

# 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 num-

ber 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



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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-

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ration programs, Olsen says.

"We've been looking around at the top-performing school systems in the world, like Finland, and it's clear that their teacher education programs are a key to their success," he says. "But you also can't help noticing that so much of what they do—in terms of selecting and training teachers, how much teachers are paid, the quality of professional development—is just the opposite of how we do things here."

### Fundamental Changes Needed

Indiana Representative Bob Behning (R), who chairs the House Education Committee, has a similar view. "You know, in these high-performing countries, teachers are viewed as nation builders," he says, "and there are all kinds of policies and practices that support a professional model of teaching. That's the direction we need to be heading."

The question, Behning says, is "how to make the fundamental changes that can really have an impact. You need a long-term strategic plan and a lot of commitment, and I think that has to start at the governor's level. It can't start at the legislative level."

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 inter-related issues, "from interest in the teaching profession all the way to preparation,

## The Teacher Labor Market

**Supply exceeds demand.** Annual demand averages 200,000 teachers, which can easily be met through three supply sources: newly minted teachers (who, on average, account for no more than half the teachers hired every year), people who prepared for teaching but never entered the profession and those with teaching experience who are re-entering the profession. All told, for every active member of the U.S. teaching workforce, there are roughly two more who are prepared to teach but are not doing so.

**Retaining existing teachers is a greater problem than training new ones.** Annually since the early 1990s, the outflow of teachers has surpassed influx by increasingly larger margins. Retirees account for only about 15 percent of those who leave the profession—either temporarily or permanently—each year. The attrition rate of beginning teachers is troublingly high, with roughly 1 in 3 quitting within five years.

**The distribution of teachers continues to be a problem.** Although the overall supply of teachers is sufficient to meet demand, shortages remain in:

- Mathematics, science, bilingual education and special education
- Urban, low-income, minority schools
- Remote, rural schools
- States grappling with rapidly growing populations or class-size reduction initiatives, or both

Also in high demand—in all subjects, grades and geographic areas—are male teachers and teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

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. 🏠



Senator  
Don Coram  
Colorado