Teacher Shortages: Everything Old is New Again, or Is It?

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Headlines about teacher shortages abound as schools recover from the pandemic. The challenges teachers faced during the pandemic significantly [increased](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19345747.2021.1938314), and many experienced burnout so intense they considered [resigning](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html).

However, conversations about [teacher shortages](https://www.isbe.net/Lists/News/NewsDisplay.aspx?ID=1404) are nothing new—they predate the [pandemic](https://iarss.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Persistent_Educator.pdf) by [decades](https://www.isbe.net/Documents/ed_supply_demand_00.pdf). Although there is [debate](https://www.educationnext.org/figuring-out-when-to-panic-about-teacher-shortages/) over the [magnitude](https://www.the74million.org/article/on-a-per-student-basis-school-staffing-levels-are-hitting-all-time-highs/) and [severity](http://teachershortages.com/) of the issue, stakeholders generally agree on the importance of recruiting and retaining [highly qualified teachers](https://www.the74million.org/article/facing-regional-shortages-u-s-schools-now-employing-160000-underqualified-teachers/).

Addressing these shortages begs the question: Are the forces behind today’s teacher shortages the same as always? Or is something new happening in the wake of the pandemic?

To understand this issue, we recently [surveyed](https://dpi.uillinois.edu/applied-research/iwerc/current-projects/teacher-workforce-portfolio/) 3,478 current and former educators in Illinois. [Findings](https://omsdpiprod.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Educator-Working-Conditions-220927-Exec-Summary.pdf) reveal a complex picture.

1. **A majority of educators feel their salary is low.**

Less than half of current and former educators agreed that their salary was appropriate, suggesting the importance of increasing educators’ [salaries](https://www.epi.org/publication/teacher-pay-penalty-2022/) in general. But given that both current and former educators found their compensation to be lacking, pay may not be the main factor driving teacher shortages.

1. **The biggest factor that motivates educators to leave—and to stay—is school leadership.**

Only one-third of former educators felt supported by school leadership, compared to two-thirds of current educators. School leadership clearly plays a critical role in promoting working conditions that [retain educators](https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/how-teaching-conditions-predict-teacher-turnover-california-schools), which ultimately supports student [development](https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/supporting-school-improvement).

1. **COVID-19 safety was a concern for former educators.**

More current educators reported feeling safe from COVID-19 in their schools than former educators, the majority of whom left during or after the pandemic. Given that safety was a concern of educators who left, checking in on the sense of safety for remaining educators may be a valuable practice for leadership going forward.

1. **School policies must be transformed to align with the beliefs of educators of color.**

For educators of color, only one-fifth of those who were considering leaving their positions agreed that school policies aligned with their personal beliefs, compared to over half of those who were considering staying. Supporting educators of color is important for [many reasons](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/diversifying-teaching-profession-report), given the benefits for [all students](https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-501.pdf), especially [students](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0034654319853545) [of color](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0162373717693109). But, as other [scholars](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609727.pdf) have asserted, this goal can only be realized if accompanied by structural changes to working conditions that have historically excluded these educators.

1. **School leaders must cultivate supportive environments for early-career educators.**

For early-career educators, less than half of those who were considering leaving felt accepted in their workplaces, compared to 85% of those who were considering staying. With nearly half of teachers [leaving](https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_researchreports/108/) the profession within 5 years, creating supportive environments—through programs such as [mentoring](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13611260903391500)—could be one mechanism to decrease attrition.

So, are teacher shortages in the wake of the pandemic driven by new or old causes? It’s complicated.

Issues like low salaries and fraught relationships with leadership are tales as old as time. But improving teachers’ sense of safety and working to align school policies with the values of educators of color are issues that deserve a spotlight in the post-pandemic period.

As states invest in policies to address teacher shortages, it’s important not to forget about the [importance of school leadership](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016146811511700305). Schools must cultivate leaders who forge positive relationships with and promote feelings of safety among staff, align policies to the values of educators of color, and enhance novice educators’ [support systems](https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/dont-forget-the-adults-how-schools-and-districts-can-support-educator-mental-health/2022/03).

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