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Examining the Root Causes and Consequences of the National Teacher Shortage

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Executive Summary

A major teacher shortage exists in the United States. As teachers leave the classroom in record numbers, administrators are forced to hire unlicensed educators in order to fill vacant positions. Teachers have changed professions because of the need for competitive salaries, lack of respect for the profession, fear of personal safety amidst the pandemic and an increase in school shootings, and a lack of support and funding from education stakeholders. The national teacher shortage negatively affected students, especially students of color, because of the lack of qualified and permanent teachers, as they do not afford students a stable and cohesive learning environment. Addressing the national teacher shortage requires several systemic changes, ranging from promoting teacher efficacy, professional development, teacher voice, and a better understanding of state standards to align with classroom management. Pay also serves as a main point of contention for those in the industry, and higher pay would incentive teachers to remain in the classroom instead of exploring other profitable opportunities. It would also help with the recruitment of future teachers, as a stable and competitive income would entice students looking for a long-term career.

Key Terms

- **Alternative certification programs (ACPs)** are programs that provide an alternative route to teacher certifications for individuals that have already received a bachelor's degree in another field.
- **Classroom management** describes the design and execution of effective classroom policies, procedures, and routines for participation in class discussions, working cooperatively in learning groups, completing class assignments, and other classroom activities (Uriegas et al., 2014)
- **Highly qualified** as defined by NCLB means having a bachelor's degree, being fully state-certified and demonstrating competence in each subject area taught (AASCU, 2005).
- **Out-of-field teacher** is a teacher who does not hold the required certificate in the subject or grade level they are teaching, (SC Department of Education, 2017).
- **Pre-service teacher** is an individual who is in the process of preparing to become a teacher (Koellner & Greenblatt, n.d.).

- **Teacher shortages** is the inability to adequately staff elementary and secondary school teacher vacancies by individuals qualified to teach in needed fields (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).
- **Teacher turnover rate** is the rate at which teachers leave their school district, change from teaching to another position from one school year to the next, change fields within teaching (e.g. primary education to secondary education), or exit the profession altogether (CDE, 2015; Croasmun et al., 1997).

Background

Qualified teachers are the backbone of K-12 education. Unfortunately, fewer teachers are enrolling in teacher education programs and new teachers are quitting the profession at an alarming rate (AACTE, 2021). Although those numbers may vary from state to state, we have seen steep declines in states like Illinois and Michigan who have seen a 60% and 70% decline in teacher enrollment in their respective states, a stark comparison to the average national decline of 35% (Partelow, 2019). This has placed a burden on school districts to implement out-of-the-box measures to fill vacant slots. Such measures

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include offering provisional certifications and recruiting career changers and international exchange teachers (Roberts Carter, 2021). Besides recruitment strategies, districts are seeking ways to keep qualified teachers. The shortage of teachers disrupts student learning as teacher vacancies lead to canceled courses and classes are staffed with substitutes and under-prepared teachers who are not certified to teach that subject matter. Teacher turnover and shortages are among the most critical issues in education: Teachers are the number one in-school influence on student achievement and research shows that poor quality teaching disrupts learning and has a negative impact on students' ability to graduate from college- and be career-ready (McKenna, 2018). The factors influencing shortages—wages, working conditions, and attrition rates—vary substantially from state to state (Sutcher, 2016). And even though the teacher labor market might be balanced at the state level, subjects or regions within the state may be experiencing shortages. These disparities, which are related to policy differences, create very different labor markets from one state, and even one district, to the next. To remedy the problem, federal, state, and district policymakers should include teachers in discussions on how to address problems that are driving teachers from the classroom (Roberts Carter, 2021).

Teacher shortages continue to be at the forefront of issues in education as teachers are quitting the profession at an alarming rate.

This trend spanning several decades impacts education on national, state, and local levels. Changes in curriculum, size of classrooms, and student outcomes change when qualified teachers are not there to meet expectations set by the government and become harder to execute for certain communities who need a highly specialized instructor such as bilingual and special needs teachers. This all contributes to unprecedented shortages and forces districts to increase recruitment efforts and retention strategies (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Haj-Broussard et al., 2016). According to the National Education Association (2022), the teaching crisis has affected all fifty states since 2001.

The National Education Association (NEA) contends that because states are no longer bound by the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) provision in Title II of the No Child Left Behind Law Act (NCLB), individual states have the option of supporting and promoting alternative preparation programs, and are not required to ensure instructors receive the necessary coursework and effective classroom management tools. According to NCLB, a highly qualified teacher must have "1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach." Beyond that, NCLB did not define its terminology, and it leaves requirements up to the states. States were given the agency to determine how teachers can prove their subject matter knowledge. Many states

approached this issue with standardized content exams. However, the exams themselves are not standardized since they were not the same in every state, meaning that "qualification" had a different meaning in each state. A teacher who may be deemed "highly qualified" by Alabama standards, may not be deemed "highly qualified" by California standards. States, however, are no longer bound to this provision after significant bipartisan criticism had accumulated that a bipartisan Congress stripped away the national features of No Child Left Behind. Its replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act, turned the remnants over to the states.

The teacher shortage crisis is detrimental to the public education system as it negatively impacts student learning and teacher effectiveness. Shortages impact teacher effectiveness because filling teaching vacancies may mean placing out-of-field teachers in classrooms teaching subjects that they are not qualified or certified to teach. One desirable characteristic of effective teachers is that they come to class prepared to teach which may enhance student learning. Therefore, out-of-field teachers may not have the skills needed to come to class prepared thus rendering them less effective in meeting the academic needs and challenges of their students. In addition, Under-prepared teachers leave at two to three times the rate of well-prepared teachers. Students of color, and students in low-income communities, are most likely to be assigned uncertified or

inexperienced teachers. With a high turnover in who is leading the classroom and lack of understanding of the subject, out-of-field teachers leave students with minimal resources to succeed in the classroom and meet student learning outcomes (Espinoza, 2018).

Areas of Research

The number of teachers enrolling in traditional teacher education programs is declining (AACTE, 2021), while the surge in alternative teacher certification has been linked to high teacher attrition, all of which have contributed to the increase in teacher shortages (Redding, 2016). While addressing the shortfall through recruitment and retention strategies has offered some relief, it is only a Band-Aid on the problem. Gaining an understanding of the reasons for teacher attrition is necessary to reduce teacher turnover, especially in high-poverty schools that receive fewer resources for teachers and students to succeed. Understanding teachers' perceptions of issues in education that impact teacher turnover is essential for long-term sustainable solutions. Although this is an area of foremost concern, there is not enough information available to discern what would be best practices for each individual school structure and learning community across the country.

Why it's important

In times of shortages, the focus shifts to how to get more teachers into the profession. However, it is equally important to focus on how to keep the teachers we have in the classroom. Compared to high-achieving jurisdictions like Finland, Singapore, and Ontario, Canada—where only about 3 to 4% of teachers leave in a given year—U.S.

attrition rates are quite high, hovering near 8% over the last decade, and are much higher for beginners and teachers in high-poverty schools and districts (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 3).

In order to reduce attrition, we must know why people are leaving the profession, who is leaving the profession, where attrition is the greatest, and what factors are associated with different rates of attrition.

- *Why?* Contrary to common belief, retirements generally constitute less than one-third of those who leave teaching in a given year. Of those who leave teaching voluntarily, most teachers list some type of dissatisfaction as very important or extremely important in their decision to leave the profession (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 3).
- *Who?* Attrition varies by teacher subpopulations: Teachers with little preparation tend to leave at rates two to three times as high as those who have had a comprehensive preparation before they enter. Teachers in high-poverty and high-minority schools tend to have higher rates of attrition, as do teachers of color, who are disproportionately represented in these schools (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 6).
- *Where?* Teacher attrition rates also vary considerably across the country. The South has a particularly high turnover rate (movers and leavers) compared to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. For most regions, teacher turnover is higher in cities than in suburban or rural districts (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 7).

Variations of Shortages

Teacher shortages are not felt uniformly across all communities and classrooms, but instead affect some states, subject areas, and student populations more than others, based on differences in wages, working conditions, concentrations of teacher preparation institutions, as well as a wide range of policies that influence recruitment and retention.

Subject Area Shortages: States across the country are currently experiencing subject area teacher shortages. In the 2015–16 school year, 48 states and the District of Columbia reported shortages in special education; 42 states plus DC did so in mathematics; and 40 states and DC reported teacher shortages in science. In a 2014–15 educator supply and demand survey, all ten special education subgroups were listed as severe shortage areas, comprising more than half of all severe shortage areas. Along with mathematics and science, this survey identified shortages in bilingual education/teachers of English learners. (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 1)

Equity Concerns: Students in high-poverty and high-minority settings bear the brunt of teacher shortages. Considerable evidence shows that shortages historically have disproportionately impacted our most disadvantaged students and that those patterns persist today. Nationally, in 2013–14, on average, high-minority schools had four times as many uncertified teachers as low-minority schools. These inequities also exist between high-poverty and low-poverty schools. When there are not enough teachers to go around, the schools with the fewest resources and least desirable working conditions are the ones left with vacancies. (Sutcher, 2016, pp. 7)

Recommendations and

Next Steps

There are several recommendations for reducing teacher turnover and attrition. To eliminate teacher turnover, federal, state, and district policymakers should consider improving the key factors associated with teacher turnover: compensation, teacher preparation and support, and school leadership. When policymakers, school administrators, and district personnel convene to discuss policies or make decisions that will impact student learning, teachers should be at the table.

1. Improve Pre-Service and Professional Development Trainings

In order for learners to get the most from their training, they must understand the value of what is being taught and view the training as a means of achieving valued outcomes. I recommend districts offer professional development training that afford new teachers opportunities to visit other school districts and observe other teacher practices in their content areas. Alternative teacher certification candidates do not have the benefit of field studies, pre-service training could offer alternative certification candidates opportunities to learn and engage in classroom management experiences. The state could look at ways to revise or 125 implement alternative certification training to incorporate teaching internships or substitute teaching before becoming responsible for student learning. This would allow alternative certification candidates opportunities to gain real-world perspective as professionals.

2. Improve Classroom Management and Understanding of State Standards

Districts should offer a number of professional development trainings and mentorships that promote confidence and competence in delivering instruction and classroom management. I recommend that policymakers require traditional teacher education programs and alternative certification programs offer a mandatory classroom management training as a part of their preservice training. The mandatory classroom management training should include an actual field training i.e. as a five-day substitute teacher experience or mentored experience in which a new teacher is observed by a veteran teacher. The field experience should be video recorded, and later viewed with a veteran teacher to discuss what went right, what went wrong, and ways to improve classroom management skills.

3. Competitive Salaries

Teaching is an underpaid profession. Curbing the national teacher shortage depends a great deal on paying educators a professional salary. Teachers are struggling to make ends meet, and the gap between their salaries and those in professions requiring similar levels of education turns many potential candidates away from the classroom. I recommend that policymakers find ways to increase teacher pay. Pay teachers as professionals in their craft. Pay teachers for additional duties that interfere with lesson planning and grading papers during contract

hours. Teachers should not have to take work home. This interferes with personal and family time and makes them feel as if they are always on the job, according to the study.

4. Recruitment

Recruitment is important to widening the teacher pool. Effective recruitment strategies are needed to recruit qualified teachers to the profession. While some teachers are attracted to the profession because of summers off and holiday breaks, others are there because they want to make a difference in the education of students. I recommend offering attractive signing bonuses to new teachers and directing recruitment efforts to recruiting high school students to enroll in college education programs. In addition, efforts should also be directed to recruit alternative certified teachers with an emphasis placed on better pre-trainings that include opportunities to manage a classroom.

5. Give Teachers a Voice

Teachers need a voice in influencing policies that affect them e.g. devising curricula, establishing student disciplinary policies, and competitive teaching salaries. Invite teachers to round table discussions on policies that affect them. Teachers want and need to feel valued and esteemed as professionals in their craft. Valued teachers are invaluable.

Citations

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