



The last several years have been particularly challenging for public school teachers and support staff. Stagnant wages, COVID-19 disruptions, inadequate funding, book bans, court decisions limiting the teaching of literature and history, and politicized attacks on both the profession and vulnerable students have taken a severe toll on educators, students, and families.

Educators across the country are leaving the profession, a profound loss not only for the teachers who love teaching and for their students but also for the nation's communities. School districts nationwide—in urban, suburban and rural areas—are grappling with teacher shortages that began long before the pandemic and that continue, in many places, to worsen (Jones, 2023).

The combination of low wages, ongoing student debt, and a rising cost of living means educators often cannot afford home ownership or live in the communities in which they work. According to a new report from Redfin, the average teacher can afford only 12% of the homes for sale within commuting distance of the school where they work, compared with 30% in 2019 (Katz & Bokhari, 2023). In some cities, the Redfin analysis shows, there are no affordable units within a 20-minute commute to their school. Rentals are hard to come by, too. The average teacher can afford about 25% of rentals within 20 minutes of their workplace, and with so many others in the community also looking for affordable housing, the competition for those units is strong.

This issue is being faced across the country, but suburban counties are facing unique, changing dynamics. From 2010 to 2021, housing starts in the suburbs did not keep up with demand. In 2021, 36.2% of all suburban counties experienced underproduction. And while housing production increased 56.9% in the suburbs in the aftermath of the pandemic, there was a 104.8% increase in suburban household formation.

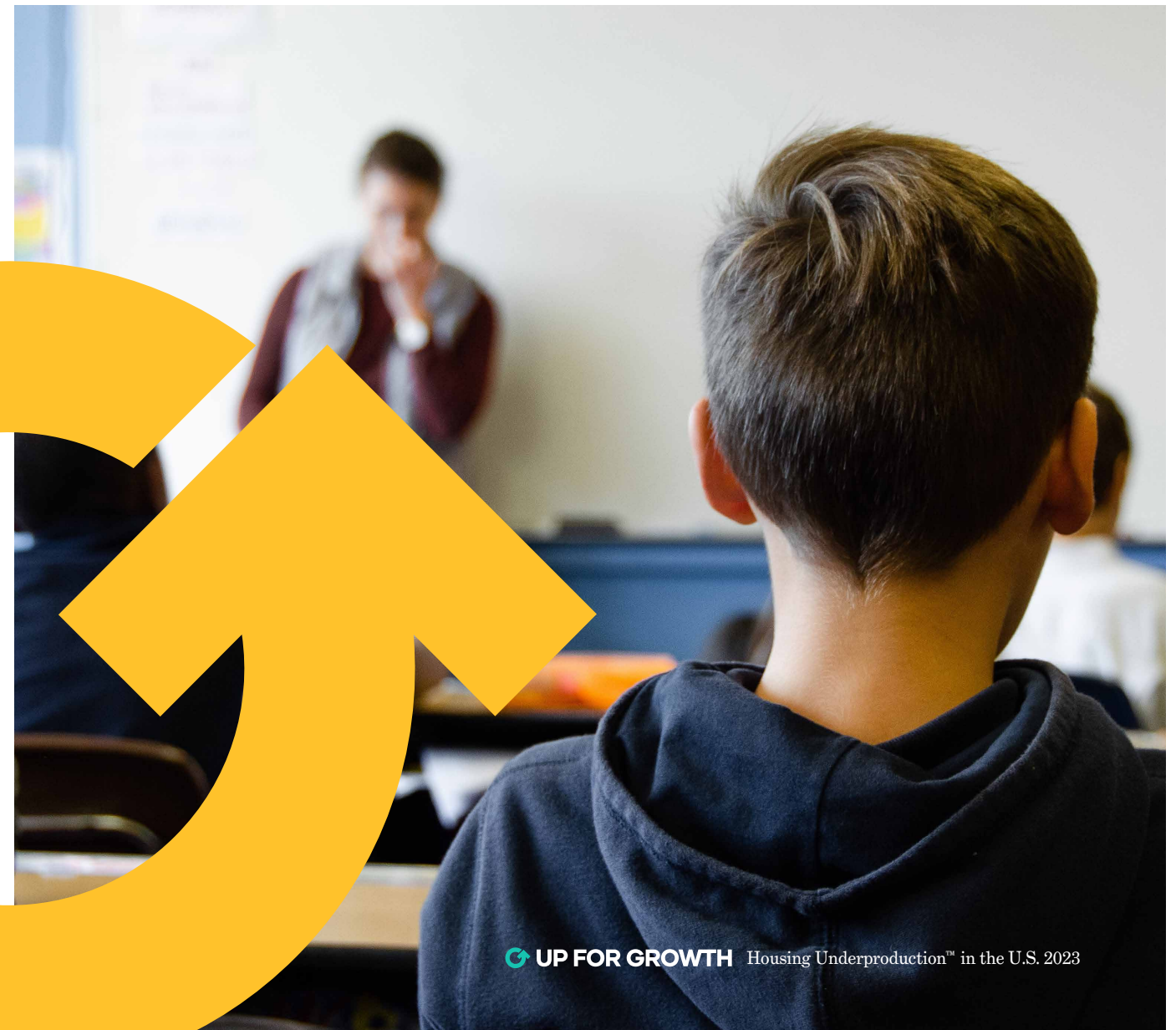
In places without affordable housing in the vicinity of schools, it feels like a Sisyphean task to recruit and retain educators. Teachers want to be part of the community where they teach, to arrive earlier in the morning and

leave later in the afternoon, to meet with students and parents, and to support after-school activities. They want to participate in community activities during the weekend and feel fully integrated into the neighborhood. That's not possible if they can't find housing nearby.

Communities, municipalities, unions, and school districts are working toward creative solutions to recruit and retain teachers in their areas. Extremely expensive San Francisco recently agreed to build two reasonably priced housing developments for educators—apartments for rent and condominiums for purchase. Shirley Chisholm Village, also in the Bay Area, is an affordable housing project aimed at providing housing for educators.

Lack of Affordable Housing Is Exacerbating the Shortage of Public Educators Across the Country, Particularly in the Suburbs

By Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS





“... the average teacher can afford only 12% of the homes for sale within commuting distance of the school where they work, compared with 30% in 2019.” (Katz & Bokhari, 2023)

Cities aren't the only places where unique projects and partnerships are addressing the lack of affordable housing that is a barrier to teacher recruitment and retention. McDowell County, a rural area in West Virginia's Appalachian country, was experiencing a severe lack of modern housing. The county had fallen into a disastrous downward economic spiral 60 years ago after nearly all the coal companies doing business there pulled up stakes.

One of the most persistent problems plaguing the county has been ongoing teacher vacancies in the schools. Over the past several decades, substitutes and uncertified teachers have regularly filled in at chronically understaffed schools. It's not that people don't want to teach in McDowell; they do. But there is a dire lack of modern housing in the county. Old, abandoned apartment buildings are uninhabitable, low-lying flood zones make new development impossible, and mountainous terrain requires difficult and long commutes from neighboring counties. Attracting and keeping teachers requires a new way of thinking.

In 2011, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and its Reconnecting McDowell partnership of private corporations, public agencies,

lawmakers, nonprofits, foundations, labor organizations, parents, and community leaders worked to put in place sustainable improvements for students, teachers, families, and the community. They financed and constructed Renaissance Village in Welch, W.Va., on a site where there had been two long-abandoned businesses. The structure became the county's first multistory apartment building in over 50 years, with modern, affordable rentals for teachers and other professionals. It opened in June 2022 and is now fully occupied.

The impact on local educators was tremendous. Terri Kennedy and her husband, Tim, for example, had been living and working in schools in neighboring Wyoming County and wanted to move to McDowell. Renaissance Village made it possible.

“I have roots in McDowell and taught there for nine years before COVID-19, commuting from Wyoming County. But I started thinking I really needed to go back home,” Terri said. “There's a lot of trauma in McDowell, and we see a lot of behavior issues. I realized I really needed to go back and be where I'm supposed to be.” Terri and Tim moved to McDowell last year, and both work at one of the two county high schools. She is a special education teacher, and he is the principal. “The only way it worked was because of Renaissance Village. This is the only affordable, nice place to live around here for teachers. We just love it. We wanted the community to know we're buying into the community, we're there for them—full force—and we want the families of our students to see us in the community.” Terri says the couple pays \$800 a month for a modern, fully equipped two-bedroom apartment.

Tim says he uses Renaissance Village as a selling point to recruit teachers. Some have come from as far away as North Carolina to work at Mount View High School.

Around the country, districts are coming up with other ideas to ease the housing problem. The Pinellas County School District in Florida is

converting a shuttered vocational school into 225 residential units, with about half being affordably priced for teachers. In Baltimore, city officials are considering a proposal for the sale of an abandoned middle school property to be converted into a teachers' village, with 37 apartments for teachers and school staff. Elsewhere around the country, excess school land is being used for teacher housing.

Teachers need affordable housing in the communities where they teach. High-quality education is imperative

to American democracy and recruiting and retaining good teachers is required to make that possible. Teachers want and need to be part of the communities in which they teach. Though teachers' villages serve that purpose beautifully, it is not a scalable solution to the problem of insufficient affordable housing. We need high-level policy changes to tackle the problem in a more satisfactory way. Without available and affordable housing, we will lose wonderful teachers and their essential connection to their students and their communities.



AUTHOR BIO

Randi Weingarten

Randi Weingarten is president of the 1.7-million-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFL-CIO, which represents teachers, paraprofessionals and school-related personnel, higher education faculty and staff, early childhood educators, nurses and other health care professionals, and local, state, and federal government employees. Prior to her election as AFT president in 2008, Weingarten served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2, representing approximately 200,000 educators in the New York City public school system, as well as home childcare providers and other workers in health, law, and education.

Weingarten holds degrees from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the Cardozo School of Law. She is an active member of the Democratic National Committee and numerous professional, civic, and philanthropic organizations.