



## Policy Brief

# Impacting the Teaching Workforce



Throughout the nation, schools are struggling to attract and retain teachers. A 2022 working paper estimated between 36,500 and 52,800 vacant teaching positions in the United States,<sup>1</sup> while a study from October 2022 found that 45% of public schools have at least one teaching vacancy.<sup>2</sup>

Although this issue has become more visible since the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher shortages have existed for many years. These shortages are often localized, affecting some geographies, academic subjects, and demographic groups more severely than others.

Effective solutions to teacher shortages must acknowledge that each state, district, and school has specific needs. Policymakers need access to data that helps them understand the needs of the areas they serve. In addition, policies must address concerns about teacher pay and workload. Until these two problems are addressed, many teachers will continue to leave the profession, fewer individuals will want to become teachers, and American children will continue to suffer.

With more than 16,000 students currently enrolled in undergraduate teaching programs and over 81,000 bachelor's and master's degrees awarded through its Teachers College,\* Western Governors University (WGU) is committed to supporting teachers and preparing a teaching workforce that meets the needs of America's students. WGU engages in practices and advocates for policies that make becoming a teacher more affordable, achievable, and fulfilling.

## Key Factors in Teaching Shortages

**Fewer teachers are entering the profession.** While the COVID-19 pandemic is often seen as a primary cause of the teacher shortage, the number of individuals earning teaching degrees has been dwindling for many years. A 2022 report found that the number of students who completed traditional teacher education dropped by more than a third between 2008 and 2019.<sup>3</sup> Compounding the issue is the fact that “a large portion of those who complete traditional and nontraditional teacher preparation programs ultimately decide not to enter teaching or to leave the profession soon after entering.”<sup>4</sup>

**Teacher shortages are primarily caused by turnover.** About 90% of the annual demand for new teachers is due to turnover; the remaining demand comes from workforce growth.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projected that approximately 270,000 teachers would exit the profession each year between 2016 and 2026.<sup>6</sup> The BLS also projected that about 47% of the individuals who left teaching would make a permanent exit from the labor force, such as retirement,

while the remaining 53% would transfer to other occupations.<sup>7</sup> A more recent study found that turnover increased by 4% in 2021-22,<sup>8</sup> meaning that about 150,000 teachers are currently changing careers each year. Retaining just one-third of those 150,000 teachers could eliminate most, if not all, existing vacancies. In order to retain more teachers, policymakers must address major factors that lead to turnover, such as low compensation, burnout, and lack of support, especially for beginning teachers.

**The teacher pay gap has been growing for decades.** An analysis from the U.S. Census Bureau states that “Although teachers are among the nation’s most educated workers, they earn far less on average than most other highly educated workers and their earnings have declined since 2010.”<sup>9</sup> In 2021, a teacher’s weekly salary was about 23.5% lower than other college graduates; when benefits were included, teachers still made 14.1% less. In the mid-1990s, this payment gap was only about 5%.<sup>10</sup> Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were praised for their hard work and commitment to students. This recognition has not translated to widespread improvements in teacher pay.

**Many teachers struggle with high levels of stress and burnout.** When compared to other working adults, more teachers and principals report struggling with depression and job-related stress. Additionally, teachers report burnout more often than other working adults.<sup>11</sup> Top reasons cited for teacher stress include managing and supporting student learning and behavior, taking on extra work due to staff shortages, and coping with low salaries.<sup>12</sup>

**More information is needed to identify state and local needs.** Although teacher shortages exist throughout the nation, the severity of the problem varies from state to state and from school to school. As one study mentions, “Shortages can occur for individual schools even when there is a statewide surplus, and schools can enjoy a surplus of labor even when there is a statewide shortage.”<sup>13</sup> A report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that shortages vary based on geographic location, student demographics, and the subject being taught.<sup>14</sup> Improved state and local data can help pinpoint specific problems and implement effective policies. Unfortunately, many states and localities do not have sufficient data. In a recent working paper on the teaching shortage, the researchers found that realizing the extent of current data insufficiencies may have been their greatest takeaway.<sup>15</sup>

\*Student Compendium – Western Governors University Institutional Research (accessed March 27, 2023).

## Policy Recommendations and Examples

As long as teaching is considered a low-paying, high-stress career, the number of teachers entering the profession will continue to decrease and the number of those leaving will continue to grow. Effective policies must address these two elements while also developing programs and pathways that support new teachers. Additionally, comprehensive state and local data can help policymakers better understand local needs and implement effective policies to meet them.

**Effective teacher recruiting and training programs can diversify the workforce and increase retention.** Apprenticeships, residencies, mentorships, “grow your own” programs that focus on area residents and current school employees, and similar programs help bring teachers into the profession and provide a support structure that can lead to better retention. Some of these programs have also been shown to add needed diversity to the teaching profession.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, these programs can provide financial support for student teaching, which has traditionally been an unpaid position.

- **Iowa’s** Teacher & Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Program provides a no-cost opportunity for existing paraeducators to earn a bachelor’s degree while learning and working in the classroom. WGU is partnered with more than 60 mostly rural school districts in Iowa as an education provider for this program.<sup>17</sup>
- **Washington** offers a high school teacher academy, Recruiting Washington Teachers, which focuses on recruiting diverse students and supporting them in exploring and preparing for careers in education, especially in subject and geographic shortage areas.<sup>18</sup>
- Since 2003, the **Alaska** Statewide Mentor Project (ASMP) has given individualized support to first-and second-year teachers.<sup>19</sup> Of those who have participated in ASMP, 94% are still teaching after five years.<sup>20</sup>
- In 2022, **Tennessee** became the first state to offer a nationally recognized registered teaching apprenticeship program.<sup>21</sup> Tennessee’s program partners school districts with educational training providers. Apprentices receive a no-cost education and a paycheck from working in the district where they will ultimately teach.<sup>22</sup>
- The Teach **Nevada** Scholarship, created by the Nevada Legislature, supports students who are pursuing teaching careers. WGU has partnered with the Nevada Department of Education since 2015 to offer these scholarships.<sup>23</sup> Students receive 75% of the award while attending college and the remaining 25% after completing a program, teaching in a Nevada public school for five years, and meeting other state requirements.<sup>24</sup>

**Policymakers must prioritize teacher pay and well-being.** Because of their important role in educating America’s youth, teachers should be among the nation’s most valued professionals. States can confirm the importance of teachers by aligning their wages with those of similarly educated individuals. In addition, policies should support teacher wellness and provide teachers with time and resources to help reduce stress and burnout.

- In 2022, the **Mississippi** Legislature passed the state’s largest teacher pay raise,<sup>25</sup> implementing an annual raise of at least \$4,000 for all teachers.<sup>26</sup> This increase puts the state’s pay for starting teachers above regional and national averages.<sup>27</sup>
- **Washington** HB 1363, passed in 2021, requires “states and districts to develop educational resources, policies and procedures to prevent and address secondary traumatic stress,”<sup>28</sup> which can be experienced by teachers and staff working with students who experience trauma and loss.<sup>29</sup>

- The **South Carolina** General Assembly passed S. 946 in 2022, which guarantees each teacher 30 minutes of personal break time, free from meetings and other interruptions.<sup>30</sup>

**Using state data can help inform local needs and education workforce policies.** High-quality, area-specific data can help policymakers understand where needs are the greatest and develop policies and programs that most effectively meet these needs.

- In **Minnesota**, the Department of Education and the Professional Educator Licensure and Standards Board administered the Minnesota Survey of Preparation, Insight, and Retention, (MNSPIRE), an online survey of licensed teachers that measured preparation and retention to help gain a greater awareness of the factors that cause teachers to leave, or stay in, the profession.<sup>31</sup>
- **Louisiana’s** state legislature created the Teacher Recruitment, Recovery, and Retention Task Force in 2021.<sup>32</sup> The task force was charged with gathering data and other information to better understand current trends in Louisiana’s teacher workforce.<sup>33</sup>
- The Data Quality Campaign, a nonprofit advocacy organization, recently published Data 101: A Briefing Book for Policymakers on Education to Workforce Data. The briefing book includes information for policymakers and others on how educator preparation programs can utilize data to develop a stronger teaching workforce.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

In a 1969 survey, 75% of adults said they would like their children to become public school teachers in their communities. In 2022, that number dropped to 37%.<sup>35</sup> As these survey results demonstrate, public perception of the teaching profession has grown increasingly negative. This negative perception has contributed to a diminishing number of teachers, especially in certain geographic locations and areas of study. Effective public policy can help reverse these trends. WGU calls on policymakers to advocate for data-driven, area-specific measures that support quality teacher recruitment and retention, especially those that improve teacher salaries and give both current and future teachers the support they deserve.

## About WGU

Established in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors with a mission to expand access to high-quality, affordable higher education, online, nonprofit WGU now serves more than 130,000 students nationwide and has more than 287,000 graduates in all 50 states. Driving innovation as the nation’s leading competency-based university, WGU has been recognized by the White House, state leaders, employers, and students as a model that works in postsecondary education. In just 25 years, the university has become a leading influence in changing the lives of individuals and families while training the workforce needed in today’s rapidly evolving economy. WGU is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, has been named one of Fast Company’s Most Innovative Companies, and has been featured on NPR, NBC Nightly News and CNN and in The New York Times. Learn more at [wgu.edu](http://wgu.edu) and [wgu.edu/advocate](http://wgu.edu/advocate).

**Please contact the WGU Public Policy Office at [PublicPolicy@wgu.edu](mailto:PublicPolicy@wgu.edu) for more information.**

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Is There a National Teacher Shortage? A Systematic Examination of Reports of Teacher Shortages in the United States – Annenberg Institute at Brown University
- <sup>2</sup> School Pulse Panel – Institute of Education Sciences
- <sup>3</sup> Teacher Education Programs Desperately Seek Students – Inside Higher Ed
- <sup>4</sup> The Pandemic Has Exacerbated a Long-Standing National Shortage of Teachers – Economic Policy Institute
- <sup>5</sup> A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S. – Learning Policy Institute
- <sup>6</sup> Projections for Teachers: How Many Are Leaving the Occupation? – U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- <sup>7</sup> Projections for Teachers: How Many Are Leaving the Occupation? – U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- <sup>8</sup> Educator Turnover Has Markedly Increased, but Districts Have Taken Actions to Boost Teacher Ranks – RAND Corporation
- <sup>9</sup> Teachers Are Among Most Educated, Yet Their Pay Lags – United States Census Bureau
- <sup>10</sup> The Pandemic Has Exacerbated a Long-Standing National Shortage of Teachers – Economic Policy Institute
- <sup>11</sup> Restoring Teacher and Principal Well-Being Is an Essential Step for Rebuilding Schools: Findings from the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys – RAND Corporation
- <sup>12</sup> Restoring Teacher and Principal Well-Being Is an Essential Step for Rebuilding Schools: Findings from the State of the American Teacher and State of the American Principal Surveys – RAND Corporation
- <sup>13</sup> Teacher Shortages: A Unifying Framework for Understanding and Predicting Vacancies – Annenberg Institute at Brown University
- <sup>14</sup> K-12 Education: Education Should Assess Its Efforts to Address Teacher Shortages – United States Government Accountability Office
- <sup>15</sup> Is There a National Teacher Shortage? A Systematic Examination of Reports of Teacher Shortages in the United States – Annenberg Institute at Brown University
- <sup>16</sup> Analysis: Study of 6 'Grow Your Own' Teacher Prep Programs Shows How They Can Improve the Diversity of the Workforce – The 74; Building a Diverse Teacher Workforce – Education Commission of the States
- <sup>17</sup> WGU Named Strategic Partner in \$12.8 Million Grant – WGU
- <sup>18</sup> Recruiting Washington Teachers – Washington State Professional Standards Board; State Policy Levers to Address Teacher Shortages – Education Commission of the States
- <sup>19</sup> Alaska Statewide Mentor Project – University of Alaska; State Policy Levers to Address Teacher Shortages – Education Commission of the States
- <sup>20</sup> Alaska Statewide Mentor Project – University of Alaska
- <sup>21</sup> Tennessee Pioneers Permanent Program to Become a Teacher for Free, First State to Sponsor Registered Teacher Occupation Apprenticeship – Tennessee Department of Education
- <sup>22</sup> Tennessee's Teacher Apprenticeship: The What and Why – Tennessee Department of Education (YouTube )
- <sup>23</sup> WGU Nevada Offering \$240,000 in Teach Nevada Scholarships – Western Governors University
- <sup>24</sup> Teach Nevada Scholarships – State of Nevada Department of Education
- <sup>25</sup> HB 530 – Mississippi Legislature; Lawmakers Pass Largest Teacher Pay Raise in Mississippi History – Mississippi Today
- <sup>26</sup> House Bill 530: Teacher Pay – Mississippi First
- <sup>27</sup> Lawmakers Pass Largest Teacher Pay Raise in Mississippi History – Mississippi Today
- <sup>28</sup> 3 State Policy Levers to Support Teacher Mental Health – Education Commission of the States
- <sup>29</sup> Certification of Enrollment, Substitute House Bill 1363 – Washington Legislature
- <sup>30</sup> S. 946 – South Carolina General Assembly
- <sup>31</sup> About – Minnesota Survey of Preparation, Insight, and Retention of Educators
- <sup>32</sup> HCR 39 – Louisiana State Legislature; State Policy Levers to Address Teacher Shortages – Education Commission of the States
- <sup>33</sup> Teacher Recruitment, Recovery, and Retention Task Force Preliminary Report – Louisiana Board of Regents
- <sup>34</sup> 2022 PDK Poll – Phi Delta Kappan International
- <sup>35</sup> Data 101 – A Briefing Book for Policymakers on Education to Workforce Data – Data Quality Campaign