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# The Teacher Shortage, 2021 Edition

RECRUITING & HIRING By Annie Buttner, Contributing Consultant on 4/19/2021 **9 MIN. READ**

This past year, K-12 has tackled a mind-boggling number of new challenges as COVID-19 threw a wrench into nearly every aspect of our lives. However, one obstacle that many districts continue to face has posed a problem for years: the teacher shortage. And as you can expect, the pandemic certainly did not make the shortage any easier.

We surveyed almost 1,200 school and district leaders across the country about their experiences with the teacher shortage, and the results paint a grim picture.

## The Landscape of the Teacher Shortage

Like many issues in education, the pain of the teacher shortage is not experienced equally by all districts — but it is certainly becoming more prevalent. Two-thirds of survey respondents report teacher shortages, a record high since we launched our first teacher shortage survey in 2015.

While many rural school systems cited their location as a major factor behind their teacher shortage, districts in all settings are struggling. Teacher shortages are most common in urban school systems, with 75% of districts in cities of any size reporting shortages. In comparison, 65% of rural districts reported shortages, along with 60% of suburban districts.

Across all settings, 44% of districts with shortages reported having difficulty filling vacancies across grade levels and subjects, while the remaining 56% reported only having shortages for specific positions. This suggests that the teacher shortage has worsened noticeably overall: in previous years, only about 34% of districts with shortages struggled to find applicants across different subjects and grade levels.

## The Hardest Vacancies to Fill

The most common shortage cited should come as no surprise: 71% of districts with shortages find it challenging to find Special Education teachers. And as we have seen in previous years, the substitute shortage claims second place — though it is close to becoming the most common shortage.

67% of survey respondents reported a substitute shortage this year, which is in line with **substitute shortage data** (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/blog/talk-data-to-me-absence-management-during-covid-19/>) from the Frontline Research & Learning Institute. It's possible that substitutes felt intimidated by the prospect of online and hybrid teaching or did not wish to risk catching COVID-19 from in-person classes. (Unfortunately, it's unlikely that the substitute shortage will disappear entirely, even after the pandemic.)

Other top shortages are:

- Secondary Math (reported by 46% of districts with shortages)
- Paraprofessionals (35%) (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com>)
- Secondary Physical Sciences (26%)
- Bilingual Education (25%)

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Some vacancies — such as Secondary Math and Sciences — historically have been hard to fill. However, the rise of the paraprofessional shortage is worth a discussion. It's possible that the paraprofessional shortage, like the substitute shortage, has worsened due to COVID-19.

Paraprofessionals and substitute teachers may have determined that the relatively low wages simply were not worth the risks of working during a pandemic. If so, these positions may become easier to fill once access to vaccines improves. Otherwise, districts will need to focus on exploring comprehensive strategies to ensure they have a healthy pipeline of qualified capable paraprofessionals. It's not just about having vacancies filled: paraprofessionals are a fantastic source of competent teachers if your district has a "Grow Your Own" program.

One administrator writes:

*"I think our district could do a better job of attracting and retaining our paraprofessional positions. We could recruit [paraprofessionals] and train them [until they are] well qualified and [receive more pay] so they stick around. Then, many of them do want to get their teacher certification, which [our district] would directly benefit from since they would be familiar with the district and want to stick around. We need to do a better job of 'growing our own.'"*

## The Causes of the Teacher Shortage (and How You Can Counteract Them)

The teacher shortage is not a new phenomenon, and a true solution will require incredible shifts on a national level in how education is funded and perceived. This change can happen someday, but that's cold comfort to the thousands of districts currently struggling to staff classrooms with high-quality educators.

So, let's talk about what *can* be done today.

The first step in solving any problem is understanding *why* it's happening. The top three reasons for the teacher shortage, as reported by our survey respondents, are as follows:

1. A lack of fully qualified applicants
2. Salary and/or benefits are lacking compared to other careers
3. Fewer new education school graduates

### Problem 1: A lack of fully qualified applicants

The most common reason given for districts' shortages is that there simply are not enough fully qualified applicants. Some administrators wrote that they rely on first-year educators to fill openings, but these new hires may lack sufficient preparation to succeed in the day-to-day work. As one respondent noted, hiring teachers who may have potential but need to develop their skills can lead to an unsustainable revolving door of job postings and ongoing turnover — unless targeted, impactful professional learning opportunities are available to help them become more effective and remain with the district

*"We are able to hire many teachers, but not many are actually 'able' to perform the job well. Our district advertises that we have weekly professional development opportunities, and we do! However, they aren't targeted enough to help those teachers who lack the skills needed to help them become better educators. We use them for a year or two and throw them away — replacing them with the next person who usually cannot do the job." — Survey Respondent*

Of course, [investing in the professional growth](https://www.frontlineeducation.com/solutions/professional-growth/) of beginning teachers who have potential is one way to counteract the impact of the teacher shortage, and this ties directly into the role of retention: teachers who feel supported are teachers who stick around and don't need to be replaced. And 69% of districts *without* teacher shortages report having high or very high retention rates, compared to only 42% of districts *with* shortages. <https://www.frontlineeducation.com/contact-us/get-a-demo/>

## 69% of districts without teacher shortages report having high or very high retention rates, compared to only 42% of those with shortages.

Of course, correlation is not causation, and it's likely that the factors that lead to higher teacher retention are also responsible for attracting more candidates. But let's back up for a moment.

No one starts out as an expert. That's the whole point of having an education system: learning is an ongoing process, and everyone has to start somewhere! And yet, there seems to be a gap in the capabilities that schools need and the skills new educators learn in their teacher prep programs. If there were greater collaboration between teacher preparation/certification programs and the administrators who hire these programs' graduates, this gap could narrow. New teachers would be more prepared to enter the classroom on their own, and districts would have more candidates who fit their definition of "qualified."

Some evidence behind this strategy: our survey found that the most *effective* (though not the most popular) recruitment channel for recruiting high-quality applicants is partnering with institutes of higher education and teacher prep programs. It was also reported to be one of the most effective channels for recruiting a higher number of applicants.

### Problem 2: Salary and benefits lacking compared to other careers

This is a tough one, because it could be solved by throwing money at the problem – but there simply isn't any money to throw. Districts operate on such limited budgets, and salaries and benefits already comprise on average **80% of their expenditures** ([https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cmb.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cmb.asp)). When other careers offer better salaries and benefits, it makes it more difficult to recruit new teachers or keep experienced educators in the profession.

There's no easy way around this. At its heart, this is a funding problem, not a budgetary one. A district may be able to make small gains by redesigning their teacher compensation systems, or coming up with innovative employee perks, but in the long term, this problem can only be solved by increased funding for K-12 education.

### Problem 3: Fewer new education school graduates

The third most common reason cited for the shortage is that institutes of higher education and teacher prep programs are **graduating fewer new teachers** (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/solutions/recruiting-hiring/insights/trends-in-teacher-preparation-programs/>). Whether undergraduate students shy away from the low salaries associated with teaching or they perceive that educators are treated unfairly by students, parents, or the community, education schools just aren't attracting as many enrollees as they used to.

*"People have little understanding of or respect for the work that teachers do. Few outside of education realize the pressure that has been placed on educators to continually do more with less 'for the good of the students.' Many districts have punitive evaluation systems that put the onus of learning on teachers rather than on students and require nothing of parents. Until these attitudes change, there will be fewer and fewer individuals choosing to become professional educators, more teachers will leave the profession due to disillusionment, and the teacher shortage will rage on."* – Survey Respondent

These are systemic issues that require a systemic solution.

But if there's one thing school systems *can* do, it's reach out to young people and spark an interest in a future profession. **As we've written before** (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/blog/a-different-kind-of-gardening-grow-your-own-teachers/>), Verona Area School District is a wonderful example of how districts can build their teacher pipelines through a Grow Your Own program.



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You may enjoy this hand-picked content:

[Podcast] Grow Your Own Teachers (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/insights/field-trip-podcast/episodes/grow-your-own-teachers/>)

## Looking Forward

Without a doubt, the teacher shortage is very real and very painful for the districts it affects. There's not much optimism to be had in the topic, either – over two-thirds of our survey respondents believe that it will become more difficult to find qualified teaching candidates in their district over the next three years. Only 7% believe the situation will improve.

But if there's one thing we have learned over the past year, it's that we never know what the future will bring, so it's always worth having hope.

To dive deeper into the results of our 2021 and 2015 teacher shortage surveys, **watch this webinar**

(<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/webinars/teacher-shortage-by-the-numbers/>). In it, we discuss things you can do in your district right now to support and retain your educators, including:

- Cultivating a safe, diverse (<https://www.frontlineeducation.com/insights/field-trip-podcast/episodes/school-workforce-diversity/>), and accepting environment for educators to grow
- Creating individualized growth paths and resources for educators
- Providing educators with measurable data for better planning around professional development

### *Annie Buttner*

Annie is a writer and part of the award-winning content team at Frontline Education. She's passionate about learning, exploring data and sharing knowledge. Her specialties include substitute management, the K-12 staffing shortage, and best practices in human capital management.

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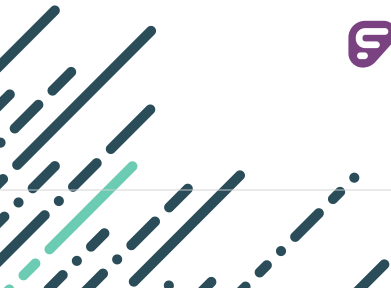




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