

**Testimony of Karen Bingert before the NJ State Board of Education
Open Topic Session: Back to School 2023
Current Issues School Leaders Face in the New School Year
September 6, 2023**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Karen Bingert, Executive Director of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA). NJPSA represents approximately 7,500 school leaders serving the public schools across New Jersey.

September. This month brings to mind many things - football season resumes, the leaves begin to change color, and our students return to school for a new opportunity at learning. For school leaders, the month of September brings more practical concerns to mind - successfully reopening their schools, finding qualified staff to cover all classes and programs, scheduling, bus routes, meeting annual staff professional learning requirements, and creating a positive school climate for students and staff to start the new school year on a high note.

Today, I am here to share with the State Board the concerns and priorities our members have shared with us as School Year 2023-24 gets underway. Our hope is that sharing our issues will inform the State Board's policy making decisions in the year ahead. We also hope to continue a positive dialogue with the Board by bringing the perspectives of the field in education to your deliberations.

In the past two weeks, NJPSA has reached out to our members with two distinct surveys. The first asked about the top three issues on our members' minds as they prepared for school reopening. The results show a broad spectrum of concerns, but certain issues rose to the top of the list.

In the first survey, our members are concerned with staffing their buildings with qualified staff, not only in the classroom but in all operational aspects of their schools. Academics, specifically increasing student performance and addressing learning gaps, are also high on their priority list. Student and staff mental health, including establishing strong intervention systems and a positive school climate, is also a top concern. Members also shared concerns about issues of equity in opportunities, resources, facilities and staffing.

Principals and supervisors are also deeply concerned about the divisive political climate in our communities and the rising impact of this divisiveness on schools, academic programs, and students. We urge the State Board to set a positive example on this front, refusing to allow the difference of opinion among adults to interfere with student opportunities and the scope of learning as outlined in our highly-rated state learning standards.

Finally, the issue of assessment concerns school leaders in several ways. Members are concerned about overtesting students, duplication in testing requirements, assessment relevance to students, the lack of clarity over high school graduation assessment as a new school year begins, and the assessment landscape moving forward in New Jersey.

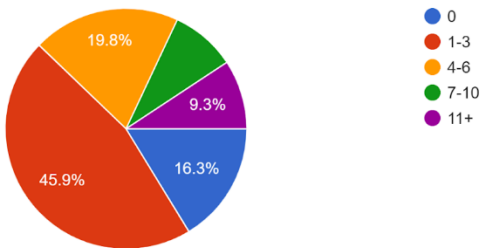
Our second survey drilled down on the status of school staffing, the top concern of our membership. The survey results (172 responses to date) reflect member comments and hiring efforts up to the last week of August on the eve of school reopenings statewide. The results indicate that at this crucial time period, only 16.3% of respondents had fully staffed their schools!

These response charts demonstrate the persistent nature and scope of the staffing crisis across school job titles.

Vacancies of Certificated Staff (Teachers, Education Service Professionals)

5. How many professional staffing (certificated staff) vacancies do you currently have in your school?

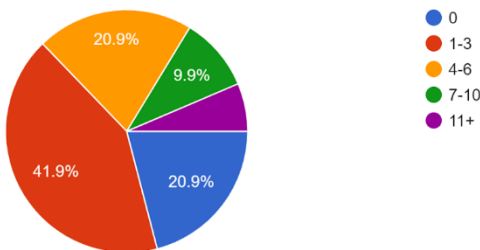
172 responses



Vacancies Among Non-Certificated Staff

6. How many vacancies do you currently have in non-certificated staff positions (janitors, secretaries, cafeteria, bus drivers, etc.)

172 responses



When asked to summarize their hiring experiences, 45.2% of respondents indicated that they had more vacancies than this time last year with 9.5% of respondents stating that they had many more vacancies than this time last year. Approximately 30% of members indicated that they had about the same number of vacancies as last year, but *all of these responses reflect staffing status just days prior to reopening schools*. This experience rate should raise the alarm that there is much more to do in the area of the educator pipeline, even with the adopted changes to the licensure code this past spring.

In terms of where the vacancies fall, many results should not be surprising since the shortages there predate COVID. The top areas of shortage are in special education, math, sciences, world language/ESL, Child Study Team, and instructional aides/paraprofessionals. Of additional concern are areas that traditionally have not been hard to fill but now are, such as physical education teachers, ELA teachers, media specialists, and even art teachers. Members noted the elimination of educator preparation programs in such areas as PE, world languages, and Family and Consumer Sciences, expressing serious concern about meeting graduation requirements and/or eliminating programs when a staff member in a specialized program

leaves the district. Several members noted that when specialized staff leave, the program offerings to students are diminished due to the unavailability of replacement teachers.

When asked for potential solutions to this broad and persistent staffing problem, our members shared the following:

- Reopen the licensure code to make additional changes; specifically, restore the Teacher of the Handicapped endorsement, provide additional options within special education to address the shortage of content teachers with special education endorsements at the higher grade levels, continue to streamline requirements for the alternate route, restore a K-8 certification to enhance flexibility, and address high school hiring shortages in math and science with greater flexibilities.
- “The state needs to advertise a more positive message about joining the education profession. Right now, people going into the field associate it with low pay, high scrutiny, and stressful work. The message that the state should be spreading is that teaching is an enjoyable and fulfilling profession in which you get to teach others about the subjects about which you are passionate. You will be respected and will build positive relationships with colleagues. It is a field where you can make mistakes and grow.”
- Advocate for the elimination of the residency requirement to teach in New Jersey. The State Board can pass a resolution to the State Legislature.
- Work with the higher education community to try out new ideas through pilot programs to find creative solutions to recruit and retain young teachers in all areas.
- Develop pathways for paraprofessionals to finish their education and join the teaching ranks.
- Develop and maintain a current database of newly certified teachers and education professionals for school districts to utilize in identifying candidates for positions. A state and/or regional level job fair would be welcome.
- The State plays a role in local working conditions which impact staff retention. The continual addition of new state requirements results in high stress levels and the increased work loads of our staff. Often, this additional work is compliance based, not instructionally focused, and interferes with our goals to assist students.
- Continue to consult and listen to the field on issues of concern throughout the school year, particularly before enacting education policies that impact our students and schools.

As a former high school principal, I personally understand the passion of our members on the issues I have shared with you today. I hope my comments will continue our positive dialogue with the State Board and further our common goal of providing a high quality education to every student in New Jersey. Thank you for your consideration.