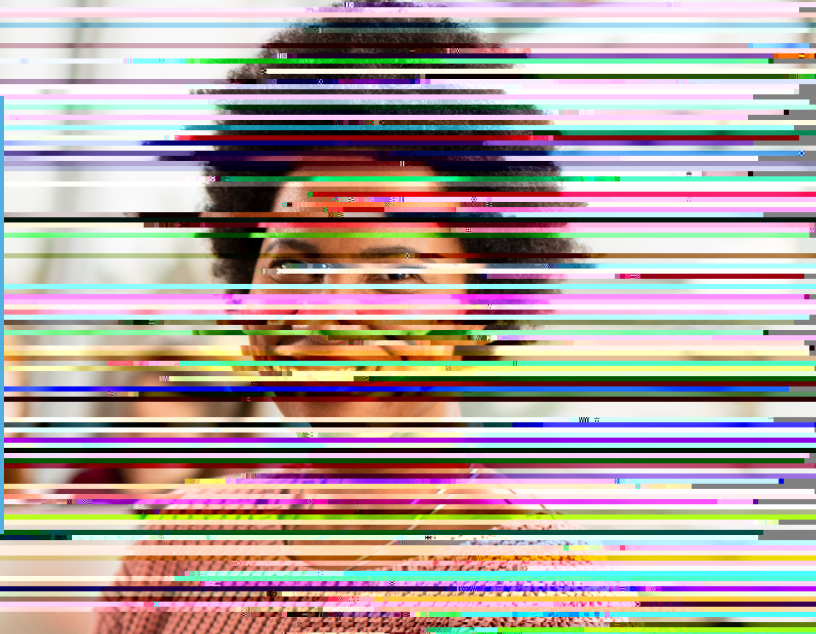




Policy Brief

# 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).



