

LR455 Teacher Recruitment and Retention Study

From the Office of Senator Margo Juarez

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Summary

This report synthesizes feedback from two complementary sources collected as part of the LR455 study on educator recruitment, retention, and teacher burnout:

Pre-meeting written responses submitted by educators through the Nebraska State Education Association (NSEA) and stakeholder listening session discussions conducted during the LR455 study, which included teachers, administrators, education leaders, and other stakeholders.

Although collected independently, both sources identified remarkably consistent themes. Participants described a profession experiencing increasing demands while resources, staffing, and public support have not kept pace. Across both sets of responses, participants emphasized that burnout is driven not by a single issue, but by the cumulative effects of expanding responsibilities, staffing shortages, student mental health needs, increasing administrative requirements, and diminishing time available for instruction and relationship building.

At the same time, educators and stakeholders identified practical, research-informed strategies that could strengthen recruitment and retention while improving outcomes. Prior to the LR455 listening sessions, the educators submitted written feedback describing their experiences in Nebraska schools, represented teachers from a variety of grade levels, content areas, and districts and provided firsthand perspectives on Nebraska students.

Data Sources

Nebraska State Education Association (NSEA)

Prior to the LR455 listening sessions, educators submitted written feedback describing their experiences in Nebraska schools. Responses represented teachers from a variety of grade levels, content areas, and districts and provided firsthand perspectives on the challenges affecting educator recruitment and retention.

LR455 Stakeholder Listening Session

Facilitated discussions were conducted with teachers, administrators, education organizations, and other stakeholders to identify challenges facing Nebraska schools and potential state-level solutions. Discussions focused on educator workload, burnout, recruitment, retention, compensation, student needs, and policy recommendations.

Overall Findings

Workload and Loss of Instructional Time

The most frequently identified concern was the growing workload placed on educators.

Teachers described:

- Large class sizes resulting in excessive grading and planning outside contract hours.
- Limited planning time.
- Increasing paperwork and compliance requirements.
- Additional supervisory duties before, during, and after school.
- Administrative responsibilities replacing instructional planning.
- Individual testing that consumes instructional time.

Many educators emphasized that burnout results from everything surrounding teaching rather than teaching itself.

School Readiness

Educators described significant changes in student preparedness.

Common concerns included:

- Reduced social skills
- Limited problem-solving skills
- Delayed independence
- Technology dependence
- Students entering kindergarten without basic self-care skills

Teachers attributed many of these changes to reduced parent engagement, increased screen time, and the lasting effects of the pandemic.

Student Behavior, Safety, and Mental Health

Educators consistently identified increasing behavioral challenges as one of the largest contributors to burnout.

Responses described:

- Aggressive student behaviors
- Classroom disruptions
- Limited behavioral supports
- Safety concerns for students and staff
- Increasing trauma and mental health needs

Many respondents believed unresolved behavior issues were a larger driver of teacher attrition than salary alone.

Leadership and School Culture

Teachers emphasized that effective leadership is critical for retention.

Supportive administrators were described as:

- Visible
- Collaborative
- Respectful of teacher expertise
- Protective of planning time

Conversely, ineffective leadership contributed to:

- Low morale
- High turnover
- Fear of retaliation
- Inconsistent discipline
- Poor communication

Several educators stated they remained in or left a district primarily because of leadership.

Respect for the Profession

Many educators expressed concern about declining public trust.

Teachers reported feeling:

- Blamed for societal problems
- Judged primarily by test scores
- Criticized publicly
- Politicized
- Undervalued despite increasing expectations

Several respondents noted that while academic expectations for students have grown dramatically, educator support has remained largely unchanged.

Compensation and Recruitment

Educators cited several financial barriers affecting recruitment and retention:

- Noncompetitive salaries
- Rising health insurance costs
- Student loan debt
- Lack of paid family leave
- Housing affordability

Participants recommended expanding loan forgiveness, tuition assistance, Grow Your Own initiatives, and teacher apprenticeship programs.

Recommendations from NSEA Feedback

Teachers most frequently recommended:

- Reduce class sizes
- Increase paraprofessional staffing
- Protect planning time
- Expand mentoring
- Improve administrator training
- Increase compensation
- Reduce unnecessary testing
- Simplify compliance requirements
- Strengthen behavioral supports
- Restore professional trust

Findings from the LR455 Stakeholder Listening Sessions

Changes in the Teaching Profession

Participants consistently described teaching today as substantially different than when they entered the profession.

Major changes included:

- Increased standardized testing
- Greater technology demands
- Growing student mental health needs
- Reduced school readiness
- Parent expectations extending beyond school hours
- Staffing shortages
- Increased compliance requirements

Many participants stated that teachers are increasingly expected to serve as educators, counselors, social workers, behavior specialists, and family supports simultaneously.

Technology and Work-Life Balance

Technology emerged as both a benefit and a challenge.

Participants reported:

- Constant parent email communication
- Increased administrative communication
- Expectations of immediate responses from both groups
- Online grading systems creating 24-hour/ 7-day demands availability
- AI misuse and student-generated misinformation
- Cyberbullying and doxing of educators
- Early childhood overexposure to technology affecting school readiness.

Many teachers described technology as eliminating healthy boundaries between work and personal life. They felt an inability to disconnect after work. This adds to the emotional demands of teaching.

Student Trauma and Mental Health

Stakeholders reported substantial increases in student mental health concerns.

Discussion focused on:

- Suicide screenings
- Trauma-related behavior
- Foster care challenges
- Abuse and neglect
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Need for trauma-informed schools

Participants emphasized that schools are increasingly expected to provide emotional support while lacking sufficient counselors, psychologists, paras, and behavioral supports. Addressing trauma earlier would improve both student outcomes and educator retention.

Teacher Shortages

Nearly every discussion referenced staffing shortages.

Participants described:

- Fewer applicants
- Teachers working outside certification areas
- Paraeducator shortages

- Larger caseloads
- Increased workload

Several educators expressed concerns about an emerging leadership vacuum, with fewer people pursuing teaching or school administration.

Local Flexibility

Stakeholders consistently encouraged preserving local control.

Participants recommended:

- Avoiding one-size-fits-all mandates
- Allowing districts flexibility
- Sharing successful local practices
- Expanding collaboration through ESUs
- Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Participants highlighted several promising approaches already occurring in Nebraska:

- Teacher apprenticeships
- Grow Your Own programs
- Community college partnerships
- High school educator pathways
- ESU mentoring
- Trauma-informed schools
- AVID implementation
- Cross-Cutting Themes

Both the NSEA responses and LR455 listening sessions identified nearly identical challenges.

The strongest and most consistent message was that teachers need more time.

Suggestions included:

- Protected planning periods
- Reduced meetings
- Streamlined paperwork
- Fewer redundant assessments
- Reduced administrative responsibilities
- Shorten student instructional time, if necessary.

Participants consistently recommended increasing:

- Mental health professionals
- School psychologists
- Counselors
- Behavioral intervention staff
- Paraeducators
- Recruitment

Suggested strategies included:

- Expand Grow Your Own programs
- Student teaching stipends
- Loan forgiveness
- Teacher apprenticeships
- Tuition assistance
- High school education pathways
- Retention

Participants emphasized:

- Competitive compensation
- Affordable health insurance
- Paid family leave
- Strong administrator training
- Ongoing mentoring
- Improved work-life balance
- Professional Respect

Educators consistently asked policymakers to:

- Increase teacher voice in policy development
- Reduce unnecessary mandates
- Restore trust in educator expertise
- Highlight positive stories about public education
- Recognize the professional aspects of teaching

Feedback from both sources suggests several areas for legislative and state-level consideration.

- Immediate Opportunities
- Protect teacher planning time.
- Expand mentoring programs.
- Increase paraprofessional compensation.
- Address educator health insurance costs.
- Improve behavioral supports.
- Expand Grow Your Own initiatives.
- Long-Term Considerations
- Modernize accountability systems.
- Reduce unnecessary testing.
- Strengthen administrator preparation.
- Increase flexibility for local districts.
- Invest in early childhood and parent education.
- Improve collaboration among the Legislature, NDE, ESUs, school districts, and educators.
- More equitable staffing across districts.

Conclusion

The findings from the NSEA educator responses and the LR455 stakeholder listening sessions present a clear and consistent picture of the challenges facing Nebraska's education system. Across both data sources, participants emphasized that teacher burnout and workforce shortages are not driven by a single issue but by the cumulative impact of increasing workloads, growing student needs, staffing shortages, expanding administrative responsibilities, and declining work-life balance.

Despite these challenges, respondents also identified practical, actionable solutions: restoring educator time, strengthening school leadership, expanding behavioral and mental health supports, investing in recruitment and mentoring, preserving local flexibility, and elevating the teaching profession. These recommendations emerged as the most promising strategies for improving educator retention and ensuring Nebraska students continue to receive a high-quality education.

A major recommendation suggested establishing these conversations and studies as a continuing task force. This task force would advise the legislature on educator workforce issues and create a space for open communication and cooperation between educators and the state. This task force could strengthen educator recruitment, retention, workplace conditions, and student success by establishing a formal partnership between educators, policymakers, and education stakeholders. The task force, led by the legislature's Education Committee, could include representatives from the Legislature, Nebraska Department of Education, teachers, educational service units, educator preparation programs, and school boards. It could meet annually during the summer to gather educator testimony, review workforce trends and statewide data, identify challenges facing schools, and develop recommendations for legislative, administrative, and local policy improvements. The task force could submit a public report to state leaders summarizing educator input, workforce data, best practices, and recommendations to improve recruitment, retention, workplace conditions, and student outcomes. Nebraska can continue as a national leader in supporting educators through competitive compensation, sustainable workloads, safe and supportive schools, adequate student mental health resources, and meaningful educator involvement in shaping education policy. This task force could assist in the goals and accomplishments the state makes to guarantee quality educational institutions.

Finally, Senator Margo Juarez was so pleased with the quality and depth of participants in this interim study. Thank you so much for your time and feedback. Let's continue to move forward.