



## Retaining Top Talent & Improving Working Conditions Issue Brief

### Issue Overview

At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, 98 of the State's 115 local superintendents responded to a survey that showed there were 11,297 school staff vacancies across North Carolina. This number includes:

- 3,619 K-12 teachers
- 1,342 bus drivers
- 850 Exceptional Children (EC) teachers
- 354 school counselors, social workers, and psychologists
- 4,364 noncertified personnel (in addition to bus drivers)

The total number of vacancies increased by 22% compared to the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, including a roughly 54% increase in teacher vacancies. The figures listed above undercount the true number of vacancies, given that 17 school districts did not respond to the survey.<sup>1</sup>

### NCSBA Position

**Teachers:** Students deserve high-quality, full-time teachers, but too many classrooms statewide are filled with long-term substitutes. NCSBA believes a competitive market salary is essential to retaining these teachers. For several years, most teachers with 15+ years of experience have not received an annual step increase. Additionally, for the 2022-23 fiscal year, new teachers received a 7.2% raise, while teachers with 15+ years of experience received no more than a 2.7% raise (except teachers in their 25<sup>th</sup> year).<sup>2</sup> Lawmakers should continue to provide raises for all teachers – prioritizing those with 15+ years of experience.

Improving the teacher pipeline should also be a high priority. Additional teacher pay investments include: restoring master's pay in a teacher's subject area and providing incentive pay for mentor teachers. NCSBA also believes that appropriating funds to provide more K-3 teacher assistants will increase teacher retention and aid in improving student performance in the State's Read to Achieve program.

**Exceptional Children (EC) Teachers:** EC teachers are becoming one of the toughest positions to fill. More than half of the State's school districts report having a higher number of students with disabilities than is covered by the 13% State funding cap. It is critical, therefore, that lawmakers

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<sup>1</sup> Liz Schlemmer and Jason deBruyn, "NC has over 11,000 vacancies in public schools, a statewide survey finds," WUNC, August 22, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Section 7A.1 of S.L. 2022-74

continue to raise the funding cap. NCSBA believes additional pay and support will go a long way in retaining these essential teachers.

**Bus Drivers & Noncertified Personnel:** School districts statewide continue to struggle filling noncertified personnel positions, particularly bus drivers. Bus routes are getting cancelled, and many students are either getting to school late or not getting to school at all. This bus driver shortage is a crisis that is both a safety and academic issue because students are expected to arrive at school safely and on time. Lawmakers should, therefore, provide pay raises for all noncertified personnel, with a priority on bus drivers.

**Mental Health Support Personnel:** North Carolina continues to substantially lag behind the nationally recommended ratios of mental health support personnel to students. The General Assembly should provide higher salaries for these professionals to become more competitive with the private sector. Additionally, school districts that have made efforts to recruit but have been unable to hire a full-time, permanent school psychologist should be given flexibility to use funds in the new school psychologist allotment for contractual services or to hire social workers, counselors, or nurses.

**School Facilities:** The 2020-21 Statewide Facility Needs Survey found that the State's 115 school districts have combined five-year construction needs of over \$12.8 billion.<sup>3</sup> The General Assembly should continue to provide funding to address school capital needs across the State. Having an environment that prioritizes learning is fundamental to a teacher's ability to support student achievement.

## **Issue Background**

### **Teachers**

Preliminary results of the 2022 Teacher Working Conditions Survey show a decrease in teachers who say they plan to continue teaching at their current school and an increase in teachers who say they plan to leave the education profession entirely.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the statewide teacher attrition rate for the 2020-21 school year was 8.2%<sup>5</sup>, which is an increase from the 7.5% attrition rate in the 2019-20 school year.<sup>6</sup> The attrition rate for beginning teachers was 9.4%, which is higher than the 7.9% rate for all other teachers.<sup>7</sup>

While a competitive market salary plays an essential role in attracting and retaining high-quality, full-time teachers, North Carolina continues to receive a low ranking for average teacher salary compared to other states. According to data from the 2020-21 fiscal year, North Carolina ranks

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<sup>3</sup> Five-Year K-12 Facility Needs Report: 2020-21 Facility Needs Survey, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>4</sup> 2022 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, Initial Data Results, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>5</sup> Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: 2020-2021 State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, February 17, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: 2019-2020 State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina, December 15, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: 2020-2021 State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, February 17, 2022.

38<sup>th</sup> in the nation for average teacher salary and 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation for average beginning teacher salary.<sup>8</sup> The current State teacher salary schedule includes annual step increases for teachers with 0-14 years of experience, starting at \$37,000 for the 2022-23 fiscal year. Teachers with 15-23 years of experience stay on the same pay level until they reach 24 years. Once teachers reach 25 years, they receive a **final** step increase, which is \$54,000 for the 2022-23 fiscal year.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to a comparatively low state-funded teacher salary, there are several other areas that show the State's lack of commitment to teachers. In 2013, the General Assembly phased out the teacher salary supplement for a master's degree or other advanced degree. Currently, only teachers who were already receiving that supplement prior to the 2014-15 school year continue to receive it.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the State does not allocate recurring funding to supplement mentor teachers, which are assigned to support beginning teachers.<sup>11</sup> (It is worth noting that a portion of nonrecurring federal COVID relief funds were allocated to support mentor teachers in 2020<sup>12</sup> and 2021.<sup>13</sup>) Lack of support for teachers can also be seen in the significant 19% decrease in teacher assistant (TA) funding levels since 2013.<sup>14</sup> TAs are essential for retaining teachers and improving student outcomes, as they provide instructional support that allows students to receive a more individualized education.

### **Exceptional Children (EC) Teachers**

At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, 85% of the State's school districts reported 850 EC teacher vacancies,<sup>15</sup> and the 2020-21 State of the Teaching Profession Report concluded that school districts continue to struggle to find teachers who are licensed in EC.<sup>16</sup> Statewide 2021-22 data on students with disabilities show declines in student success, including a 77.9% graduation rate, compared to 82.1% in 2020-21, and a 17.8% dropout rate, compared to 11.6% in 2020-21.<sup>17</sup>

Special education services are funded at the federal, state, and local levels. The State provides each school district with a per-student allocation that cannot exceed 13% of a school districts' students. The allocation does not consider a student's specific needs or the local school system's funding capacity. The 2021 State budget increased this State funding cap for EC services from 12.75% to 13%<sup>18</sup>, but still more than half of the State's 115 school districts report having a higher number of students with disabilities than can be supported by this funding level. Additionally, the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says the federal government will cover 40%

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<sup>8</sup> NEA, Educator Pay and Student Spending: How Does Your State Rank? (accessed January 20, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Section 7A.1 of S.L. 2022-74

<sup>10</sup> 2013 Annotated Conference Committee Report, North Carolina General Assembly Fiscal Research Division.

<sup>11</sup> Employee Salary and Benefits Manual 2020-2021, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>12</sup> Section 1.2 of S.L. 2020-97

<sup>13</sup> Section 1.2 of S.L. 2021-3

<sup>14</sup> Statistical Profile, Table 16, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (accessed January 20, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Liz Schlemmer and Jason deBruyn, "NC has over 11,000 vacancies in public schools, a statewide survey finds," WUNC, August 22, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Report to the North Carolina General Assembly: 2020-2021 State of the Teaching Profession in North Carolina, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, February 17, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Annual Public Report for Students with Disabilities, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>18</sup> Joint Conference Committee Report on the Current Operations Appropriations Act of 2021, North Carolina General Assembly, November 15, 2021.

of the extra cost of educating a student with disabilities<sup>19</sup>, but it is consistently reported that federal funding has never reached that target.<sup>20</sup> As a result of these funding discrepancies, local school districts are forced to cover additional costs, which not only affects hiring and retaining EC teachers but also limits access to special education curriculum, equipment, and technology.

### **Bus Drivers & Noncertified Personnel**

At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, 85% of the State’s school districts reported 1,342 bus driver vacancies.<sup>21</sup> These positions are not particularly easy to fill because bus drivers are required to complete trainings and testing prior to employment. This includes completing a three-day school bus driver training class, passing up to four different knowledge tests, successfully completing behind-the-wheel training, and passing a skills test.<sup>22</sup> Currently, understaffing at the Department of Motor Vehicles is preventing individuals applying to become school bus drivers from receiving the required commercial driver license (CDL). Additionally, the CDL is also required for similar State agency and private sector jobs, many of which pay a higher base salary.

In addition to the bus driver vacancies reported at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, 85% of the State’s school districts reported 4,364 noncertified personnel vacancies. This is 45% of the total reported vacancies.<sup>23</sup> As of July 1, 2022, any State funded noncertified personnel hired by a public school is legally required to be paid \$15 per hour.<sup>24</sup> While this compensation is an improvement compared to previous years and can be used as a recruitment tool, it has the potential to decrease retention because a new hire can receive the same income as someone who has been employed by a public school for several years.<sup>25</sup>

### **Mental Health Support Personnel**

North Carolina continues to fall short of nationally recommended ratios of students to mental health support personnel.<sup>26</sup>

	<b>Nationally Recommended Ratio</b>	<b>North Carolina Ratio</b>
School Counselors	1 : 250	1 : 335
Schools Psychologists	1 : 550	1 : 1,815
School Social Workers	1 : 250	1 : 1,025
School Nurses	1 : 750 (or 1 per school)	1 : 890

Recent legislative efforts to increase North Carolina’s ratios include a school psychologist allotment that provides funding for each school district to hire at least one psychologist, as well as

<sup>19</sup> Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, 20 U.S.C. § (1975).

<sup>20</sup> Tammy Kolbe, Elizabeth Dhuey, and Sara Menlove Dautre, “More money is not enough: The case for reconsidering federal special education funding formulas,” Brookings, October 3, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Liz Schlemmer and Jason deBruyn, “NC has over 11,000 vacancies in public schools, a statewide survey finds,” WUNC, August 22, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> School Bus Endorsements, North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles (accessed January 20, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Liz Schlemmer and Jason deBruyn, “NC has over 11,000 vacancies in public schools, a statewide survey finds,” WUNC, August 22, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Section 7A.8 of S.L. 2022-74

<sup>25</sup> SL 2022-74 Non-Certified Salary FAQ (2022-23 School Year), North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

<sup>26</sup> Meeting of the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force, October 31, 2022.

distribution of federal COVID relief funds for contracted mental health support personnel in schools.<sup>27</sup> Despite these efforts, many school districts cannot use the school psychologist allotment funds because they are unable to recruit and hire full-time, permanent school psychologists, and the funds do not cover contractual services. These funds also cannot be used to hire social workers, counselors, or nurses, which was allowed prior to a 2021 State law. This means funds go untouched instead of being used to help students in crisis. Additionally, existing federal relief funding will soon run out, which will reduce access to mental health support in schools.

### **School Facilities**

The Statewide Facility Needs Survey completed in 2020-21 found that North Carolina's 115 school districts have combined five-year construction needs of over \$12.8 billion.<sup>28</sup> This is roughly a 59% increase from reported need in the 2015-16 survey.<sup>29</sup> This survey underestimates school capital needs because the amount is based on 2020 average cost-per-square-foot for new school construction and does not account for inflation.

State law assigns responsibility for school capital needs to the local school districts, while the General Assembly is responsible for school current expense funding.<sup>30</sup> Despite these designated responsibilities, for the 2021-22 school year, local school districts spent \$3.3 billion on school current expense, which is 20% of the total operating cost of public schools.<sup>31</sup> If school districts did not need to supplement State appropriations for current operating needs, this local funding could be used to reduce the backlog of capital needs.

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<sup>27</sup> S.L. 2021-180

<sup>28</sup> Five-Year K-12 Facility Needs Report: 2020-21 Facility Needs Survey, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, September 1, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Statewide Facility Needs Survey 2015-16, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, School Planning Section.

<sup>30</sup> G.S. 115C-408(b)

<sup>31</sup> Statistical Profile, Table 22, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction