



United States Teacher Retention Crisis

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States is facing a decrease in teacher retention that threatens the stability and quality of its public K-12 education system. With a deficiency of educators, the development and success of future generations are in peril. This brief will analyze the root causes of teacher shortages and their effects on student learning and equity, with potential policy solutions to strengthen educator recruitment and retention.

II. OVERVIEW

The national teacher retention crisis results in low teacher-to-student ratios and less qualified educators in the classroom, which widens the opportunity gap. Students in rural communities and economically disadvantaged areas suffer the most, as educators often find jobs in metropolitan and developed areas to be more economically fulfilling. Despite efforts to maintain teachers in the classroom and advance equity through a state's K-12 public education system, the number of teachers still working in the profession continues to decrease, with nearly every state reporting vacancies in key subject areas such as Math, English, Science, and History. Teachers are leaving the classroom due to a variety of factors: low salaries, limited career advancement, and increasing professional demands. Additionally, newer generations are finding careers that do not

sustain or build economic stability. Therefore, this brief examines the scope of the teacher shortage, identifying its systemic causes and the effectiveness of current policy responses. Moreover, it will explore innovative approaches towards rebuilding the teaching profession as a sustainable practice.

A. Relevance

Teacher shortages refer to the growing inability of schools in the United States to recruit and retain qualified educators in high-need subjects and rural communities. While the layperson's definition of an educator has remained unchanged for decades, growing trends (low pay, high workloads, and burnout) have encouraged educators to find new career paths, leaving thousands of classrooms without stable instruction. This shortage affects student learning, diminishes educational equity, and forces schools to hire less qualified or uncredentialed instructors to guide a classroom's learning environment. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, following the Covid-19 pandemic in 2022, nearly half (44%) of public schools currently report full- or part-time teaching vacancies.¹ Yet this trend is not solely a result of recent events: the Learning Policy Institute traces the origins of the teacher retention crisis back to the Great Recession of 2008, when widespread layoffs and budget cuts began weakening the teaching workforce nationwide.²

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Teaching has existed as a core profession in the United States for centuries, as the backbone of American society. Following the Civil War, teaching was often considered a job for women, as salaries were considered acceptable for their gender; meanwhile, men worked in physically demanding fields. The foundation of teachers' importance remains a backbone in modern-day society, where a teacher's role in student development continues to be overlooked and underappreciated. The idea that teaching is "women's work"³ continues to diminish the importance of the role, ultimately leading to lower wages and benefits. According to the American Association of University Women, occupations that were primarily dominated by males usually pay better than roles filled by women.⁴

As U.S. education developed throughout the 1980s to modern-day society, a multitude of campaigns and federal warnings were initiated to reduce educational inequality, such as "A Nation at Risk" and eventually "No Child Left Behind," which contributed to the subjection of teachers and their eventual burnout.

In 2008, the Great Recession hit the United States, causing massive layoffs, frozen hiring, and pay cuts. The role of a teacher was no longer seen as a source of livelihood; around 120,000 K-12 educators lost their jobs, and more left the career.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this issue on a global scale, with students resorting to distance learning mechanisms to continue

meeting education requirements. With education controversies and curriculum constraints, teachers cite burnout caused by student discipline, insufficient pay, lack of respect, politicians and non-educators making decisions that affect education, and too many district initiatives.⁵

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders are teachers in the public sector of K-12 education, especially those who face financial disadvantages due to inadequate pension or a lack of support. These insufficiencies cause teacher burnout and decreased retention. As a result, many teachers take risks to find new jobs and vacate positions that are filled by less qualified employees. Ideally, teachers should have a say in how they are treated: economically and independently. Policies should strive to promote financial freedom for the working class, vital for future generations.

Students and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are stakeholders as their direct education is impacted by the lack of educators in the teacher workforce. Students from rural areas with high teacher-to-student ratios are impacted the most, creating disparities in the opportunity gap for students from high-income households to those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Teacher retention must be promoted to reduce the bottleneck on student ability.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to teacher retention lies in the perpetuation of disregarding and underpaying educators. Continued stakeholder indifference toward these matters will exacerbate the societal conditions of institutional neglect, thereby deprofessionalizing teaching. The cycle

of teacher burnout will remain unimpeded, causing the current trend of teacher vacancies to grow drastically while less qualified employees take their jobs. This is, besides the fact, that complacency would expose the working conditions that LEAs and school districts impose on educators, eventually damaging the appeal of a teaching career and decreasing employee morale. Aside from the implications for the teaching career field, educational quality will continue to decline as classrooms are increasingly staffed by inexperienced teachers. In June 2025, data showed that nearly every state faced significant staffing gaps, with over 365,000 uncertified teachers and more than 45,000 unfilled positions nationwide. Altogether, over 411,000 teaching roles were vacant or inadequately filled, marking a year-over-year increase of roughly 4,600 positions.⁸ This causes students to lose access to consistent, high-quality education instruction and rely on substitutional means that lower academic rigor.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because the national teacher retention crisis affects individuals and the communities they inhabit, it is necessary that nonpartisan intervention is prioritized. The benefits of such intervention include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) **Student Achievement and Educational Outcomes:** Immense teacher turnover weakens continuity in instruction, with students facing inconsistent teaching styles and lowered academic growth. This is emphasized in student achievement test scores, where higher rates of teacher turnover are associated with lower student achievement scores.⁷ Students are taught

better with consistent and experienced educators, who are normalized to their positions and understand community needs. Stable teacher-student relationships promote high engagement in classroom material, directly impacting learning outcomes. This benefits all stakeholders in improving and maintaining educational outcomes necessary for postsecondary success.

- 2) **System Stability and Workforce Continuity:** Inconsistent workforce management and high job displacement disrupt organizational performance and are costly to state and local education agencies. Simply replacing a teacher costs larger school agencies to spend nearly \$25,000 when school and district expenses related to separation, recruitment, hiring, and training are factored in.⁹ As demonstrated, when teachers depart the workforce, funds are directed towards training efforts rather than instructional improvement. Nonpartisan efforts regarding stability and continuity benefit students as they obtain uninterrupted education, while districts can reduce spending efforts.
- 3) **National Competitiveness and Innovation:** The ability of the future generation of the United States is dependent on student success and growth in their developing years. Studies show that in spring 2023, 56 % of American fourth-graders were performing on grade level in math, down from 69% in 2019, and for English, a decrease from 72% to 65%. Additionally,

behavior issues have stifled the ability to explore disciplinary measures as 4- and 5-year-olds are throwing chairs, biting, hitting, and disrespecting teachers.¹⁰ Nonpartisan beliefs demonstrate that working together on alleviating such issues and promoting high-quality and well-supported education in STEM advancement, technological innovation, and civic literacy will shape future labor markets and keep pace with international education standards.

V. Tried Policy

Tried policies stem from state legislation focused on changes at the State Board of Education (SBE) level. For example, the Maryland General Assembly's House Bill 986, passed in 2025, requires each local board of education to establish a new teacher retention program. Consequently, the SBE must update teacher retention guidelines to reflect the bill's requirements by 2026. Notable effects include significant increases in local expenditures to meet additional requirements for such programs. Specifications mention providing teachers with regular cohort-based opportunities to share experiences, providing principals with resources and support needed to facilitate a teacher's success in their first years of teaching, and assigning new teachers to highly competent teacher mentors in the county to provide support and information.¹¹ There are shortcomings in this approach: implementation varies across districts, more burdens are placed on administrators, and there is no guarantee of the quality of support.

Examination of policies enacted by other states

reflects these issues. Similar policies in California call for policy recommendations, such as planning for strategic sustainability for teacher residencies that have been launched and for continued expansion, gathering and reporting additional data on all of the state workforce programs to understand their use and impact, and supporting ongoing funding, continued uptake, and impact studies of the National Board Incentive Program.¹²

VI. Policy Options

Federal Teacher Residency Expansion Policy

Teachers new to the workforce face adversity in managing workloads and navigating tasks, causing attrition and low retention rates. Accordingly, studies report that 20–30% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years, and that attrition is even higher from high-poverty schools and in high-need subject areas, like the ones in which residents teach, often reaching 50% or more.¹⁴ Establishing a Federal Teacher Residency policy would create networking options for new educators to participate in year-long, paid training programs to work alongside experienced teachers while earning their certifications, similar to a medical residency. State-funded projects have proven an increase in teacher productivity, where teacher residency programs boost retention to 80–90% after three years and 70% after five. The impacts of such a policy would build community-based pipelines and increase equity among districts by ensuring that disadvantaged communities have qualified and well-prepared teachers. Given the potential for implications in enforcing residency programs, it is vital to highlight that the policy

would establish a federal funding guarantee and quality residency framework to prevent unevenness across LEAs.

Strengthened Loan Forgiveness – Incentives

A prevalent issue often motivating teachers to leave the workforce is due to inadequate pay compared to student debt and personal debt. By strengthening loan forgiveness programs at the federal level, the incentive can not only help teachers fight off financial burden but also help them become economically independent, a status that is often rare in the modern teaching world. In North Carolina, the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Program offers scholarships and debt relief through a merit-based initiative to prepare students for future teaching careers. Expanding a nationwide incentive program targeted at loan forgiveness would help motivate teachers to stay in the profession, ultimately retaining teachers in high-need districts and shortage subjects. Especially in high-cost states, with a negative real wage growth compared to inflation, debt forgiveness would substantially promote the financial well-being of teachers.

Salary Ground-Cap

A policy rooted in capping the minimum wage for teaching positions would ensure teacher salaries adequately reflect the time and effort they invest in their careers. Addressing the chronic underpayment of teachers by benchmarking their wages to comparable professionals with equivalent education levels would therefore increase equity across career sectors. A bachelor's degree is required to be a qualified teacher in the United States, varying in some locations. The economic gap between teachers and other

bachelor's degree holders is a major cause of the lack of teacher retention: teachers aren't paid for their worth. According to the Economic Policy Institute, in 2024, the wage gap between teachers and equally educated professionals was 26.9%, extraordinarily greater than 6 percent recorded in 1996.¹⁴ In 20 states, the relative teacher pay penalty was at least 25%. Establishing a floor for teacher salaries would compensate for the mistreatment of their salaries. Raising pay to >85% would make teaching competitive and economically feasible for those who consider a career in education. In turn, this would reduce disparities across districts as the salary floor would apply state-wide, ensuring all teachers receive equitable pay. In turn, students and faculty members are less burdened by attrition and instability.

VII. Conclusions

In this paper, I have explored the causes of the United States' teacher retention rates, their effect on families of lower classes, and the perpetuation of inequality across educational agencies with low financial support. Additionally, I have examined potential policy options aimed at alleviating this issue at a federal level. Of all options, a teacher residency program is the most feasible in its implementation and outcomes, locally administered and implemented to ensure equality is achieved across varying school districts.

The teacher workforce continues to be an underrated and underappreciated profession. Their dedication and mentorship to the next generation of critical thinkers, innovators, and workers are vital to the continuation of societal well-being and working through complacency. It

isn't just teachers that are affected by the lack of professional educators, but students, too. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate the cause-and-effect relationship that teacher retention rates have on the educational stability and quality that students obtain. Although the trend continues in a downward slope, it can be overcome through awareness, acknowledgement, and action. Ensuring equity, financial stability, and progress can change the trend for good.

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