**OpEd from Advance Illinois re. IARSS report.**

One of the most important responsibilities that our state and districts have is ensuring that *all* students have great teachers to support their learning and development.

Illinois, like most other states, has been grappling with teacher and staff shortages. These shortages have not been felt evenly across the state; rather, they impact our students of color, English Learners, students with diverse learning needs, and students from low-income households, and in underfunded districts the most.

This month, the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) released its annual IARSS Educator Shortage Survey. Through a survey of superintendent perceptions, the report gives us a first glimpse into staffing trends in Illinois in SY2022-2023. Based on superintendent reports, IARSS estimates that 30% of posted teacher positions went unfilled or were filled with a less-than-qualified hire. Though concerns about the shortage are widespread, shortfalls are largely concentrated among substitute teachers, paraprofessionals, and special education and bilingual educators.

This matters because the research is clear: teacher quality is the no. 1 school-based factor impacting student outcomes, and teacher diversity is also strongly linked to improved outcomes for all students, but especially students of color. Addressing staffing challenges requires the state to take a comprehensive approach to address needs across the full continuum of the educator pipeline—from recruitment all the way through the retention of veteran classroom educators.

In good news: over the last five years, the state and districts have taken bold and thoughtful steps to strengthen our educator pipeline—and it's making a difference. In just the last year, the state has added over 2,500 teaching positions without increasing our vacancy rate, which has remained largely steady at 1.5%. Additionally, enrollment in educator preparation programs is growing and becoming more diverse. And last year, Illinois achieved the highest teacher retention rate since ISBE began reporting this data in 2014. This is all terrific news.

We are heartened by our Governor’s and ISBE’s strategic efforts to address the root causes of the teacher shortage, including by investing in K-12 schools through the Evidence-Based Funding formula (EBF), increasing minimum teacher salaries, expanding early recruitment efforts, and through investments in targeted scholarships. Furthermore, federal stimulus dollars have been used to invest in recruitment and retention of bilingual and special education teachers, affinity groups for teachers of color, and mentoring and coaching for early career teachers.

These investments begin to address the teacher shortage more systemically. Now is the time to support and intensify this work. Alongside IARSS, we recommend that our lawmakers:

* **Increase state funding for K-12 schools**: More and stable dollars from Springfield allow schools to compete for teachers and fill openings.
* **Plug federal funding holes that support a stronger pipeline**: Federal stimulus funds that are currently being used to support educator recruitment and retention end in September 2023 and 2024, and policymakers in Illinois must step up to ensure these efforts continue without interruption.
* **Make teacher training more affordable:** Increase funding for minority teacher scholarships, tuition repayment programs, and other state financial aid.
* **Expand opportunities for paraprofessionals to earn their credentials:** Support those paraprofessionals and teaching assistants interested in earning their license to be a teacher in high-need subject areas.

In order to support student success, it is critical that we continue to strengthen the teaching profession so that our young people and career changers choose this professional path, maintain rigorous training programs and licensure standards for our teachers so that they arrive student-ready day one in the classroom, and support our teachers’ long-term development and retention. Never have our students needed a strong, diverse teaching force more.

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