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The Facts– and Fictions– About Teacher Shortages

As school districts across the nation scramble each year to fill vacant positions, policymakers are struggling to understand the nature of the country's teacher shortages. Is there a need to produce more and more licensed teachers, or is something else needed to shore up the teaching workforce?

Context

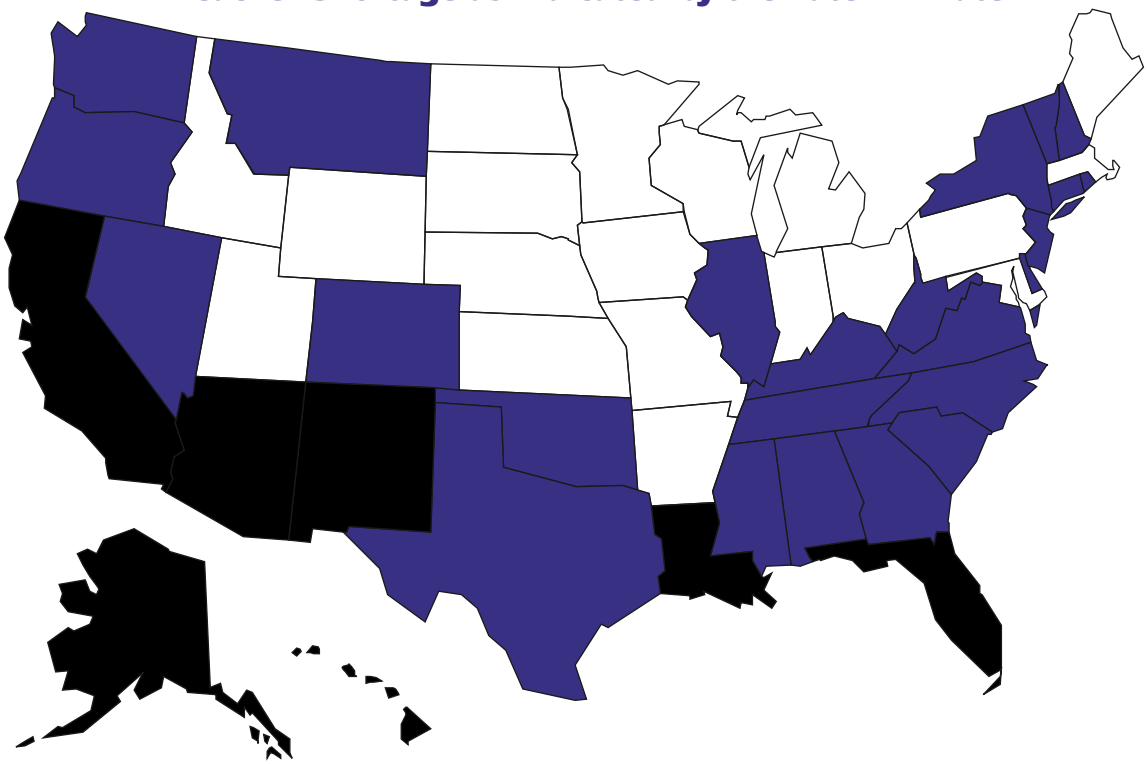
Over the past two decades, numerous commissions and reports have raised a cry of alarm about expected teacher shortages. Based on projections of rapidly increasing elementary and secondary student enrollments, along with the "graying" of the teaching workforce, analysts have predicted a near crisis in the nation's ability to staff its classrooms. Such dire predictions could not have come at a worse time—just as consensus is building about the tremendous impact good teaching has on student learning. As a result, there is tremendous pressure to produce both more and better teachers, despite the fact that there is a lack of agreement about how to define and how to produce quality teaching. Facing an uphill battle to fill all classrooms with qualified teachers, the nation is hampered by poor data on teacher supply and demand, lack of a national teaching workforce strategy, and insufficient research on which remedies really work. To truly comprehend and tackle teacher shortages, educators and policymakers must better understand both supply and demand issues and avoid one-dimensional solutions.

Observations

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the United States is not currently facing a crisis in total teacher supply. However, production levels must be maintained in order to staff all our nation's classrooms.

The dire predictions of the past 20 years have not come to pass, and the nation has been successful at recruiting more teachers. Between 1988 and 2001 the number of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools increased 29 percent, more than matching student enrollment growth of 19 percent. Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that the number of teachers will increase five percent between 2001

Teacher Shortage as Indicated by the Late-Fill Rate



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, School and Staffing Survey (1999-2000). (Data analysis by Patrick Murphy, Michael DeArmond, and Kacey Guin, "A National Crisis or Localized Problems? Getting Perspective on the Schooe and Scale of the Teacher Shortage," Education Policy Analysis Archives Volume 11, Number 23, July 31, 2003.

- greater than 2.0 percent (7)
- 1.0 to 2.0 percent (24)
- less than 1.0 percent (37)

and 2013, adequately meeting expected student enrollment growth.

There are many reasons for the increased supply, including the furor over teacher shortages itself. In addition to the large number of teachers produced each year through traditional teacher preparation programs, fears about shortages led to expansion of alternative routes to certification and more and more new entrants to the teaching workforce. In addition to newly produced teachers, large proportions of new hires each year are recruited from the nation's "reserve supplies"—those who prepared for teaching in the past but never entered the profession (17 percent) and those who taught sometime in the past and are re-entering the profession (23 percent).

The nation's biggest challenges in this area stem from a misalignment between supply and demand. The distribution of teachers—across geographic and subject areas—continues to be troublesome.

Despite the overall teacher supply, there remain shortages in:

- high demand fields of special education, mathematics, science, and bilingual/ESL.
- certain areas of the country, largely western, southwestern, and southeastern states (see map) and areas in which class-size reduction initiatives have been implemented.
- urban, low-income, minority schools and remote rural schools.

There is not a perfect correlation between overall supply-and-demand patterns and district hiring experiences, but rather a complex relationship that reflects many factors, including antiquated hiring procedures. In general, states offering higher

salaries have fewer hiring problems, as do wealthier school districts within states. States with policies that are more supportive of teachers and states that have a greater number of teacher preparation institutions also have fewer hiring problems. But lack of license reciprocity and pension portability across jurisdictions can make it difficult to get teachers where they are most needed.

A second major challenge is finding ways to improve teaching quality while simultaneously addressing teacher shortages. This challenge is made more difficult by the lack of consensus about what makes a teacher "qualified" and pressures to find the "quick fix."

A central debate about teaching quality centers on the relative importance of pedagogical skills versus content knowledge. Experts who believe that both are essential to good teaching argue for improving traditional teacher preparation programs and strengthening licensure requirements. Others who question the value of pedagogy favor alternative routes to certification as a faster, better solution to both quality and quantity problems. The search for quality teaching is complicated by the occurrence of out-of-field teaching that often results from how schools are organized and staffed rather than from inadequate teacher supply.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) addresses this problem by requiring all teachers to be "highly qualified" by 2005-2006—defined as having a bachelor's degree, being fully state-certified, and demonstrating competence in each subject area taught. Though many critics find the law too tough in certain areas (e.g., requiring special education teachers to have competence in all core areas they teach), others feel the law is not tough enough, as it allows states too much leeway in defining competence. Moreover, there is widespread concern that NCLB distracts attention from real issues of teacher quality—that even if all teachers are "highly qualified" by NCLB definition, there is still no demonstration of effectiveness in promoting student learning.

Teacher shortages are less a function of how many teachers are produced than of how many are lost each year through turnover and early attrition. This "revolving door" problem inflates the "demand" side of the equation and keeps school districts in a perpetual state of intense hiring pressure.

Only 60 percent of those trained to be teachers move directly into teaching jobs, and of those who do, only 50 to 60 percent will still be teaching five years after entering the profession. Due to low salaries, poor administrative support, student discipline problems, lack of faculty influence and autonomy, and poor student motivation, many teachers change jobs each year and many leave the profession altogether.

Historically in this country, the profession of teaching has been viewed as an "easy in/easy out" occupation—a temporary line of work for women. With a ready supply of entrants into the pipeline, there was little incentive to try to retain them. More recently, educators have learned that replacing teachers is very costly and has a negative impact on student achievement. Many of the same factors that affect teacher recruitment also affect teacher retention and these factors can't be ignored. The high need subjects of science, mathematics, and special education, and the high poverty schools suffer from both greater recruitment and greater retention problems.

These observations lead to the conclusion that increasing teacher supply is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for solving our teacher workforce needs.

Individual states and the nation as a whole must develop comprehensive teacher workforce strategies that address the interrelated factors of recruitment, distribution, quality, and retention.

These strategies must be built on comprehensive teacher data systems and research on the effectiveness of various remedies. Many remedies have been tried thus far and progress is being made in fits and starts. What is needed is a comprehensive approach to teacher workforce needs, one that addresses specific state and local conditions. Such a strategy might include:

- Strengthened teacher preparation, induction and mentoring, and professional development programs, with attention to high-demand areas. For example, AASCU's Task Force on Mathematics and Physical Science Enrollments is developing recommendations for strengthening the math and science teaching pipelines.
- Financial incentives, including increased salaries and pay for performance, as well as incentives for high-need areas (e.g., student loan forgiveness and housing assistance).
- Alternative certification programs aimed at high-need areas.
- Intensified recruitment efforts and partnerships between teacher preparation programs and school districts (e.g., early outreach to students of color and "grow-your-own" programs).
- Increased professionalism and improved working conditions (e.g., enhanced license reciprocity and pension portability, opportunities for advancement, reduced teaching loads and extra support in hard-to-staff schools).

Conclusion

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future was on the mark when it stated that policymakers need to change the question from "how can we find and prepare more teachers?" to "how do we get the good teachers we have recruited, trained, and hired to stay in their jobs?" Focusing too heavily on teacher recruitment will not solve the teacher shortage problem, and it may serve to lower teacher standards, keep salaries low, and erode working conditions. The better approach—one that in the long term will benefit teachers and students—is to develop a comprehensive strategy to raise the profession of teachers, by preparing, supporting, and rewarding teachers for the important work that they do and by creating better conditions under which they work.

Resources

American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). AASCU's *To Create a Profession* examines ways college presidents and chancellors can support teachers as professionals. **aascu.org**

Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy (CTP). The work of Richard M. Ingersoll calls attention to teacher turnover as central to the problem of teacher shortages. **ctpweb.org**

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) provides comprehensive data on the characteristics of the nation's teachers, hiring practices, compensation, and conditions in schools. Its supplementary Teacher Follow Survey (TFS) collects data from the same individuals one year after SASS and provides information on teacher turnover and attrition. **nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/**

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF). NCTAF views improving teacher retention as a major strategy for addressing teacher shortages and improving teacher quality. **nctaf.org**

National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ). *Searching the Attic: How States Are Responding to the Nation's Goal of Placing a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom* (2004) offers insight and recommendations pertaining to NCLB. **nctq.org**

National Governors' Association (NGA). NGA's Center for Best Practices researches teacher shortages, supply and demand, and out-of-field teaching. **nga.org/center/**

Southeast Center for Teaching Quality (SECTQ). SECTQ conducts research related to teacher recruitment and retention, including surveys of teachers and administrators. **teachingquality.org**

State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO). *Data Systems to Enhance Teacher Quality* (2003) makes the case for comprehensive teacher pipeline data systems. **sheeo.org/quality/data%20sys.pdf**

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