

SUPPORTING VIRGINIA'S EDUCATION WORKFORCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School divisions in the Commonwealth are facing a deluge of teacher turnover, faculty shortages, and workload demand as school systems recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. New and returning educators need reliable professional development support to overcome these challenges, while school districts need additional support in reaching their environmental literacy goals, such as providing Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences in each grade band. With a fund dedicated to paying teachers for the personal time they invest in professional development and supporting school districts in achieving their environmental literacy goals, Virginia can help retain and grow the skill set of our best teachers.

CHALLENGE

Teachers report being overwhelmed with the demands of teaching, especially as student emotional needs have increased and learning retention has reduced due to the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Virginia, “only 78.9% of teachers returned to their same school in fall 2021”¹ which was a significant decrease from 2020. “Teacher turnover creates a constant drain on funding. When hard-to-staff school districts spend a portion of their funds on attrition, they have less money available for curriculum, enrichment programs, mental health support, school-based support staff, and other resources that can support students. Essentially, students pay the price for the ongoing teacher exodus.”²

Because of the decrease in teacher retention, school districts must seek alternative routes for teacher attrition, which can include hiring inexperienced or underqualified teachers. Professional development (PD) is essential to creating effective teachers, especially when teachers are being recruited from non-traditional avenues or alternative professions in the education field. However, professional development providers have noted that teachers are increasingly only participating in PD if they are compensated for their time. Many PDs are offered outside of school contract hours. In the past, teachers have not typically been compensated for attending additional training, but there is a shift in this paradigm.

Additionally, teachers are filling roles typically filled by administrators, such as being the unofficial planner of field experiences or support persons for environmental literacy plans. Similar to professional development, these roles are not compensated, even though they take up significant time. Especially in smaller or under-resourced districts, there is often no administrative personnel to take on these roles. These extra roles contribute to teachers feeling overwhelmed, especially when they are not compensated for these duties.

SOLUTION

Research suggests that investing in teachers makes a difference in student achievement. In order to implement needed policies associated with staffing every classroom

— even the most challenging ones — with high-quality, well-supported teachers, substantial and targeted investments must first be made in both teacher quality and education research.³ Education policymakers and administrators should be well informed on the complexity of this issue and adopt holistic measures along many dimensions to support existing teachers through professional development funds, which will help to attract and hire new, highly qualified teachers.

To support statewide and under-resourced school districts, “substantial and targeted investments must first be made in both teacher quality and education research.”⁴ Teachers and future qualified educators need additional resources to compensate for time outside of the classroom in Professional Development and time spent on coordinating science literacy lessons and field experiences.

To help school districts implement environmental literacy goals, the fund would support a local or regionally-hired coordinator to lift some administrative burden from teachers as they navigate classroom capacity challenges. The environmental literacy coordinator would ideally take care of program coordination, scheduling, reporting, curriculum sharing, and other administrative tasks which support the coordination of environmental literacy plans in school districts. The coordinator’s acquired (and/or incumbent) familiarity with local environmental programs, organizations, and other outreach skills would not only support teachers administratively but would also secure reliability for the continuous pursuit of environmental literacy programs as schools encounter faculty turn-over, ensuring that those programs are seen to completion.

The environmental literacy coordinator would look different in different divisions. Some divisions might opt to compensate a teacher or administrator who already serves in this capacity. Some might find they need an FTE based on their size and needs. Other divisions might want to collaborate with an NGO that could provide the expertise and support. Divisions could choose to work collaboratively with other divisions in their region. The fund is meant to give divisions options that best suit their particular needs and local communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

\$600,000 per year in competitive grants to be managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation Office of Environmental Education to support the development or implementation of school district environmental literacy plans, including stipends for teacher professional development or environmental literacy planning and coordination.