

2021 ILLINOIS EDUCATOR SHORTAGE SURVEY

Illinois' Persistent Educator Shortage

Support Staff Shortages During a Time of
Crisis

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ILLINOIS' PERSISTENT EDUCATOR SHORTAGE

SUPPORT STAFF SHORTAGES DURING A TIME OF CRISIS

Shereen Oca Beilstein¹, Tom Withee²

ABSTRACT

The annual Educator Shortage Survey, conducted by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools, indicates that shortages of support personnel (e.g., school counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and speech-language pathologists) were severe for the 2021-22 academic year. Districts are struggling to fill open positions in these areas throughout the state and at all grade levels. These positions provide much-needed support for students as schools respond to the impacts of COVID-19. Findings highlight the importance of strategic efforts that develop and retain a highly qualified and diverse educator workforce statewide.

CONTEXT

Teacher shortages encumber public school communities in Illinois and across the nation.^{3, 4, 5, 6} District and school leadership have long struggled to hire teachers who are adequately qualified for open positions, often in specific content areas such as bilingual education, English as a second language, and special education.^{7, 8, 9} Unfortunately, staff shortages extend beyond teachers. They affect school support personnel, or support personnel for brevity, a category of specialized staff that includes school psychologists, social workers, and guidance counselors, among others.

Support personnel play a critical role within a school's ecosystem by contributing to students' cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional development, physical and mental health, and overall well-being.¹⁰ Recent reports have shown that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, student outcomes ranging from mental health to learning have declined.^{11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16} This research emphasizes the need for all students—especially students who represent historically marginalized communities—to have sufficient access to support personnel.

When support personnel positions are not filled in schools, teachers and administrators—many of whom are already experiencing increased levels of burnout and stress—often step in to help when possible.^{17, 18} Most teachers and administrators, however, lack the specialized training and knowledge support personnel bring to their school communities.

In this report, we examine current support personnel shortages in five areas: school counselor, school nurse, school psychologist, school social worker, and speech-language pathologist (SLP).¹⁹ The analysis is based on the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools' (IARSS) annual Educator Shortage Survey, which includes data on the unfilled (i.e., job openings that remain vacant) and underfilled (i.e., job openings occupied by under-qualified, substitute, or outsourced hires) support personnel positions that participating districts reported for the 2021-22 academic year (AY).²⁰

Current and historical Educator Shortage Survey data show that districts and schools are continuing to experience difficulty hiring qualified support personnel. Our goal with this report is to provide stakeholders, policymakers, leadership, and aspiring educators with information that can support decisions about which specializations and regions to prioritize and how to allocate resources.

OUR APPROACH: TOTAL VERSUS PERCENTAGE

We use the same methods in this report as in the Chronic Teacher Shortages series, analyzing support personnel positions in five areas: counselor, nurse, psychologist, social worker, and SLP. Continuing readers may skip ahead to the Results. We repeat the methods here for new readers.

In Fall 2021, 663 of 853 district superintendents (78% response rate) completed the annual IARSS 2021 Illinois Educator Shortage Survey, hence referred to as the Educator Shortage Survey. Responding districts are located across Illinois, but Chicago Public Schools is among those districts that did not participate.²¹

As part of the survey, district superintendents identified (1) the number and type of open positions they posted for the 2021-22 AY as well as (2) how those positions were filled, whether by a qualified hire, an under-qualified hire, a substitute, an outsourced hire, or if they were left vacant (i.e., an unfilled position). The Educator Shortage Survey defined an under-qualified hire as a licensed educator who is not endorsed for a specific area, such as a teacher with a Professional Educator License who is fulfilling the duties of a counselor. A substitute was defined as a long-term hire who is not a licensed educator, such as a substitute filling in for a parental leave.²² An outsourced hire was defined as a long-term hire who is provided by a third-party contractor, such as a district utilizing a staffing agency's employees. For most of our analyses, we collapse under-qualified, substitute, and outsourced hires (i.e., underfilled positions) with unfilled positions and refer to this aggregated group as **un/underfilled positions**.

To understand how the existing teacher workforce may not meet the specific hiring demands of districts and schools in Fall 2021 for the 2021-22 AY, we measure open support personnel data—at the district level—in two ways:^{23, 24}

1. For the open positions posted, the total number of un/underfilled positions in a specific area.²⁵
2. For the open positions posted, the percentage of un/underfilled positions in a specific area out of the total number of open positions posted for this area.²⁶

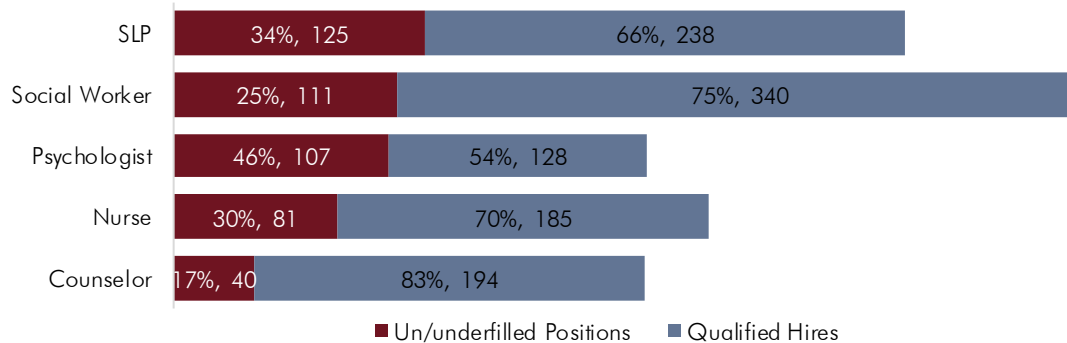
RESULTS

The Educator Shortage Survey indicates that of the 1,549 open support personnel positions responding districts were attempting to hire for the 2021-22 AY, 464 (30%) were reported un/underfilled. In fact, historical data reveal that shortages have existed—with fluctuation—in these areas dating back to the Educator Shortage Survey's inaugural year during the 2017-18 AY.²⁷ Here, we present on the following findings for the 2021-22 AY: (1) the magnitude of un/underfilled support personnel positions; (2) where the reported un/underfilled positions are geographically located; (3) the unmet demand for support personnel by grade band; and (4) the breakdown of un/underfilled positions by hiring method.

What Is the General Demand for Support Personnel?

All five support personnel areas are greatly impacted by staffing challenges due to high total numbers and percentages of un/underfilled positions (Figure 1): SLP (125 - total number un/underfilled, 34% - percentage un/underfilled), social worker (111, 25%), psychologist (107, 46%), nurse (81, 30%), and counselor (40, 17%). These data suggest that there is high demand in these areas, and districts are having difficulty finding qualified personnel.

Figure 1. Total number and percentage of support personnel positions reported un/underfilled compared to number and percentage of qualified hires.



Where Are Support Personnel Needed Geographically?

Similar to findings on teacher shortages, different pictures of support personnel shortages emerge based on the two measures utilized. Using total number of un/underfilled positions indicates greater severity in more densely populated areas (Figure 2), with the highest demand found in Cook County (110, 35%; please note that Chicago Public Schools did not participate). Using percentage of un/underfilled positions indicates greater severity in rural areas (Figure 3), particularly in the northwest, including Carroll (7, 100%) and Lee (1, 100%) counties; in central Illinois, including McDonough (3, 100%), Pike (2, 100%), Logan (6, 100%), and Shelby (10, 100%) counties; and in the southeast, including Clay (2, 100%) and Lawrence (4, 100%) counties.²⁸

Figure 2. Total number of posted support personnel positions reported un/underfilled.

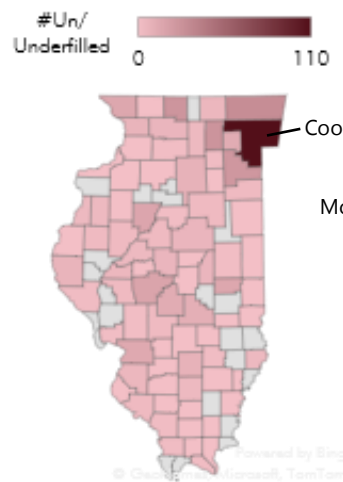
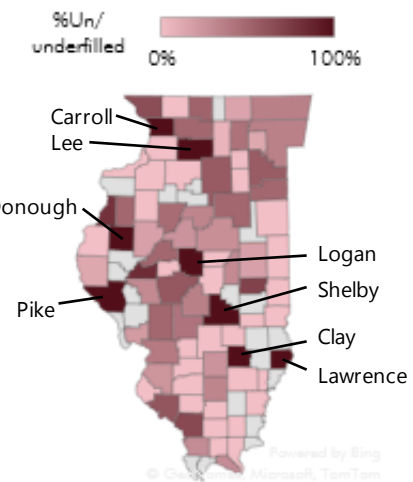


Figure 3. Percentage of posted support personnel positions reported un/underfilled.



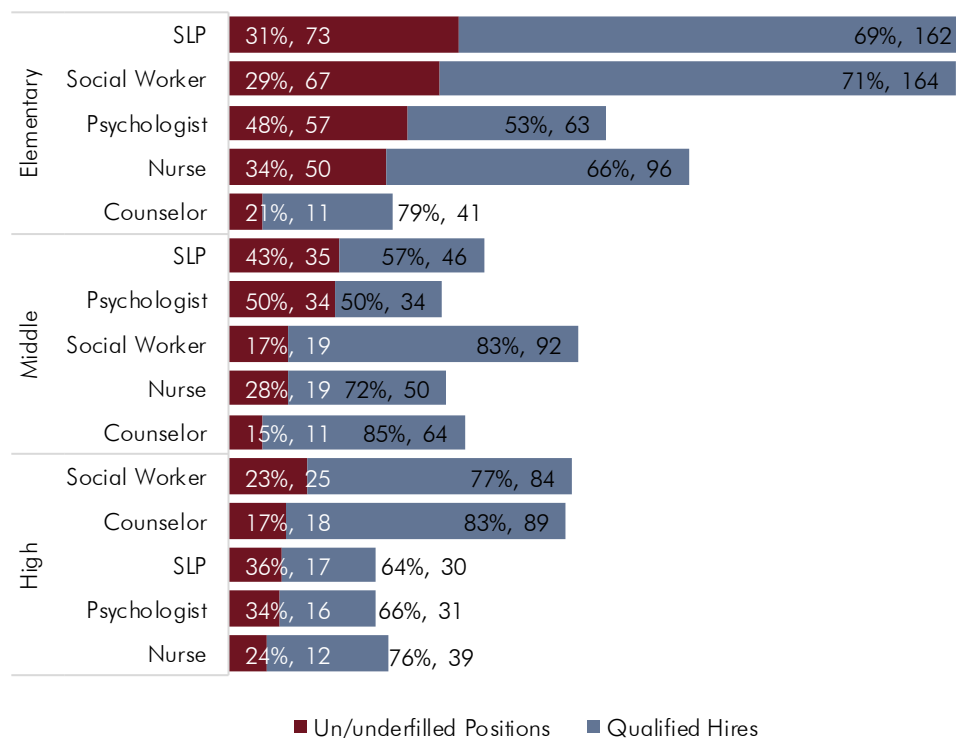
What Is the Demand for Support Personnel by Grade Band?

Results indicate that the hiring needs for support personnel differ by grade bands (Figure 4). The largest demand for support personnel comes from elementary schools, with the highest number of

posted positions and un/underfilled positions for SLP (**235** - total number of posted positions in **bold**, *73* - total number of un/underfilled positions in *italics*), social worker (**231**, *67*), psychologist (**120**, *57*), and nurse (**146**, *50*). The highest percentage of un/underfilled positions is found for psychologists at the elementary and middle school levels, at 48% and 50% respectively. Subsequently, the percentage of un/underfilled SLP positions for all grade levels is also high at 31% for elementary, 43% for middle, and 36% for high school.

In general, the percentage of un/underfilled positions across all support personnel areas within grade bands is substantial, ranging from 15% to 50%. These high percentages of un/underfilled positions indicate that schools across grade bands are struggling to fill open support personnel positions with qualified hires, but to varying degrees.

Figure 4. Total number and percentage of support personnel positions reported un/underfilled compared to number and percentage of qualified hires by grade band.



Note: Figure 4 is arranged in descending order of number of support personnel positions reported un/underfilled within each grade band.

What Is the Breakdown of Hiring Methods for Un/Underfilled Support Personnel Positions?

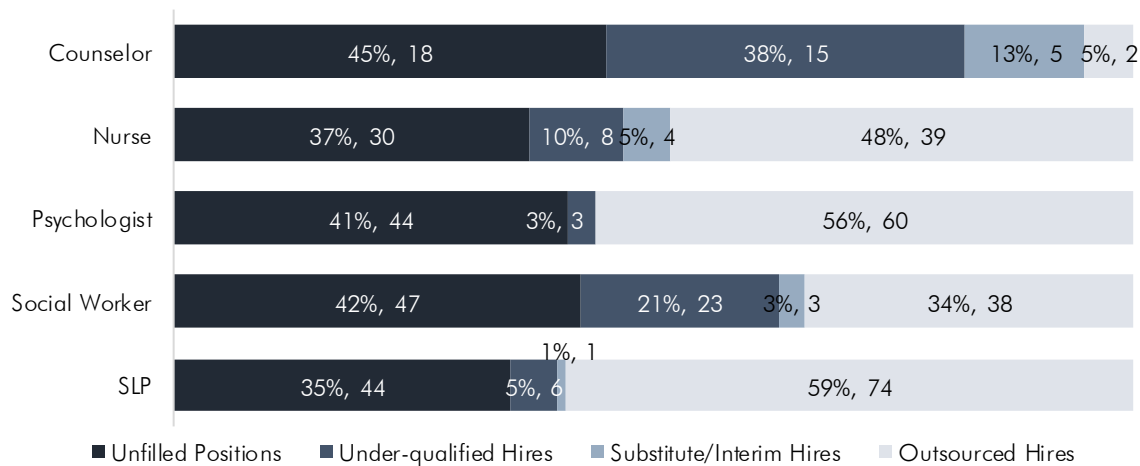
The Educator Shortage Survey captures detailed information about the different hiring methods districts used to address un/underfilled support personnel positions (Figure 5), which include staffing an under-qualified hire, a substitute hire, an outsourced hire (these three methods are subsumed under the category of *underfilled* positions in this report), or leaving the position vacant (i.e., an unfilled position).

We highlight several key findings. First, the amounts of unfilled positions for all support personnel areas are concerning, ranging from 18 to 47 for total number and from 35% to 45% for percentage of unfilled positions. Second, with the exception of counselor, the amount of outsourced positions is considerable across all support personnel areas: nurse (39 - total number outsourced, 48% - percentage outsourced), school psychologist (60, 56%), social worker (38, 34%), and SLP (74, 59%). Moreover, the proportion of outsourced positions, as compared to each of the remaining un/underfilled options, is the largest for SLP (59%), psychologist (56%), and nurse (48%).

We note that the levels of outsourcing for support personnel are significantly higher than the levels found for outsourcing teachers.²⁹ To illustrate, approximately 46% of un/underfilled support personnel positions (213 outsourced positions of 464 un/underfilled positions)—across all five areas—were outsourced for the 2021-22 AY. By comparison, only 7% of un/underfilled teacher positions (97 outsourced positions of 1,376 un/underfilled positions)—across all content areas—were outsourced for the same AY. One possible explanation for the higher number of outsourced support personnel is that they may provide special education services that are mandated by state and federal laws. In other words, if districts and schools are unable to hire the adequate support personnel required to meet the special education needs of their students, then administrators often turn to outsourcing to fulfill state and federal obligations. Another possibility is that districts and schools may have more outsourcing options for support personnel compared to teachers.

The means by which schools outsource support personnel can include working with (1) third-party staffing agencies, which are private companies that manage employee recruitment, hiring, payroll, and benefits, among other responsibilities; (2) special education joint agreements, which are cooperatives formed by multiple school districts that provide the participating districts' students access to specialized programs and services; (3) and local mental health facilities, which may extend their services to surrounding schools. Outsourcing, at times, may end up costing districts and schools more money than contracting with support personnel directly. For example, a superintendent of a rural school district said that the costs associated with outsourcing a social worker are higher than the costs would be if the social worker were hired directly (e.g., \$241 per day when hiring in-house vs. \$358 per day when outsourcing, representing a nearly 49% increase).

Figure 5. Support personnel shortages by proportion of un/underfilled hiring method.



CONCLUSION

Results from the annual IARSS Educator Shortage Survey reveal a acute and persistent support personnel shortages, as districts across the state reported challenges staffing open counselor, nurse, psychologist, social worker, and SLP positions. Though shortages exist across all five specialization areas, districts, and schools exceedingly need qualified SLPs, psychologists, social workers, and nurses.

Support Personnel Shortages by Geographic Region

Geographic analyses of shortage severity indicate that urban districts have higher numbers of un/underfilled support personnel positions, whereas rural districts tend to have larger percentages of un/underfilled positions. Although urban districts dictate a higher demand, due in part to serving larger student populations, they are generally able to fill greater proportions of their open support personnel positions than rural districts. It is important to understand that both types of districts are struggling to hire qualified support personnel, just in varying capacities.

Support Personnel Shortages by Grade Band

Grade-band analyses show that the highest overall demand for support personnel comes from elementary schools, and it is driven by large shortages in the areas of SLP, social worker, psychologist, and nurse. For all grade bands, however, the percentage of un/underfilled positions is substantial across all areas, reiterating the fact that districts and schools are struggling to fill open support personnel positions with qualified hires. This finding is especially salient for school psychologist positions at the elementary and middle school levels and for SLP positions at all grade levels.

Addressing Unfilled Support Personnel Positions

The numbers and percentages of open support personnel positions that remain unfilled, or vacant, are troubling. The repercussions of these vacancies can result in diminished student access to vital support personnel during a time when—due to the pandemic—students may need these specialists the most. Just as with teacher shortages, targeted strategies are needed to boost the supply of support personnel in specializations and geographic regions with deep shortages, as many of these shortages impact students who represent historically marginalized communities. For specific short- and long-term policy recommendations developed by IARSS, please refer to the 2021 Educator Shortage Report.³⁰

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Shereen Oca Beilstein, Research Specialist, 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 Illinois State Board of Education. (2022). Unfilled positions 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/unfilledpositions>.
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- ⁵ U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Teacher shortage areas. Retrieved from <https://tsa.ed.gov/#/home/>.
- ⁶ Jacobs, S., & Olson, L. (2021). In demand: The real teacher shortages and how to solve them. Washington, D.C.: FutureEd. Retrieved <https://www.future-ed.org/in-demand-the-real-teacher-shortages-and-how-to-solve-them/>.
- ⁷ Advance Illinois. (2020). Illinois' educator pipeline: Fall 2019 data analysis, challenges, and opportunities. Retrieved from <https://www.advanceillinois.org/research-hub/strong-diverse-educator-pipeline>.
- ⁸ Illinois State Board of Education. (2020). Educator supply and demand. Retrieved from <https://www.isbe.net/edsupplydemand>.
- ⁹ Beilstein, S. O., & Withee, T. (2022). Chronic teacher shortages: Part 1—content and geographic areas with high need. Chicago, IL: Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative, Discovery Partners Institute, University of Illinois and Goshen Education Consulting, Inc. Retrieved from <https://iarss.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ChonicTeacher.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ For more information about school support personnel, please see <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/training-technical-assistance/roles/school-support-staff>.
- ¹¹ Jones, S.E., Ethier, K. A., Hertz, M., et al. (2022). Mental health, suicidality, and connectedness among high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic — Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021. *MMWR*, 71(Supplement 3), 16–21. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7103a3.htm?s_cid=su7103a3_w.
- ¹² Goldhaber, D., Kane, T., Mceachin, A., & Morton, E. (2022). A comprehensive picture of achievement across the COVID-19 pandemic years: Examining variation in test levels and growth across districts, schools, grades, and students. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. Retrieved from <https://caldercenter.org/publications/comprehensive-picture-achievement-across-covid-19-pandemic-years-examining-variation>.
- ¹³ Halloran, C., Jack, R., Okun, J. C., Oster, E., & Mit, J. O. (2021). Pandemic schooling mode and student test scores: Evidence from US states. NBER Working Papers. Retrieved from <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29497>.

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- ¹⁴ Lewis, K., Kuhfeld, M., Ruzek, E., & Mceachin, A. (2021). Learning during COVID-19: Reading and math achievement in the 2020-21 school year. NWEA. <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/07/Learning-during-COVID-19-Reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year.research-brief-1.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Duckworth, Angela L., Tim Kautz, Amy Defnet, Emma Satlof-Bedrick, Sean Talamas, Benjamin Lira, and Laurence Steinberg. "Students Attending School Remotely Suffer Socially, Emotionally, and Academically." *Educational Researcher* 50, no. 7 (October 1, 2021): 479–82. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211031551>.
- ¹⁶ Cashdollar, S., Wang, Y., Barragan Torres, M., & Bates, M. (2022). Does School Instructional Modality Predict Average School Achievement? Learning During the Pandemic in Illinois Series. Chicago, IL: Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC), Discovery Partners Institute, University of Illinois. Retrieved from <https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/learning-modalities/>.
- ¹⁷ 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.
- ¹⁸ Prothero, A., & Maya Riser-Kositsky, M. (2022). School counselors and psychologists remain scarce even as needs rise. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-counselors-and-psychologists-remain-scarce-even-as-needs-rise/2022/03>.
- ¹⁹ For information on the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) licensure requirements for school support personnel, please visit <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/PEL-School-Support-Ed-Lic.aspx>.
- ²⁰ 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.
- ²¹ In the results, we aggregate district-level data into counties to protect the confidentiality of survey respondents.
- ²² We note that this definition of a substitute teacher directly comes from the IARSS Educator Shortage Survey instrument. In this context, a licensed educator refers to someone who has a valid Illinois Professional Educator License. According to Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) regulations, substitute teachers in Illinois must obtain—at minimum—a substitute license. Please see <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Short-Term-Sub-Teach.aspx> for more information about licensure requirements for substitutes.
- ²³ Goldhaber, D., Strunk, K. O., Brown, N., Naito, N., & Wolff, M. (2020). Teacher staffing challenges in California: Examining the uniqueness of rural school districts. *AERA Open*, 6(3), 2332858420951833. Previous research has used vacancy rates as one measure to examine educator shortages. For example, Goldhaber et al. (2020) defines vacancy rate as "the total number of teacher job postings listed by a district per 100 teachers (based on full-time equivalent [FTE]) in different subject areas" (p. 2). We view the percentage of un/underfilled positions in a specific area, relative to the number of open positions posted for that specific area, as a variation on this definition of vacancy rate.
- ²⁴ Wilson, A., & Pearson, R. (1993). The problem of teacher shortages. *Education Economics*, 1(1), 69-75.

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- ²⁵ Examining the total number of un/underfilled positions captures differences in the relative volume of support personnel shortages. This measure can be driven by areas where a high number of open positions are available. These shortages may occur in geographic regions with high population densities. For example, a large district may have a large shortage of school psychologists due to the number of positions they have to fill.
- ²⁶ Examining the percent of un/underfilled positions captures differences in the relative proportion of specific shortages with respect to the overall demand in an area. This measure can detect the magnitude of shortages in areas that are not necessarily driven by a high volume of open positions available.
- ²⁷ Due to methodological changes in how Educator Shortage Survey data were collected over time and changes in response rate, a longitudinal comparison for support personnel was not feasible.
- ²⁸ Not all districts from all counties responded to this survey. Therefore, some measurement error exists in the number and percentage of un/underfilled positions reported in this white paper. For more details about response rates, please refer to the full Educator Shortage report and interactive dashboard, see https://bit.ly/IARSS2021shortage_38TLrLT.
- ²⁹ Please see the Chronic Teacher Shortages series here: <https://iarss.org/2021-educator-shortage/>.
- ³⁰ For IARSS policy recommendations, please see the 2021 Educator Shortage Survey report here: <https://iarss.org/2021-educator-shortage/>.