

2021 ILLINOIS EDUCATOR SHORTAGE SURVEY

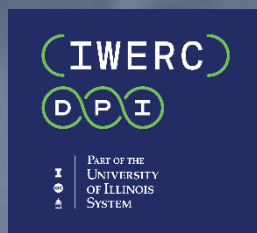
Illinois' Persistent Educator Shortage

Multiple Sources Point to the Same Conclusion

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ILLINOIS' PERSISTENT EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

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ABSTRACT

Data from the annual Educator Shortage Survey conducted by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools indicate that the burden on public schools to find qualified educators has not improved over recent years. Data from the Illinois State Board of Education further show that the pool of qualified teachers and administrators has not met the demand of districts and schools. It is imperative that policymakers invest in all parts of the educator pipeline from recruitment and preparation to induction and retention to support the development and maintenance of a highly qualified and diverse educator workforce statewide.

CONTEXT

An educator shortage exists across the state of Illinois, and the nation. Covered extensively in news outlets, policy papers, and research reports, this long-standing issue is the result of a complex amalgam of local, state, and national factors. Changes in government funding, economic conditions, educator recruitment and retention rates, and student enrollment, among other factors, come together to influence the educator labor market.^{3,4} For more than 20 years, the size of the educator workforce in Illinois has not sufficiently met the demand of public-school districts. Following a nearly decade-long downward trend in the early 2000s, the teacher shortage has steadily increased since 2010, with some fluctuation, reaching a peak in Fall 2019.^{5,6}

When an educator shortage such as this exists, districts and schools are unable to fill vacancies with qualified teachers and administrators who hold the license or certificate required for the position.⁷ In addition, since the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly began in 2020, educators have found themselves in heightened high-stress, precarious roles due to vacillating school conditions—the prolonged toll of which has led many stakeholders to speculate that the educator shortage may worsen.^{8,9}

As the pandemic continued into the 2021-22 academic year (AY), news of educator burnout, decreased student enrollment and attendance, canceled school days, and lack of essential staff such as bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians further fueled hypotheses about a “mass exodus” and “great resignation” among educators. This raises the question: What is the current nature and severity of the educator shortage? And, more specifically, has the shortage worsened in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

To answer these questions, we compared longitudinal data collected by multiple state organizations, including the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS)¹⁰ and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Our analyses focus on district superintendents’ perceptions of the teacher shortage and of pandemic-related consequences on staffing and class offerings (IARSS). We also weigh information related to unfilled (ISBE) and underfilled (IARSS) teacher positions, statewide teacher retention rates (ISBE), enrollment and completion of in-state teacher preparation programs (ISBE), and teacher retirement rates (TRS).

Our findings ultimately depict a complex picture of the educator workforce in which high-level, aggregated data corroborates administrators' on-the-ground perceptions of day-to-day operations, which were exacerbated by consequences due to the pandemic.

This report leads off a series of white papers that investigate different facets of the educator shortage. In this paper, we will focus on the teacher shortage. In subsequent papers, the focus will shift to consider the principal shortage, the intersection of geographic and content-specific teacher shortages, and employment patterns related to educator turnover in regions with shortages.

RESULTS

SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHER SHORTAGE

Results from the 2021 IARSS Illinois Educator Shortage Survey, hence referred to as the Educator Shortage Survey, indicate that a majority of responding district **superintendents perceive the teacher shortage to be a serious and persistent issue.**

For this study, 853 district superintendents were contacted in October 2021, and 663 (78% response rate) completed an online survey. Of the 663 participating districts,

- 88% reported a teacher shortage problem.
- 77% believe that the teacher shortage continues to get worse.
- 93% anticipate that the teacher shortage problem will persist into the 2022-23 AY.

"A lot of teachers quit right before the start of school. We are keeping teachers we never would have kept in the past."

-West Central Illinois Superintendent

More than half of the reporting districts from all population densities (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural¹¹) and from all but one region rated their teacher shortage as being a major to serious problem. Disaggregating the data by location reveals that areas of varying regions and population densities view the severity of the teacher shortage differently. A greater proportion of districts in rural areas reported major to serious problems (see Figure 1), as did the following regions, all of which serve large rural areas (see Figure 2): Northwest, West Central, East Central and Southeast. For reference, Figure 3 maps IARSS regions by county; Figure 4 depicts population densities by county; and Figure 5 illustrates district superintendents' perceptions of the shortage's severity broken out by county.

Figure 1. Percentage of superintendents who rated the teacher shortage as being a major to serious problem by population density.

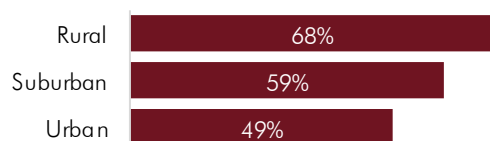


Figure 2. Percentage of superintendents who rated the teacher shortage as being a major to serious problem by region.

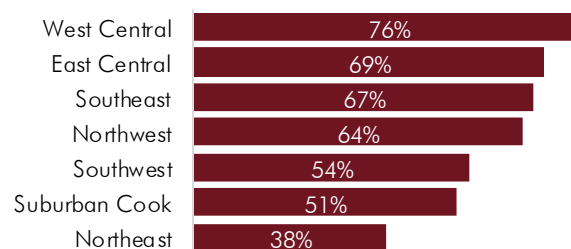


Figure 3. IARSS regions by county.

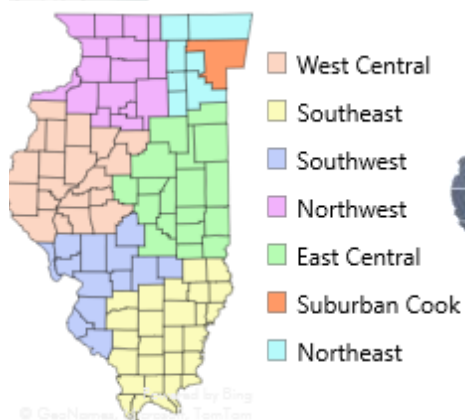


Figure 4. Population density of counties.

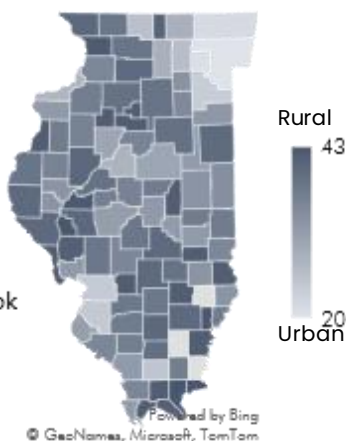
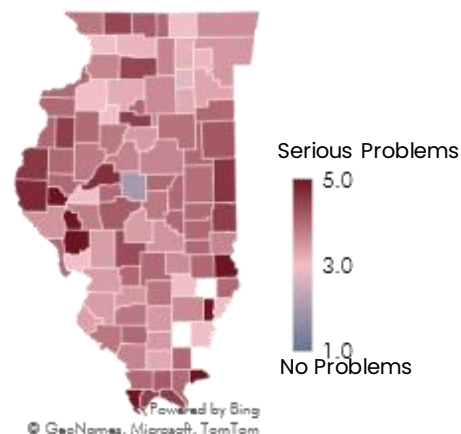


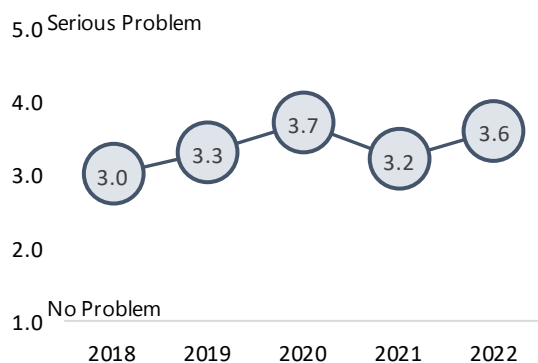
Figure 5. Superintendents' perceptions of teacher shortage severity by county.



PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHER SHORTAGE: LONGITUDINAL COMPARISON

Placing this year's findings in context, survey data suggest that participating superintendents' perceptions of the shortage for the 2021-22 AY increased from the 2020-21 AY on average. Prior to the 2020-21 AY, superintendents' perceptions steadily increased from 2017-18 to 2019-20, with a decrease in 2020-21. We note that this year's results approach, but are not higher than, pre-pandemic perceptions, indicating that the **teacher shortage has been a persistent worry for superintendents**. Figure 6 displays a 5-year trend in superintendents' average rating of the teacher shortage severity. (In Figure 6, and subsequent figures, each year refers to an entire AY. For example, 2022 refers to AY 2021-22, 2021 refers to AY 2020-21, etc.)

Figure 6. Superintendents' average rating of the teacher shortage.



"There was a teacher shortage before the pandemic. There are few if any candidates for open positions. That has not changed with COVID-19. The greatest impact of COVID-19 has been on our ability to hire non-certified staff this year. We are competing with every other field/industry that has employee shortages."

-West Central Illinois Superintendent

UNFILLED AND UNDERFILLED POSITIONS¹²

The Educator Shortage Survey measures the number of positions that are both unfilled (i.e., vacant) or underfilled with an under-qualified hire.¹³ For the 2021-22 AY, school districts reported that of the 12,000 open teacher positions they posted, 2,040 (17%) remained unfilled or underfilled. Because 78% of school districts (663 of 853) took part in this year's survey, the total number of unfilled and underfilled teacher positions across the state, for the 2021-22 AY, is likely higher.

For the 2020-21 AY, school districts reported that of the 5,414 open teacher positions they posted, 938 (17%) remained unfilled or underfilled, but with 69% of school districts (591 of 853) responding.

From one perspective, the shortage appears no worse, as the percentage of unfilled and underfilled positions remained at 17%. From another perspective, the shortage in absolute numbers appears to have drastically increased, from 938 to 2,040 unfilled and underfilled positions. This is likely not explainable by the increase in response rate alone. These unfilled and underfilled positions represent a serious net increase in unmet need.

As additional points of comparison, we looked at 5-year trends from ISBE’s administrative data on unfilled and filled full-time teacher positions, which are publicly available for the 2020-21 AY and prior AYs. However, whereas the Educator Shortage Survey captures both unfilled and underfilled teacher positions, ISBE only measures unfilled teacher positions. Figure 7 presents data from ISBE’s Unfilled Positions report.¹⁴ While the number of unfilled teacher positions increased from 2016-17 to 2019-20, it dropped in 2020-21.

Figure 7. Total number of unfilled full-time teaching positions statewide (ISBE Unfilled Positions report).



Figure 8. Total number of filled full-time teaching positions statewide, in thousands (ISBE Illinois Report Card).



Figure 9. Unfilled full-time teacher positions as percent of reported total filled and unfilled full-time teacher positions (ISBE Unfilled Positions report and ISBE Illinois Report Card).



“For the first time in my career, I have funds (through federal grants) that have given me the financial resources I need to staff my buildings how I would like them staffed. Unfortunately, I have had to fill these positions with staff who I believe are not necessarily going to be successful, simply because they were the only candidate. We have smaller class sizes now, which is great, but if the person teaching those classes is less than qualified, I fear the educational outcomes will be no different than when we had very qualified people teaching larger classes.”

-Southwest Illinois Superintendent

We also pulled the number of filled teacher positions from the Illinois Report Card. As displayed in Figure 8, the total number of full-time teacher positions increased from 2016-17 to 2020-21, except for 2017-18.¹⁵

Tying these two ISBE reports together, it appears that the percentage of unfilled teacher positions, out of the total number of teacher positions (i.e., the sum of unfilled and filled teacher positions), rose by 0.7 percentage points from 2016-17 to 2019-20 and then dropped 0.2 percentage points from 2019-20 to 2020-21 (see Figure 9).

This trend is reflected in district superintendents’ perceptions of the shortage severity (see Figure 6), which rose from 2017-18 to 2019-20 and then dropped in 2020-21.

REPERCUSSIONS OF UNFILLED AND UNDERFILLED POSITIONS

When faced with the challenge of staffing unfilled teacher positions, district and school administrators become forced to make difficult decisions that affect school communities, working conditions, and most importantly, students and their families. The options administrators have to fill these vacancies are far from optimal. One method is to modify the classes offered by increasing class sizes, canceling classes, and converting classes to online instruction. The 2021 Educator Shortage Survey, for example, found that 412 classes were canceled and 385 were converted to online instruction for the 2021-22 AY because of teacher shortage issues in responding districts.

Another method is to fill vacancies with teachers who are licensed or certified in other areas (i.e., out-of-field placements). In instances when administrators cannot find an out-of-field placement, one critical resource administrators often turn to is the substitute teacher pool.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE SUBSTITUTE SHORTAGE

Because short- and long-term substitute teachers occupy an integral role in the Illinois public school system, the Educator Shortage Survey probes superintendents' experiences with and views on the substitute teacher pool. We cannot compare the superintendents' views presented here with data from ISBE because their publicly released data does not include information on substitute teachers.

Findings from the 2021 Educator Shortage Survey indicate that a majority of responding district superintendents also perceive the substitute teacher shortage to be a serious and persistent issue.

Of the 663 participating districts,

- 96% reported a substitute teacher shortage problem.
- 90% believe that the substitute teacher shortage is worse in the current AY.
- 95% anticipate that the substitute teacher shortage problem will persist into the 2022-23 AY.

Disaggregating the data by location reveals that the substitute shortage is widespread. Geographic areas of varying regions and population densities (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural) have relatively the same views on the substitute teacher shortage severity. The proportion of districts—by region and by population density—that reported minor to serious problems ranged from 95% to 100%.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Amid the prolonged and politically charged COVID-19 pandemic, districts and school communities have found themselves in a perpetual state of flux. The public health emergency forced many schools to shift to online learning for the remainder of the 2019-20 AY, and during the 2020-21 AY, schools adopted a variety of learning formats from remaining remote, to shifting to a hybrid model, to moving to in-person learning.

“COVID-19 has decimated the climate and culture of my buildings. Employees are angry, exhausted, and ready to turn toward other careers.”

-Southwest Illinois Superintendent

“The number of substitutes needed has increased—the number of substitutes available has not necessarily increased. Admin has subbed on numerous occasions and teachers are doubling up classes to make up for the lack of subs.”

-Southeast Illinois Superintendent

The current 2021-22 AY, thus far, has posed new challenges as school leadership, teachers, and families are asked to adjust and readjust to the new realities of returning to in-person learning. On top of the educator and essential staff shortage, surges in COVID-19 cases, staff and student quarantines, and the Omicron variant have brought about chaotic day-to-day climates in which teachers and administrators are filling in whenever and wherever needed.

Findings from the Educator Shortage Survey reflect some of the difficulties superintendents experienced in Fall 2021. In particular, 49% of superintendents reported that pandemic-related educator burnout led to increased teacher turnover.

In contrast, during the 2020-21 AY, 22% of 591 participating districts reported that pandemic-related educator burnout led to increased teacher turnover. Additionally, in last year’s survey, more districts (67%) decreased the number of substitutes hired.

Nevertheless, despite increased burnout and teacher turnover, a majority of participating districts saw an uptick in the number of educators they hired for the 2021-22 AY. In fact,

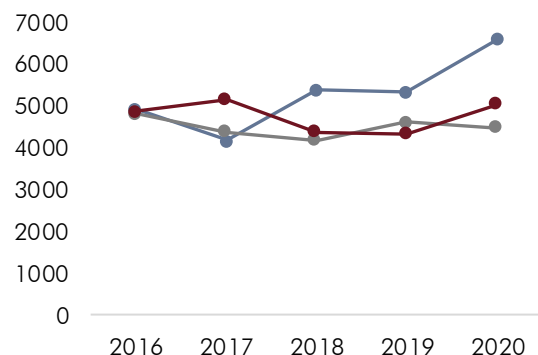
- 74% of superintendents disagreed that the logistical concerns created by the pandemic decreased the number of educators employed in their district—representing a 4% increase from last year’s survey.
- 61% increased the number of teachers hired in response to the pandemic—up 24% from last year.
- 61% increased the number of paraprofessionals hired in response to the pandemic—up 21% from last year.

Growing and Maintaining the Teacher Workforce

TEACHER PREPARATION

The early teacher pipeline directly contributes to the size of the educator workforce, and one major indicator of the future supply of teachers is the number of students who are enrolled in and complete teacher preparation programs.¹⁶ Data from ISBE’s Illinois Educator Preparation Profiles indicate that new enrollment in teacher preparation programs increased in the 2017-18 and 2019-20 AYs. Completion of and active enrollments in teacher preparation programs remained relatively steady from 2015-16 to 2019-20 (see Figure 10).¹⁷

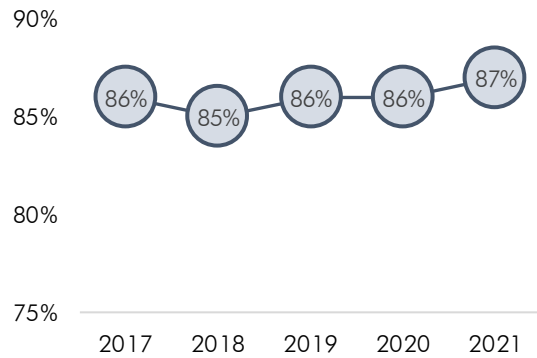
Figure 10. Student new enrollments, active enrollments, and completions of Illinois education programs at state institutions of higher education.



TEACHER RETENTION AND TURNOVER

Once schools successfully recruit and hire teachers, another integral factor to consider when evaluating the teacher shortage is teacher retention. Defined as the “three-year average of the percentage of full-time teachers returning to the same school from the previous year,” the Illinois Report Card shows that teacher retention rates across the state have remained relatively stable over the past 5 years, reaching a high of 87.1% in 2020-21 (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Statewide average teacher retention rates. (ISBE Illinois Report Card).



At the district level, however, retention rates for 2020-21 vary substantially, ranging from 45.8% to 100%.¹⁸ Variations in retention rates subsequently imply variations in turnover rates. Turnover rates refer to the percentage of teachers who leave their positions by moving between schools or leaving the profession.¹⁹ Although some teacher turnover can be expected (e.g., retirements), the implications of high turnover rates can be detrimental for districts and schools.

Teacher turnover can affect a school’s financial resources, as the replacement process requires recruitment, hiring, and training;²⁰ staff culture, as retained staff must constantly mentor and build working relationships with new teachers;²¹ and instructional cohesion, as turnover can affect teachers’ ability to collaborate and implement an effective curriculum.²⁰ Put simply, teacher turnover can affect a school’s entire ecosystem, which has been shown to negatively impact student learning, especially for low-performing and Black students.²²

TEACHER RETIREMENT

In the 2021 Educator Shortage Survey, teacher retirement was ranked as the top reason why districts posted open positions, followed by resignation and the creation of a new position. According to the Teachers’ Retirement System (TRS) of the State of Illinois, the total number of retirements has increased since the pandemic started, with fiscal years (July through June) 2019-20 and 2020-21 seeing more retirements than 2018-19. However, these numbers are relatively equivalent to pre-pandemic retirement totals when taking into account retirements during the fiscal years 2016-17 and 2017-18 (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Number of teachers retiring (TRS).



CONCLUSIONS

Results from the Educator Shortage Survey indicate that district superintendents’ perceptions of the teacher shortage during the current 2021-22 AY worsened compared to the previous AY on average. A 5-year comparison shows that their worry is chronic.

Longitudinal administrative data from ISBE on unfilled and filled full-time teacher positions match year-to-year changes in district superintendents’ perceptions of the teacher shortage severity. We calculated the percentage of unfilled full-time teacher positions relative to the total number of teacher positions (i.e., a sum of unfilled and filled teacher positions) and found that both this percentage and superintendents’ average rating of the severity shortage increased from 2017-18 to 2019-20 and decreased in 2020-21.

In the fall of the 2021-22 AY, districts responding to the Educator Shortage Survey reported that 2,040 teacher positions remained unfilled or underfilled. Because this figure accounts for just 78% of

school districts statewide, the total number of unfilled and underfilled teacher positions across the state is likely higher. Furthermore, according to Educator Shortage Survey data, it is likely that the total number of unfilled and underfilled teacher positions increased from 2020-21 to 2021-22, indicating that the teacher shortage worsened from the previous AY. It will be important to see if 2021-22 data from ISBE confirm this finding.

The Educator Shortage Survey also probes superintendents' perspectives on the substitute teacher pool, as substitutes represent an essential part of the educator workforce. An overwhelming majority of district superintendents reported a worsening substitute teacher shortage from the 2020-21 AY and anticipate that the problem will continue into the next AY.

To provide a more holistic picture of the teacher workforce, we also analyzed enrollment and completion of in-state teacher preparation programs, statewide teacher retention rates, and teacher retirement numbers. Acknowledging minor fluctuations in the data, completion of teacher preparation programs and statewide teacher retention rates have remained relatively stable over the past 5 years. And although teacher retirements have risen since the pandemic started, these numbers are comparable to pre-pandemic totals. Of note, however, is new enrollment in teacher preparation programs. New enrollments rose in recent years, which could potentially bode well for the future supply of teachers. It will be important to see whether this trend continues into the 2020-21 AY.

In sum, the educator shortage in Illinois is a historic, persistent problem that will likely continue to negatively impact district and school communities unless local and state leaders develop targeted strategies to support and augment the current teacher workforce. Looking forward, it is imperative that policymakers **invest in all parts of the educator pipeline** from educator recruitment and preparation to educator induction and retention. For specific policy recommendations developed by IARSS, please refer to the 2021 Educator Shortage Report.²³

ENDNOTES

¹ Shereen Oca Beilstein, Senior Research Associate, IWERC. Dr. Beilstein is an educational psychology researcher, whose interests span STEM education, developmental psychology, and the learning sciences. At Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), Shereen researches the factors that support recruitment and retention of a diverse, high-quality teacher workforce in Illinois.

² Tom Withee, Senior Researcher, Goshen Education Consulting, Inc. Tom Withee is an educational researcher and program evaluator with expertise in STEM education and data visualization.

³ Dee, T., Goldhaber, D. (2017). *Understanding and addressing teacher shortages in the United States* (Hamilton Project Report 2017-05). The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/es_20170426_understanding_and_addressing_teacher_shortages_in_us_pp_dee_goldhaber.pdf.

⁴ Guarino, C. M., Santibanez, L., & Daley, G. A. (2006). Teacher recruitment and retention: A review of the recent empirical literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 76(2), 173-208.

⁵ Illinois State Board of Education (2011, 2014, 2017, 2020). *Educator Supply and Demand*. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/edsupplydemand>.

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- ⁶ Illinois State Board of Education (2021). *Unfilled Positions*. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/unfilledpositions>.
- ⁷ Sutchter, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.* Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching>.
- ⁸ Illinois Education Association. (2020, Nov. 11). *One-third of Illinois educators considering leaving profession in midst of COVID-19 pandemic* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://ieanea.org/2020/11/11/one-third-of-illinois-educators-considering-leaving-profession-in-midst-of-covid-19-pandemic/>.
- ⁹ Steiner, E. D., & Woo, A. (2021). *Job-related stress threatens the teacher supply: Key findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html.
- ¹⁰ The Illinois Educator Shortage Survey, now in its fifth consecutive year, was designed to capture school district superintendents' perceptions of the educator workforce across the state. Conducted by IARSS in collaboration with the Illinois State University Center for the Study of Education Policy and Goshen Education Consulting, the annual survey assesses the impact of the educator supply—focusing specifically on teachers, substitutes, and administration—on day-to-day, district operations such as open positions and class offerings. The IARSS study for the 2021-22 AY had a 78% response rate from districts all across the state of Illinois but does not include responses from Chicago Public Schools. While several Special Education Districts/Cooperatives and Vocational Districts/Schools respond to the survey, their responses are not included as part of the full report or in this paper.
- ¹¹ Counties were classified as rural, suburban, or urban based on their Percent Rural Population from the 2010 census. 0 - 9% rural were classified as urban; 9 – 40% rural were classified as suburban, more than 40% rural were classified as rural.
- ¹² A previous version of this white paper contained an incorrect figure, which inaccurately reported that the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Unfilled Positions report contained information about academic years (AYs) 2017-18 through 2021-22. However, ISBE has yet to release their report for the 2021-22 AY, and the Unfilled Positions report only provides data up to 2020-21. In the updated version of this white paper, we have corrected the corresponding figure (now Figure 7) and related text. We apologize for the error and have taken care to update the results and conclusions to reflect this important change in the data.
- ¹³ IARSS defines open teacher positions as positions a school district posted to be filled for the 2021-22 AY.
- ¹⁴ ISBE conducts the annual Unfilled Positions Survey in October. The state defines an unfilled position as “any budgeted licensed education staff position a district was unable to fill as of October 1 of the current school year. Non-licensed positions are not included.” See <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/2021-Unfilled-Positions-Webinar.pdf>. Figures 7, 8 and 9 include only schools that are part of the Illinois Report Card which excludes Special Education Districts/Cooperatives and Vocational Districts/Schools.
- ¹⁵ Data from the 2021-2022 AY will not be released until late Fall 2022.

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- ¹⁶ Goldhaber, D., & Holden, K. (2020). *Understanding the Early Teacher Pipeline: What We Can (and, Importantly, Can't) Learn from National Data*. (CALDER Policy Brief No. 21-1120). Washington, D.C.: National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.
- ¹⁷ Data about student enrollment and completion in education preparation programs were provided from the Illinois State Board of Education via personal communication, January 14, 2022. The data shown here include new and active enrollees. The data shown here are single counts of individuals as opposed to counts of program participants. Publicly available data can be retrieved from <https://apps.isbe.net/epp/public#/state-report>.
- ¹⁸ We excluded charter schools from this analysis because they operate under different policies and more flexibility than public schools. Compared to previous years, the variation in teacher retention at the district level for the 2020-21 AY is consistent with 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 AYs.
- ¹⁹ Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover-report>.
- ²⁰ Barnes, G., Crowe, E., & Schaefer, B. (2007). *The cost of teacher turnover in five school districts: A pilot study*. National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497176.pdf>.
- ²¹ Guin, K. (2004). Chronic teacher turnover in urban elementary schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 12(42). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v12n42.2004>.
- ²² Ronfelt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4-36.
- ²³ For IARSS policy recommendations, see the 2021 Educator Shortage Survey report here: <https://iarss.org/2021-educator-shortage/>.