

Help Wanted: Next Steps in Addressing the United States' Teacher Shortage

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 global pandemic impacted the United States' educational landscape by intensifying the teacher shortage. In particular, significant help is wanted in filling public school vacancies in specialty areas, which has resulted in non-instructional staff teaching in classrooms and impacting school operations. Federal, state, and local education agencies are taking steps to attract teacher candidates and retain current teachers, but will these efforts be enough? Education preparation programs are making changes to their programs to ensure they support teacher candidates while obtaining their initial teaching license. This article will define the teacher shortage, explain the impact of the pandemic, and discuss action steps being implemented to address the teacher shortage. The article will showcase insights from scholarly literature, observations, and document analysis. The purpose of this article is to provide a review of the relevant literature exploring actions being implemented at the federal, state, and local levels to address the teacher shortage. By reviewing these steps, education agencies and teacher preparation programs can evaluate their future actionable steps to recruit and retain teachers.

Keywords: Teacher shortage, COVID-19 global pandemic, education preparation programs

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the United States' educational landscape. In particular, the global pandemic "exacerbated a preexisting and long-standing shortage of teachers" (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) - National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that "nearly half (44 percent) of public schools currently report full- or part-time teaching vacancies...of public schools with at least one reported vacancy, 61 percent specifically identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a cause of increased teaching and non-teaching staff vacancies" (NCES, 2022). As a result, primary and secondary public schools need help to fill these teacher vacancies, which has resulted in non-instructional staff teaching in classrooms and impacting the overall school operations. Education agencies at the federal, state, and local levels have had to rethink, research, and re-engage in actionable steps toward attracting prospective teacher candidates and retaining current teachers. Also, education preparation programs have had to re-evaluate their programmatic policies and procedures to ensure they were supporting new teacher candidates in these roles while obtaining their initial teaching licenses (NCES, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to discuss teacher shortage as it relates to defining it, explaining the impact of the pandemic on teacher shortage, and evaluating proposed solutions to the teacher shortage at multiple education levels. In other words, this article is a review of relevant literature focused on the teacher shortage and the future directions that teacher preparation programs are considering to embark on. The article will showcase insights from scholarly literature, observations, and document analysis to explain the successes and challenges in the educational agencies' proposed solutions. By evaluating these successes and challenges, education agencies can hopefully re-evaluate and continue to provide the help that is needed by taking the next steps in attracting new teachers to the profession and retaining current teachers.

Teacher Shortage: The Who, What, & Where

The first step in addressing the teacher shortage is to explain what is a teacher shortage, who are these teachers, and where the teacher shortage is occurring. The definition of teacher shortage is the "inability to fill vacancies at current wages with individuals qualified to teach in fields needed," (Sutcher, et al., 2016). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveyed a sample of schools during the 2022-2023 school year about teacher absences. The NCES School Pulse Panel study collected data that revealed "45% of public schools reported having one or more vacant teaching positions in October, and 53% percent of public schools reported in August feeling understaffed entering the 2022-2023 school year," (NCES, 2023).

When looking at the demographics of teachers, the majority of U.S. teachers are white females. The U.S. Department of Education’s NCES examined the race and ethnicity of public school teachers in the United States. In 2017-2018, the percentage distribution of teachers by race/ethnicity was 79.3% white, non-Hispanic; 9.3% Hispanic, regardless of race; 6.7% Black or African American, non-Hispanic; 2.1% Asian, non-Hispanic; 1.8% Two or more races, non-Hispanic; 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic; and 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic (NCES, 2020). Based on this analysis, NCES proposed two important conclusions including “teachers of given race/ethnicity were more often found in schools where their race/ethnicity matched a majority of the student body” and “at the same time, in schools where the majority of students were not White, the majority of teacher tended to be White,” (NCES, 2020). In reviewing this data, it is evident that school districts and educator preparation programs are having difficulty recruiting or attracting teachers from diverse populations. For instance, the National Council on Teacher Quality, a nonprofit organization focused on addressing educator quality, found that every state needs to make more efforts in recruiting and attracting new teachers from a variety of demographics (NCTQ, 2023). There were five main suggestions on how to recruit more teachers from a variety of demographics including setting diversification goals, tracking retention data, paying teachers more in schools with teacher vacancies, reevaluating hiring policies, and including teachers of color within policy development (NCTQ, 2023). Furthermore, more strong partnerships should occur between school districts, schools, and higher education institutions from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and community colleges to expand the diversity of the teacher workforce and pipeline (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

As a result of the global pandemic, there is a growing demand for qualified teachers in special education, elementary, science, math, and multilingual classes (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). A majority of the teacher shortage has occurred in special education classrooms with 7% unfilled positions, multilingual classrooms with 6% unfilled positions, and computer science classrooms with 5% unfilled positions (Wong, 2023). Based on the recent U.S. Census records, we live in a multilingual nation with individuals from Mexico being the largest group of immigrants in the U.S. at 10.7 million, followed by individuals from India with 2.71 million living in the U.S., and individuals from China consisting of 2.38 million living in the U.S. (Shoicet, 2023 as reported by the Migration Policy Institute). Additionally, schools in high-poverty and/or high-minority school districts are reporting an increase in teacher vacancies (Turner & Cohen, 2023). Although school districts have had recruiting challenges before the pandemic, “shortages are a lot like school districts themselves. They often begin and end at arbitrary lines that have more to do with privilege and zip code than the needs of children,” (Turner & Cohen, 2023). Therefore, another area where school

districts and educator preparation programs should consider making more efforts is recruiting and attracting new teachers in special education, multilingual, science, and math specialty areas, as well as individuals of color.

Help Wanted: The When and Why

The second step in addressing the teacher shortage is to recognize when and why teacher shortage continues to impact our schools. Since 1990-1991, the Department of Education has reported on teacher shortages by state and subject area in the “Teacher Shortage Areas (TSA)” report (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). There are several continuous reasons for the shortages of teachers, which relate to modest salaries, low morale, recent retirements, continuing curriculum changes, and safety issues (Wong, 2023). An opinion piece by Thomas Edsall in *The New York Times* explained that teachers are experiencing burnout due to “under-compensation” and “demoralization” (Edsall, 2022). With regard to compensation, “wages are essentially unchanged from 2000 to 2020 after adjusting for inflation,” (Edsall, 2022). Also, teachers are not fully being valued for what they have been hired to do: teach. Educators are required to do more work for less pay. They often find themselves having to take on other full-time or part-time jobs in order to pay for their living expenses. Therefore, another area that school districts and educator preparation programs should consider implementing is providing a living wage to teachers, additional bonuses to experienced educators, and professional development.

Unfortunately, the “why” of teacher shortages is not a relatively new question to ask. Even though the COVID-19 global pandemic did create unprecedented challenges that impacted teachers being retained, schools have continuously seen a teacher shortage (Wong, 2023). So, what efforts are being implemented in response to the teacher shortage? In 2022, the U.S. Department of Education’s Secretary, Miguel Cardona, called on all stakeholders to address the teacher shortages (NCES, 2022). Secretary Cardona’s charge was in response to how the COVID-19 pandemic was amplifying the teacher shortage situation with a lack of new teachers, teachers leaving the profession, and teachers retiring.

Next Steps: The How

When Secretary Miguel Cardona called upon the national, state, and local education agencies to respond to the teacher shortage, he mentioned how the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER) could be used by state and local education agencies to recruit, train, and retain teachers. In reflecting on Secretary Cardona’s charge, three main areas that need to be continuously funded to truly help with the teacher shortage on a long-term basis.

Teacher Residency & Apprenticeship Licensure Programs

When the U.S. Department of Education issued funding from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER), it provided \$122 billion to state and local education agencies to recruit, train, and retain teachers. With this funding support, school districts began exploring teacher residency programs where school districts would receive money to help current school employees, such as instructional assistants, paraprofessionals, and substitutes, become residential licensed teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The objective of the teacher residency and apprenticeship licensure programs is to reduce the financial obstacles because individuals are receiving a paycheck while they earn their state licensure (Will, 2023).

Residential licensed teachers are full-time school employees who are enrolled in an accredited initial teaching licensure program. A rationale for the teacher residency program is that the participants are already invested in the school, connected to the students, and established in their communities, so the participants would more than likely remain long-term as teachers (Wong, 2023). Residential licensure programs also tend to recruit and maintain teachers of color within the teacher profession (Will, 2023). The residential licensure opportunities have been working in rural communities since its implementation because a lot of the residential licensure teachers have families and limited time to travel to other locations for licensure. Therefore, higher education institutions are redesigning their programs to be more attractive to residential licensure teachers, especially in rural communities. For instance, the South Carolina Department of Education is working with higher education institutions to develop and recruit new educators of color and provide scholarships to promote a pathway toward training (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Since residential licensure teachers are completing the initial teaching license while working full-time as a teacher, education preparation programs have to accommodate the teacher's full-time schedule. For instance, NC State University's Master of Arts in Teaching Program redesigned its program to be more accommodating to residential licensure teachers by offering 100% online courses to ensure teachers can work full-time and then take classes online during the evening hours. Some of the courses are asynchronous, which allows the teachers to complete the work on their own. It is becoming a trend in the higher education communities to provide accelerated pathways toward certifications by allowing teachers to receive an initial teacher license while getting paid for their full-time jobs (Wong, 2023). It appears that if districts and higher education institutions collaborate to offer this customizable opportunity, there will be more teachers who remain in the position long-term as they are invested in the school community. For instance, the Arizona Department of Education partnered with three state universities to support schools with recruitment, retention, and professional development with local communities (U.S. Department of

Education, 2022). The Department of Labor has also committed more than \$100 million in grants for apprenticeship programs that include teaching-related grants to provide academic and financial support to those pursuing residential and apprenticeship programs (Will, 2023).

Another important opportunity that the school districts are implementing is teacher apprenticeships, which introduce high school students to the teaching profession by becoming paraprofessionals once they have graduated from high school. Then, the paraprofessionals can work towards a bachelor's degree to be certified to teach (Cohen, 2023). Some states are referencing these programs as "Grow Your Own" programs. The strength of these programs is the school districts are recruiting teacher candidates from their communities who are invested in the communities, understand the communities' needs, and provide more diversity within the teaching profession. For instance, the Tennessee Department of Education instituted a "Grow Your Own" program from the ARP ESSER grant to recruit, train, and support 650 future educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The challenge of the teacher apprenticeship program is increasing the interest of prospective teachers. Researchers have noted that "the interest in teaching has fallen among high school seniors and college freshmen to the lowest level in the last 50 years," (Kraft & Lyon, 2022). The main reasons for the lack of interest from high school students relate to teachers' salaries, fewer opportunities for professional development, and a general sense of lack of morale from experienced teachers.

The teacher residency and apprenticeship licensure programs allow for state and local education agencies to work with higher education institutions' educator preparation programs (EPPs) by customizing the curriculum as well as providing financial aid to reduce the cost of the EPPs and licensure examinations. Another surprising change in the teacher landscape is now nearly half of states in America have teacher apprenticeship programs due to the need to hire teachers (Balingit, 2023). Of course, the challenge of these programs is recruiting individuals to pursue the teacher residency and apprenticeship licensure programs since teachers are not paid competitively and some states barely provide a livable wage to teachers. However, the ARP ESSER funding did address the opportunity for state and local education agencies to provide more compensation to teachers.

Livable and Competitive Wage

In comparing the United States to other countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States pays its teachers far less than 28 other OECD countries while the U.S. teachers work more hours per year than the teachers in the 28 other OECD countries (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022). The OECD countries are a variety of countries around the world, yet a lot of these countries are demographically smaller and less wealthy than the United States. Nevertheless, the United States

does not pay its public school teachers anywhere at the compensation level that teachers deserve. The global pandemic shined a spotlight on teachers' salaries situation as more teachers left the profession to seek other employment opportunities (Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022).

One of the objectives of the ARP ESSER funding was to provide state and local education agencies with funds to recruit and retain educators by offering more livable and competitive wages. Teacher salaries are one of the reasons for a lack of interest and retainment of teachers, which contributes to the teacher shortage. Therefore, the ARP ESSER funding allows states and local education agencies to provide more funding to new teachers' salaries, bonuses, and competitive pay opportunities. The major challenge of such funding is implementing continuous livable and competitive wages to retain educators. In particular, rural communities struggle with providing livable and competitive wages due to teacher salaries being dependent on the local county tax system. With this reality, the federal and state governments need to offer more equitable funding to ensure teachers are retained in rural and low-income communities. Due to inflation, teachers' salaries are not meeting the cost-of-living needs of teachers, which includes the cost of raising rent and home prices (Armstrong, 2023).

By providing more living and competitive wages to new teachers, there will be more individuals considering the apprenticeship and residency licensure programs. As mentioned before, high school students, paraprofessionals, and instructional assistants are incentivized to pursue these teacher licensure opportunities. Another challenge in motivating individuals to pursue education preparation programs is the cost. Education preparation programs at higher education institutions can cost between \$10,000-\$29,000 because the cost of higher education has doubled due to inflation (Turner & Cohen, 2023). When you compare that with how much a new teacher makes starting at \$34,000-\$40,000, it is no wonder why individuals are not attracted to the profession (NCES, 2022). Therefore, a major challenge is continuously offering new prospective teachers' educational scholarships, stipends, and loan forgiveness opportunities to keep up with the cost of inflation.

There are school districts that are implementing the ARP ESSER funds to help address the under-compensation realities that most teachers face. For instance, Asheville City Schools in North Carolina are providing bonuses to full-time employees of up to \$3,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Also, the Providence Public School District in Rhode Island is providing early signing bonuses to newly hired teachers and support staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Yet, school districts need to attract new teachers in understaffed positions including special education, science, math, and multilingual classrooms. By attracting new teachers in these areas, there will be a decrease in the teacher shortage, as those are the most critical areas to fill (Turner & Cohen, 2023).

Retention and Professional Development

As expected, a student's learning is impacted when there is a high turnover of teachers. The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in many schools shutting down, students losing weeks of valuable instruction time, and some teachers quitting or retiring before the students returned to school. Therefore, the ARP ESSER funding was implemented to help state and local districts think strategically about building up experienced teachers' morale to stay in the profession. In the United States, school districts spend around \$18 billion on teachers' professional development per year, but the quality and relevancy are not meeting the teachers' needs (Ross, 2023). The U.S. Department of Education offered guidance to education agencies by encouraging them to provide opportunities for experienced teachers to have more support staff in their classrooms, more self-care/mental health days, professional development, and flexible schedules to ensure more time to plan and prepare for instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Teacher preparation programs such as American University's School of Education have suggested that school districts need to provide growth opportunities for teachers to not leave the profession, but to take on teacher leadership roles such as the grade level chair, instructional coaches, or mentoring new teachers (American University's School of Education, 2022). Furthermore, the new teachers need mentoring and professional development to feel as though they have the support to learn on the job as well, especially during a global pandemic. Teachers have felt "demoralized" by the system because the school districts didn't recognize all of the extra requirements teachers had to deal with during the pandemic that was beyond just teaching the curriculum. Therefore, the ARP ESSER funding was suggested to be used for supporting teachers through mental health days, self-care opportunities, mentoring, and professional development. The Pachogue-Medford school district in New York used the funding to hire permanent substitute teachers to help facilitate classroom instruction when teachers needed self-care/mental health days or professional development. Also, the Puerto Rico Department of Education is providing compensation to the school staff to ensure they are retained (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Researchers have also noted that "teachers' job satisfaction is at the lowest level in five decades," (Kraft & Lyon, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated the stress that teachers felt with the closing of schools, losing teaching days, learning how to teach online, and teaching with safety precautions. The ARP ESSER funding was instituted to ensure state and local education agencies could support school systems in providing more communication, teacher mentoring, providing more planning time during school days, and access to mental health wellness support (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Teachers also need to have their basic supplies met to teach effectively in the classroom and safe working conditions that promote a culture of positivity and support (American University's School of Education, 2022). The Missouri Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education used the ARP ESSER funding to strengthen its teacher mentoring program, implement surveys to determine working condition issues, and provide more social-emotional services for the teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Teachers need professional development that focuses on instructional practices and not general content knowledge, as these types of support allow new teachers to progress in their pedagogical skills and can be connected to further collaboration, coaching, and mentoring from veteran teachers (Ross, 2023).

Oftentimes, teachers also need more support staff to complete their daily responsibilities of grading, attending meetings, planning, and working in small groups or one-on-one with students. Therefore, additional support staff would provide the opportunity for teachers to meet those daily responsibilities. Gaston County Schools in North Carolina is an example of a county that is using the ARP ESSER funding to provide additional support staff to schools that need that additional classroom coverage (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Although school districts are making efforts to retain experienced teachers, these successes cannot be just a one-time change. Providing opportunities for experienced teachers to have more support staff in their classrooms, more self-care/mental health days, professional development, and flexible schedules to ensure more time to plan and prepare for instruction should be the norm. Therefore, a challenge is making sure that these efforts are continuous, universal for all teachers, and become the norm of a teacher's career.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the years since the global pandemic, the educational landscape has indeed been impacted. Although teacher shortages have existed for decades, the global pandemic intensified the issue and the most critical stakeholders affected have been the students. Students undoubtedly deserve the best and most effective teachers possible, and it is the objective of the ARP ESSER funding to ensure that reality occurs. The ARP ESSER has demonstrated success by offering more teacher residency and apprenticeship licensure programs, livable and competitive wage opportunities, as well as retention and professional development. However, the major challenge is ensuring that these funding opportunities continue and legislators recognize the need to respond to the teacher shortage (Turner & Cohen, 2023). Without continuous funding, these action steps will end, the successes will diminish, and the return of the “help wanted” sign will occur in school districts around the country.

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