TRANSFORMING
THE TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH CAROLINA
MAY 2023
PRESENTED BY TEACHFORAMERICA South Carolina
Thank You to Our Participants and Supporters Who Made the Second Annual DiscussED Possible

FACILITATORS

Tori Carter
Director, Coaching and Pre-Service
Teach For America South Carolina (TFASC)

Christine Culp
Senior Managing Director, Leadership Development
TFASC

Lezze Steward
Director, Corps Member Programming and Operations
TFASC

Dr. Freronda Green
Managing Director, Teacher Leadership Programs
TFASC

Brandon Johnson
Assistant Principal
Greenville County Schools

Michael Van Tyne
Director, External Programs
TFASC

Courtney Waters
Executive Director
TFASC

PANELISTS AND PARTICIPANTS

Dr. Mary Adeogun
Teacher
Charleston County School District

Anjali Bhatt
Teacher
Florence County School District
Three

Hunter Britton
Teacher and Intern Assistant Principal
Darlington County School District

Natasha Burns
Literacy Coach
Darlington County School District

Katie Crews
Senior Program Manager
TEACH South Carolina

Charlotte Cullipher
Math Interventionist
Darlington County School District

Monifa Ellington
Manager, Community Relations
Ingenuity

Tim Flowers*  
Senior Counsel for Litigation and Investigations
The Boeing Company

Amber Gedden
Teacher
South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice

Dr. Jenna Hallman
Executive Director
Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA)

Katie Halbe
Field Marketing Manager, Southern Region
Volaris USA

Sean Holleran
Vice President
FNB Corporation

Deion Jamison
2023 South Carolina Teacher of the Year
CERRA

Edmon Jones
Executive Deputy Lead
AT&T

Adrian King
President
Charleston County Education Association

Staci Koance
Campus Director, Teaching Fellows and Academic Advisor, College of Education
Clemson University

Audrey KS Lane
Founding Partner and Executive Director
E3 Foundation

Kazie Mabry-Thomas
Site Coordinator Lead
Communities In Schools of South Carolina

Phyllis Martin
Chief Executive Officer
Tri-County Cradle to Career Collaborative

Kimberly Sutton Mason
Principal
Darlington County School District

Clay Middleton
Managing Director
Mercury

Carly Pesce
Senior Managing Director, Strategic Support
Teach For America (TFA)

Norvell Pettus
Community Relations Specialist
Domion Energy

Dr. Sheila Quinn
Superintendent
Clover School District

Katie Robinson
Chief Academic Officer
Meeting Street Schools

Omarie Todd
Senior Vice President, Regional Field Executive
TFA

Liz Ulles
Principal in Residence
Meeting Street Schools

LaTisha Vaughn
Founding Partner and Chief Programs Officer
E3 Foundation

Dr. Frances C. Welch
Dean, School of Education
College of Charleston

Barry Whalen
Senior Vice President
HLA, Inc.

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AUTHORS

Annette Filliat
Sarah Ann Snipes

DESIGNERS

Caesar Blue
Jenny Dougherty

SPONSOR

Barry Whalen in Memory of Jan Whalen

FACILITATORS

Tori Carter
Director, Coaching and Pre-Service
Teach For America South Carolina (TFASC)

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INTRODUCTION

In celebration of our 10th anniversary last year, TFASC launched DiscussED, a bold conversation series to reimagine South Carolina’s education system. This annual forum convenes cross-sector leaders to generate innovative solutions that help end educational inequity, so every child in South Carolina has an opportunity to learn and co-create a future filled with possibility.

The theme of the inaugural DiscussED, “The Future of Education: 2040 and Beyond,” was intentionally expansive to begin our thought-provoking series. For the Second Annual DiscussED, however, we took a more granular look at a pressing issue in education today – the teacher shortage crisis – and explored the transformation of the teacher’s experience to recruit and retain more diverse, high-quality educators across the state.

Why are teacher vacancies and departures growing in South Carolina? The first section of this report synthesizes five key issues that are facing teachers according to the Second Annual DiscussED participants. As we know, teaching is a profession that is unlike any other. Everything starts with teachers who play a crucial role in fostering the whole child, yet working conditions for educators have become increasingly difficult. Teachers need to thrive in a profession where their expertise is honored.

To improve conditions for South Carolina teachers, leaders in our education ecosystem must come together to advocate for the teaching profession and, ultimately, students. We can no longer work in silos expecting different results. By collaborating and sharing unique perspectives, DiscussED participants developed actionable recommendations to recruit and retain more teachers in the next year. The second section of this report outlines these urgent suggestions that are grouped by five topics: recruitment, compensation and benefits, school funding and staffing, evaluation, and advancement.

If you are interested in learning more about the organizations, programs, and initiatives that are transforming the teacher’s experience in South Carolina, we are proud to offer the DiscussED Community Resource Guide. The purpose of this guide is to encourage discussions and partnerships among these organizations, which could significantly improve conditions for educators across the state. Please see page 17 for more information.

Thank you to our participants who provided powerful insights during the Second Annual DiscussED. We are particularly grateful to the educators and administrators who conveyed the grassroots nature of this year’s forum. We also want to recognize those who did not attend DiscussED yet are deeply committed to supporting teachers and improving education in South Carolina.

The Third Annual DiscussED is planned for spring 2024 to continue these innovative conversations and stay accountable to the recommendations in this report. On our path forward, how can you leverage your network to bring leaders into future DiscussED exchanges and build partnerships that turn the ideas in this report into reality? We each play a part in the creation of a more effective and equitable education system that serves all students, teachers, and communities in South Carolina.

Sincerely,

Courtney Waters
Executive Director, TFASC

THE ISSUE:

Why Are Teacher Vacancies and Departures Growing in South Carolina?

South Carolina is ranked 42nd among the states for Pre-K to 12 education (U.S. News & World Report, 2022). Under-resourced schools that serve low-income students and students of color are not equipped to meet students’ needs.

How do we prepare all students for success in a rapidly changing world, especially as the pandemic widened the disparities in the state’s “minimally adequate” education system? It starts with teachers who play a crucial role in a student’s academic, social, and emotional development. Decades of research have proven that teacher quality is the most important school-based factor influencing student outcomes (Rice, 2003).

Unfortunately, South Carolina’s public schools are facing worsening teacher shortages. The number of teacher vacancies increased by 39 percent at the start of the 2022-2023 school year compared to the previous year, and vacancies have more than doubled from two years ago (CERRA, 2022).

Teacher departures have also steadily increased since the 2020-2021 school year. One in seven educators did not return to a teaching or service position in the same South Carolina public school district during the 2022-2023 school year (CERRA, 2022).

Why are teacher vacancies and departures growing in South Carolina? During the Second Annual DiscussED, participants explored this question, and five issues emerged that are facing teachers today.
LACK OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Public school teachers in South Carolina are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students (Schaeffer, 2021). During the 2021-2022 school year, 77 percent of teachers identified as non-Hispanic white compared to 48 percent of students who were white. Nearly one-third of students were Black or African American (32 percent), and 12 percent were Hispanic or Latino (SCDOE, 2022). In contrast, only 16 percent of teachers were Black or African American, while only two percent were Hispanic or Latino (SCDOE, 2022).

It is imperative to recruit and retain a teacher workforce that reflects the student population. Research shows that teachers of color increase the academic outcomes, graduation rates, and college aspirations of students of color, and teachers of color are highly rated by students of all races (Learning Policy Institute, 2018). For Black students, more specifically, teachers who reflect their identity have a greater impact on people of color.

The reason why I went into education was to give students who look like me, and who come from underrepresented areas like I came from, the opportunities to change and shift the world. Providing them with a high-quality education means that one day they’ll be able to advocate on behalf of the profession because they’ll remember they had a great teacher.

— Deion Jamison, Recipient of “2023 South Carolina Teacher of the Year”

LACK OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

As teacher vacancies increase, educators who remain in the classroom are asked to do even more while managing many of the additional responsibilities and heightened expectations from the pandemic, according to Patrick Kelly of the Palmetto State Teachers Association (Koeske, 2022).

One of the responsibilities that emerged from the pandemic was providing more support to students—helping them catch up academically and addressing their mental health needs. During these turbulent years, student discipline issues arose, which can be difficult for early career teachers to navigate. Furthermore, many teachers did not feel supported by administrators in discipline issues. In South Carolina, 70 percent of departing teachers reported that discipline problems were a factor in leaving their position, and administrative concerns were also a reason for many teachers (Brown, et al., 2022).

If a classroom does not have a teacher to start the year, schools often turn to larger class sizes, putting students at risk of not attaining the excellent education they deserve.

LARGER CLASS SIZES CREATE LONGER HOURS FOR TEACHERS WITH MORE PAPERS TO GRADE, MORE PARENTS TO CONTACT, AND MORE DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS (KOESKE, 2022). IT CAN ALSO LEAD TO MORE ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS THAT MAKE TEACHERS FEEL UNDERVALUED AND ARE NOT DRIVING THEIR STUDENTS FORWARD. WHILE STATE REGULATIONS MANDATE THAT CLASSES MAY NOT EXCEED 35 STUDENTS IN ENROLLMENT (SCDOE, 2017), SMALLER CLASS SIZES ARE MORE MANAGEABLE FOR TEACHERS AND PROVIDE MORE ATTENTION TO STUDENTS.

A typical teacher works about 54 hours a week, and in the summer, teachers review curriculum, study academic standards, discover new research-based learning strategies, and more (Nigro, 2022). There is a misconception that teachers are off each afternoon and seasonal break, but the reality is that most educators are working unpaid during these times.

LACK OF LIVING WAGES

South Carolina’s public school teachers have felt overworked and underpaid for years. During the 2021-2022 school year, the average teacher salary in South Carolina was $53,393, which was $13,000 less than the national average (NCES, 2022). To make matters worse, compensation barely increases with tenure. Many teachers have difficulty supporting a family on their current salary, and for this reason, they are not the head of household, have a second job, or are leaving the profession.

Given the lack of living wages, affordable housing remains an issue for educators. In Charleston County, for instance, the average starting teacher salary is $43,146, and under the current pay scale, a teacher with a bachelor’s degree would need 22 years of experience to afford a home in the county (Rowan, 2023). Teacher salaries need to be adjusted for regional differences in cost of living across the state.

Student debt is another concern for educators. Even though base pay for most public school teachers will increase by $2,500 (Bustos, 2023), teacher pay has remained relatively stagnant for decades. Yet, the inflation-adjusted cost of a four-year degree has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2020 (Cohen and Turner, 2023). This discrepancy is resulting in fewer education majors at South Carolina’s colleges and universities to account for teacher attrition and K-12 enrollment growth (Sanders and West, 2020). In 2022, only 17 percent of educators hired in South Carolina were recent graduates of the state’s education schools—the lowest percentage in the last 15 years (Koeske, 2022).

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The teacher shortage crisis is the result of multiple factors not controlled by educators. Despite the wealth of experience and expertise of teachers, the lack of educator voice, respect, and professional autonomy are contributing factors in their dissatisfaction (NEA, 2022).

Teachers seek more autonomy in the classroom to better prepare their students for the 21st century, but they are still adhering to state standards from the 20th century. South Carolina’s public education system, which has remained largely unchanged for 100 years, is not designed to empower students to lead and shape the complex global world into which they will graduate. As Kizzie Mabry-Thomas of the Communities In Schools of South Carolina shared, “If school districts provide teachers with the curriculum, teachers need the flexibility and time to build lesson plans from this framework that spark creativity and meet the needs of their individual students.” While there is a need for greater accountability in K-12 education, it is important for standardization to provide a foundation for innovation as teaching is both an art and a science.

During the pandemic, many educators gained newfound autonomy when they took a step back from planned lessons, reflected on the needs of their students and families, and connected their teaching with present realities – resulting in more innovative and creative instruction (LaFors, 2020). It is problematic for educators to return to the pre-pandemic status quo of little influence over decisions like curriculum and instructional materials in their classroom. Research shows that when teachers do not have significant roles in setting curriculum and determining what is taught, they are more likely to quit (NEA, 2022).

As Dr. Jenna Hallman of CERRA stated, “Intensive development starts in pre-service before new teachers enter the classroom.” High-quality induction programs provide new teachers with coaching and mentoring from experienced teachers in the same subject or grade level, classroom observations, orientation sessions, and reduced workloads (Bishop, et al., 2016). However, when more veteran teachers are retiring or leaving the classroom early, new teachers in South Carolina are losing access to learning opportunities with them.

Teachers cited the lack of collaboration opportunities with colleagues as one reason for leaving (Bishop, et al., 2016). “We have been training teachers and teaching students the same way for decades, yet we expect different results,” said LaTisha Vaughn of the E3 Foundation. When teachers have more time to plan and collaborate, research indicates that student academic outcomes are stronger (Rinehart, et al., 2017).

As teachers progress in their careers, advancement opportunities are often unclear. Educators are seeking a better understanding of the pathways for career advancement both in and out of the classroom.

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### LACK OF VOICE, RESPECT, AND AUTONOMY

The teacher shortage crisis is the result of multiple factors not controlled by educators. Despite the wealth of experience and expertise of teachers, the lack of educator voice, respect, and professional autonomy are contributing factors in their dissatisfaction (NEA, 2022).

“"If school districts provide teachers with the curriculum, teachers need the flexibility and time to build lesson plans from this framework that spark creativity and meet the needs of their individual students."”

— Kizzie Mabry-Thomas, Site Coordinator Lead, Communities In Schools of South Carolina

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Teachers need to be heard by policy leaders in the transformation of their profession. Many elected officials who are shaping education policy have no K-12 school experience — except for being a student in their youth (Ferlazzo, 2017). Policymakers are frequently pushing for more oversight of teachers that perpetuate a “teach to the test” mentality instead of creating space for innovation in the classroom.

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### LACK OF ADVANCEMENT

Professional development for teachers is often ineffective – misaligning with their leadership goals or precluding collaboration with other educators. In several South Carolina school districts, these opportunities have even dwindled since the pandemic began. By failing to provide teachers with access to personalized professional development and learning communities, it impairs their growth, sense of purpose, and career advancement opportunities (Garcia and Weiss, 2019).

“"We have been training teachers and teaching students the same way for decades, yet we expect different results."”

— LaTisha Vaughn, Founding Partner and Chief Programs Officer, E3 Foundation

Early career teachers need intensive training to maintain classroom discipline and support students’ social-emotional needs. Less experienced teachers reported higher levels of emotional distress from their work compared to more experienced educators in South Carolina (Brown, et al., 2022). As a result, during the 2022-2023 school year, more than one-third (36 percent) of the state’s teacher departures had five or fewer years of experience (CERRA, 2022).

As Dr. Jenna Hallman of CERRA stated, “Intensive development starts in pre-service before new teachers enter the classroom.” High-quality induction programs provide new teachers with coaching and mentoring from experienced teachers in the same subject or grade level, classroom observations, orientation sessions, and reduced workloads (Bishop, et al., 2016). However, when more veteran teachers are retiring or leaving the classroom early, new teachers in South Carolina are losing access to learning opportunities with them.
CALL TO ACTION:
What Can South Carolina School, District, and State Leaders Do to Recruit and Retain Teachers in the Next Year?

There are immense challenges facing the education system in South Carolina. But together, we can solve them, so every child has an opportunity to learn and co-create a future filled with possibility.

One of the biggest challenges is the teacher shortage crisis. During the Second Annual DiscussED, cross-sector leaders explored the transformation of the teacher’s experience to recruit and retain more high-quality educators in South Carolina. What would change if those in the education ecosystem rallied together to advocate for the teaching profession and, ultimately, students?

“We cannot work in isolation to transform the teacher’s experience and improve student outcomes in South Carolina,” said Courtney Waters of TFASC. “No one has all the answers. We must partner to make change.” By collaborating and sharing diverse perspectives, DiscussED participants developed actionable recommendations that will improve conditions for South Carolina teachers in the next year. These urgent suggestions, which are grouped by five topics, are outlined in the pages that follow.

The Third Annual DiscussED is planned for spring 2024 to convene leaders, continue these innovative conversations, and stay accountable to the recommendations in this report.

RECRUITMENT

Support programs and initiatives that are recruiting diverse, high-quality teachers and removing barriers to enter the teaching profession.

“District and school leaders need to carefully consider where and how they are recruiting teachers who reflect the demographics of our student population,” said Katie Robinson of the Meeting Street Schools. One approach is to support — and possibly align — programs and initiatives in South Carolina like Call Me MISTER that are increasing the number of teachers from diverse backgrounds and building communities of support to retain outstanding educators of color.

If South Carolina’s leaders are committed to diversifying the teacher workforce, we need to remove barriers to enter the teaching profession and provide more support to keep equity-oriented teachers from all backgrounds in the classroom. Because there are not enough traditional educators to quickly solve the teacher shortage in South Carolina, alternative certification programs are part of the solution to recruit and retain diverse, high-quality teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff schools and subjects.

Prioritize “homegrown” recruitment of those with existing ties to their communities.

Teachers with roots in their communities are more likely to stay long-term in local schools and develop relationships with students and families that yield profound impact.

For this reason, school districts, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions could partner to develop or expand “grow your own” programs that recruit diverse community members to teach in local schools. These programs offer wraparound services to non-traditional recruits such as mentoring, training, and often financial support (Wood, 2022). “Homegrown” recruitment is especially important for South Carolina’s rural communities that tend to have more difficulty attracting educators to their districts.
In South Carolina, for example, 64 percent of teachers held a master’s degree or higher during the 2017-2018 school year (NCES, 2018).

To recruit and retain high-quality teachers that all students deserve, South Carolina’s leaders need to offer educators competitive pay, which is above the living wage, based on their education, experience, and cost of living within the state. Research finds that raising teacher pay by 10 percent reduces student dropout rates by three to four percent (Loeb and Page, 2000).

In addition to substantial salary increases, leaders could offer paid opportunities to teachers, such as writing curriculum, as they progress in their career. As TFA’s Elisa Villanueva Beard shared, “Policymakers looking to boost student performance – and combat pandemic-inflicted learning loss – should support proposals to make teaching a more economically viable profession.”

“Expanding student loan forgiveness to teachers – especially those in hard-to-staff schools and subjects – is a smart step toward making education a more viable career path. Furthermore, because student loan debt is held disproportionately by people of color, this will help establish a more racially and ethnically diverse teaching workforce, which benefits all students and particularly students of color (Beard, 2023).”

In addition to student loan forgiveness, South Carolina’s leaders could expand benefits, such as thoughtfully crafted tax credits, support for out-of-pocket certification costs, and access to affordable housing, to address the financial barriers of becoming an educator. The Fairfield County School District, for instance, is building an affordable rental housing community for teachers, and the district’s J.R. Green said this project could become “a model for rural communities, not only in South Carolina, but across the nation” to recruit and retain high-quality teachers (Holdman, 2022).

“In other fields, residents are not volunteering their time. We need full-year residency programs where aspiring educators are being paid for their student teaching experience.”

— Dr. Jenna Hallman, Executive Director, CERRA
School Funding and Staffing

Permanitize the new school funding formula that allocates money more equitably and gives districts more spending flexibility.

“School districts need the flexibility to allocate dollars based on the particular needs of their communities,” said LaTisha Vaughn of the E3 Foundation.

In 2022, the South Carolina General Assembly instituted a new school funding formula that shifts where money is allocated and gives districts more flexibility in how to spend their money. School districts serving higher concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities will receive more dollars (Green, 2022). Additionally, spending decisions will now be made by the local school board, lifting certain restrictions, stated Katie Nilges of SCDOE (Hagwood, 2022).

Because the new school funding formula is temporary, South Carolina’s policymakers could make it a permanent state law. As lawmakers consider this model in the future, it is imperative to listen to district administrators, school leaders, and teachers.

“School districts need the flexibility to allocate dollars based on the particular needs of their communities.”
— LaTisha Vaughn, Founding Partner and Chief Programs Officer, E3 Foundation

Rethink school staffing models to better support teachers.

Working conditions are causing many teachers to feel spread thin and not properly supported. To improve working conditions, South Carolina’s state leaders need to ensure adequate, equitable, and flexible school funding that provides districts with more budget autonomy to hire staff and rethink staffing models – meeting the needs of their students and communities.

With a larger budget, South Carolina’s district leaders could reexamine hiring administrators based on the number of pupils for administrators to be more effective and supportive of teachers. For instance, the funding formula may only allow schools in South Carolina to hire one assistant principal per a standardized number of students, and this can lead to frustration for teachers when an administrator is managing too many competing priorities.

South Carolina’s early career teachers need more support, in all forms, to stay in the classroom. According to LaTisha Vaughn of the E3 Foundation, “We need to rethink teacher development because many early career educators are simply not ready for the classroom reality they face.”

To retain new teachers and transform student outcomes, education leaders can introduce a “shelter and develop” model by having co-teachers, mentors, more observation time, and/or fewer students in the classroom as they build competencies.

As teaching experience increases, South Carolina’s education leaders could better support veteran educators by having lead teachers that rotate each year and a teaching assistant in the classroom. When teachers are rotated out of the lead position for one school year, they would either have reduced or no instructional time, which provides them with a much-needed break to develop curriculum and support other teachers. Additionally, with the support of teaching assistants, teachers can focus on their main task of teaching, and it is easier to provide specialized instruction in the classroom (Clifton, et al., 2021).

Lastly, by hiring more school counselors and school-based family navigators in South Carolina, education leaders can support teachers to identify and address the social-emotional needs of students and build partnerships with families and communities. Amber Gadsdon of the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice shared that “many teachers are leaving our noble profession because they do not feel respected by parents or the community.” When schools, families, and communities work together as partners, students benefit (Lambert and Munroe, 2022).

Evaluate

Partner with teachers to evolve standards to the 21st century, then provide educators with more autonomy in the classroom.

Teacher retention will improve when we allow educators to be the experts in their field. Educators with autonomy in the classroom have higher job satisfaction, but unfortunately, many teachers report that they have little influence over decisions such as curriculum, instructional materials, content of professional learning opportunities, discipline policies, and educator hiring practices and evaluation (NEA, 2022).

As Anjali Bhatt of the Florence County School District Three shared, “I would love the autonomy to teach students what they need to know because if there is a learning gap, for example, I am pressured to keep teaching to state standards. Sometimes, you really need to take that pause, go back to previous lessons, and meet students where they are.”

Instead of reinforcing a mandated “teach to the test” mentality, South Carolina’s leaders can partner with educators to evolve standards to the 21st century, then provide teachers with the autonomy to adapt lessons that best meet students’ needs in their classrooms.

“I would love the autonomy to teach students what they need to know because if there is a learning gap, I am pressured to keep teaching to state standards. Sometimes, you really need to take that pause, go back to previous lessons, and meet students where they are.”
— Anjali Bhatt, Teacher, Florence County School District Three
Moreover, coaching and mentoring programs can benefit alternative teachers by offering support on the pathways to certification.

South Carolina's education leaders could also give more recognition to teachers for their professional learning and for their growth in supporting students and colleagues, such as the state's Effectiveness and Leadership Micro-Credential Academy.

Offer teachers clear pathways to leadership.

Many teachers seek clear pathways to leadership – and to earn a higher professional salary – without leaving the classroom to pursue administrative roles. South Carolina's education leaders could offer them compensated roles that include developing and adapting curriculum, mentoring early career teachers, leading professional learning, and working with community partners and allied professionals (Berry, et al., 2022).

Additionally, South Carolina’s policymakers and district administrators could provide more opportunities to partner with teacher leaders in the co-creation of educational policy. “There is still a lack of teacher voice in the state’s policymaking,” explained Deion Jamison, recipient of “2023 South Carolina Teacher of the Year.” “To elevate teacher leader voices, lawmakers could listen more to the priorities from ‘District Teachers of the Year,’ and districts could invest in leadership development programs that prepare teachers to be advocates for their profession and for their students.”

Redesign instructional time to give teachers more time to plan, collaborate, and reflect.

A new law will guarantee at least half an hour of unencumbered time daily, which could be used for a break or planning, for all elementary and special education teachers in South Carolina public schools, but it does not guarantee unencumbered time for middle and high school teachers (Green, 2022).

“We need more time to collaborate with teachers in our school and across districts to share ideas and best practices that improve student achievement.”

— Dr. Mary Adeogun, Teacher, Charleston County School District

Teachers need more time to plan, collaborate, and reflect outside of instructional time, so they can create more engaging lessons that meet the unique needs of their students while connecting to state standards. To give educators more reflection time, South Carolina’s leaders could redesign instructional time by offering four-day school weeks, modified school calendars, and/or teacher sabbaticals. “We need more time to collaborate with teachers in our school and across districts to share ideas and best practices that improve student achievement,” emphasized Dr. Mary Adeogun of the Charleston County School District.

Provide teachers with access to more high-quality, personalized professional development opportunities.

Research indicates that there is a positive link between effective teacher professional development, teaching practices, and student outcomes. Effective professional development often focuses on specific curriculum content and pedagogies, incorporates active learning, fosters collaboration, shares best practices, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback, and/or is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

To improve student learning and teacher retention, South Carolina’s education leaders need to provide educators with access to more high-quality, personalized professional development opportunities that align to their leadership goals. One approach is to create interdependent coaching or mentoring partnerships between less experienced and more experienced teachers – honoring them as professionals who have the capacity to inspire and encourage one another (Steen, 2022). As Deion Jamison, recipient of “2023 South Carolina Teacher of the Year,” shared, “Coaching can be instrumental in collaboratively improving the craft of both new and veteran educators.”

Advancement

How Can You Get Involved to Transform the Teacher’s Experience in South Carolina?

If you are interested in learning more about the organizations, programs, and initiatives that are transforming the teacher’s experience in South Carolina, check out the DiscussED Community Resource Guide at tfasc.org/discussed. The purpose of this guide is to encourage discussions and partnerships among these organizations, which could significantly improve conditions for educators across the state.

If you are interested in attending the Third Annual DiscussED in 2024 to continue these innovative conversations, visit tfasc.org/discussed.
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1691 Turnbull Avenue
Suite 203
North Charleston, SC 29405
843.414.2920

tfasc.org/discussed