



## Teaching Is Not a Sacrifice: It's Time to Change the Story

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We've all heard the headlines: the teacher shortage is reaching crisis levels. But what if I told you this shortage isn't just about low pay or pandemic burnout? What if it's rooted in something much older and deeper—a cultural story we've been telling about teachers for over a century?

In my new research, I argue that if we want to strengthen public education in North Carolina and beyond, we need to rethink how we understand teachers' labor. Right now, we're stuck in a myth—the “martyr teacher” myth. You've seen her in movies like *Freedom Writers* or heard about her in faculty meetings. She's the endlessly selfless teacher who “does it for the kids”

and never asks for more. We admire her. But we shouldn't model our entire education system around her.

This story has consequences. It justifies low pay, overwork, and impossible expectations. And it's one of the reasons we're losing so many passionate, experienced teachers.

The research is clear: most teachers leave not because they don't love the job, but because the job doesn't love them back. A recent RAND Corporation study found that 73% of U.S. teachers report frequent job-related stress—more than double other professions. Nearly one in three reports symptoms of depression. Add to that a 14% pay gap compared to other college-educated workers, and it's no wonder that fewer people are entering the profession, and more are leaving it behind.

But here's what might surprise you: this isn't just a policy failure—it's a cultural inheritance. The expectation that teaching is a calling, a sacrifice, or a labor of love comes from 19th-century ideals that framed women's work as naturally selfless and morally superior. When public schools first began to expand, women were brought in as teachers—not because they were seen as professionals, but because they were cheap, plentiful, and already expected to care for others without asking for much in return.

This historical framing shaped our modern education system. Teaching became “women's work”—work that was vital but undervalued. And while our classrooms have changed, those old assumptions haven't. They're still baked into the way we structure teacher pay, workload, and expectations today.

Why does this matter now? Because as schools face growing pressure to do more with less, many politicians are using the teacher shortage to justify harmful policies like school vouchers and privatization. These strategies don't solve the problem—they make it worse by diverting public funds from public schools and undermining support for the very people who keep them running: teachers.

The truth is this: we can't fix the teacher shortage without changing the story we tell about teachers. We need a new narrative—one that recognizes teaching as essential, skilled, and sustainable labor.

One promising alternative is the “politics of care.” Instead of expecting teachers to sacrifice themselves for the system, we could structure our schools around the idea that care—of students, educators, and communities—is a shared responsibility. This would mean better pay, more autonomy, smaller class sizes, and time for rest and professional growth. It would also mean holding the system accountable—not just individual educators.

We've already seen what happens when care becomes a collective value. Communities rallying for fully funded schools, teachers organizing for better conditions, parents and families standing beside educators—all of this is rooted in care. And care, not sacrifice, is what public education really needs.

The martyr teacher myth is an old story, and it's time to retire it. Teachers are not saints or saviors—they're professionals who deserve respect, support, and fair compensation. If we

want to keep great teachers in our classrooms, resist the tide of privatization, and ensure every child in North Carolina has access to a high-quality public education, we need to start by changing the way we talk about teaching.

Let's tell a new story—one that values care, demands justice, and puts public investment back where it belongs: in our schools and the people who make them thrive.



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