

STATEMENT TO PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
ON TEACHER/STAFF SHORTAGES IN CHARTER SCHOOLS

BY MARY JO WALSH

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Good morning, Chairman Sonney and Members of The House Education Committee,

Hello, I am Mary Jo Walsh. I have the privilege of being the principal at the Fell Charter School; a Kindergarten through grade 8 elementary school located in Simpson PA. We are an amazingly successful, small and diverse school located in NEPA that primarily serves financially struggling families who want a great education for their children. Most of our parents have a minimum of a high school diploma, and they want more skills and opportunities for their children; thus they have made the choice to enroll their child with us at Fell Charter School.

Our school is 21 years old and I have been blessed to have been the leader for the last 16 years. Over these years, I have done my best to recruit, train and retain exemplary teachers who are willing to go beyond the normal expectations of teaching to make connections with students, engage students in active learning, and help families work with their child to provide for a solid foundation on which to build their rest of their child's academic career; no matter whether that means post-secondary schooling, trades, military or other choices, all leading to our graduates being productive and contributing members of a global society.

Over the last two years, we have struggled, as many of my counterparts have, to secure and retain quality teachers, substitute teachers and staff willing to meet the needs of the students in our building. For me, this task has been humbling, exhausting and sadly completely out of my control, no matter what I do or have done.

It has been humbling to sit with teachers who had dedicated years of service to our school or teaching in general; watching them struggle with the decision to

leave our students, leave teaching and walk away from a passionate mission of teaching due to the ravages of this pandemic. They had fears of being in a school and becoming ill, fears of leaving their loved ones alone or bringing the disease home to them, and fears of just the day-to-day stress of the pandemic hanging over their heads. These men and women struggled to say goodbye to students; knowing that students come to school for the safety and consistency of that familiar face who really KNOWS them and how to meet their unique needs. It has been humbling for me to watch the decision-making process. In the end, it was heartbreaking to watch them move on, with no plan to return; 80 percent of my staff!

It has been exhausting for all of us being in a building day in and day out securing the academic needs, social needs, mental health, physical health, food security, clothing needs and safety needs of our students; on top of teaching, meeting standards and being accountable to the charter school regulations. This pandemic has forever changed the job description of teachers, staff, administrators and parents.

We are more than ever, reflecting on Maslow's Hierarchy...we CANNOT even get to teaching (even though our students are so far behind and need us more than ever to be present in the classroom) until we satisfy their basic needs; including but not limited to, food, clothing, and supplies for school. We are double-timing our work with students to secure basic needs, communication with families and THEN teach. The lines of what teaching is and what teaching is not have become blurred. In previous years we all had truly clear roles in how to function in our job, how to contribute to the school or classroom we are working in and how to plan each day for our tomorrow. Everyone is now responsible for everything.

Double duty does not even cover what we are asking people to do. The principals are teachers, the teachers are lunch staff, the janitors are hall monitors. Unless every single person is giving 110%, our school day does not work. We are burdening an already overburdened staff; because we have no choice. It is painful to keep asking teachers and staff to do more. But we have no choice. We are compromising in areas of high needs, most especially in the area of mental health for students and their families, as well as academic tutoring and small group mental health groups because our choices are limited...not only are we compromising, but we have no room for error any more. Teaching has become more than what we teach and learn in a classroom.

The role of a teacher has become a totally encompassing job, to be someone completely responsible for a classroom of precious human beings, for seven-and one-half hours a day. Teachers are teaching, triaging students and families and are treating mental health crises because they HAVE to. We need help.

Our teachers are burning out. They are stressed by the extra work they are doing. They need mental health support. They need to plan together, not alone. They need prep time to plan the most engaging lessons. The bright lights of teaching are being dimmed by the need to do everything for children and worry about themselves last. How do we recruit for THAT job? How do we retain people for THAT job? When will our teachers get time to take care of themselves.... remember that most of them leave their job at school to go home and take care of their children, their family members and other people who also mean a great deal to them. We have truly come to a point of no return and our students are paying a dear price for our inability to fix this problem.

As I noted earlier, this is all sadly out of my control as an administrator and I do not mean that in a Machiavellian way...I mean that there are no people willing to come to be interviewed that I can even offer more money to, or offer a better schedule to. There is no one to make an offer to. Our school, like many others, has been recruiting, advertising, and working with agencies, all to staff our buildings. Success is elusive.

We are losing teachers to other industries and professions. Why wouldn't another profession want to hire a teacher? Teachers are dedicated, compassionate, detail oriented; they are the perfect candidate to hire.

It is time that we start looking at other professionals and industries to recruit those highly skilled people to teach our children, now. We need to make pathways to help schools succeed, thrive and survive. We need the people "in the field" who want to teach, working with our students. We need to tap into their knowledge base to make sure that their trades, skills, and entrepreneurial spirit gets passed on to the next generation of learners.

We need to remove barriers to hiring. We need to partner with industries to create pathways for our students to enter the job market, but also for their professionals to enter the teaching profession. We need reciprocal agreements now that may mean changing how we run schools. I am all for making sure that

we have strong teaching preparation programs, but it is high time that we begin to explore new options for recruiting. We need something in place NOW. We cannot wait another year or two or our schools will be closed. We are currently in survival mode...the mode below survival is failure. We cannot afford to fail our students. We cannot wait years to solve this problem. We need this problem solved now or there will not be a tomorrow of quality education for our students.

Someone asked me last week, what am I afraid of with regard to teaching and learning? My fear is that we do not have enough dedicated people teaching our students. Our students cannot and will not thrive. Our students will not have the drive to seek more or better. Our students will not have the social skills to be well-rounded contributing members of society if they lose the quality role models in their classrooms now. Most of all these are the generation of people who will be OUR leaders, our healthcare workers, our teachers. How can we expect more from them in the future if WE short change them now?

Thank you for your attention to this important issue and I am happy to answer any questions.