

Sen. Larson: Legislative leaders release package aimed at maintaining Wisconsin's education workforce

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Madison, WI – Today, State Senators Chris Larson, LaTonya Johnson, Jeff Smith, Rep. Sondy Pope, and Democratic colleagues released an eight-piece package of legislation to address the staffing crisis plaguing Wisconsin's K-12 schools. They offered these remarks:

“For years, our schools have sounded the alarm that there is a crisis around hiring and retaining quality educators in our state. This legislative package supports maintaining our education workforce through treating our teachers as professionals once again.

“The deferred maintenance of this profession and lack of respect our educators have seen over the last decade has demoralized a profession that many see as a calling. Policymakers and cash-strapped districts have used our educators' love of teaching against them to the point of cutting wages and benefits while increasing workloads and expectations. Over the past ten years, Wisconsin educators have seen their wages cut by an average of nearly 12.5% adjusted for inflation, and benefits slashed by over 13%. We can no longer expect quality educators to enter into or stay within a system that does not value them.

Teacher Annette explains it like this: 'The entire education system relies on unpaid overtime. The shortage will continue, along with high turnover rates, until the workload and unrealistic expectations change.'

“Unfortunately, over the past ten years, our schools have seen a reduction in local classroom teaching experience by 17.5% and overall teaching experience go down by 8.6%. This brain drain is attributed to the undervaluing of our education professionals. As experience is gained and not rewarded, we have seen teachers leaving our districts for private sector careers that value their experience and talents.

“By establishing a minimum pay while pairing increases to higher educational achievement and longevity, we can assure that our educators are paid fairly for their work and are incentivized to continue their education to provide the best instruction and support to our children. Furthermore, this package establishes self-directed preparation periods, offers educators a voice in district decisions, and lessens the burden of repaying student loans through a teacher pledge program, while eliminating the vow of poverty taken as a student-teacher.

“The importance of reestablishing professional treatment of our education workforce cannot be overstated; this is especially true when looking to future generations of educators in Wisconsin. The regressive public policies initiated over a decade ago, paired with the constant assault on public education writ large, have left our current educators deflated and forced prospective educators to look into alternative career paths.

“The recent Public Policy Forum report, “Fewer Education Grads Pose Threat to Teacher Workforce,” outlines that education degrees declined by nearly 13% in Wisconsin’s most significant public education market after the repeal of collective bargaining rights.

‘... education completions dropped substantially both in number and as a share of all new degrees and certificates awarded. Education completions decreased 12.9% from 2,244 in 2011 to 1,955 in 2019.’ – WI Policy Forum

“In addressing the need to attract and retain quality educators, we must listen to the folks in the field who have had their voices long silenced by state lawmakers. Respect, support, and appreciation must be reestablished to mitigate the detrimental effects of deprofessionalization in the teaching field.

“The initiatives outlined in this legislative package and the many other progressive ideas previously offered by Democratic members over this session demonstrate a positive way forward in supporting our students and families by maintaining a

quality, professional education workforce.”