

The Myth of the Teacher Shortage

In recent years we have been bombarded with dire warnings of a “teacher shortage.” A quick online search of “teacher shortage 2024” uncovers an extensive list of reputable reports of school districts contending with unfilled positions and dramatically fewer applicants. These reports, coupled with educational workshops and state policy changes, seek to address the shortage. State policy changes have gone so far as allocating funds encouraging paraeducators to become teachers and offering sizable stipends to student teachers. Many states have lowered teaching qualifications to get potential candidates into the classroom faster. K-12 policy analyst [Paige Shoemaker DeMio](#) recently wrote in [msnbc.com](#) that a reduction of qualifications to address shortages is misguided, and she’s correct!

Despite such measures, colleges and universities have seen a sharp decline in students pursuing teaching careers. This raises an important question: If the number of teachers entering the profession is dwindling, why aren’t we recruiting qualified and certified teachers who left the profession early? In other words, instead of reducing qualifications, shouldn’t we put more focus on incentives and workplace improvements to keep and return high-quality and experienced teachers to the classroom?

According to the California Department of Education, during the 2023-24 school year there were 464,836 certified teachers, and shockingly, 152,712 who are currently certified and *not* teaching. This accounts for 31% of certified teachers in the state who are certificated but who choose not to teach. In contrast, Nebraska had 55,152 certified teachers in classrooms across the state and 28,936 (52%) who are certified but *not* teaching. These figures are reflective of trends nationwide. With such large numbers of teachers available, this isn’t a teacher shortage; it’s a retention problem – with lasting consequences.

State Data	Certified Teachers who are not Teaching	Retired Teachers	Total Certified Educators
2023-24			
California Dept of Education	142,343	10,369	464,836
Nebraska Dept of Education	28,936	1,552	55,152
Arizona Department of Education	50,328	pending	109,109

When educators leave the profession or change schools, student learning suffers, overall school performance drops, and those still teaching feel increased stress. The unseen ripple effect on people – especially children, communities, the future of education and the functionality of the nation – are incalculable. The financial strain is also significant. [Urban districts spend an average of \\$20,000 hiring each new teacher.](#)

During the past year I interviewed more than 150 teachers from 31 states, both current and former educators. Their concerns are consistent: unrealistic expectations, toxic or unsafe work environments, divisive politics, low pay, and unfavorable policies drive them away. They share heartbreaking stories of having to decide between their mental and physical health or staying in a profession they once loved.

Teaching has always been stressful but since the pandemic stress levels have skyrocketed. A common refrain echoed by many of those teachers was similar to the experience of a ninth-year, now-former, science teacher at a low-income urban school. “I developed physical signs of stress- extreme lack of energy and food sensitivity. I developed high anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed.” [According to Nguyen and Kremer \(2022\), “Teacher dissatisfaction and burnout are highly associated with teacher intention to leave teaching and their actual attrition behavior.”](#)

It’s simple. If teachers are burned out or dissatisfied, they are more likely to quit.

School administrators are searching for teachers – any teachers – who can fill an open classroom position. The result is that many educators teach outside their area of qualification or interest. This causes more dissatisfaction. According to Stacy DeCorsey, a former Minnesota National Distinguished Principal of the Year, “In the next ten years it will be very difficult to find quality educators for our classrooms. This will most certainly impact our future.”

Recruitment efforts are important, but without addressing retention, the recruitment investment is wasted. New teachers depart for the same reasons their predecessors did, creating a revolving door of educators. Low retention rates also discourage potential applicants; it’s no surprise when few want a job no one else seems to want.

Instead of lowering teaching qualifications we must address issues leading to teacher dissatisfaction and burnout. Teachers don’t enter the profession to get rich but when the stress of the job becomes unmanageable, even an increase in salary isn’t enough to keep them.

As we approach the start of another school year, let’s shift the narrative to more accurately reflect the reality of the teacher *retention* crisis. We need to ask, “what can we do to bring this large group of experienced teachers back to the profession and keep the quality educators currently in our schools from leaving?”

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