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## Help wanted.

**N**ot that you've already heard it said enough but - welcome back! If you haven't already noticed, we're experiencing a severe shortage of teachers in our country. The underlying reasons for the current teacher shortage shouldn't necessarily come as a surprise either.

For years we have been hearing about the impact on our profession once millions of Baby Boomer generation teachers reached retirement age. The exodus from our ranks began before the pandemic but the lost years of 2020-2022 (and some say it continues) saw many educators make the difficult decision to leave the profession early. We have also seen a marked decline in the number of college students declaring a major in music education (some say it is as high as 40% in places).

The rationale for the general shortage of teachers in all areas has to do with many contributing factors such as lagging teacher salaries, increasing workload, a rise in negative public sentiment toward our profession and a malaise that has set in regarding the viability of teaching as a career choice. Our once "noble profession" has been taking it on the chin for far too long.

### Regaining respect

There have been recent studies and proposals regarding the way in which the teaching profession can be re-energized and repopulated moving forward. Despite some excellent suggestions and proposals, there is one glaring problem. To quote the famous comedian Rodney Dangerfield, "I don't get no respect!" While it isn't proper English, I think that many in the teaching profession these days would agree with this statement.

On an almost daily basis the news and media feature another story about the decay of educational programs and institutions in our country. Public perception of our profession seems to be at a critical low point as we continue to see and hear the upsetting stories about the teacher shortage, lack of support staff, near impossible working conditions, public incursions on school districts involving the banning of books and curriculum, cancellation of programs and the list goes on. In short, the news isn't too rosy for a profession struggling to recruit and retain the next generation of teachers.

I received a reference check phone call from a building principal in a small rural

school district and she began by apologizing to me for the brief chat since she had to cover a class because there were no subs available. She then told me that she routinely had to drive a school bus to make morning pickups and afternoon drop-offs. The shortage has taken its toll on principals and support staff too!

In my humble opinion, the education profession needs to mount a major public relations campaign at every level and in every community stressing the value of all school personnel and the role they play in the overall health of our nation. The politics of the moment have kept our profession from unifying with a single voice to "sing the praises" about the importance of supporting education now and well into the future.

### Changing hearts and minds

While each of us in music education tries to continue to encourage our best students to follow a path into music education beyond high school, we also must be mindful that we have a job to do with the parents of all of our students and in the school community.

Much of what stands in the way of sending the right message out into the world has to do with enlisting the media in support of the education profession. The importance of codifying a positive message about the lifelong benefits of becoming a teacher has to do with putting forth an unrelenting message of positivity about the importance of why we need teachers.

Too much of the negative impact felt by millions of students and parents during the pandemic still lingers on despite many efforts to rebuild our programs. While many of our schools and teachers have made progress in restoring as much as possible to pre-pandemic levels, there is so much more that we need to accomplish but it must be a unified effort. We must find solutions to making sure that there are plenty of candidates available for schools in all settings. Urban and rural schools not only need a good pool of teacher candidates from which to choose; they also need highly effective and capable candidates.

A nationwide strategic plan to support education and especially to encourage students to follow the path of becoming a teacher begins with restoring trust and the public's perception that teachers do make a difference (in a good way).

The only way you can take steps to drive home this message is to make this a 21st century reality that brings together all political divisions, as well as economic, cultural and social divides, and that focuses on the truth that our future is focused on kids and the importance of education as the foundation of building a stronger tomorrow. We keep hearing about the importance of investing in our kids, but you can't do that unless the commitment becomes a shared goal and one that addresses glaring teacher shortages all over.

### Securing the future

Ensuring that there is a future that will support music educators in training today requires more than just promises and quick fixes. Ultimately, change, which we know comes slowly because change for the better first involves that there is "trust" and a commitment on all sides, needs to resonate at all levels with strong support from our leaders no matter which way they lean.

How exactly we get to that starting point is a great question. What we do know is that the longer the current trends in education continue, the longer we will see a decrease in students wanting to become teachers. The longer we continue to watch teachers struggle in all school settings, the harder it will be to train future generations of teachers. In the end this is not an uplifting message, but it is certainly a warning that we all need to do more to guarantee that there will be something left of our profession in the years to come.

You and I know that the finger pointing needs to end now. There are no quick fixes, either. Until the time comes when others stop attacking the education profession and start looking at shared ways to make it better (privatization for some is not the only answer either) we continue to fall further into the abyss.

All of us share in the responsibility to help change the national discourse as it relates to education today and tomorrow in our nation. Keep doing whatever you can and remember that it takes time to effect change. Working together in NYSSMA® we do make a difference for kids. They deserve the many wonderful opportunities we once had and that ultimately led us to become teachers. ||

*"[Kids] don't remember what you try to teach them. They remember what you are."*

— Jim Henson