

Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
“The Immediate and Long-Term Challenges Facing Public School Teachers: Low Pay,  
Teacher Shortages, and Underfunded Public Schools”

Written Testimony

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My name is Gemayel Keyes, and I am an educator and a member of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, an AFT local. On behalf of the PFT, the AFT and my colleagues and students, I want to thank Chairman Sanders and the committee for addressing this critical issue.

I teach middle-years special education in a Philadelphia public school. I was born and raised in Philadelphia and educated in Philadelphia public schools. I am a product of the teachers who molded me into a lifelong learner and left an indelible mark on my life. Just last week, after 18 years with the School District of Philadelphia, I completed my first year as a classroom teacher. While this is the third position that I’ve held in the district, starting my career as a bus attendant, I’ve spent most of my career in education as a paraprofessional, and that’s how I stumbled upon what I would come to find was my calling.

For the entirety of my 18-year career, I have worked in the same school, primarily with students who have disabilities and complex needs, and alongside veteran teachers, all of whom are now retired. Those now-retired veteran teachers told me that I was meant to be a teacher, even when I didn’t see it. They saw a gift in the way I was able to bond and build relationships with even the most challenging of students, getting them to work and complete tasks when others couldn’t. As time progressed, I began to see what those veteran teachers saw and pondered the question of what could be next for my career.

At the time I moved into my career as a paraprofessional, the starting salary was \$16,000 and the maximum was \$30,000 per year. For those of you who don’t know, paraprofessionals work alongside teachers in the classroom to help “keep the train on the tracks” when needed and are essential to working with students who need additional attention and support. Many paraprofessionals work multiple jobs just to keep their heads above water and stay a centimeter above the poverty line. As I began to recognize that I did want to pursue a career as a teacher, I also started looking into schooling. Seeing costs in comparison to my salary was off-putting, so much so that it caused me to delay going back to school for some time. Then my school’s special education compliance manager presented me with a flier for a college program that was offered through a partnership with Harcum College and the district that accepted a limited number of paraprofessional applicants. However, this program did not include any type of direct financial assistance or commitment from the school district.

My major concern with going to school was going into debt, but I ultimately understood it was necessary to get to where I wanted to be in my career. I applied, was accepted into the program and obtained my associate degree in early childhood education, with

honors. I continued to Eastern University to earn my bachelor's degree in the same area. While at Eastern, I had the option to obtain my teaching certification while doing my coursework, but this also meant that I would have to take unpaid leave from my job to complete the student-teaching component in a different school district from the one I work for. This was something I could not afford to do.

My situation was not unique, as I knew of several other paraprofessionals in the exact same boat—literally steps away from being able to teach but facing that same student-teaching hardship. At the same time in 2019, my union, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, was in the early stages of negotiating our next contract, and I used this time to speak with my union leadership about my journey to become a teacher and some of the obstacles. It was from this meeting that the seeds for the Para Pathways program were planted. After 2020, our district was facing more vacancies than in the past, as many teachers had retired or left the profession over the course of the pandemic.

My union saw that the best potential teachers are already hard at work in classrooms serving children daily as paraprofessionals and that alleviating barriers would allow access to the teacher pathway. The Para Pathway program was a priority for my union and the district agreed. The district understood that paraprofessionals know the schools, live in the school community and share similar life experiences with our students. To make this happen, the school district agreed to make the Para Pathways program contractual and eliminate as much of the financial burden as possible, ultimately making obtaining a degree cost-free for paraprofessionals in the program with a multiyear commitment to teaching in Philadelphia schools.

Through the Para Pathways program, there are multiple pathways to teaching that are available to paraprofessionals based on their education level. Since I already had my bachelor's degree, I entered the Teacher Residency program, which meant I would spend one year working under a mentor teacher, in a Title I school, while taking coursework to obtain my master's degree in special education. Alongside me in the residency program were career-changers coming from every profession, ranging from corporate America to the military. All of us were following our passion to become educators. Many of my residency classmates, especially those coming from careers outside of education, were unprepared for what it meant to teach in urban public schools, and in under two years, a few had already quit due to burnout from the stresses that come along with the job.

Many don't understand that you are not only responsible for content but must take on many roles in the classroom based on the needs of your students, all with a starting salary of around \$45,000. Teachers are also constantly putting their own money back into their classroom, providing necessities for the job and their students' needs, like school supplies and snacks for hungry students. In just this school year, I spent over \$1,000 on classroom supplies so I could be effective.

But even as a teacher, I still have an additional part-time job. I can't even achieve the American dream of homeownership because of a high student debt-to-income ratio—

even though I have saved for a down payment and can qualify for a mortgage. Since I've been a paraprofessional, with a top income significantly less than a first-year teacher, I know the American dream is also out of reach for many of my colleagues. On top of the personal monetary contributions for teachers in special education, there's also hours of paperwork that cannot possibly be completed during work hours if we're expected to actually teach and work with our students.

The "PA Needs Teachers" report from 2023 stated that Philadelphia needed 2,015 teachers. This means that Philadelphia is in a severe teacher shortage. In my district, there are about 200 vacancies. At the start of the next school year, due to the Para Pathways program, 100 paraprofessionals will have earned teaching positions. But, if there is no steady pipeline of teachers coming in from outside of this program, things will not change for the profession.

We must invest in our teachers but also in our paraprofessionals. If we continue to underinvest in the pay and working conditions and don't match the responsibilities and job expectations, the paraprofessionals shortage will rise, the same way the pipeline of teachers has declined. I must also acknowledge and fully recognize that my job as a teacher would be impossible to do without my paraprofessional staff.

Each of us is here because a teacher taught us, inspired us, lit a spark and encouraged us to expand our minds, exploring our dreams. Becoming a bus assistant, a paraprofessional or a teacher is a respectable profession. As a teacher, I wake up every weekday and make a choice to be an urban educator in a district where many of our school buildings are crumbling due to decades of deferred maintenance and have issues with asbestos, and where many of our students have diverse needs.

I hope more school districts look at the success of Philadelphia's Para Pathways program and decide to invest in their school employees and offer a "grow-your-own" program. I also hope that the federal government can make providing funding for those programs a priority. Our counterparts in other countries take education seriously and invest in and respect their education professionals. Something must change, and that change can be driven by Congress, the policymakers who help shape what education in America looks like.

Thank you for letting me share my experience with the committee today, and I welcome any questions.