

# UNDERPAID, UNAPPRECIATED, UNPROTECTED:

## WHY DOESN'T AMERICA RESPECT OUR TEACHERS?

Article by Andrew Bachrach

Graphics by Jaidyn Holt

Nowadays, there seem to be very few things that Americans can agree on. However, when nearly 60% of Americans believe that teachers are underpaid, according to a September 2018 survey from USA Today, you would have expected some sort of meaningful action, right? Wrong. In fact, the pay gap between teachers and other comparable professionals' education has grown exponentially to its largest ever: the Economic Policy Institute found in 2018 that teachers make 18.7% less.

Our society continues to show a lack of respect for American teachers for all of the work they put in to educate the leaders of tomorrow. With low pay, negligible benefits, a lack of respect from society and education funding drying up, it is critical that we address the state of teaching in our nation before future generations begin to suffer the consequences.

Since the 1990s, teacher wages have stagnated more than any other profession, and in certain states, Time Magazine finds that some teachers have actually seen a decrease in wages when adjusted for inflation. In Florida, the estimated average public school teacher's salary is about \$48,395, far lower than the national

average. As wages often vary significantly from state-to-state, they may not always cover living costs, especially in Central Florida. Mathematics teacher Shannon Bergman, who previously taught for Seminole County Public Schools, said she agrees that teachers across the nation are underpaid for the work that they do.

"This year, obviously, I think we're being asked to do two and three people's jobs all at the same time," Bergman said. "It really has doubled, tripled exponentially ... the things we have to do. So, no, they're not paid enough."

As it is becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet, many now leave the profession early, or are forced to work a second job, because of how difficult it is to support their families. It is devastating to the American education system that qualified and bright young teachers simply cannot afford to continue in the profession, and this needs to be fixed soon.

"Many young people find it very difficult to make ends meet when they are first starting, especially in our capitalist society that pressures us to buy things," English teacher Dean Rhoads, who has taught at TPS for over 40 years, said. "What that ultimately means is that we lose good people."

Many experts believe low teacher pay is a symptom of larger problems. Susan Moore Johnson, a professor of education at Harvard, believes that the roots of the industry's relatively low pay lie in sexism, as the majority of teachers in the 20th century were women.

"The hidden subsidy of public education is the fact that teachers for many years were working at suppressed wage levels because they really had no options other than teaching," Johnson said in a Time Magazine interview.

However, the larger ailment plaguing the American education system may be a lack of respect from our society, coupled with a lack of political motivation to legislate for change. The Atlantic reports that in 1986, 91% of respondents said that parents and teachers respected each other. Today, that number has fallen to 49%. Statistically and anecdotally, parents have been showing less and less respect for educators. Sadly, teachers are begin-

ning to see this behavior rub off on students.

"There's been a perception that teachers are not civil servants, they're employees of parents," said Social Sciences teacher Brandon Burmeister, who previously taught at Winter Park High School. "There has to be some way to break that cultural viewpoint. If anything, we are employees of the kids."

The societal consciousness has begun to affect the morale of teachers, as just 34% of American educators believe that society values them, according to The National Council on Teacher Quality. While parents should definitely be involved in their children's education, there is a line that they should not cross. Once parents begin to question teachers' authority in their own classroom, that consciousness begins to spread throughout society.

"It becomes a problem when parents think they can tell you what to do in your classroom and what to teach," Bergman said.

As society's viewpoints on the education

our schools of funding, we are robbing our students of a successful future. According to the Florida Sun-Sentinel, compared to the national average of about \$12,000, Florida spends just below \$8,000 per student, which is frankly appalling. Even more appalling was Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' order to open all public schools in the state, under threat of funding cuts. In the midst of a global pandemic that has already killed over 270,000 Americans and nearly 19,000 Floridians according to the CDC, DeSantis' actions are immoral, disrespectful and dangerous. Why would you punish schools that chose to not risk the health of their communities?

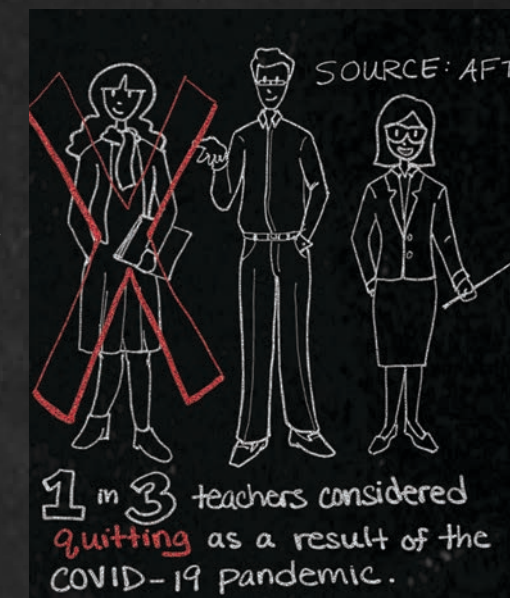
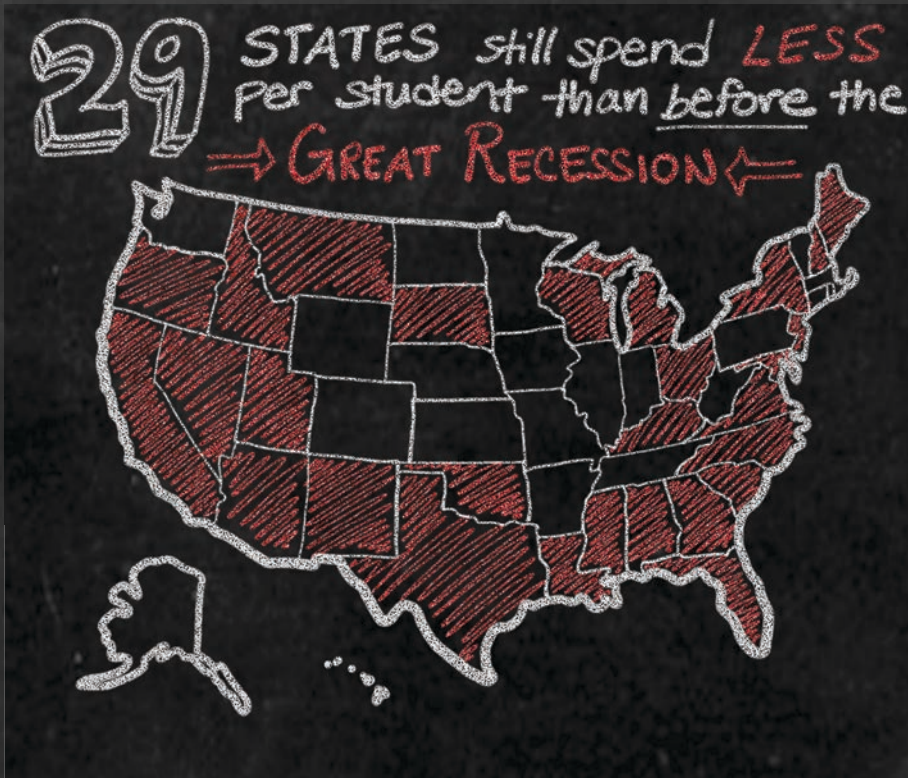
"[Lower education funding] is...detrimental to the state," Rhoads said. "It's short-sighted. Florida is educating students who aren't capable of filling well-paying jobs. We have to have a more educated population, and our population simply isn't being educated."

The state has also continued to impose unreasonable standards and guidelines that, according to Mathematics Teacher Michael Hill, who previously taught at Winter Park High School, believes have negatively affected the quality of public education.

"Is my task much different than 25 years ago? No, I don't think so," Hill said. "I think what's happened, at least in public schools, is all the other peripheral things that are put on educators by non-educators."

We can debate the issues all day, but in order to solve this exponentially growing problem, we need real world solutions that work. The Conversation, a non-for-profit global network of newsrooms, finds that both state and federal governments need to invest in incentives to attract new teachers, and should also draw prospective educators to areas where there are teacher scarcities. With hefty college loan debt often being one of the biggest obstacles to potential educators, if we invest in programs for student loan-forgiveness, teachers may instead look for jobs in areas that need teachers, rather than where the money is or work a second job.

Every year, fewer Americans want to become teachers, contributing to a growing teacher shortage that shows no signs of slowing down,



especially in the world of COVID-19 and school shootings.

"There's a possibility that you could be killed in this occupation," Burmeister said.

The time to act is now. As teachers continue to go underpaid, undervalued, unprotected and underfunded, we neglect the cornerstone of our society: education. So, when we as a nation ask ourselves why we don't respect our teachers, we should instead be asking why we don't want the future of our world to be made in America. Teachers need more resources at their disposal to educate the leaders of tomorrow. However, with all of Americans' focus on the shortcomings and problems of education, we forget to respect and thank our teachers for all of the hard work they put in every single day, for us students.

"Because there is so much focus on what's wrong with education, we don't value the positives, and we don't see what's right about it, which makes it more disrespected," Bergman said. "I think that teaching is a harder job than a lot of people ever realize or ever will realize."

