowlark Elementary called *Our Community, Our Teachers*, through which any school staff member, including our custodian or head secretary, can receive a scholarship to pursue a degree in education.

There are teachers in every school and district in our nation proudly leading from their classrooms, and it is time we elevate the excellence that America's teachers exemplify. When we do, even the hearts of our harshest critics can be moved.

Just months before she passed, my mom left me this voicemail:

Hi Son, this is Omma. I just wat to say hi to you, how is everything going with you, and I am thinking of you. And I love you so much.

I just want to say I am so proud of you as a teacher. You are a great teacher, you are a wonderful son.

I love you so much.

I followed my heart into teaching, and eventually won my mom's heart, too. When we improve teacher pay, strengthen our communities, elevate the professionalism of our incredible educators, and provide greater opportunities for professional growth, then more young Americans will become teachers. Not despite their parents' wishes—to make their parents proud.