



## OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® Audio

### PA Needs Teachers—and Needs Them to Stay

May 7, 2026

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**Nathan Driskell:** *Our educators are the workforce behind the workforce, essentially, and they are the profession that makes all other professions possible.*

**Sharon Keschull Barrett:** Welcome to Opportunity Culture® Audio. I'm Sharon Keschull Barrett.

We think of a crisis as coming on suddenly—when you have a heart attack, that's a health crisis. But in education, some issues can bubble at a long, unpleasant simmer—til the ingredients meld enough to become a painfully clear crisis.

That's true in Mississippi, where I spoke recently with education advocates about their call to action on the state's teacher retention crisis. Now, their fellow advocates in Pennsylvania have taken up the charge.

**Driskell:** Many public schools lose over 20 percent of their teachers annually, which is kind of an eye-popping statistic.

**Barrett:** Think about that—more than 280 public schools in Pennsylvania lose more than 20 percent of their teachers, year after year. That was Nathan Driskell, the chief policy officer of the National Center on Education and the Economy. His organization and Teach Plus Pennsylvania lead PA Needs Teachers, a statewide coalition of 50-plus organizations working on solutions to the state's teacher shortages.

That 20 percent is indeed eye-popping, but even for schools where teacher attrition isn't *that* steep, it's still really rough, said Laura Boyce, the Pennsylvania executive director for Teach Plus.

**Laura Boyce:** In Pennsylvania, we're seeing that teacher attrition is hovering around 7%. And when we look at, you know, the highest-performing international systems, their teacher attrition is closer to 2 to 3 percent. And so, numerically, we're losing around 7,000 teachers a year, and we aren't bringing in that many as newly certified teachers. And so that is causing an increasing reliance on uncertified, emergency-permitted teachers.

**Driskell:** And those losses are not equitable, right? They disproportionately impact low-wealth and underfunded urban and rural communities, and especially teachers of color.

**Barrett:** Those burnout-induced good-byes are bad for the teachers who quit, bad for their colleagues, bad for their administrators—and terrible for students.

And as a report in February showed, they kick off a very un-virtuous cycle of instability, with fewer educators left to handle larger classes with fewer supports, followed by more burnout, and more bye-byes.

Jill Weller-Reilly, who has been teaching at Lenape Middle School in Central Bucks School District for 30 years as a Spanish and math teacher, is a senior fellow who was named the Teach Plus PA Fellow of the Year in 2024. She and other policy fellows wrote that February report, titled *Reimagining Teaching: How Strategic Staffing Can Empower Teachers & Accelerate Learning in PA*.

**Jill Weller-Reilly:** The teaching profession in Pennsylvania is under real strain. When I talk to colleagues, there is a consistent theme: Educators are deeply committed to students, but the job itself has increasingly become difficult to sustain. In my world, I don't hear many students expressing interest in going into teaching. Many of my colleagues have shared with me that they actively discourage their own children from entering the profession. You know, I think one of the important patterns that we see in Pennsylvania is a U-shaped attrition curve. Early-year teachers leave at higher rates during the first few years due to issues of being overwhelmed with all of the tasks that a teacher is required to do—you know, the behavior management on top of the curriculum, on top of the instruction day-to-day, and then your typical schedule interruptions and needing to modify and adjust almost daily. And then it stabilizes—that attrition stabilizes in the middle of someone's career when they have developed skills to manage all of that. But we see an uptick again later in people's careers due to issues of burnout, limited growth opportunities, feeling undervalued—all of that is very true. I see that in my district. I know we see it across the state. So we know that this isn't just a pipeline issue, right? It is also a retention issue across different times in the educational profession, which means that, you know, we can't solve this just by bringing more teachers in. We also have to look at how the job itself is designed.

**Barrett:** Policy fellow Christopher Brown, who teaches ninth- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grade English at Conestoga High School in the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District, realized that after 14 years, he needed to do more, as he absorbed his colleagues' ongoing concerns around pay, planning and collaboration time, and classroom management—especially as teachers see students affected by ever-increasing screen time.

**Christopher Brown:** Honestly, I'm an advocate by nature, and I spent my entire career advocating for students. But as I've gotten older in this profession, I recognize that teachers need advocacy as well.

**Barrett:** Brown, who is in his first year of the policy fellowship, said he appreciates how his teacher voice is being heard—and the model he can set for his students, some of whom decided recently to follow his lead and contact Governor Shapiro and state representatives to share their environmental concerns.

**Brown:** Yeah, I'm definitely energized by being able to connect with my local state reps and also my local senators and advocate and talk with them directly about these concerns. And so I've advocated for issues such as teacher retention, staffing models, and certification pathways.

**Barrett:** So, what brought PA Needs Teachers and the policy fellows to put out their report, which called for state support for strategic staffing design?

Formed in 2022, PA Needs Teachers first saw success from advocating for policies aimed at bringing more teachers *into* the pipeline, such as a statewide student teacher stipend, a registered apprenticeship model, and pathways for paraprofessionals and other school employees to become certified.

But, Boyce said...

**Boyce:** Teachers, even if we can get them past those financial hurdles, are getting to the classroom and saying, this isn't a sustainable profession.

**Barrett:** So the 10 policy fellows in the Reimagining the Teaching Role working group declared the teacher turnover issue a crisis in their report, which came out of the fourth annual PA Needs Teachers summit in November 2025.

**Weller-Reilly:** What I consistently hear and what I experienced myself is that teaching can feel isolating. There are very limited pathways for growth without requiring that you leave the classroom. You know, I've been fortunate to work with school leaders who intentionally prioritized collaboration, and I can attest to how powerful that can be for both instruction and morale. But what has become clear to me is that we can't leave something that important to chance, right? We can't leave it to an individual leadership style. In too many cases, whether teachers have the time to collaborate depends on where they work or who their principal is. So, then the question becomes, if we want to retain great teachers, how do we design the job itself so that collaboration and growth are built into the structure of the work

and not left to individual circumstances? And so that's what brought us to strategic staffing models. They address this by restructuring the roles so that teachers can collaborate, they can grow, and they can lead, and they can do all of that while they remain in the classroom.

**Barrett:** The report specifically highlighted Opportunity Culture® design as an example.

**Brown:** Honestly, it just comes down to the simple truth that many of our problems in teaching right now aren't just about who is in the classroom, but how the learning environment is actually structured. And don't get me wrong, like, student teaching stipends are important. Recruitment campaigns are important, multiple career pathways in the profession are important to fill vacancies. But staffing design asks the deeper question of why is the role unsustainable, right? And so Opportunity Culture redesigns our profession to reduce teacher isolation, to share responsibility across teams, and to build in collaboration and support. And so, for us, Opportunity Culture models allow strong teachers to reach more students through team-based roles, and other educators to take on roles like small-group instruction and support. And I personally believe that this approach increases student access to effective teaching and prevents burnout by redistributing the workload.

**Barrett:** And it sets another good example for students, he said.

**Brown:** It may also help them and model for them how to be more collaborative in their learning as well. And I think that when we model that type of environment, that it will impact students' ability to engage in diverse thoughts, ability to be able to empathize with others and be able to support each other as well, because they see that we are modeling their learning off of a collaborative system.

**Barrett:** Jill Weller-Reilly had the chance to visit schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, that were using Opportunity Culture Multi-Classroom Leader teams, in which a teacher with a record of producing high-growth student learning leads a small teaching team.

**Weller-Reilly:** So in one classroom, I observed a third-year teacher who was doing some instruction in math. And she had students organized into three small groups at different learning levels. And while she worked directly with one group, the other students were engaged in independent work aligned to their needs. And so what stood out to me was not only the structure, but it was also the quality of the instruction, right? She was asking high-level questions. She was moving fluidly between the groups. She was monitoring the understanding of all the students in that classroom. And then what struck me about that is that, that is the type of practice that I would typically associate with a very experienced teacher, but she's only in her third year, right? So what observing that Opportunity Culture model in North Carolina made clear to me was that her effectiveness wasn't accidental. She was a strong teacher—I don't want to take anything away from her; she's absolutely a strong teacher—but she's also working within a system that is intentionally designed to accelerate her development. So, you know, what I saw felt like a win-win-win. Early-career teachers grow faster through embedded coaching. Experienced teachers extend their impact without having to leave the classroom. And most importantly, students gain more consistent access to strong instruction. And what I took away from that visit is that when systems are intentionally designed, they can significantly change the trajectory of teacher development, and that has real implications for keeping teachers in the profession.

I got a sense that all of the teachers and the administrators that we were speaking with seemed to feel, you know, the administrators definitely felt like this was a relief for them, right? That they no longer needed to manage all of the learning of the staff and the behaviors of the students. You know, it wasn't a bottleneck up in the office. The leadership had been distributed throughout the entire system so that they could effectively manage what they needed to manage. I heard the Multi-Classroom Leaders talking about if this position had not become available, they definitely were going to be leaving the profession, that they needed something that was going to give them more money. They needed something that, not that teaching didn't feed their soul, but that, it just wasn't working for their families. And so, they were going to need to look into something else, but that these opportunities made it possible for them to stay. What I witnessed among the students, you know, I was in classrooms where they had fabulous teachers to begin with, but also

the Multi-Classroom Leaders would walk in and suddenly that teaching was shared between the two adults. And the students felt, it seemed to me, very comfortable asking questions of either adult or leaning on either adult. And so, the energy in the classroom felt really good and focused on learning. And so, I think it was just, emotionally for all of the stakeholders, very positive.

**Barrett:** Laura Boyce was also on that visit to Charlotte schools.

**Boyce:** One of the spaces that we observed that a lot of the members of our group from Philadelphia remarked on afterwards when we were debriefing was one PLC space that was—it was an elementary school and upper elementary team, probably fourth- or fifth-grade math, and it was three or four teachers. And they were rehearsing for an upcoming lesson. They were taking turns just standing up in the front of the room and modeling pieces of the lesson, and the Multi-Classroom Leader was giving real-time feedback and jumping up to model. And while I've seen PLC spaces where there are teachers talking about instruction and talking about what they're going to teach, I'd never seen that level of true vulnerability and opening up of practice, and you could see one of the newer teachers improving in real time as you imagine, what's it going to look like for her to step into the classroom. Just the level of support that all of the teachers felt and excitement about what the model was creating for them, both in terms of access to great instruction, access to support, and a clear pathway that they could see and aspire to for greater leadership and impact and reach, that was all just really exciting to see. And you could imagine what that could look like in Philadelphia in a way that made it much more concrete for us.

**Barrett:** And providing that well-paid pathway to advance without going into administration will help at all levels, Brown said.

**Brown:** This will allow teachers to remain in the classroom without having to have those additional degrees and certifications to be able to have leadership roles, and being able to carry on more because they were effective in the classroom, provides multiple classrooms with access with strong teachers, but also be able to supplement their pay, where they can be passionate and do things that they love without having to find an additional gig that's outside the classroom, or to have to go into more debt and student loans.

**Barrett:** The fellows' report highlighted four opportunities for state leaders to support this and bring it to scale. Both Brown and Weller-Reilly said that of those four, they want state lawmakers' attention now on the request to fund a pilot program.

**Weller-Reilly:** Standing up the strategic staffing pilots is where I would like our state leaders to focus on right now but doing so, again, in a very intentional and equitable way. You know, pilots are powerful because they allow us to move out of theory and into practice, and their design very much matters, right? I first think that the equity selection is critical, right? These opportunities should include a range of districts, not just those with existing capacity, you know, but those that are also facing the greatest staffing challenges.

**Brown:** What makes this important is that it turns this idea of reimagining a role into action. I would propose and I would hope that the state can have a grant program that allows schools to be able to pilot new approaches, be able to get support and be able to evaluate so that the state can see what works and to scale it. I also just appreciate that it can include policy waivers since current rules can somewhat limit innovation.

**Barrett:** The report highlighted North Carolina's Advanced Teaching Roles grant as an example of how a state can provide funding for the early design and implementation phase, in which districts set parameters on teaching roles, pay supplements, accountability, and other details, and each school then forms a design team to make a plan that fits their needs. PA Needs Teachers would love to see a state grant program modeled after that, Boyce said.

**Boyce:** And we are actively pursuing that with legislative language and conversations with policymakers and our friends at the Pennsylvania Department of Education. We recognize that is the type of thing that may take a few years to really socialize and get off the ground and build the support for. But as I said, we've gotten a pretty enthusiastic response. We

just believe that if we want these types of models to be accessible to all types of schools, including rural school districts, smaller school districts, poorer school districts, there obviously are ways to be creative with Title funding or philanthropic funding, but to level the playing field, we would like to see state support that could ensure access for all and that could scale as familiarity with the program grows and hopefully the results begin to speak for themselves.

**Barrett:** On the philanthropic side, Boyce said...

**Boyce:** We are excited to have some funding anticipated to support pilots in both the School District of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia charter sector. Philadelphia is experiencing the teacher shortage more severely by every measure than any other district in the Commonwealth. They have the highest vacancy numbers and rates, the highest emergency permit numbers and rates, the highest attrition rates. I'm a parent of a kindergartner in the School District of Philadelphia, and I started my career in the School District of Philadelphia. I really believe if we want to see results across Pennsylvania, we have to prove it's possible in Philadelphia, which is our largest school district in the state by far. It serves the largest number and percentage of students of color, of economically disadvantaged students. So I really strongly believe that we have to make Philadelphia a proof point of what's possible across Pennsylvania.

**Barrett:** And, Weller-Reilly said, a crucial balance is needed wherein the state provides the funding to get districts going on staffing design, setting up parameters for accountability, but also gives schools flexibility within those parameters to meet their own needs. That flexibility is a key component of Opportunity Culture design.

**Weller-Reilly:** Very often, I think teachers feel as though things are top-down. Teacher voice is imperative to doing this right. And this is also extremely important, that pilots need to include strong research and evaluation from the start. We should be asking clear questions, right? Are student outcomes improving? Are we seeing stronger instructional practice? And are teachers more likely to stay? Those are the outcomes that we would hope to see, and I think we need to be tracking that from the beginning. You know, what I saw in North Carolina worked because those structures were intentionally supported. And if we want more classrooms like that, we need to design pilots that allow us to learn what works and then how to scale it.

**Barrett:** So, what's next for PA Needs Teachers? For starters, the week after we talked—the week that this podcast is posting—they were in Harrisburg meeting with legislators.

**Weller-Reilly:** I will be testifying before the House Education Committee next week, bringing this to their attention. So, generally we are working in Harrisburg with both legislators and with the Pennsylvania Department of Education in trying to get everybody to move the ball forward as far as solving issues with the teacher, the teacher crisis, coming at this from a couple of different angles.

**Boyce:** We've gotten an overwhelmingly positive response from teachers, including, you know, some of our policy fellows and other teachers who were not as actively involved in the writing of the report. You know, one particular teacher I remember posted something on social media that says, this just feels like the beginning of a really important conversation in Pennsylvania and the one that we really need to have. So I think there's a recognition that, you know, we know that the status quo isn't working but had not necessarily had a lot of models to point to as to how it could look different. We have gotten really enthusiastic responses from policymakers. Some of our policymakers and business leaders that we've presented to have said, 'yeah, it doesn't make sense the way that we have a principal with 70 direct reports in a school. I'd never organize my business in that way.' But I think probably the thing that has most excited policymakers from both sides of the aisle is just this idea that with a modest upfront investment to help with the technical assistance and the figuring out how do we go from A to B, we can then create self-sustaining models that could both improve teacher retention and satisfaction and the teacher experience and drive student achievement. So it almost sounds too good to be true, but they just see that as a win-win-win, that it's not something that is going to require huge new investments from the state in perpetuity, but a strategic investment that can really help to transform the talent systems and instruction is really exciting to policymakers.

**Driskell:** I think this is a bipartisan positive success story, that, once you fully understand and hear from educators and families and young people about impact, becomes very easy to endorse and embrace. And we don't necessarily have a lot of those in education right now. I think it's important to really make the point that this is about a smart investment. It's not actually about kind-of adding endless dollars with no kind of hope of an ROI. And part of me hates to put it in those terms, but it's really being more strategic about existing capacity and then seeing a return on investment via, you know, savings in terms of the cost of teacher turnover. And that's an argument that really, really resonates with the policymaker community.

**Barrett:** But the effects go well beyond the savings for individual schools that have to replace teachers.

**Driskell:** It may be stating the obvious, but our educators are the ones who are imparting foundational skills to young people to ensure they can successfully enter college and career pathways. And these roles are becoming increasingly important as the world changes, the job market shifts, new technologies start to upend everything. Which is why it's so important to ensure that educators have protected time and capacity to consider the many ways their roles or their competencies might be shifting, right? They can't do that alone. It's not fair of any profession to ask them to just navigate the way the world is changing solo. So, you know, there is plenty of research out there that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement. And there's a corollary to that, which is that effective teachers are predictive of the future earnings and employment potential of students. And so the really short way to say it, you know—teacher shortages and lack of adequate preparation and ongoing professional learning and development and growth have ripple effects that go well beyond schools and hit the workforce as a whole. Our educators are the workforce behind the workforce, essentially, and they are the profession that makes all other professions possible.

**Barrett:** Harkening back to Weller-Reilly's comments about teachers discouraging their own children from entering teaching, Driskell also noted how important it is for Pennsylvania's economy to have strategic staffing design affect teacher retention *and* recruitment.

**Driskell:** There's a piece to this that's really crucially important in a largely rural state like Pennsylvania, which is that inspiring young people to give back to their community through becoming an educator can be a key strategy for mitigating or reversing population decline in rural areas, which is a key concern of demographers and lawmakers from both parties and economists throughout Pennsylvania. Teaching can be and really should be an attractive pathway to the middle class for a rural young person who wants to stay close to their family and give back to their community. But we both know too often it is not that, because it's not financially viable, it's too stagnant, it's inflexible, it's isolating. And so by changing all of that, we have, I think, a real opportunity to reverse some of those demographic shifts and build up thriving rural communities in a very real way.

**Barrett:** If policymakers and education leaders get this right, Weller-Reilly says, the state will feel the effects at multiple levels.

**Weller-Reilly:** At the classroom level, teachers at different stages of their careers would have opportunities to grow through a system designed to support their development. And most importantly, students would benefit from more consistent access to strong instruction regardless of what classroom they get assigned to. At the school and the district levels, I think professional learning would shift from something that often happens outside the school day to something that's embedded within the school day. Growth would become part of how schools operate, not something that teachers have to pursue after-hours or on their own. And at the state level, I think we would begin to see stronger student outcomes over time, along with improved teacher retention and a more stable pipeline into the profession. I also think it would strengthen the connection between the teacher preparation programs and the K-to-12 systems. So ultimately, I think it creates the conditions for a profession that is more sustainable, more collaborative, and more attractive to those considering teaching as a career.

**Brown:** Oh my gosh, I'm so hopeful. I hope that Pennsylvania shifts from a system where teaching is isolated and unsustainable and that we could just focus on being creative and flexible with collaborative, supportive ways to teach in this profession.

**Barrett:** Thanks to these four leaders for taking the time to share their thoughts with me. To learn more, see [OpportunityCulture.org](http://OpportunityCulture.org) and links about these organizations in our show notes.

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