



# The Big Short

Addressing looming teacher shortages is more than a matter of fair pay

*By Kelly Coash-Johnson*

As the demand for public education increases, states will continue to struggle to recruit and retain high-quality educators. For many states, the increased need for teachers will arise simply from demand. As of fall 2018, there are 50.7 million students attending elementary and secondary schools in the U.S., and that number is projected to increase to 52.1 million by 2027.

While the need to educate our students is consistent, how we get educators in the right placements at the right times will vary from state to state. Some states will struggle to

replace an aging workforce, while others will drive demand through various rules and regulations that require more from teachers.

To no one's surprise, a lack of competitive compensation is a factor that's frequently cited as contributing to teacher shortages. Nationwide, teachers earn an average of about 20 percent less than individuals with college degrees in other fields. While we can agree that teachers everywhere deserve to be compensated appropriately and fairly, the national teacher shortage has many aspects that need to be addressed. Here are a few factors to consider:

■ **Declining interest in the profession.**

According to a survey of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, deans of colleges of education say the No. 1 reason behind declines in enrollment is the perception of teaching as an undesirable career. This perception has worsened in the last year, thanks to teacher walkouts and strikes. National attention has been focused not only on teacher pay, but also on working conditions in schools and with students. It comes down to the fact that the teaching profession is being asked to do more with less.

■ **Declining enrollment in teacher training programs.** Between the 2007–2008 and 2015–2016 terms, there was a 23-percent decline in the number of people completing teacher-preparation programs. Some say that the decline is the result of increasing costs for education majors, but most data point to a decline in the interest in teaching overall. With more focus given to careers in engineering and the sciences, it should be no surprise that areas such as teaching are suffering.

■ **Teacher retention and turnover.** A bigger issue in regard to the teacher shortage lies in the data surrounding retention. In 2012 alone, about 16 percent of teachers left their districts, and more than half left the profession altogether. About 30 percent of new teachers leave the occupation within the first five years.

With this information, districts are now changing their strategies to examine the data surrounding their own retention rates. While many teachers leave a district because of low pay, most leave because of the workload and other working conditions. As a new generation of teachers comes on board, schools will need to understand their needs and find ways to keep them engaged and retained.

## Start by asking teachers why they teach and what they would appreciate in the future.

### Promising Strategies

Changing the dialogue is a top priority. State lawmakers and educational associations are working hard to find new, creative ways to address the issues that prevent us from getting enough quality teachers into classrooms. In monitoring various initiatives, we see lots of potential in strategies being put forth by state organizations and lawmakers.

With the high costs of the traditional college programs discussed above, many states are establishing scholarships and loan forgiveness programs to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. These programs are funded at the state and district levels, and they address both recruitment and retention.

Many states also opt for economic policy solutions, including changing laws that govern the recruitment of newly retired teachers. Some state legislation reduces or eliminates the requirement to “sit out” of the classroom after taking retirement. Early reports indicate that the solution is economical and successful, allowing teachers to keep their retirement funds and bring in additional income. This option has also proven vital to some rural districts that have been hit hard by a teacher shortage.

Another strategy catching on involves licensure reciprocity. While schools seek to recruit outside their geographical areas, states need to lessen reciprocity rules to give districts the opportunity to recruit from a larger pool of candidates. For districts that also face a shortage of diverse candidates, allowing further reach is also a step in the right direction.

There is no “secret sauce” for districts that are facing teacher shortages now and in the future. Each district will need to capitalize on their strengths and lessen their weaknesses. A good place to start is by asking your current teachers why they work for you. Why do they teach? What would they appreciate in the future? If you ask the right questions, you'll find some great solutions—and maybe some great new teachers, too. □

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