No Substitute for Trained Teachers

If the teacher workforce has grown nearly 50 percent since the 1980s, why are states still reporting shortages?

BY SUZANNE WEISS

In mid-2017, with the start of the new school year just weeks away, Coloradans might have thought the sky was falling. Over a three-month period, a steady drumbeat of news stories warned of an impending catastrophe for Colorado’s K-12 schools.

The first alarm bell was a brief news article on declines in the number of graduates from the state’s 50 teacher-preparation programs—a trend that was exacerbating teacher shortages in rural areas.

Next came a story on a handful of particularly hard-hit school districts in remote areas where shortages are nothing new and are primarily attributable to low pay (as little as $24,000 a year) and high turnover. Drawing on a quote from the article, the headline declared the problem a “crisis that would only get worse.”

That’s when the story went viral. In the cascade of news coverage that ensued, the words “teacher shortage” and “crisis” became joined at the hip, and the predictions grew more and more dire. By late July, major news outlets were running stories describing a “massive K-12 teacher shortage” that could result in thousands of teaching positions across the state going unfilled in the fall.

But as Colorado schools began opening their doors, the furor subsided more rapidly than it had arisen. Looking back, it’s easy to see what happened. The media had garbled the state’s data on the annual number of teaching jobs that typically come open and are easily filled (about 3,500 statewide) versus the number of positions that are hard to fill or are staffed by long-term substitutes (about 100 statewide).

Teacher Supply and Demand

As mistaken as the Colorado news coverage was, it touched on a critical and increasingly urgent issue, one affecting nearly every state: teacher supply and demand.

In October 2015, the president of the Nevada Board of Education described that state’s teacher shortages as “horrific” and warned that, absent improvement, “We’re all going to sink.” Around the same time, the Tulsa World declared “Crisis Hits Oklahoma Classrooms,” and the Texas education commissioner labeled shortages “the biggest threat to our schools.”

Over the past two years, nearly a dozen states have established task forces, ordered up white papers and action plans, or passed legislation designed to ease shortages.

Strategies vary widely. Eight states—Arizona, California, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Utah and Wisconsin—have revamped their teacher-licensing processes and, in some cases, loosened requirements for credentials. Several states are considering loan-forgiveness programs and other incentives for teachers who agree to work in hard-to-staff schools. Still others are pushing postsecondary institutions, which for years have overproduced elementary school teachers, to step up their training of special education, English-language-learning, and secondary math, science and technology teachers.

In the view of Wisconsin Senator Luther Olsen (R), chair of the Senate Education Committee, targeted reforms and investments can go a long way to easing teacher shortages.

Wisconsin legislators recently approved bills making it easier for out-of-state teachers to transfer their credentials, for skilled tradesmen to become career-technical educators and for Montessori-trained teachers to get certified. Another bill eliminated traditional continuing-education requirements in favor of a new “lifetime license” system for high-performing teachers.

The Wisconsin Legislature also allocated $500,000 for a pilot program that will help place prospective teachers in rural classrooms for the final stage of their training. The program will provide stipends and, in some cases, free or reduced-rate housing.

For Wisconsin, the next—and much harder—steps will be to tackle the root causes of teacher shortages: low salaries, high turnover rates and substandard prepa-
Both Olsen and Behning see a danger in hyping and potentially overreacting to teacher shortages.

“It’s not so much a crisis as it is a cyclical thing where we are going to see a rebound,” Olsen says. “I mean, let’s face it, we’re short of people in a lot of professions, aren’t we? I don’t think we need to be lowering standards to get more people into teaching.”

Some of the policies being discussed and adopted across the country, Behning says, are motivated by the misconception “that we need to increase the overall supply of teachers, when the real problem is a misalignment of supply and demand,” coupled with high attrition.

“Our turnover rate for teachers is 8 percent a year compared with the international rate of 3 percent,” he says. “Just think, if we could manage to cut that 8 percent by half, we wouldn’t have any shortages at all.”

Finding the Latest, Greatest Ideas

As for Colorado, a bipartisan coalition of legislators successfully pushed forward a measure requiring preparation of an action plan for improving teacher recruitment and retention.

The legislation is significant for several reasons, says Kim Hunter Reed, executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, which is charged with drafting the plan. Foremost, it presents an opportunity to do something that Colorado, like most states, has barely taken a stab at in the past: developing a clearer picture of the complexity, nuances and dynamics of teacher supply and demand. “This will move us from anecdotal information to the kind of deep analysis that informs good policymaking,” she says.

The plan will draw on a variety of sources and perspectives—via surveys, town halls, environmental scans and conversations with policymakers in other states—to pinpoint weak spots in the educator pipeline. It will identify the latest and best ideas for addressing a range of interrelated issues, “from interest in the teaching profession all the way to preparation, induction and retention,” Reed says.

The legislation “sends a strong signal that we take this issue seriously,” says one of its sponsors, Colorado Senator Don Coram (R), whose district includes several of the state’s most sparsely populated counties.

“I think it’s a good start,” he says. And that’s as good a place to begin as any.