



EDUCATORS FOR EXCELLENCE CHICAGO

2019



Ask an Educator

Priority Issues for Chicago's Classrooms

To create this guide, our team of educators examined data from over 1,200 surveys and 20 focus groups of Chicago educators. We identified what education issues they cared about the most in order to drive change within the district, union, and state. We believe these ideas will have a significant and immediate impact on our profession, ensuring our students receive the best education we can provide.

Thank you to our many colleagues who shared their experiences and opinions to best address the most challenging issues facing Chicago classrooms. As educators, we want to provide our expertise and enact meaningful change that will best support our students and our profession.

Ask an Educator Leadership Team

Charles Beavers II

Teacher Leader at Kozminski Community Academy

DeJernet Farder

First-Grade Teacher at Morton School of Excellence

Dayna Heller

Special Education Teacher at Roger C. Sullivan High School

Bryan Meeker

Biology Instructor at Garcia High School

Sarah Reardon

Fourth-Grade Departmentalized English Language Arts and Social Studies Teacher at Casals School of Excellence

Karen Van Zytveld

Fifth-Grade Humanities Teacher at Galileo Scholastic Academy

Dr. Winnie Williams-Hall

Diverse Learning Teacher at Nicholson STEM Elementary

Ask an Educator

Priority Issues for Chicago's Classrooms

From a new governor and mayor to the Chicago Teachers Union election and contract renewal, the 2018-19 school year is a pivotal moment of opportunity to transform education in our city. As new education policy-makers emerge, they must rely on the expertise of leaders in the classroom: educators.

Our Chicago colleagues identified five issues that decision-makers and teachers should tackle together: educator voice, supports for diverse learners, wages and benefits, school funding, and educator mental health supports. Each of these challenges presents an opportunity for a variety of stakeholders to bring forth meaningful change and concrete plans to address these pressing priorities.

Across our five issues, there is one universal trend: educators want to be better informed and more involved in the decisions impacting our students and our profession. In order to serve students to their full potential, leaders at all levels must bring educators to the forefront of the decision-making process and prioritize the issues we have outlined. By reading this guide, our hope is that policymakers not only focus their efforts on the opportunities and solutions we are hungry for, but realize the value to actively seek out and listen to the expertise of current classroom educators.

In order to ensure our students receive the best education possible, Chicago educators call for:



Educator voice

Recognition as experts and a seat at the decision-making table to ensure policies are informed by the realities of our classrooms.

Supports for diverse learners

More quality trainings and specialized staff to meet diverse learners' needs.

Wages and benefits

Increased financial stability and a clearer understanding of our wages and benefits.

School funding

A better understanding of how schools are funded and being part of the decision-making process to ensure equity for our most vulnerable students.

Educator mental health supports

Improved access to resources for prioritizing their own mental health.



Educator Voice

Educators should be recognized as experts and have a seat at the decision-making table to ensure policies are informed by the realities of our classrooms.

Chicago teachers don't feel well represented at any level – from schools to the state – and the farther they are from the decision-making entities, the more they feel their voices are excluded.¹ While we want more opportunities to be heard, K-12 teachers are the least likely to agree that their opinions matter compared to other professions.² However, teachers across the nation also fear retaliation for speaking up.³ Throughout focus groups, our peers' frustration with being ignored and excluded was loud and clear.⁴

“Even though I’m often asked to take on additional roles within my school, I still don’t feel valued as a professional.”

Dr. Winnie Williams-Hall, Diverse Learning Teacher at Nicholson STEM Academy

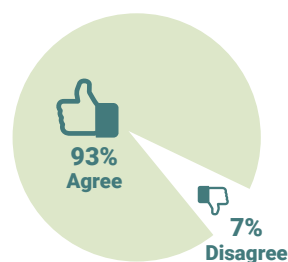
“We are shaping decision and policymakers of the future. We need to be a part of those policy decisions now.”

Karen Van Zytveld, fifth-grade Humanities Teacher at Galileo Scholastic Academy

WHAT WE NEED

Collaboration and empowerment

Educators have on-the-ground experience that makes us experts with what works for students. From holding a seat on the Chicago Public Schools Board of Education to taking part in the governor’s Educational Success Committee, educators must have more opportunities to collaborate with decision-makers at all levels to ensure the concerns for our students and profession are accurately represented.⁵ Bringing more educators into the decision-making fold recognizes us as partners, elevates the teaching profession, and increases support from educators for new policies, which in turn improves the implementation. When we are treated as professionals and included in the decision-making process, we see stronger outcomes for students.⁶



93% of Chicago teachers wish there were more opportunities as a teacher to influence education policy.

Voices from the Classroom Chicago Data. (2018). e4e.org/chidata

Diverse Learner Supports

Educators want more quality trainings and specialized staff to meet diverse learners' needs.

In 2018, a state investigation found severe district violations in Chicago that left diverse learners without the supports they need to succeed.⁷ Due to a lack of special education funding to hire and train staff, these vulnerable students have been packed into oversized classrooms and illegally denied the accommodations and modifications to which they are entitled.⁸ In addition, a Chicago Teachers Union report found that school staff were overloaded and overwhelmed, especially when providing diverse learners with critical one-on-one time.⁹

Further, diverse learning teachers and paraprofessionals, including special education classroom assistants, comprise the top two educator shortage deficits in Illinois.¹⁰ By failing to retain teachers in these hard-to-staff positions, the district is depending on existing staff who may not have the appropriate training and capacity to properly serve our most vulnerable students.

As a result of underfunding special education, Chicago educators are greatly concerned with the lack of quality staff training and the growing number of unfilled positions. Focus group participants overwhelmingly stated that diverse learners do not receive adequate support at their schools.¹¹ Until these issues are addressed, staff will continue to burn out and students will be left behind.

The National Association of Social Workers recommends one social worker per 250 students.¹²

For intensive-need students, the recommendation changes to one social worker per 50 students.¹³

Chicago Public Schools has only one social worker per 1,200 students.¹⁴

WHAT WE NEED

Quality training and dedicated time for all staff

We recognize that the unique needs of diverse learners require different behavioral management strategies and social and emotional learning supports. We want quality, staff-wide Individual Education Program (IEP) trainings, specifically on interpreting and implementing accommodations and modifications for students. To ensure students receive consistent supports, both general education and diverse learning teachers in Chicago desire more time embedded in our daily schedule for collaboration and preparation. Prioritizing trainings to support diverse learners and time to exercise these concepts will provide the hard and soft skills that will help our students succeed.

More specialized staff

Our jobs would be more sustainable if schools were adequately staffed and prepared to address the individual needs of diverse learners. Our schools need more specialized staff to ensure all students receive proper services, including additional diverse learning teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

“If we are truly committed to closing the achievement gap for diverse learners, we must make time for the teachers who support them to plan, share, and reflect with other experts in the building.”

Artemis Kolovos, Diverse Learning Teacher at Lyman A. Budlong Public School

Wages and Benefits

Educators need financial stability and a clearer understanding of our wages and benefits.

Wages and benefits are top of mind for educators. Not only do many of us begin our careers mired in student loan debt, but the continued rise of Chicago's cost of living adds to our burden.^{15,16} This financial strain combined with our heavy workloads forces some of us to reconsider if we can continue to be teachers and also provide for our families. In fact, recent studies link compensation concerns to lower retention rates and educator shortages throughout the nation, especially for hard-to-staff schools and subjects.^{17,18,19} Without financial stability, retention will continue to be a significant challenge, ultimately impacting student learning.

Although the district and union are working together to address our financial worries, current classroom teachers feel disconnected from the process. We feel uninformed about the contract negotiation process and often confused over how these decisions will impact our livelihoods.^{20,21} Additionally, we recognize that there are useful resources and programs designed to support some of our economic concerns, such as federal student loan forgiveness, but they are cumbersome and difficult to access.



Only half of focus group attendees were happy with their compensation.²³

WHAT WE NEED

Transparent and accessible information

Educators need assistance to navigate our personal financial information and existing economic services. We want a centralized location to find easy-to-understand information regarding our contract and pension, as well as help streamlining financial services and the application processes, especially student loan forgiveness programs.

Innovative compensation

To ensure our schools recruit and retain diverse and talented teachers, our district should explore innovative compensation plans that will best address the demands of teaching in Chicago. These opportunities could include a choice between a 10- or 12-month pay schedule, additional benefits such as disability insurance, stipends for teaching in hard-to-staff schools or for additional certifications, and assistance paying off student loan debt.²²



On average, student loans cost roughly 10% of monthly pay for a public school teacher earning the average starting salary.

Carrig, D. (2018, May 4). USA Today

School Funding

Educators want to better understand how schools are funded and be part of the decision-making process to ensure equity for our most vulnerable students.

Equitable school funding is the number one concern for teachers nationally and in Chicago.²⁴ Although Illinois' new education funding formula adds more money to our schools, years of severe cuts to our budgets mean schools are still playing financial catch-up.²⁵ As families have left Chicago and birth rates have decreased, enrollment has dropped by roughly 10,000 students per year in recent years.^{26,27} These enrollment drops mean that major allocations based on per-pupil funding have disappeared.

In our focus groups, teachers noted that despite the new funding formula, they still are not able to access basic resources like textbooks, pencils, and bathroom soap for their classrooms. Given how opaque the formula is, educators are unable to understand where the money is being spent.²⁸ Further, management decisions made *for* schools rather than *with* schools have introduced new and complicated challenges. For example, when Chicago Public Schools replaced individual school janitors with private cleaning services, accountability for school maintenance was lost.²⁹ With questions about how allocations are prioritized and inconsistent budget transparency, our peers expressed doubt that the funding process at all levels — school, district, and state — is designed to ensure equity for all of our students.^{30,31}

92% of teachers in Chicago believe inequitable school funding is still an issue in the state.



85% of Chicago teachers surveyed believe that students and teachers do not have access to equitable classroom supplies and resources.

Voices from the Classroom Chicago Data. (2018). e4e.org/chidata

WHAT WE NEED

Input on funding priorities

Educators have a direct line of sight into the needs of our schools and classrooms, and understand that each school comes with its own unique challenges and funding priorities. By bringing a broad array of educators into budget conversations early and often, we will ensure students receive the individualized supports and resources they require from their neighborhood school.

Easy-to-digest information about school funding

In addition to budget transparency at the state and district levels, educators need a better understanding of our individual school budgets. This will allow us to better advocate on behalf of our students and their needs.

“Although the state has made efforts to improve school funding, I’m still seeing inequities play out in my classroom. I need to understand why this is still an issue, despite more funding.”

Focus group participant

Educator Mental Health Supports

Educators need improved access to resources for prioritizing their own mental health.

According to a 2017 report from the American Federation of Teachers, 61 percent of educators felt that work was “often” or “always” stressful.³² Furthermore, almost half of students nationwide have experienced some level of trauma, which they bring with them into schools.³³ Responding to student trauma, coupled with the myriad of daily stressors we experience, produces secondary trauma in educators, which ultimately impacts our mental health.³⁴

These stressors for students and educators can have a negative impact on a school’s climate and culture, creating unsafe and exclusionary learning environments.³⁵ All of these issues are compounded when teachers feel like they are disconnected from their peers. When we do not have the chance to collaborate with each other, we can feel alone and isolated, leading to low morale and ultimately leaving the profession.³⁶

With our heavy workloads, it is difficult to find and take advantage of mental health resources for our personal well-being. An overwhelming majority of focus group respondents were unaware of Chicago Public Schools services available through the Employee Assistance Program, such as free counseling.³⁷ We can’t afford to miss out on these valuable resources and miss the chance to take care of ourselves.



58% of teachers reported having poor mental health seven or more days a month.

American Federation of Teachers. (2017). Educator Quality of Work Life Survey

“If we’re going to address the issue of rampant teacher attrition, then we need to explicitly address the issue of educator mental health. If teachers are not encouraged and incentivized to take their health and the health of their colleagues seriously, they won’t have the stamina or capacity to stay in the classroom.”

Ashley McCall, third grade English & Language Arts Bilingual Teacher at César E. Chávez Multicultural Academic Center

WHAT WE NEED

Access to educator mental health supports

Educators need clear communication on how to access the professional development and counseling services that already exist. More importantly, we need to be encouraged to utilize these supports by having dedicated time at school to focus on our well-being, as well as specific mental health days in addition to regular sick days.

Prioritize staff culture

Teaching can feel very lonely, but with dedicated time to build collaborative relationships with our colleagues, we can better support each other and our students. Focus group participants expressed a desire for more recognition and appreciation through weekly staff shout-outs, more welcoming spaces designated for staff such as staff lounges, and staff-wide self-care professional development opportunities.³⁸

“Every time a six-year-old tells you they have nothing to live for, it takes a toll on you as a teacher — mentally and emotionally.”

Charles Beavers II, teacher leader at Kozminski Community Academy

Endnotes

1. Educators for Excellence. (2018). Voices from the Classroom. p. 24. Retrieved from https://e4e.org/sites/default/files/2018_voices_from_the_classroom_teacher_survey.pdf
2. Gallup. (2013). State of America's Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education. p. 23. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/services/178769/state-america-schools-report.aspx>
3. Hinnant-Crawford, B. (2016, Fall). Education Policy Influence Efficacy: Teacher Beliefs in Their Ability to Change Education Policy. *International Journal of Teacher Leadership*, 7(2). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1137496.pdf>
4. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
5. Miller, R. (2018, November 27). Pritzker transition announces Educational Success Committee [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://capitolfax.com/2018/11/27/pritzker-transition-announces-educational-success-committee/>
6. Ibid.
7. Jones, S., & Calomese, H. (2018, May 16). Corrective action and recommendations stemming from the public inquiry into special education policies at Chicago Public Schools. Illinois State Board of Education Meeting. pp. 74 - 126.32. Retrieved from https://www.isbe.net/Documents_Board_Meetings/201805-packet.pdf
8. Perez Jr., J. (2018, May 11). Officials say CPS special education policy violated federal law, suggest 3 years of monitoring. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-chicago-special-education-violation-monitor-20180511-story.html>
9. Chicago Teachers Union. (2018, October 26). The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve 2.0. Retrieved from <https://ctulocal1.org/reports/schools-chicago-students-deserve-2/#sec11>
10. Friedman, B. (2018, June 26). Teacher Shortage Downstate Looks Different From Chicago Shortage. *WTTW Chicago Tonight*. Retrieved from <https://news.wttw.com/2018/06/26/teacher-shortage-downstate-looks-different-chicago-shortage>
11. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
12. National Association of Social Workers. (2012) NASW Standards for Social Work Services. p. 18. Retrieved from <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1Ze4-9-Os7E%3D&portalid=0>
13. Ibid.
14. Barnum, M. (2016, March 27). Exclusive — Data Shows 3 of the 5 Biggest School Districts Hire More Security Officers Than Counselors. *The 74 Million*. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-data-shows-3-of-the-5-biggest-school-districts-hire-more-security-officers-than-counselors/>
15. Carrig, D. (2018, May 4). Crushing student loan debt, stagnant pay can put teachers in financial bind. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2018/05/04/teachers-salary-student-loan-debt-forgiveness/529424002/>
16. Cost Of Living Increasing At Fastest Rate In 10 Years. (2018, August 10). *CBS 2-Chicago*. Retrieved from <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2018/08/10/cost-of-living-increasing-fastest-rate-10-years/>
17. Educators for Excellence. (2018). Voices from the Classroom. p. 65. Retrieved from https://e4e.org/sites/default/files/2018_voices_from_the_classroom_teacher_survey.pdf
18. Illinois State Board of Education. (2018, September). Teach Illinois: Strong Teachers, Strong Classrooms. p. 9. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Teach-Illinois-Memo.pdf>
19. Betancourt, S. (2018, September 6). Teacher shortages worsening in majority of US states, study reveals. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/06/teacher-shortages-guardian-survey-schools>
20. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
21. Salazar, R. (2016, August 27). An open letter to the Chicago Teachers Union Bargaining Committee. *Chicago Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.chicagonow.com/white-rhino/2016/08/an-open-letter-to-the-chicago-teachers-union-bargaining-committee/>
22. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators
23. Ibid.
24. Educators for Excellence. (2018). Voices from the Classroom. p. 17. Retrieved from https://e4e.org/sites/default/files/2018_voices_from_the_classroom_teacher_survey.pdf
25. Thomas, C. (2016, May 24). CPS principals warn parents of big budget cuts. *ABC 7 News-Chicago*. Retrieved from <https://abc7chicago.com/education/cps-parents-rally-to-protest-extreme-budget-cuts/1355225/>
26. CBS 2-Chicago. (2018, May 17). U.S. Births Hit A 30-Year Low As Fertility Rate Drops In Most Age Groups. Retrieved from <https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2018/05/17/u-s-births-hit-a-30-year-low/>
27. FitzPatrick, L. (2018, October 26). CPS loses another 10K students, enrollment now at 361K. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/cps-public-schools-enrollment-falls-kids-students/>
28. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
29. FitzPatrick, L. (2018, March 28). CPS inspections 'blitz' finds rat droppings, bugs, filth in schools. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/cps-inspections-blitz-finds-rat-droppings-bugs-filth-in-schools/>
30. FitzPatrick, L. (2018, July 24). Advocates say CPS budget better than in recent past, but not transparent enough. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Retrieved from <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/advocates-say-cps-budget-better-than-in-recent-past-but-not-transparent-enough/>
31. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
32. American Federation of Teachers. (2017). 2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey. Retrieved from https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/2017_eqwL_survey_web.pdf
33. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). Helping Children and Youth Who Have Traumatic Experiences. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/brief_report_natl_childrens_mh_awareness_day.pdf
34. Minero, E. (2017, October 4). When Students Are Traumatized, Teachers Are Too. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/when-students-are-traumatized-teachers-are-too>
35. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2017, June). Sounding the Alarm: Building the Climate & Culture Our Students Need. p. 8. Retrieved from <https://e4e.org/what-we-do/policy-solutions/sounding-alarm>
36. Senechal, J., Sober, T., Hope, S., Johnson, T., Burkhalter, F., Castelow, T., . . . Varljen, D. (2016, December). Understanding Teacher Morale. Retrieved from https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1055&context=merc_pubs
37. Educators for Excellence-Chicago. (2018). Focus Groups and Discussions with Chicago Educators.
38. Ibid.



Whether it is elevating educators' voices, increasing support for diverse learners, providing clear communication on wages and benefits, enacting equitable school funding, or supporting educator mental health, one thing is clear: We are eager and willing to get involved in the decision-making process when it comes to the policies that impact our students, our schools, and our profession. Whether you are sitting in the governor's mansion, a City Hall meeting, or the union office, we urge you to prioritize the issues most pressing to Chicago's educators. Give us a seat at the table, and together we will ensure that schools and educators are equipped to provide all students with the tools they need to succeed.





Ask an Educator



For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table – the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators for Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers. E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers' Principles and Beliefs.

E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action and advocate for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at e4e.org.

 /Educators4Excellence

 @Ed4Excellence

 E4E.org