

A Kentucky Teacher's List of 22 Things We Need to Do to “Fix” Public Education

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Folks, I'm no education policy expert or “super teacher”, but as the child of two teachers and a public middle school teacher myself, I've got some thoughts to share on what should be done to help America's public schools.

Today, my own school district — Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), the 30th largest district in the nation — had to cancel school for the fifth time in the last two weeks due to a teacher “sick out” primarily organized through activist teacher groups on social media. Teachers in Kentucky are rightfully frustrated about a number of public education-damaging bills currently being considered by Kentucky state legislators, as well as a general culture of distrust and contempt that has developed between teachers and lawmakers under the current governor, Republican Matt Bevin.

While my fellow teachers were in the state capitol again fighting the good fight, I decided to stay home and come up with a list of policy and program changes that I think can help “fix” public education. Yes, we need to be vigilant in defense of our current education systems, but it's just as important for us to constantly look for ways to make them better and keep alive the vision for where we need to go. It's a long list, but we've got a lot to fix!

Before I get to it, I do want to say: as it is now, K-12 public education in the U.S. is certainly not completely “broken”. Teachers and other public school staff across the nation already do enormous good despite enormous barriers. In fact, the greatest changes needed in the U.S. surrounding public education are cultural ones rather than policy ones. As a whole, Americans

simply don't properly value the public education systems they have, and that, first and foremost, is the greatest barrier to improving them.

With that in mind, here's one lowly middle school English teacher's list of 22 policy and program solutions for what is ailing American public education:

- 1.) **We need to space out vacation time throughout the year rather than having a 2–3 month break in the summer.** The long summer breaks are a holdover from the 18th century, when 85% of Americans were farmers and schools lacked air conditioners.” That rationale no longer exists and in fact all the data suggests that long summer breaks are REALLY DUMB EDUCATION POLICY. Students lose something like 25-30% of what they learned the previous year over the long summer months — and that is especially true for students from low-income families who tend to be involved in far fewer enriching and educational activities during the summer months. Also, more breaks during the school year would cut down on burnout and stress both for teachers and students.
- 2.) **If we're serious about novice-reduction in the school system, then we need to offer (and even mandate) more programs for reading and math intervention outside of normal school hours, particularly during the summer months.** As far as I'm concerned, any students that score in the bottom 20–30 percent in reading or math on end-of-year tests should be required to attend some kind of free summer reading and/or math programs to catch up. I suppose we could make those programs “voluntary” if folks don't like the whole “mandatory” thing. Either way it would require a major investment in added personnel, buses, and building maintenance during the summer. The question is, do we really care enough about helping low-performing students to make such investments?
- 3.) **We need to adjust all middle and high school schedules to start no earlier than 8:30 and preferably closer to 9:30 a.m.** All the data suggests that adolescents are biologically inclined to function better on a later schedule and that their learning suffers when they are forced to go to sleep early and wake up early. Many progressive districts have already made this shift. My own district (JCPS) still starts at 7:30 a.m., evidence be damned.
- 4.) **We need to make sure that no class size is larger than 25 kids, with an average size set at 18–20.** Just ask teachers what they prefer when it comes to class size and they will tell you that medium class sizes work best. I know teachers in JCPS that have 30 students a class and five such classes a day. Do you have any idea how hard it is to give good feedback to that many students — especially if you're an ELA or Social Studies teacher having to grade that many essays? It's a downright herculean task. And practically impossible, even for “super teachers”.
- 5.) **We need to provide more quality after-school activities, late buses, field trips, and in-school speakers, special performances, and other non-traditional programs — which also means we need more public funding for those activities and programs.** I can't help but get a little angry when I think about just how much easier it is for schools that serve students from predominantly middle- and high-income families to raise funds and provide these ‘extra’ kinds of educational

opportunities to students. I cringe every time swarm of my low-income students come to my door begging me to support some fundraiser they're required to do in order to participate in band. Once again, without more actual funding at the district and state level, poorer kids suffer and inequality worsens. While we're at it, we also need to put funding for academic competition and other extracurricular academic programs on par with sports programs. All students need to have access to meaningful extracurricular activities other than sports. Studies show that "students with positive after-school activities do better in the classroom and stay away from crime, drugs and alcohol." This means we also need to work with community organizations to provide more safe and nurturing environments to function as homework centers where students can study, receive tutoring, and use computers. (Some people call these "libraries"!)

6.) **We need to extend the school day by half an hour to allow students more time for lunch, recess, mindfulness, and/or to access the library, counseling services, and intervention services during the day.** I'm sure, like many items on this list, this one may not be popular with the general public, or even with teachers. But in many school districts the school days are simply packed too tightly to allow for many vital activities — and that's true for scrambling teachers with 10 minutes to eat lunch as much as it is for exhausted students who forget to pee in the three minutes between periods.

7.) **We need to make sure that every school has the funding and staff to provide a full slate of basic electives.** That means art, music, drama, P.E., and foreign languages at the very least—but also other special elective courses depending on the school, courses like Chinese, shop, photography, computer programming, philosophy, etc. What's more, at any given time, every student should be able to take at least two electives in addition to their core content classes. The arts shouldn't be an educational luxury!

8.) **We need to take student trauma and other mental health conditions seriously. This means we need to hire an army of counselors, therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, etc. to work in and with schools to assess student mental health needs, diagnose psychological conditions and learning challenges, and provide regular long-term counseling and care — but also in a way that doesn't take significant time away from that child's education.** Any teacher who has worked in a priority school knows that there's loads of trauma that students experience that never gets addressed, and many psychological and learning conditions that students face (e.g., ODD, EBD, ADHD, depression, bipolar disorder, dyslexia, etc.) that are never or belatedly diagnosed and treated. Without this kind of support in public schools, once again: poor kids suffer and inequality worsens. While we're at it, we should provide free counseling and therapy for teachers as well. Without some therapy, I don't know if I'd still be a teacher...

9.) **We need to pay teachers more so that public education can compete for talent with other highly-skilled professions.** Teacher pay obviously needs to be aligned with the cost-of-living in a district, which means that average compensation should vary widely from place to place — but in far too many districts teachers barely make a middle class wage, and in some districts they barely escape poverty. There's no excuse for that. Teachers who commit to multi-year stints at

priority schools should also be provided additional compensation for their willingness to absorb the enormous added stress and challenges associated with working at those schools. That's a no-brainer.

10.) We need to get rid of any and all government policies and programs designed to provide support to private schools and/or siphon off public support and funding from normal public schools. That means no more voucher programs, charter schools, special tax breaks for private schools and their donors, etc. The growth of private schools inevitably creates political stress on public school systems because folks are disinclined to pay for public services they don't use, and it prevents public schools from being able to benefit from a whole class of students and the investment and participation of their families in the education process. As a result, once again: poor kids suffer and inequality worsens. In my own city of Louisville, private schools have boomed since the forced integration of the 1960s and 1970s. Surprised?

11.) We should not allow any public school to have a population higher than 66% of application-only or "magnet" students. This means that every public school should be made up of a minimum of 1/3 students that are "resides" or "neighborhood" students — i.e., those that do not have to apply to get in. The reality is that even within the public school system there are some public schools that are so selective that they are essentially able to function like private schools, serving primarily the same elite tier of society and functioning with the same level of exclusivity and privilege, all of which, again, only worsens inequality. In addition, all public schools should ensure that at least 2–3 core classes per day are "integrated" regardless of student ability to prevent extreme ability grouping or "tracking" from occurring within schools. According to most studies, "tracking" has a disproportionately negative impact on students in lower-level classes, while greater integration does not have a major adverse effect on high-achievers.

12.) We need to eliminate property-tax-based funding for public schools. Standardized state and national funding for education is the norm in the rest of the developed world and yet the primarily local-level funding model for public schools has long survived in the U.S., serving as a major underlying contributor to educational inequality and (by extension) residential segregation and suburban sprawl. Here's one commentator's summary: "As wealthy zip codes can spend more on education, the overall system becomes uneven and reinforces skill gaps and socio-economic divides. If we could start with a blank slate and look around the world, we would probably institute state and federal funding in public education like virtually every other country, and not fund education largely through property taxes. This would create a far more even system." No do. And yet here we are.

13.) As a related point, we need to consolidate small school districts, particularly in urban and suburban settings, to allow for a more equitable distribution of resources, cut down on administrative redundancy, and increase opportunities for social, racial, and economic integration in schools. Many large urban school districts were purposely broken up into smaller ones during the era of school integration to allow predominantly white school districts to avoid

having to meaningfully integrate. As a result, many major cities (see: Detroit) have been left with a splintered system of districts that has long reinforced inequality and de facto segregation and continues to produce low educational outcomes for far too many students.

14.) **We need to make sure that new teachers are properly trained but also properly supported and mentored in the early stages of their careers.** I'm not against "emergency", "express", or "alternative" certification routes for teachers, but such routes are hardly optimal. And regardless of the education route, every teacher should be required to have an M.A.T. within five years of starting full-time — and be properly compensated for it. Even more importantly, we should make sure that every new teacher starts in some kind of co-teaching role alongside a veteran so that they can gain experience for a couple years without the trauma of having to figure out classroom management all alone. Make no mistake: classroom management for new teachers, particularly in priority public schools, can be traumatic, and it's a big reason why many new teachers don't last or jump over to private schools. In many cases, we set new teachers up to fail with this sink-or-swim approach. You should not have to be a "super teacher" to be an important part of the system. I'm certainly not! A good public education system is built on the backs of many devoted but mediocre career teachers, not a few high-achievers.

15.) **We need to recruit more minority teachers and staff.** One of the tragic by-products of school integration in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s was that many career African-American teachers and school administrators lost their jobs. To this day, far too many minority students across the country are being taught primarily by white teachers, especially white women, who — despite their best intentions, dedication, and hard work — are simply not quite as natural role models for minority students. Studies show that the race of teachers does matter for educational and behavioral outcomes in schools with high-minority populations. There's no reason why we can't attract more minority talent to professions in public education. We just haven't been trying very hard...

16.) **We need to provide mandatory high-quality public preschool for all children ages 3–4.** Note: this doesn't mean we should be boring the poor toddlers to death! Preschool should still be as much about play and socialization as getting a jumpstart on school skills. But such programs can be a good way to ensure that all students start school ready to learn, which can pay surprising dividends for the rest of their lives.

17.) **We need to add more magnet programs and intra-district busing services for middle and high schools in order to provide greater school choice and improve social, racial, and economic integration in schools.** Louisville has done a mostly admirable job on this issue. Like most of the public, I'm a big believer in "school choice", but it needs to be within the normal public education system and not take away from the underlying goal of providing quality education to all students. Magnet programs are a good way to offer this kind of choice and still promote integration and equity.

18.) **We need to do more to provide paths to success that don't require four-year college or university degrees.** This means we need to reintroduce trade school programs in high schools and educate students and parents about the full range of middle class career options, including those that do not require standard four-year post-secondary degrees. As one commentator explains: "Since about 30% of American high school students don't attend a university today, the option to learn a trade would prepare them far better for a secure future than releasing them into the workforce with no usable skills." Among the alternatives to four-year degrees, students can gain vital skills needed to access middle class employment through "(1) employer-based training, (2) industry-based certifications, (3) apprenticeships, (4) postsecondary certificates by colleges, and (5) associate's degrees." Schools, districts, local and state governments, post-secondary institutions, and potential employers should be partnering on these kinds of programs in public middle and high schools. It's a win-win-win situation! So why not?

19.) **At the same time, we need to do more to provide counseling, preparation, scholarship access and other support services for students wishing to attend colleges and universities — particularly students from high-poverty backgrounds.** There are a lot of talented low-income students out there who are not getting the support they need either to make it to college or university, to pay for college or university, or to survive and thrive once they are there.

20.) **We need to fix standardized testing.** First, that means we need to decrease the sheer number of standardized tests students are required to take each year. (My first year as an ELA teacher, my students were required to take eight standardized tests in English alone over the course of the year — three diagnostic, three proficiency, and two end-of-year KPREP tests. It was insane.) Second, it means we need more written and critical-thinking questions on tests and fewer multiple-choice questions. And finally, it means we need to stop setting unachievable goals for gains in school-wide testing scores, and then punishing schools and/or teachers when their students (obviously) aren't able to magically achieve those gains.

21.) **We need to provide dramatically increased funding for school infrastructure—** particularly for those schools with deficient HVAC systems, outdated plumbing, dark or overcrowded classrooms, crumbling halls, rodent/insect/mold issues, and the like. It is unconscionable, for example, that there are public schools in this country with unsafe drinking water. Extreme temperatures or cramped, grungy classroom environments are clearly a detriment to both learning and teaching. In my fourth year at my current school, I still haven't figured out how to properly use our antediluvian AC system. I don't know if schools should quite be "palaces", but at least they ought to be conducive to learning. For what it's worth, it would also be great to see more schools lead the charge in adopting renewable sources of energy, particularly solar and geothermal.

22.) **We need to encourage parents and caregivers to be more active in their child's education.** There's an obvious connection between the level of involvement of parents and caregivers in a child's education and that child's educational outcomes. And yet many parents and caregivers either aren't able to be as involved as they'd like or don't know how. There are easy public

policies that can address this problem: offering parent-teacher conferences in the evenings rather than during the day, providing food or transportation for some school events (e.g., band concerts), using technology to improve communication, etc. Some districts have incentive programs (see: Detroit) that offer parents rewards when they participate in workshops or other activities that help them to get more involved in their child's education.

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Ultimately, as the African proverb goes, it really does “take a village” to raise a child. My guess is that even if we enacted every policy on this list, no matter how ambitious, we'd still encounter many of the same barriers to educating young people in this country simply because they would still lack the other social supports they need to thrive.

Education is not actually a “silver bullet”. The public education system generally, and teachers more specifically, cannot fix our society's deepest problems, and shouldn't be expected to. We cannot miraculously disrupt the hideous death march of generational poverty or overcome the toxic legacy of institutionalized racism. For that, we need better social support services across the board, better healthcare and childcare for all, better mat- and pat- leave policies, better prenatal and neonatal care, better wages for low-level jobs, better gun safety regulations — not least so that teachers and students don't have to worry quite as much about the prospect of a school shooting!, better affordable housing, better access to healthy food, and so on.

In the meantime, even enacting a few of the above policy changes in education could have a major impact. We need to build public education up and treat it like an asset as necessary to our country as defense. In the end, it's for the kids — the future's greatest asset!