

A notebook of short but worthy items

Teacher pension woes

A new national report on the teacher pension systems in all 50 states offers a grim picture of the amount of pension debt and teachers' lack of access to flexible and fair benefits.

"Optimistic projections, willful ignorance, and continued deferral of consequences hang like a fog over the teacher pension policy landscape," said Sandi Jacobs, one of the report's authors. "At this point, state teacher pensions won't turn around with just a few good years on Wall Street. The crisis can't be solved without intentional action by policymakers."

The report, coauthored by the National Council on Teacher Quality and EducationCounsel, presents a number of key findings:

- **Inadequate funding.** South Dakota and Wisconsin are the only states with fully funded teacher pension systems. Only seven states have teacher pension systems funded at 90% or higher. Illinois ranks at the bottom with just 42% of its obligations funded.
- **Large pension debt.** Nationwide, more than two-thirds of every dollar contributed by employers to teacher retirement systems goes to servicing pension debt rather than funding current retiree benefits (or is saved for future benefits for teachers contributing now).
- **Limited flexibility.** In 38 states, teachers are only able to enroll in defined benefit pension plans. Only Alaska provides teachers with a flexible defined contribution plan. Six states — Florida, Michigan, Ohio, South Carolina, Utah, and Washington — offer teachers a choice.
- **Pension costs rising.** Since 2008, 31 states have increased teacher contributions to pension systems. Since 2012, 36 states have increased how much employers must contribute.
- **Teacher benefits squeezed.** In all but three states (Arizona, Minnesota, and South Dakota) teachers are not vested in their pension systems until they have worked for at least three years. In 20 states, teachers must work seven to 10 years to vest. Only six states allow teachers to take their contributions and at least a portion of employer contributions when they leave the pension system.
- **Inequitable accrual of benefits.** In 38 states, pension benefits are a function of the years of service rather than age only. Most states allow teachers to retire early with full benefits, at a cost of as much as \$841,000 per teacher just for benefits collected before age 65.

"The miasma blanketing teacher pension policy suggests that states are, at best, engaged in short-term magical thinking about their retirement systems," said the report authors.

Source: Doherty, K.M., Jacobs, S., & Lueken, M.F. (2017, February 23). *Lifting the pension fog: What teachers and taxpayers need to know about the teacher pension crisis*. Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality & EducationCounsel. www.nctq.org/dmsStage/Lifting_the_Pension_Fog



Better SEL preparation for teachers

Preservice teachers need more instruction on how to develop their own and their students' social and emotional skills, including the ability to reflect on interactions, empathize with others, and calm themselves, according to a new report prepared for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, an advocacy and research group based in Chicago.

Source: Schonert-Reichl, K.A., Kital, M.J., & Hanson-Peterson, J. (2017). *To reach the students, teach the teachers: A national scan of teacher preparation and social and emotional learning*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia.



Linking **climate** to performance

A more positive school climate may be linked to higher academic performance, suggests a new study by two federal agencies.

Researchers examined data about 7th graders from the California Healthy Kids Survey and administrative data from roughly 1,000 California middle schools, covering the years from 2004 to 2011, to measure students' perceptions about six domains of school climate.

Middle schools with a positive climate were schools in which students reported high levels of safety/connectedness, caring relationships with adults, meaningful student participation, and low rates of substance use at school, bullying/discrimination, and student delinquency. Researchers measured school-level academic performance by examining 7th-grade California Standards Test scores in English language arts and math.

Among their key findings:

- Schools with a more positive student-reported school climate had higher academic performance in English language arts and math.
- Changes in a school's student-reported school climate over time were associated with changes in academic performance at that school.

Researchers said the results suggest that school climate is associated with academic performance at a single point in time and that changes in school climate are associated with changes in academic performance across time. But they cautioned against inferring that intentional efforts to improve school climate would also improve academic performance. "The study was not designed to ascertain whether school climate is causally related to academic performance," they said.

Source: Voight, A. & Hanson, T. (2017, January). *How are middle school climate and academic performance related across schools and over time?* (REL 2017-212). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Beyond Black History Month

Books by black authors and about black children get plenty of attention during Black History Month in February. But children read all year long!

28 Days Later

An annual project of The Brown Bookshelf, this is a monthlong initiative to showcase the best reads for children. Lists include picture books, middle grades literature, and young adult novels. Lists are available on the web site through 2008 with links to authors and other web sites.

<https://thebrownbookshelf.com/brown-bookshelf-library>

Scott Woods

These are 28 black picture books that aren't about boycotts, buses, or basketball. In what he calls a "humble sampling," Woods has created a list of "28 children's picture books, most of them featuring black children doing what all children do: play, make up stories, learn life lessons, and dream."

<https://scottwoodsmakeslists.wordpress.com/2016/01/30/28-black-picture-books-that-arent-about-boycotts-buses-or-basketball>

Brightly

In partnership with Penguin Random House, Brightly features children's books from all publishers. Look for lists on topics such as "help kids understand what it's like to be a refugee."

www.readbrightly.com/celebrating-black-authors-past-and-present-favorite-reads-and-soon-to-be-classics-for-young-readers