



Durbin, Baldwin, Smith, Bustos Introduce Bill To Address Teacher Shortages In Low-income And Communities Of Color

July 23 2020 2:55 PM

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and Tina Smith (D-MN), along with U.S. Representative Cheri Bustos (D-IL-17), today introduced a bicameral bill that would address severe nationwide shortages of early childhood and K-12 teachers that disproportionately impacts students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. Exacerbated by low pay, school leadership instability, and poor teaching conditions, schools in low-income communities struggle to retain experienced, qualified education professionals. Teacher pay has also worsened in the past 20 years, and teachers in low-income schools are more underpaid than teachers in more affluent schools.

The *Retaining Educators Takes Added Investment Now (RETAIN) Act* creates a fully refundable tax credit for teachers, paraprofessionals, mental health providers, and school leaders in Title I schools and educators, program providers, and program directors in head start, early head start, and Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funded early childhood education programs. The tax credit increases as these professionals become more experienced to incentivize retention.

“We have a teaching crisis in communities across Illinois and the country that pays our educators too little and incentivizes high quality and experienced educators to work in more affluent areas. The impact on students in Black and Brown neighborhoods and low-income communities is drastic, with many students in the greatest need being taught by teachers with the least experience. How is this fair in 2020?” Durbin said. “We can help address these disparities immediately by incentivizing teachers and other educational professionals to make careers in areas with the most need.”

“Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, America was facing a shortage of qualified early childhood and K-12 teachers because they are so often underpaid and overworked, especially in low-income communities. In order to ensure that every student in America has access to a high quality education, regardless of where they live, we must do more to support our nation’s educators,” said Baldwin. “With many states and districts facing looming budget cuts during this crisis, this problem is in even more urgent need of solutions. Providing a fully refundable tax credit to teachers and staff at Title I schools is a commonsense way to both reward our educators for the work they do and boost retention in our schools, which will ultimately create a higher quality learning environment for our nation’s kids.”

“Every student should have access to a quality K-12 public education and part of that is paying teachers more,” said Smith. “Teachers rise to the challenge, working hard to meet the academic and emotional needs of their students, but they remain largely underpaid. This contributes to teacher shortages, which disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds and students of color—at a time when education inequities will likely be further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. That is just wrong. The RETAIN Act will help raise teacher pay, help schools overcome these shortages and ultimately help ensure students get the best education possible.”

“The teacher vacancy crisis hurts our most vulnerable children most. When we sell our teachers short by leaving them underpaid and undervalued, we sell our next generation short,” said Bustos. “As conversations about reopening our schools begin to ramp up in Illinois and across the country, the number of empty teacher positions has continued to skyrocket, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only compounded the problem. We cannot wait any longer. To directly address this issue and bolster efforts to recruit and retain teachers, I’m proud to put forward the RETAIN Act today with Senators Durbin, Baldwin and Smith to invest in our educators and improve the classroom experience for our students.”

According to federal data, the average teacher salary in 2016 was \$58,950—though this obscures lower pay in less affluent school districts. The national median salary of Early Childhood Educator (ECE) teachers in 2015 was just \$28,570 (qualifying many for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program).

Teacher pay is largely shaped by local tax revenue, and to receive modest increases, teachers must obtain expensive graduate degrees—adding student loan debt that dwarfs the accompanying pay raise. Further, schools consistently struggle to attract and retain effective teachers who reflect the diversity of students, particularly with respect to teachers who are African-American, Latino, and/or men. The current pandemic is expected to exacerbate these inequalities.

The following organizations support the RETAIN Act: AASA-The Superintendent Association; American Federation of Teachers; American School Counselor Association; Chicago Teachers Union; First Five Years Fund; Illinois Education Association; Illinois Federation of Teachers; Illinois Principals Association; National Association of Elementary School Principals; National Association of School Psychologists; National Education Association; and the Service Employees International Union.