

SUMMARY

SOLUTIONS FOR SUCCESS



Introduction

In November, leaders of the state's two education employee organizations, AFT-West Virginia and WVEA, conducted focus groups to generate solutions to improve our public schools in ways that best support student success. The effort stemmed from both organizations' dissatisfaction with the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores and the ongoing dialogue with our members detailing the challenges educators and their students face each day. The groups met to discuss and were determined to address these challenges and ultimately, move the student achievement needle forward in West Virginia.

Initially, the organizations determined that garnering input from everyone involved in our school systems, including parents, would be the first step in identifying both the greatest strengths and challenges in our public schools, and a series of focus groups was scheduled.

The purpose of the focus groups was to involve stakeholders and the public and gather their input and ideas on the resources, supports, training, community and parent engagement, and other factors that will help improve student achievement in West Virginia.

Methodology

Focus groups were held in November and December of 2022 in Morgantown, Wheeling, Charleston, Beckley, and Martinsburg. An online focus group was also conducted to provide additional accessibility to educators and members of the public who could not attend an in-person meeting. While participation levels varied depending on location, the organizations were overall pleased with turnout during the busy holiday season.

Participants at each location and online were split into small discussion groups, given an overview of the format of the event and discussion group ground rules, and asked to address the following questions:

- What are the three biggest issues facing public education today in your county?
- What initiatives, resources or supports are needed to address the challenges you identified in Question 1?
- Tell us something our school system does well. What is something to change?

Additionally, focus group participants also completed a post-forum questionnaire with multiple-choice and ranking questions. The same format was utilized in the online event, with links to the materials and the post-event questionnaire being provided to participants.

Key discussion points and responses to forum questions

Our public schools are the great equalizer and accessible to everyone. For most West Virginia children our public schools represent a gateway to success. A quality education can provide a child with the tools needed to escape from the cycle of poverty. And a high-quality education system can help our students overcome many of the high-stakes obstacles they face during their childhood.

In every location during the forum discussions, it was mentioned that our public school employees are

committed to helping each student achieve to the best of their abilities. They not only care for the educational needs of the students but for their well-being. It was mentioned that employees dig into their own pockets for clothing, supplies and even food for many in their classrooms. But those loving and caring of school employees cannot overcome the trauma and environment many of these children have experienced and continue to experience.

The issues facing our students outside of school frequently impact their participation in the learning process. Some withdraw, some act out and create disruptions, most fall behind, some have trouble staying awake, some accumulate excessive absences. Regardless of the reaction, our schools are poorly equipped to help those students.

Most of the problems hampering our students' ability to focus on school are caused by external, environmental factors that follow those students into our schools and impair their ability to learn.

Our schools have neither the staff nor the resources to adequately help those students deal with their traumatic, emotional, and mental health needs. We must have more counselors, psychologists, and nurses to support students' needs.

In addition to the lack of support services for students, perhaps an even bigger need is to have fully certified, highly trained employees working throughout the system. The difficulty finding employees to adequately staff our school systems is a problem that is growing exponentially. In addition to the shortage that currently exists in our systems now, there are very few students entering college with the intention of majoring in education. And the shortages aren't just in the classrooms, bus operators, cooks and aides are also difficult to find.

Vacancies exist in every county in the state and we must make a commitment to do what is needed to recruit and retain our certified employees throughout the state. Much discussion at the forums centered around the lack of respect for the profession from policymakers, the public, parents, and students. The constant denigration of our public schools by leaders has impacted morale, made many leave the profession and discouraged others from entering. Low pay, the inattention to employee benefits and the lack of support from administrators were cited by many as additional reasons their colleagues have left the profession.

And finally, our classrooms and schools have far too many discipline problems. When students are ready to learn and teachers are ready to teach, classroom disturbances often impact the learning process. Student outbursts occur far more frequently, more employees are being hit or kicked, and employees are spending more time dealing with the disruptions during each class period. All these events take away from the lessons being taught and student learning.

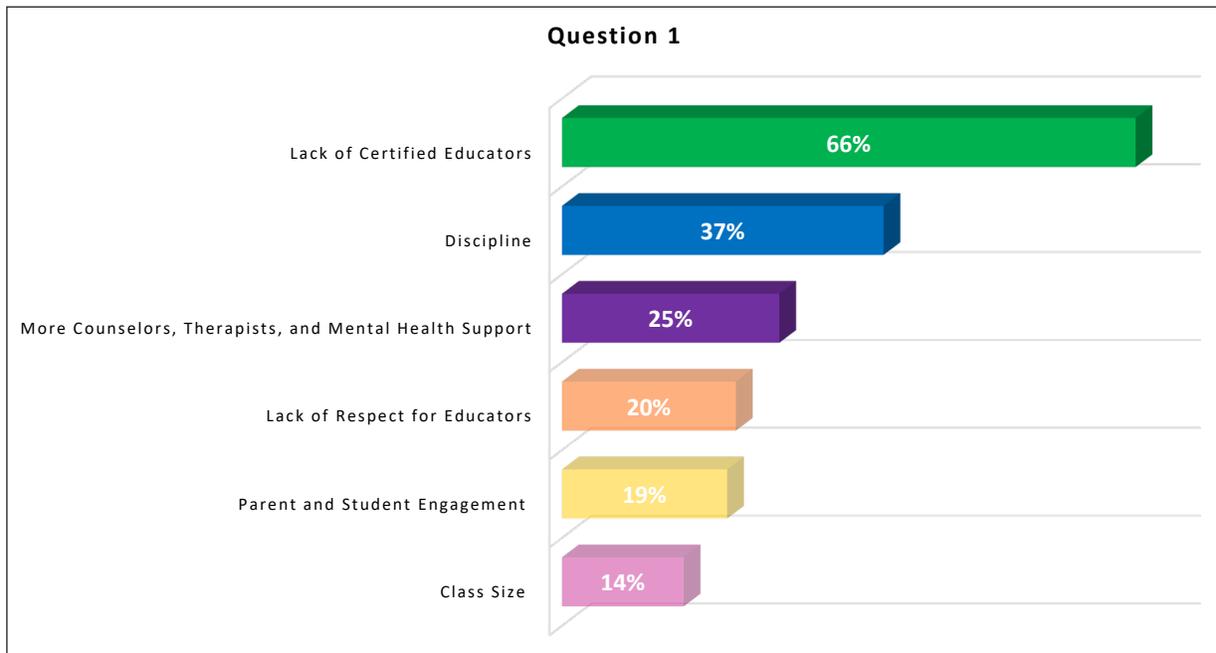
Administration and leadership responses to disruptive students is also a problem in student learning loss. Many disruptive students are immediately returned to class to continue the disruption. Others assault employees and are back in class the next day without any discipline administered. Employees are fed up over the lack of discipline and many parents remove their children from school to escape the unruly student in their child's classroom. We must enforce discipline policies if learning is to occur in our schools.

Forum participants found it easy to identify the problems and suggest ways to overcome those problems. In other states, many of those problems have been corrected by providing the proper resources and leadership.

Our schools need additional resources, we need certified employees, and we need administrators who will adequately deal with disciplinary issues. Correcting those issues will start the process of addressing many of the issues our employees and students confront.

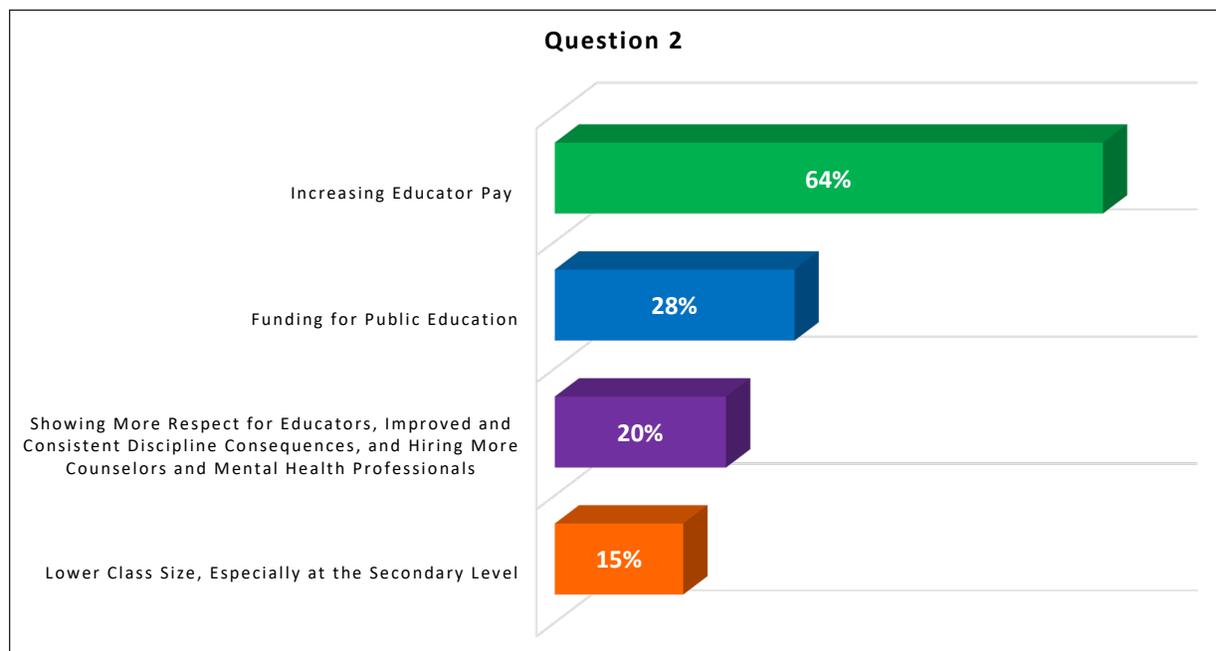
Forum Questions: Below is a brief synopsis of the most common forum responses broken down by question:

Question 1 – What are the three biggest issues facing public education today in your county?



66% of the participants listed the lack of certified educators as the number one problem facing public education. 37% of the participants' said discipline was the biggest problem facing our schools. In addition to the lack of certified educators, 25% stated our schools needed more counselors, therapists, and mental health support. Lack of respect for educators was the next most common response with 20% of those surveyed. Parent and student engagement was next at 19%. Finally, class size was listed by 14% of the participants.

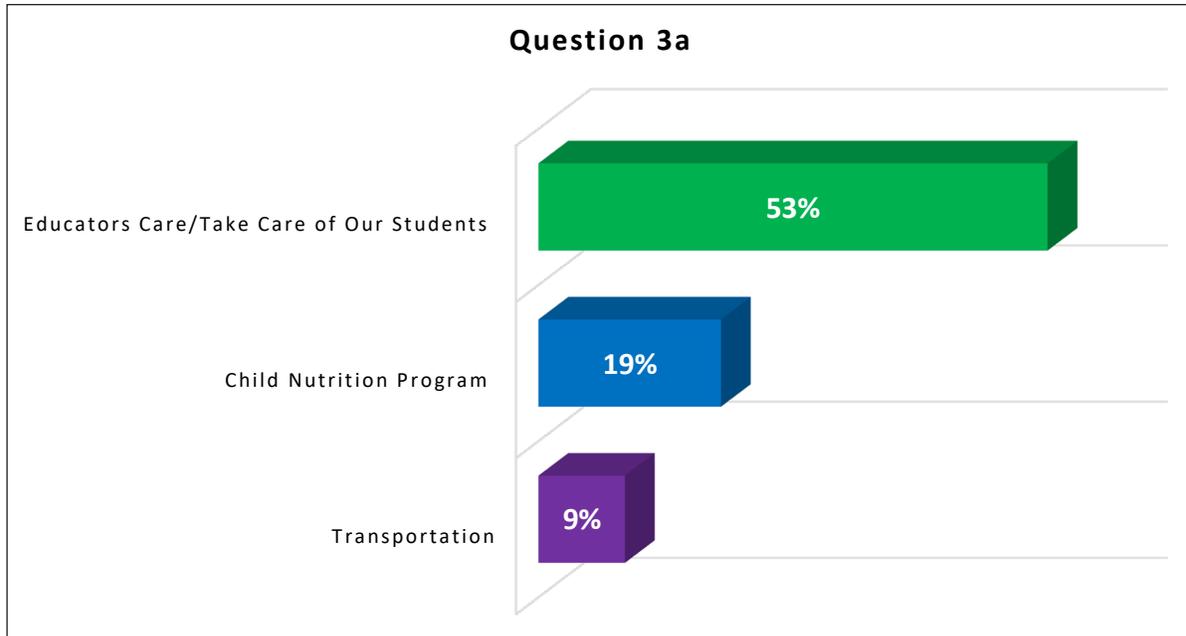
Question 2 – What initiatives, resources or supports are needed to address the challenges you identified in Question 1?



Increasing educator pay was the most common response on how to fix the problem stated in Question 1 with

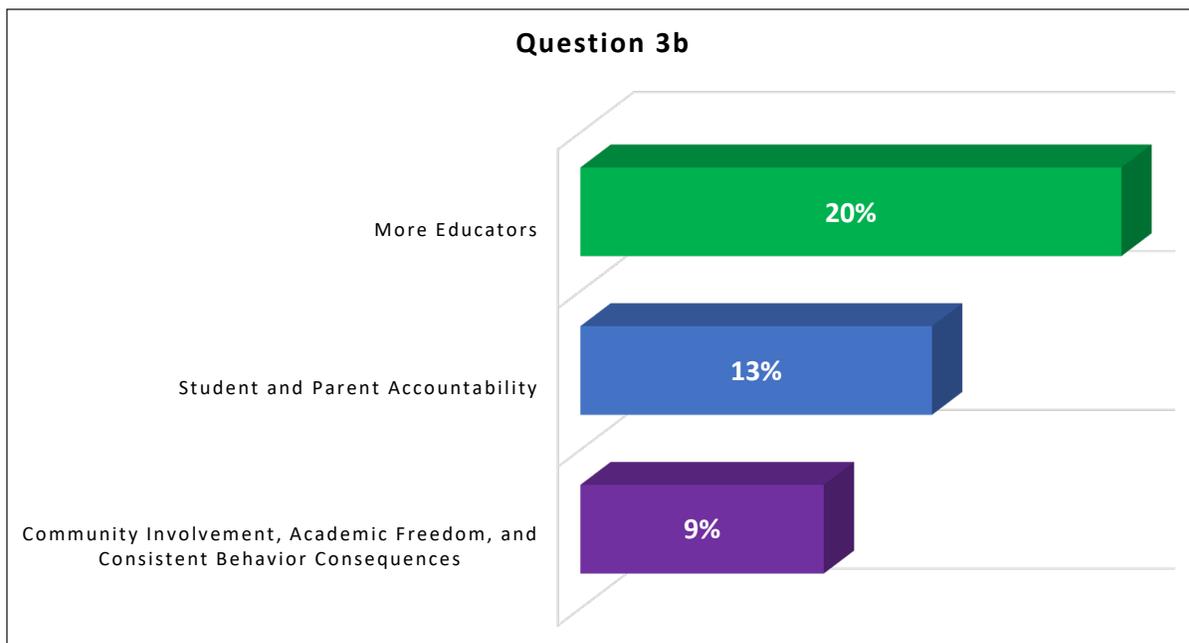
a 64% response. Funding for public education was the next most common response with 28%. Showing more respect for educators, improved and consistent discipline consequences, and hiring more counselors and mental health professionals all scored 20% on the cards. Finally, 15% of the participants thought we need to lower class size, especially at the secondary level.

Question 3a – Tell us something our school system does well.



While there were a variety of answers for this, our educators care/take care of our students was the most common response with 53% of those attending having this as their number 1 answer. The second most common response was our child nutrition program with 19% of the attendees listing this. Finally, 9% of the respondents listed our transportation as the most successful thing we do in public education. Since child nutrition and transportation are a reflection of our caring educators, one could conclude that 81% think our educators do a great job of taking care of our students.

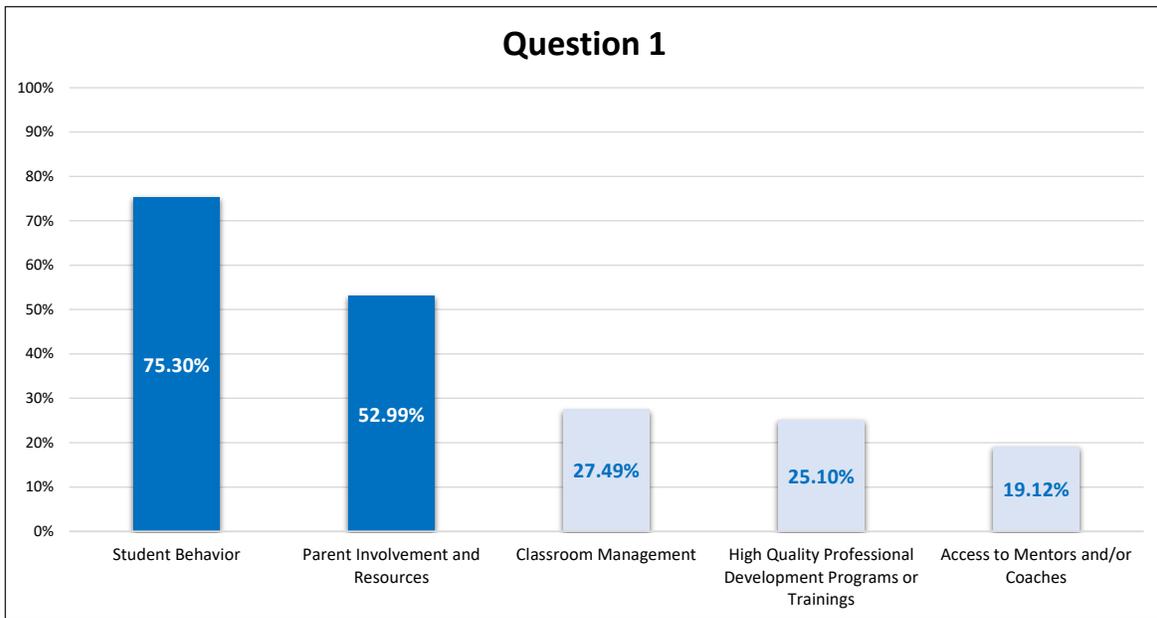
Question 3b – What is something you would like to see changed in your school system?



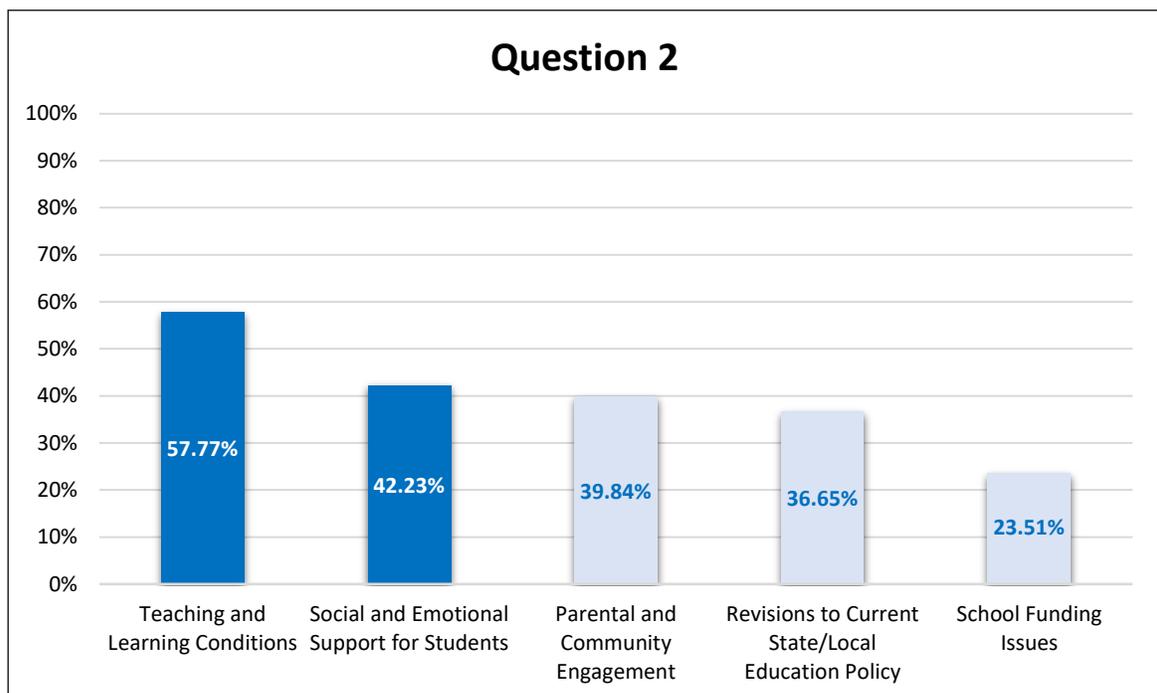
This brought the widest range of answers. 20% listed the need for more educators as the number one need. This included the need for certified teachers, more counselors, and more nurses. Student and parent accountability was the second most common response with 13%. Community involvement, academic freedom, and consistent behavior consequences all had a 9% response by those attending.

Online follow-up questionnaire: Following each forum, participants were directed to an online, anonymous survey to give additional input. Here are the results of the post forum questionnaire.

Question 1 – What areas of support would you find most useful for your students to help them succeed? Select your top two choices.



Question 2 – Which of the following are most important to improving student achievement? Select your top two choices.



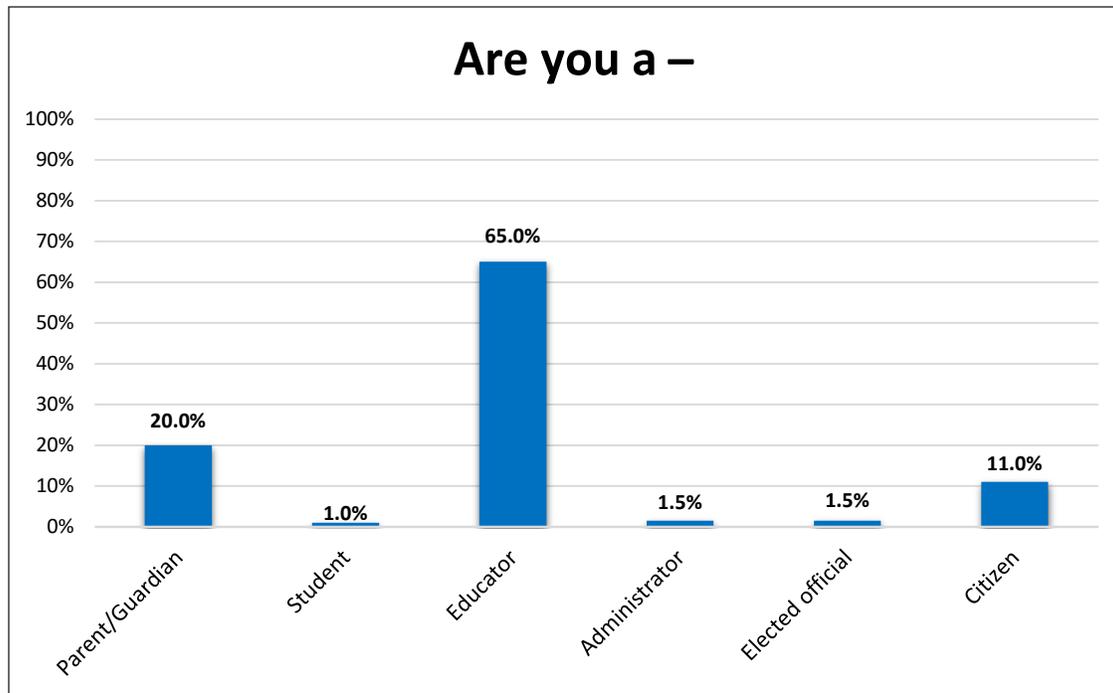
Question 3 – Prioritize the following issues from 1-7 in order of importance as to increasing student achievement. 1 is most important – 7 is least important.

- 1 Programs for student tutoring/remediation
- 2 Alternative learning placements
- 3 Increasing time for planning and collaboration with colleagues
- 4 Increase the number of education support personnel
- 5 Reducing student absenteeism
- 6 More time teaching and less paperwork requirements
- 7 Smaller class size

Question 4 – Below are some items that can be harmful to student achievement. Please rank 1 as the most harmful to 10 being the least harmful.

- 1 Student suspension due to behavior
- 2 Students experiencing bullying or harassment
- 3 Excessive standardized test preparation
- 4 Reallocation of funding away from the public schools
- 5 Tardies/absenteeism by students
- 6 Lack of substitutes when educators are absent
- 7 Lack of certified teachers for all subjects
- 8 The size of some classes
- 9 Lack of respect for educators
- 10 Student disruptions in the classroom

Demographics of those taking the online survey



Takeaways and recommendations

Based on the discussions and the analysis of the data, we make the following recommendations.

- **Recruitment and retention of employees.** One of the biggest items for retention and recruitment of employees is a competitive salary. Salaries must be competitive with education jobs in our surrounding states as well as other professions within West Virginia. While the recent 5% salary increases have been appreciated, they have not kept up with the salaries of our surrounding states and inflation. Even with multiple years of 5% salary increases, the number of vacancies increased from 728 in 2018 to more than 1,500 now and the number of students pursuing education careers has declined. Salary increases must be combined with treating employees as professionals. This means allowing professional autonomy in delivering classroom instruction and not using our public schools to advance the political agendas of our elected officials. While respect is difficult to quantify, treating educators as valued professionals will go a long way to keeping educators in the system.
- **Manage student discipline.** Education employees are exhausted by the disciplinary issues plaguing our public schools. From minor classroom disruptions to assaults on employees, actions must be taken to provide a safe and effective learning environment. These disciplinary problems occur at all levels. We advocate for alternative education centers at all academic levels, including elementary. Discipline referrals must be treated seriously by administrators, and discipline must be uniform and fair for all students. Students should be placed in the proper learning environment. The least restrictive environment may not be the best for student learning.
- **Mental health supports.** All students and employees should have access to mental health supports. This will require additional counselors, psychologists, and mental health professionals in our school systems at all levels.

- **Increased parental involvement.** To assist student learning, parents and guardians must be involved. For this to happen, those individuals need resources and support from our school systems and communities. Student achievement levels are highest when there is a coordinated effort between home and school environments. Resources such as Communities in Schools and parent resource centers should be expanded.

Our school systems are working on tight budgets with very little money to provide additional resources to support increasing student achievement. If we are committed to increasing student achievement, we must commit the resources, both financial and programmatic, to institute programs and student assistance.

Even with additional resources, we will not see the desired results overnight. Increasing student achievement will take time and we must be committed to staying the course as the initiatives and changes we institute have time to show the desired results.