

## Op Ed Ali Saueressig

For as long as I can remember, I've been aware of a growing crisis facing rural schools like the one I attended. As a child, I stood outside football games on Friday nights handing out flyers, urging a "yes" vote on operating levies to allow our small district to continue providing basic programs and keep teachers in classrooms. Again and again, the community voted yes, voluntarily taking tax increases during the recession to fill gaps in the government funding we received.

But just north of us, our rival district wasn't as fortunate. Eight operating levies failed. Sports, clubs, staff, and teachers were cut. But it wasn't enough, and in 2010 the district, like 11 other rural districts in Minnesota, adopted a four-day school week to cut costs. In Oklahoma, the crisis is even more acute: [96 rural districts have reduced to four day weeks](#). When schools can barely afford to keep the lights on, adequately compensating teachers is often out of the question. As enrollment numbers fall and rural populations age and shrink, along with their tax base, this funding crisis grows more acute. The result? Rural districts nationwide face a teacher shortage, and the teachers who stay face poverty.

Recently, [teachers in Kentucky staged "sick-outs"](#) protesting changes to the state's pension system, emboldened by last month's [nine-day teacher strike](#) in West Virginia that resulted in a 5% raise for teachers. A walkout by Oklahoma teachers demanding increased school funding has [extended](#) into its second week. In Minnesota, financial stress on our schools has eased since the economy improved. School funding has risen since the recession, and most of those 11 rural districts with a [four-day week have returned to a full school week](#). But even so, rural Minnesotan schools are having trouble finding and keeping teachers.

I've watched as family friends left the teaching profession for the private sector, unable to support their families on a teaching salary even in Minnesota, a state ranked in the top ten for public education. My dad, a high school teacher, told me that though he loved his job, I shouldn't teach. He has tenure and a master's degree in physics, but despite this my family was on the verge of qualifying for free and reduced school lunch. And I saw young, gifted teachers fizzle out after two years, unable to support students facing poverty, addiction, and abuse on low salaries and long hours. Minnesota's 2017 Teacher Supply and Demand [report](#) showed that a quarter of Minnesota teachers leave their jobs within three years, and 15% after just the first year. If we can't attract and keep qualified teachers in the classroom, rural schools and students will suffer.

Minnesota requires fully-licensed teachers to have at least a bachelor's degree, which'll run you \$80,000 at a public school and double that at a private school. And after taking on that debt, [the average starting salary in Minnesota is only \\$34,500](#) – and health insurance costs in rural districts often [consume half that pay](#). As aging teachers retire and young teachers leave, [open positions in greater Minnesota often draw fewer than five applicants](#). It's hard to attract new graduates to rural schools with low pay and little stability due to budget cuts. This is doubly true for graduates with degrees in STEM

fields. Though there's a high demand for teachers in these subjects, they're drawn elsewhere to private sector work with higher salaries and job security. Like schools in other rural states with a teacher shortage, Minnesota has adjusted its licensure standards to allow more people to teach. But this is not enough. We must increase school funding.

Rural schools must offer all required subjects, electives, and services regardless of the size of their enrollment. As funding is cut and cash-strapped towns are stretched to their tax limit, the extras available to students – honors classes, sports, the arts – are shaved away. Class sizes increase and so does the burden on teachers. We expect rural teachers to not only teach, but play social worker, coach, and support staff as well. This is unfair not only to these teachers, but also to the students they serve. The conversations about school funding and teacher pay started by educators in West Virginia and Oklahoma are relevant to Minnesota too. While we may not face the level of crisis these states do, their plight highlights the importance of maintaining (and increasing) school funding, especially to make teaching an attractive career. Doing otherwise hurts rural students like me.