Underneath the Hood: Consistencies and Surprises in the SY24 Educator Shortage Survey

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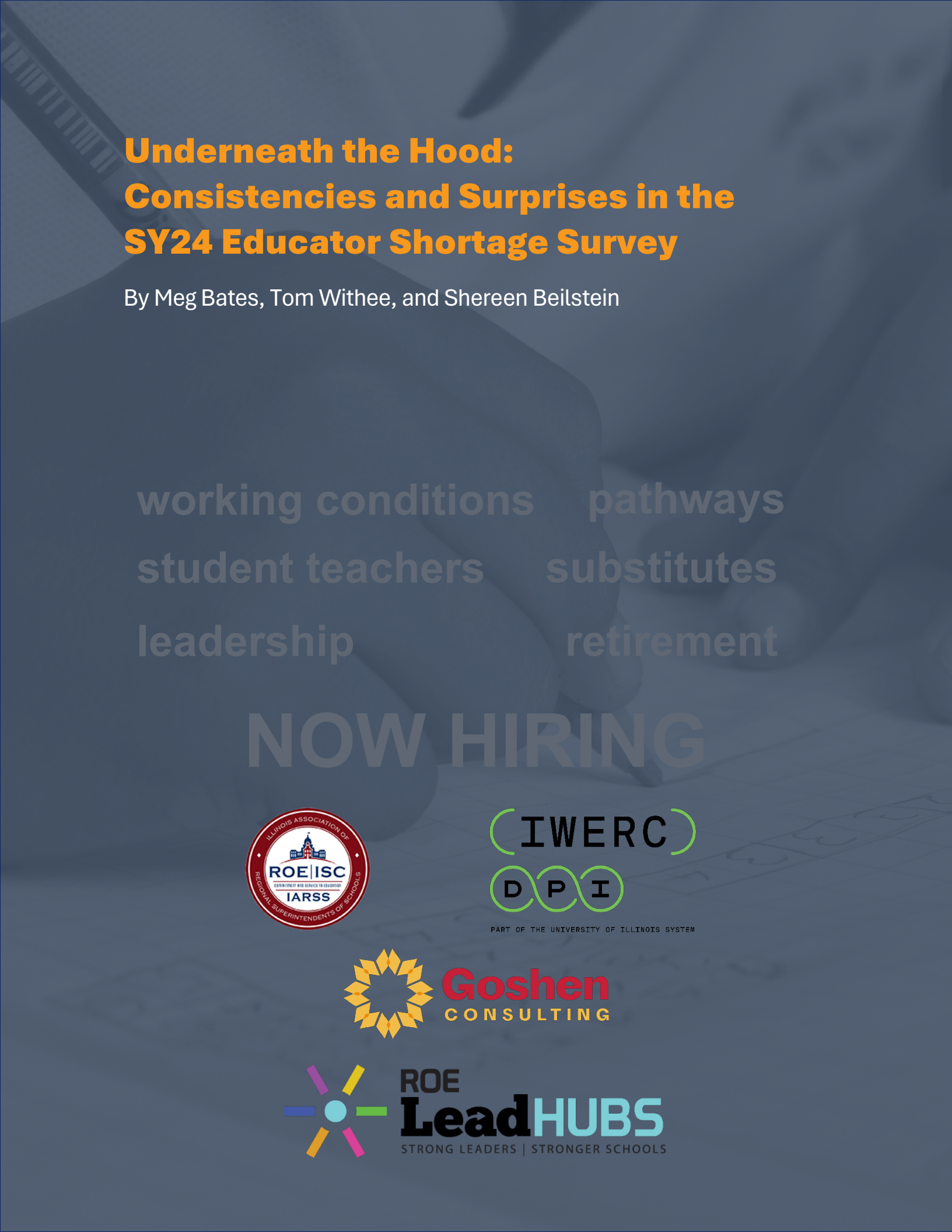

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Introduction

It is well-established that Illinois has a teacher shortage. Or, more accurately, Illinois has teacher *shortages* in specific content areas and geographic areas, as well as a critical shortage of teachers whose demographics match those of the student population.

Seven years of the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) educator shortage survey, eight years of unfilled positions reporting from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and an influential Advance Illinois (2023) report have all detailed the extent and nuance of these shortages.[4] Illinois is suffering from shortages in the areas of special education and bilingual education, with more general shortages concentrated in approximately 170 remote rural and highly urban districts. These shortages have roots in issues related to compensation, working conditions, and school leadership. From this understanding, the state has invested heavily in programs designed to alleviate these shortages, ranging from the $45 million teacher vacancy grant program (begun in school year 2023-2024, or SY24) to longer-term investments in financial aid and pipeline programs for future teachers.

What then, can this year's educator shortage survey tell us that adds to this conversation? This year marked the first time that ISBE and IARSS collaborated on the development and execution of the educator shortage survey—and data from the survey and unfilled positions were released together. With this unique partnership, did we find anything new under this particular sun?

In this white paper, we explore two consistencies and three surprises in this year's data collection. First, we dig into what we learned in SY24 about two shortages for which there is widespread agreement and attention: **special education** and **bilingual education/English as a Second Language** (ESL) teachers. While these two shortages have been consistent in all data collections, this year's findings provide nuance on where these shortages occur and how districts are responding to these continued vacancies.

Second, we dig into three areas where there is less attention—and potentially some surprise for state stakeholders. This includes what we know about shortages (or lack thereof) in positions outside of teaching: **administrators, school support staff,** and **paraprofessionals**.

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[4] These reports are available publicly for IARSS (https://iarss.org/2023-educator-shortage/), ISBE (https://www.isbe.net/unfilledpositions), and Advance Illinois (https://www.advanceillinois.org/research-hub/strong-diverse-educator-pipeline).

Exploring Consistency #1

Special Education shortages continue, but perceptions of these shortages vary by district characteristics, with rural districts perhaps suffering most.

In SY24, there were 1,361 special education teacher vacancies, resulting in a 6% vacancy rate (double the overall teacher vacancy rate of 3% for 4,096 vacancies). The educator shortage report goes into detail about these overall numbers, remedies that districts used to address these shortages, and the perceived severity, causes, and solutions of these shortages. Here, we explore interesting distinctions by district characteristics, which shed light on how special education shortages are affecting different student populations across the state.

First, we examine differences in district leaders' perceptions of special education shortages. Table 1 shows district leaders' viewpoints on two issues: (a) the percent who view special education shortages as serious or very serious and (b) the percent who received fewer than five applications for open special education positions. These results are broken down by different categories of district characteristics.

Table 1. Perceptions of Special Education Shortages by District Characteristics.

	Percent Rating Special Education Shortages as Serious or Very Serious	Percent Reporting Fewer than Five Applicants for Special Education Positions
Overall	81%	85%
By District Locale*		
Rural	80%	98%
City	82%	73%
Suburb	80%	71%
Town	81%	97%
By Evidence-Based Funding Tier		
Tier 1 (furthest from adequacy)	84%	87%
Tier 2	81%	95%
Tier 3	67%	67%
Tier 4 (closest to adequacy)	68%	68%
By Average Teacher Salaries		
High	71%	58%
Mid-High	78%	83%
Mid-Low	82%	98%
Low	85%	99%
By Percent of Students of Color		
Students of Color <25%	85%	85%
Students of Color 25%-50%	83%	66%
Students of Color 50%-75%	73%	74%
Students of Color >75%	79%	94%

*NOTE: District locales are based on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) designations. Cities are within urban areas with more than 50,000 people, and suburbs are within those urban areas but outside the principal (largest) city or cities. Towns are within urban clusters with 2,500-50,000 people. Rural areas are outside both urban areas and clusters.

These findings show that districts are experiencing special education shortages in distinct ways. First, districts appear to experience these shortages more severely if they

(a) are further from funding adequacy, (b) have lower average teacher salaries, and (c) have fewer students of color. Second, districts appear to receive fewer applications for open positions if they (a) are in rural and town locales, (b) are further from funding adequacy, (c) have lower average teacher salaries, and (d) have either a very low or very high percent of students of color. In short, we see that districts in rural and town areas, as well as districts with fewer resources, have greater perceived issues with special education shortages. These perceptions echo findings from the ISBE unfilled positions data, where overall unfilled rates for special education positions were highest in rural areas.[5]

Beyond these perception differences, we also found important differences in what district leaders cited as the causes of their shortages and openings in special education. Table 2 shows the percent of district leaders selecting each cause by district locale.

Table 2. Percent of District Leaders Citing Each Cause for Special Education Shortages and Openings. (Only top overall causes are listed.)

	Average	City	Rural	Suburb	Town
Causes of Shortages					
Burnout from working conditions	56%	40%	59%	50%	58%
Increased responsibilities	52%	47%	59%	42%	53%
Better compensation in a neighboring Illinois district	46%	37%	54%	43%	35%
Better compensation in another profession	40%	21%	48%	31%	40%
Limited number of applicants due to district urbanicity	39%	39%	54%	17%	49%
Limited number of applicants due to district size	36%	11%	50%	18%	45%
Causes of Openings					
Resignations	42%	28%	54%	40%	30%
New positions	25%	35%	22%	25%	21%

NOTE: Green indicates higher than average percent; purple indicates lower than average.

These findings show that different districts have different causes of shortages. Rural areas report *all* the causes of shortages much more than the average. Towns mostly follow the averages, but they report limited applicants due to size and urbanicity more

[5] We also note here that the IARSS annual educator shortage survey has historically been critiqued for using superintendent perceptions of shortages as a measure, given that superintendents do have some political incentive to claim that there are shortages. However, as will be seen throughout this report, superintendent perceptions vary by district characteristics and by the type of position about which they are asked. These variations suggest that the superintendent survey is a useful measure of differences in shortages across districts, one which superintendents answer with a good level of fidelity and discernment.

than average, and they report losing special educators to neighboring districts less than average.

In contrast, cities report *much* less than average that they lose special educators due to burnout, compensation in other professions, and limited applicants because of district size. Suburban areas report much less than average a lack of applicants—either due to district urbanicity or size.

Districts also have different reasons for openings (that they then either fill or do not fill). Rural areas most report having openings due to special educator resignations. In contrast, cities most commonly report having openings due to creating new positions. All together, the findings in Table 2 show that rural areas suffer from lack of applicants and resignations from diverse causes. Meanwhile, cities and suburban areas report fewer issues with applicants, with cities likely to have openings due to new (rather than chronically unfilled) positions.

To summarize, these analyses show that—while special education shortages are widespread—these shortages may be more pernicious and harder to address in rural areas. Rural areas suffer from lack of applicants, fewer resources, and lower salaries, all factors that appear to make it difficult to recruit and retain special educators.

Exploring Consistency #2

Bilingual/ESL shortages continue, but they are most predominant in suburbs, with few good options for mitigating them.

In SY24, there were 375 vacancies for bilingual education (240) and ESL (135) teachers statewide. These vacancies were spread across 113 districts, including districts of all locales. However, these vacancies were predominantly in the suburbs. Overall, 65% of these shortages, accounting for both bilingual education and ESL vacancies, were in suburban areas. (By comparison, only 35% of the *total* teacher shortages—across all content areas—were in the suburbs.) Specifically, suburban areas were home to 73% of the bilingual education vacancies (175 out of 240) and 52% of the ESL vacancies (70 out of 135).

Districts across the board made strong efforts to remedy these vacant positions, with district leaders reporting using alternative means to address 223 of these vacancies.[6] Overall, the most common methods used to address these shortages were hiring a substitute teacher (48%; N = 108) and modifying offerings/responsibilities (34%, N = 75).

By far, suburban areas remedied the most bilingual/ESL positions (N = 168). Their strategies mirrored those identified above. They used substitute teachers (52%, N = 88), modified offerings/responsibilities (35%, N = 59), retirees (8%, N = 13), and outsourcing to third party vendors (3%, N = 5). Unfortunately, none of these options are ideal, as substitute teachers are not necessarily qualified for the role and modified

[6] The number of remedied positions comes from the IARSS Educator Shortage Survey (N = 756), which represents a subset of districts that completed ISBE's Unfilled Positions report (N = 975). As such, the total number of remedied positions may well be higher.

offerings/responsibilities can diminish the services students are receiving (either directly or indirectly).

To summarize, while Bilingual/ESL shortages are a problem across Illinois, they are essentially a crisis in suburban districts, with a lack of great options for addressing them. While suburbs are *generally* in a fortunate position with respect to educator shortages, that is not true for Bilingual/ESL teachers, and there is a great need to better support English Learners in the suburbs.

Exploring Surprise #1

Illinois has no apparent administrator shortage, but emerging issues in CPS and other urban districts may portend future concerns.

The first IARSS educator shortage survey was conducted in SY18. In that school year, district leaders reported few concerns about open positions for administrators; the percents of open principal and assistant principal positions filled with qualified candidates were each over 85%. These trends continued from SY19 to SY23, with the qualified fill rates for principals and assistant principals continually sitting over 90%. However, while district leaders continued to report few *current* problems with administrator shortages, they began—starting in SY20—to predict that there would be *future* problems with administrator shortages.

And yet, despite these gloomy forecasts, the SY24 data show nothing but clear skies for administrator shortages. Out of all the positions collected in ISBE's unfilled positions report, administrators have the lowest vacancy rate (1.2%). This rate is dwarfed by that of teachers (3%), support staff (5.5%), and paraprofessionals (7.2%). Relatedly, administrator shortages are simply not as widespread. While 417 districts experienced teacher shortages, and well over 200 experienced school support and paraprofessional shortages, only 58 districts had an administrator vacancy of any kind. These low vacancy rates held for two positions of school-level importance: principal (0.5% vacancy rate) and assistant principal (1.4% vacancy rate).

Having established that the data show no administrator shortage, is there *any* cause for concern about administrators? The answer is that the cause for concern seems low, but there may be a couple of reasons to stay vigilant.

First, while any educator vacancy is problematic, schools simply cannot operate without principals. As such, these positions may be filled, but not with willing applicants. In other words, schools may be calling educators with the appropriate license into a duty they did not actively seek. The low percentage of assistant principal vacancies (a less necessary position for school operations) may undercut that theory. Nevertheless, understanding the dispositions toward the role of those called to serve as principals may be an area ripe for further investigation.

Second, we see that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) may have more cause for concern than other districts. The ISBE unfilled positions data show that there were 17 principal vacancies and 44 assistant principal vacancies in the entire state in SY24. Of the 17 principal vacancies, 14 were in CPS (82%). Of the assistant principal vacancies, 26 were

in CPS (59%). However, even with CPS dominating these vacancies, the result is just 2.3% of CPS schools (14 out of 610 CPS schools in the unfilled positions data) operating with a principal vacancy—hardly a crisis compared to other shortages described in this paper.

This being said, any vacuum in leadership is not ideal for students and should be unpacked. The principal vacancies in CPS are found more in elementary schools (N = 9) than high schools (N = 5), and the assistant principal vacancies are even more heavily in elementary schools (N = 19) than high schools (N = 6). More attention to leadership development at the elementary level in CPS may be warranted.

Looking beyond CPS, it is worth noting that the vast majority of principal and assistant principal vacancies were in cities. Cities accounted for 88% of principal vacancies and 75% of assistant principal vacancies (far more than the 38% of overall teacher vacancies and 50% of all administrator vacancies for which cities account). The cities of Rockford, Champaign, and Decatur had two assistant principal vacancies each. In contrast, rural and town districts had only 2 principal vacancies and 0 assistant principal vacancies. The suburbs had 11 assistant principal vacancies and 0 principal vacancies. The data suggest that, **if an administrator shortage is to spread more widely, the cities may be the first signal.**

Exploring Surprise #2

Illinois has a heavy shortage of school support staff, particularly in those staff who support students' mental health.

While administrator shortages were low, school support staff shortages are surprisingly—and alarmingly—high. In SY24, there were 1,095 unfilled support staff positions, amounting to a 5.5% vacancy rate. School psychologists (11%), nurses (9%), and social workers (6%) all had vacancy rates above this average, suggesting an even greater need for these key positions.

District leaders felt these shortages keenly. They reported serious or very serious concern about shortages of psychologists (70%), social workers (67%), nurses (61%), and counselors (57%). These sentiments about the severity of *all* support staff shortages were strongest for leaders in cities (86%), followed by suburbs (81%), towns (79%), and rural areas (75%).

Leaders remedied 836 of these shortages with alternative strategies. Table 3 shows how four key support staff positions were remedied. The findings show that these important positions were often outsourced to third-party vendors and/or given to existing employees as extra duty.

Table 3. Count of each remedy for four common support staff positions.

	Social Worker	Psychologist	Counselor	Nurse
Outsourced using a third-party vendor	58	**87**	17	**70**
Assigned extra duty to existing employee	**63**	44	**25**	30

Connected virtually with remote personnel	7	30	1	8
Utilized a university student	23	8	10	8
Hired a retiree	24	11	7	3
Other	13	1	10	25
Total Remedied	188	181	70	144

Shortages in these positions may have negative impacts on students, given their importance for supporting students' mental health. Table 4 shows how district leaders (N = 714) conceive of support staff positions in supporting students' mental health. A majority of district leaders view all these support staff positions as playing an important role in students' mental health, with the strongest majority (87%) identifying social workers as playing that role.

There are important distinctions by district characteristics. As compared to the average, high school districts are more likely to view all these positions as supporting mental health. Conversely, elementary district leaders are much less likely to see counselors as having such a role. The role of the school psychologist is viewed differently across geographies, with rural districts less likely to cite psychologists as having a role in mental health, while city and suburban districts are more likely to cite this.

Table 4. Percent of district leaders who felt each staff position supports students' mental health.

	Social Worker	Psychologist	Counselor	Nurse
Average	87%	66%	66%	56%
By District Type				
Elementary	86%	67%	44%	52%
High School	**92%**	**73%**	**84%**	**63%**
Unit	88%	62%	**86%**	**62%**
By District Locale				
Rural	81%	51%	68%	50%
City	91%	**78%**	70%	57%
Suburb	92%	**80%**	60%	61%
Town	89%	62%	76%	64%
By Evidence-Based Funding Tier				
Tier 1 (furthest from adequacy)	92%	61%	68%	62%
Tier 2	85%	66%	75%	56%
Tier 3	93%	67%	64%	55%

Tier 4 (closest to adequacy)	80%	68%	57%	53%

District leaders also see their needs for these positions growing. Half of district leaders (50%) saw their needs for social workers grow this year (SY24) from previous years. Districts in EBF Tier 1 (furthest from adequate funding) had the highest reported growth in need for social workers this year (57% of districts).

Going further, a majority of district leaders predicted their needs would grow in the future for social workers (62%) and psychologists (53%). Rural districts were least likely to see a growing need for these positions, while cities, suburbs, and towns were more likely than average to see a growing need. Districts in EBF Tier 1 (furthest from adequate funding) were most likely to see a growing need for social workers, while districts in EBF Tier 3 were most likely to see a growing need for psychologists. By far, districts with the lowest percent of students of color (0-25%) were the most likely to see a growing need for both social workers and counselors. **Clearly, support staff shortages across the state deserve attention, particularly as students continue to grapple with mental health issues in the wake of the pandemic.**

Exploring Surprise #3

Unfilled paraprofessional positions continue to climb, reaching an all-time high number and vacancy rate in SY24.

Moving paraprofessionals into licensed teaching positions is often cited as a strategy for alleviating teacher shortages. But what if paraprofessionals themselves represent a significant shortage area? In SY24, the state had a surprisingly high number of unfilled paraprofessional positions (2,755), with a vacancy rate of 7.2%, by far the highest out of all positions explored.

Table 5 shows the count of unfilled paraprofessional positions in ISBE's unfilled positions data from SY17 to present. Although data are not directly comparable across years, given different participation rates each year and changes in data collection, this year clearly marks the most striking shortage yet.

Table 5. Counts of unfilled paraprofessional positions in ISBE's Unfilled Positions data.

School Year	Number of Unfilled Paraprofessional Positions
2024	2,754
2023	2,684
2022	2,435
2021	1,243
2020	1,370
2019	959
2018	844
2017	472

In SY24, 230 districts across the state reported a paraprofessional shortage. Cities had the highest number of vacancies (1,066) and the highest unfilled positions rate (9%). This was followed by suburban areas (1,117 vacancies or 6% rate); towns (159 vacancies or 4% rate); and rural areas (55 vacancies or 2% rate)[7]. CPS, Peoria, and Springfield were examples of districts experiencing high paraprofessional shortage numbers and vacancy rates. Interestingly, schools in the second-highest funding tier had the highest unfilled rate of paraprofessionals, perhaps signaling that they were attempting to hire more than usual (using ESSER funds or other funding sources), but unable to fill them.

Superintendent perception data confirm and elaborate upon these trends. District leaders from cities (84%), suburbs (88%), and towns (83%) all had similar percents reporting serious or very serious problems with paraprofessional shortages, while district leaders from rural areas only had 76% viewing the problem as serious or very serious (perhaps signaling less need for the role or more ability to fill it when needed). **Indeed, the data suggest that paraprofessional shortages are a growing problem, but perhaps not as large an issue for rural areas as other locales.**

Conclusion

The SY24 educator shortage survey, along with the ISBE unfilled positions data collection, provided both confirmation of past trends and new areas of interest. Once again, special education and bilingual/ESL shortages loomed large, but this year's data suggested that these issues most perniciously affect rural and suburban districts, respectively. Administrator shortages remained low and confined mostly to the state's largest district: CPS. In contrast, support staff and paraprofessional shortages—often overlooked in policy debates—continued and grew.

[7] The "unfilled positions" rates in this paragraph were calculated by Goshen Consulting and IWERC and differ from the calculation used for "vacancy rates" in ISBE's Unfilled Positions data.