

**Testimony of Randi Weingarten,
President
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Before the House Committee on Education and Labor

**Full Committee Hearing on:
Underpaid Teachers and Crumbling Schools: How Underfunding Public Education
Shortchanges America's Students**

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Good morning, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx. My name is Randi Weingarten, and I am president of the American Federation of Teachers. On behalf of the AFT and its 1.7 million members, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss how underfunding public education has led to a lack of investment in school infrastructure and public services that has shortchanged America's students.

The AFT represents people who work in almost every aspect of education—in public, private and charter schools, from early childhood and pre-K through 12th-grade teachers, paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel to higher education faculty and professional staff. We also represent federal, state and local government employees, and nurses and healthcare workers.

Our members and the students they teach see and feel the effects of this lack of investment in education, from the health and safety risks to the lack of opportunities.

How do we send children to school with black toxic mold on floors, classrooms without heat or air conditioning, leaking ceilings and contaminated water? How do we say technology is important, yet not have enough of the necessary equipment? How do we say knowledge is important, yet have teachers spending their own money just to provide educational materials for their students?

We send our children to schools in these conditions, and we expect them to thrive. Our children deserve better, and AFT members recognize the unique role the federal government can play to infuse support into our public education system—including public school infrastructure and the related services needed—so all children can receive a high-quality education.

Having just returned from the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, I have smelled the mold and observed the conditions in schools myself—and the Trump administration's decision to cut \$1 billion in FEMA aid for rebuilding Puerto Rico's schools after the hurricanes makes legislation supporting infrastructure and federal education programs even more critical. These are the very same teachers who are spending 10 cents per page for hundreds of copies to make sure their kids have materials for class.

As I continue to describe the dismal conditions of too many of our public schools, you will see why our members are very, very grateful for the focus of this hearing and for legislation that will invest in school resources and infrastructure.

- Last year, two Philadelphia elementary schools were forced to close for an extended time because of major mold growth throughout the buildings, with resulting remediation costs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Asthma prevalence can be as high as 40 percent for students who are exposed. Those at highest risk are already among the most vulnerable: students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- A recent survey of Detroit’s schools found that nearly a third of school buildings are in an “unsatisfactory” or “poor” condition. Missing ceiling tiles expose electrical wires. Roofs leak, leading to toxic black mold, and students are forced to learn in classrooms that are either way too warm or way too cold. Expensive computers are kept in rooms with buckling floors.
- In Baltimore last winter, teachers had to call on the city to close schools in the face of chronic heating problems that plunged indoor temperatures into the 30s and 40s. Children were bundled up head to toe in coats and hats. Kids can't learn and teachers can't teach in freezing classrooms and in schools with no heat, frozen pipes and frigid winds coming in through drafty windows.
- In Virginia, overcrowded and under-resourced schools are crumbling under the weight of deferred maintenance and declining investment.
- In Hillsborough County, Fla., the district could only afford to fix or replace air conditioners at 10 schools this summer, leaving 38 in need of major repairs. When schools opened, pictures of thermostats showed temperatures of 87 and 88 degrees indoors.
- In Oklahoma, where education funding as a whole has dropped drastically in the past decade, parents and teachers during last year’s teacher strike shared pictures of decrepit or out-of-date textbooks. Books with torn pages, broken bindings and outdated information—including some that listed George W. Bush as president—became a symbol of the fight for adequate resources.

There are hundreds and hundreds of more examples from across the country: Stories of teachers picking up mouse droppings as part of their morning duty. Stories of brand-new white boards that are unusable because there is no access to electricity. In 2017, in a report on the nation’s infrastructure, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave school facilities a D-plus.¹ The report found that nearly a quarter of permanent public school buildings were in fair or poor condition; more than 30 percent of public school facilities, windows, plumbing and HVAC systems were in fair or poor condition, and 53 percent of public schools needed to make repairs, renovations or upgrades to be in good condition.

¹ American Society of Civil Engineers, “2017 Infrastructure Report Card,” www.infrastructurereportcard.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Schools-Final.pdf.

And the problem is not new. In 1994, my home local, the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, fed up with deteriorating conditions and incompetent inspections, sued the city on behalf of its members, parents and children. I remember—I was the counsel who that led that case. Twenty-five years later, we are still at it.

Teachers dig into their own [pockets](#)—literally, 94 percent of America’s teachers use, on average, \$479 of their own money every year (in schools where 75 percent or more of the students participated in free or reduced-price lunches, teachers spent, on average, \$554) to buy supplies for their classrooms. They do this to ensure their students get the public education they deserve, while lawmakers persistently underfund public schools. According to a recent AFT report, “A Decade of Neglect: Public Education Funding in the Aftermath of the Great Recession,” governments in 25 states have shortchanged public K-12 education by \$19 billion over the last decade.

Among the report’s findings, 25 states spent less on K-12 education in 2016 than they did prior to the recession. Chronic underfunding explains why, in 38 states, the average teacher salary is lower in 2018 than it was in 2009, and why the pupil-teacher ratio was worse in 35 states in 2016 than in 2008.

The problem is worse in higher education, where 41 states spent less per student, creating a massive affordability and accessibility gap. This explains why tuition and fees for a two-year degree in 2017 rose at three times the rate of inflation when compared with 2008, and why the cost of a four-year degree rose even higher, putting college woefully out of reach for far too many Americans. In addition, student debt is collectively over \$1.5 trillion, and this debt surpasses all types of household debt other than mortgages.

Funding has been promised before—take, for example, the promise of Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools last year released a report, “Confronting the Education Debt,” detailing the systemic underfunding of public schools, focusing specifically on underserved populations. According to the AROS findings, the historic underfunding of Title I and IDEA has reinforced a separate and unequal education system, leaving a \$580 billion funding hole that has shortchanged the futures of our nation’s most vulnerable students. At the state and local levels, the report highlights that, on average, districts with large populations of students of color received about \$1,800 less in per-pupil funding than districts with a majority of white students.

Things were made worse with the GOP tax plan that passed last year. The plan paid for corporate tax cuts by limiting the deduction for state and local taxes (SALT), which pay for public education, public colleges, public safety and infrastructure. Millions of people will pay more taxes and, as a result, it will become harder for states and communities to raise money for these public investments. Because of this, New York state’s income tax receipts are down more than \$2 billion so far, and the cap on the SALT deduction is the primary reason.

While the recession may have forced budget cuts on our schools, both the AFT and AROS reports expose how certain state legislative bodies and governors exacerbated the damage by cutting taxes for the rich at the expense of public schools. These are choices some states have

made, to the detriment of kids who needed this funding most, and it's why Rep. Scott's legislation is so vital right now.

I hear the same things over and over from AFT members: Disinvestment in public education and lack of attention to infrastructure needs, including public schools, are hurting kids and hurting educators. They're struggling to get by on salaries that don't reflect the importance of their work. They are forced to make do with inadequate and often dangerous working conditions. They're frustrated by their lack of latitude to meet children's needs and policies that have weaponized student achievement.

Substandard school conditions and outdated materials prompted the recent walkouts in Los Angeles, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and North Carolina, and they're why my colleagues marched to the state Capitol in Richmond, Va., earlier this month.

Educators, parents, students and our community allies have engaged in self-help. They have exposed how widespread disinvestment is, how low teachers' pay is and how high their healthcare costs are. They have exposed the worsening [conditions in public schools](#), particularly for children of color and children from low-income families. AFT members have been working collectively with the NEA, other unions and community members to advocate for our public schools. But frankly, the diversion of resources to private alternatives has further exacerbated the problem. That may be why in the latest PDK poll, when asked about strengthening public schools or moving to private alternatives, nearly 80 percent said strengthen public schools.

You can see that public support in levy referendums. During the 2018 election, Wisconsin taxpayers voted to direct at least \$1.3 billion more into their local public schools, raising their own property taxes in most cases to pay for it. In all, 77 referendums were passed enabling school districts to borrow money for capital projects or exceed their state-mandated revenue limits to maintain or expand programming. In Florida every local ballot initiative for school funding passed—20 out of 20. This made 2018 a record year for school district referendums. Similar stories come from Maryland, Montana and Missouri.

The 2018 [PDK poll](#) of Americans' attitudes about public schools made clear that most Americans have trust and confidence in public school teachers. Overwhelmingly Americans send their children to public schools: 91 percent. But they want public schools strengthened. They believe teachers are underpaid; they say they would support them if they went on strike for better wages. And, as they have for nearly two decades, Americans cite lack of funding as the biggest problem facing their local schools. Another new poll by *Politico* and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health asked Americans about their priorities for the new Congress in 2019. The top six priorities included increasing spending on the nation's infrastructure and increasing federal spending on K-12 public education.

Teachers and communities are demanding a reordering of priorities—it's not enough to simply say our children are important; we have to show they're important, and that means investing in public education in a meaningful way. The question now is whether lawmakers' priorities will change.

With all due respect, let me address head-on the arguments that are often made that spending on education is inefficient, or that the United States spends more than other countries on education. Should we spend every dollar wisely? Of course. And can all of us find some waste and inefficiency? Of course. Do we need to reorder our priorities? Of course. For instance, personally, I would rather spend money on community schools and mental health services for kids than on testing or endless test prep.

Let me be real: Most federal education funding flows to state education agencies based on the number of eligible students. The states in turn allocate the funding to local educational agencies that distribute the funding to individual schools. All along the way, there are tight limits on how much each agency may use for administrative purposes.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which tracks education in 35 industrialized and emerging nations, the United States spends 4.7 percent of its gross domestic product on public K-12 education—the exact average among OECD countries. And a key difference is that in the United States, most of the funding comes from state and local governments, while many other countries have a federalized education system. In fact, 14 OECD countries spend a greater share of their GDP on education, including France, Norway and the United Kingdom.² And in the United States, unlike these other countries, spending on teachers' salaries does not account for the costs of employees' contributions for retirement or healthcare plans.

It is time for both state governments and the federal government to step up.

Our members and leaders want to help with this advocacy. The AFT is launching Fund Our Future, a national campaign to get necessary sustainable investments in our public schools and public colleges. It's time to reverse the funding cuts in our cities and states and stop diverting money from our schools to give tax cuts to the rich or to fund for-profits and unaccountable charters.

Congress can help us by:

- **Investing in rebuilding and modernizing schools and colleges.** The AFT strongly supports the Rebuild America's Schools Act, a \$100 billion proposal to address the chronic underinvestment in school buildings across the country, including the creation of sustainable community schools. We hope it will be one of the first items of business for the committee. We urge you to include it in any infrastructure package. It is time to address the deteriorating and obsolete school facilities that exist in far too many of our communities. The Rebuilding America's Schools Act makes school infrastructure a priority and commits resources to back that claim up.
- **Fully funding Title I to support schools that serve poor students.** According to the AROS report, if Title I were fully funded, every Title I student could have access to health and mental health services, including dental and vision exams; there could be a

² <https://data.oecd.org/eduresource/public-spending-on-education.htm>

full-time teaching assistant in every Title I classroom; and there could be a full-time nurse, librarian and counselor in every Title I school.

- **Fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** to support students with special needs, including Part C, which serves 3- to 5-year-olds. The federal government promised 40 percent of the funding when the law was first enacted, yet the federal government's contribution has not exceeded its current level of 16 percent. IDEA protects the rights of more than 6 million students with disabilities (approximately 13.5 percent of students) to receive a free and appropriate public education. We must make sure the resources are there to make it happen; 40 means 40.
- **Supporting H.Res. 58**, which expresses the sense of the House of Representatives that compensation of public school teachers should be comparable to that of other college graduates with years in the workforce where the teachers are employed.
- **Investing in higher education.** The Higher Education Act and its Title IV federal financial aid programs—consisting of grants, loans, work-study funds and other mechanisms—are the primary ways the federal government supports students' access to higher education. The student loan programs are a mess. Last year nearly 29,000 applications for Public Service Loan Forgiveness were submitted and processed, but of those 29,000, just 289 applications were approved. That's a 99 percent denial rate. Meanwhile student debt has increased from \$600 billion to \$1.5 trillion in 10 years. Congress should increase funding for Pell Grants; enact student loan borrower protections, such as restoring bankruptcy protections for student loan debt; improve the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program; and prevent predatory lending institutions from defrauding and abusing students and taxpayers.

This is defining moment. We must find real, sustainable solutions to the disinvestment in public education and services. Investing in our nation's public schools will pay dividends as we prepare our nation's young people for equal and responsible citizenship and productive adulthood.

I look forward to working with many of you on this important effort and answering questions from the members of the committee.