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Teacher Supply and Demand

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Research Illuminates the Nature and Causes of School Staffing Problems

In 1996, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future published a report that placed the issue of teaching quality at the center of the nation's education agenda.

The report called into question the widely held assumption that two converging trends – the “graying” of the teacher workforce and rising elementary and secondary school enrollments – would inevitably lead to severe, widespread and sustained teacher shortages.

Such predictions and concerns were off the mark, said the authors of *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*. The problem wasn't the overall supply of teachers, which was, and would continue to be, more than adequate to meet demand, they said. Rather, it was imbalances between supply and demand – in certain subjects and certain school districts – attributable largely to significant numbers of teachers leaving their jobs for reasons other than retirement.

Policymakers needed to change the question, the report said, from “How do 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?”

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* summarizes recent research on the issue of teacher supply and demand, including:

- An analysis of urban district hiring practices, and their effect on applicant attrition and teacher quality
- An examination of the role of teacher turnover in school staffing problems, and the extent to which school characteristics and organizational conditions contribute to teacher turnover
- A report calling for increased federal leadership and investment in augmenting the capacity and performance of the nation's teaching force.



Wanted: A National Teacher Supply Policy for Education

(Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes, Education Policy Analysis Archives, September 2003, <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n33/v11n33.pdf>)

This paper makes the case for increased federal leadership and investment in augmenting the capacity and quality of the nation's teaching force. Teacher supply and demand is too complex and consequential a challenge for states and districts to grapple with on their own, say authors Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes. What's needed, they contend, is a major federal initiative focused on three goals:

- Expanding the supply of qualified teachers in urban and isolated rural school districts, and in certain subject areas – math, science, special education and bilingual education
- Improving the retention of qualified teachers
- Creating a national labor market for teachers.

The authors call for federal programs and subsidies similar to those that have been used since the 1940s to ease shortages of doctors in underserved communities and in certain health fields, including scholarships, loan forgiveness and pay incentives for teachers willing to work in hard-to-staff schools and subject areas.

They also urge increased federal support – in the form of grants to schools, districts and postsecondary institutions – for the testing and development of innovative approaches to preparing, supporting and compensating teachers.

Finally, they propose the federal government work with states to:

- Develop common licensing exams and interstate agreements about content and pedagogical coursework that would facilitate reciprocity and respond to the standards called for in No Child Left Behind
- Create a system of pension portability across the states
- Collect and analyze labor market data to improve forecasting and planning at the federal, state and local levels.



Missed Opportunities: How We Keep High-Quality Teachers Out of Urban Classrooms

(Jessica Levin and Meredith Quinn, The New Teacher Project, 2003, <http://www.tntp.org/docs/reportfinal9-12.pdf>)

It's not that large city school systems have trouble attracting high-caliber teachers – it's that they don't move quickly enough to hire them.

This in-depth analysis of urban district hiring practices, and their effect on applicant attrition and teacher quality, produced several interesting findings. In the four districts that were studied:

- The pool of applicants was more than ample to fill available positions, even in high-need subjects such as math, science and bilingual education.
- By the time districts got around to making job offers in mid-to-late summer – the typical timeline in big-city school systems – up to 60% of applicants had withdrawn from the hiring process, often to accept jobs in suburban districts that generally hire earlier.
- The best candidates – those with the most options – were more likely to withdraw, leaving districts scrambling to fill vacancies from an applicant pool with higher percentages of unqualified and uncertified teachers. The study found that withdrawers had higher grade point averages and were 40% more likely to have a degree in their teaching field than the eventual new hires.

As a result, the authors conclude, “urban districts lose the very candidates they need in their classrooms to meet the No Child Left Behind mandates. Millions of disadvantaged students in America's cities pay the price with lower-quality teachers who are more likely to be uncertified, to have scored poorly on college and licensure exams, and to be teaching outside their field.”

The report calls for states, districts and unions to work together to create a more accelerated hiring process by (1) revising vacancy-notification requirements that allow retiring or resigning teachers to offer very late notice of their intent to depart, making it difficult to accurately forecast which vacancies will exist in September and (2) reforming collective-bargaining requirements to speed up the transfer process and enable schools and principals to consider external and internal candidates equally.

Another major problem, according to the report, is state budget timelines, which typically leave administrators unsure about which positions will be funded in their schools until mid-to-late summer.

The Teacher Labor Market

Supply exceeds demand. Annual demand averages 230,000 teachers, which can easily be met through three large and growing supply sources: newly minted teachers (who, on average, account for no more than half the teachers hired in a given year), individuals who prepared for teaching in the past but never entered the profession, and those who taught sometime in the past and are re-entering the profession. All told, for every active member of the U.S. teaching force, there are roughly two individuals who are prepared to teach but are not doing so.

Retaining existing teachers is a far greater problem than training new ones. Since the early 1990s, the annual outflow of teachers has surpassed the annual influx by increasingly larger margins. Retirees account for only about 15% of those who leave the profession – either temporarily or permanently – each year. The attrition rate of beginning teachers is troublingly high, with roughly one in three quitting within five years.

The distribution of teachers – across geographic and subject areas – continues to be a troublesome problem. While the overall supply of teachers is sufficient to meet demand, there remain shortages in high-demand fields such as mathematics, science, bilingual education and special education, and in urban, low-income, minority schools as well as remote, rural schools; and in states grappling with rapidly growing populations and/or class-size reduction initiatives. Also in high demand – in all subjects, grade levels and geographic areas – are male teachers and teachers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Source: “Wanted: A National Teacher Supply Policy for Education”
<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n33/v11n33.pdf>



Teacher Turnover, Teacher Shortages and the Organization of Schools

(Richard M. Ingersoll, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, January 2001, <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Turnover-Ing-01-2001.pdf>)

This report focuses on (1) the role of teacher turnover in the staffing problems of schools and (2) the role of school characteristics and organizational conditions in teacher turnover.

The author, who has done extensive research on teacher shortages and underqualified teachers, finds that school staffing problems are neither synonymous with, nor primarily due to, an insufficient supply of teachers. Rather, they result from “excess demand” created by large numbers of teachers leaving their jobs for reasons other than retirement.

Teacher turnover, he says, is a multidimensional – and widely misunderstood – phenomenon that takes a variety of forms: intradistrict transfers, migration to jobs in other districts and states and leaving the teaching profession altogether. And the problem isn’t limited to urban public schools. Turnover rates are only moderately lower in suburban public schools, he notes, and even higher in small private schools.

The author’s analysis of data from two large-scale federal surveys found that teacher retirements are increasing, “but the overall amount of turnover accounted for by retirement is relatively minor compared to that resulting from other causes. In particular, low salaries, student discipline problems, inadequate support from the school administration and limited faculty input into school decisionmaking all contribute to higher rates of turnover, after controlling for the characteristics of both teachers and schools.”

The author compares the problem of hiring enough teachers to fill the nation’s classrooms to pouring water into a leaky bucket. Recruiting new teachers – the dominant policy strategy to this point – isn’t enough, he says.

“Current policies not only will not solve school staffing problems, but they also divert attention from the primary underlying problem – the manner in which schools are managed and teachers are treated,” he writes.

The author concludes by calling for greater attention on the part of policymakers and researchers to an issue just as important as the causes of teacher turnover – namely, its consequences. How – and how well – do schools cope with a recurring loss of staff and a recurring need to rehire? How does continual turnover affect curricula, programs and the ability of the teaching staff to work together? And how does the loss of teachers affect parents, students and the community?

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