

Getting Them, Keeping Them

Which Factors Contribute to the Shortage and Retention of High-Need Teachers in the
U.S. and Canada?

Global Politics

May 2024

Word Count: 3250

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Introduction

Teacher shortages are an ongoing problem in many countries, with a need for almost 69 million teachers worldwide in the next seven years to make universal education a possibility (O'Hagan, 2022). While the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on education, this paper will focus more broadly on factors contributing to teacher shortages and retention, and possible solutions to mitigate these shortages in the U.S. and Canada. While both countries follow a similar educational progression--from primary school, to lower and then upper secondary--Canada has a larger emphasis on language as a bilingual country.

Many factors contribute to retaining high-need teachers and to the shortages of qualified educators in the field, so it is often hard to pinpoint a few factors that are reflected over the whole field. This is partially because countless categories of teachers can be classified as high-need, depending on their location, district needs, and subject areas. Most commonly, Special Education, Foreign Language, STEM, minority (commonly Latina/o or Black), and rural-area teachers are in high demand, classifying them as high-need. Many of these fields require extra or more specific degrees and certifications, making entry more difficult. However, as in the case of minority teachers, the teachers could be motivated by different things, causing the hiring tactics that districts/countries use--typically based on majority studies--to be less effective. Teacher shortages often occur when there is a significantly low number of educational staff, but a normal or high number of positions that need to be filled.

This essay will compare teacher surveys from the U.S. and Canada between three different groups of high-need teachers, between the years of 2009 and 2018. The range of these studies helps identify common factors behind teacher shortages, and why teaching positions are so difficult to fill. The analysis will dive into why these factors are prevalent and how they can be resolved, if at all. It will then assess the limitations of these studies and explore policies set in place surrounding the groups of high-need teachers and if those policies can address the main factors recognized to cause high-need teacher shortages and low retention rates. Ultimately, it will discuss how high-need teacher shortages and low retention rates occur mainly due to low administrative support, the scarcity of teachers certified for high-need positions, and the amplified struggle of being a minority teacher.

This investigation opens up discussion on how different and/or similar teacher needs are across time, location, subject, and ethnicity. It will create a space to address high-need teacher support and to consider whether all high-need groups can be satisfied with the same solutions. While studies of individual groups are important, school boards and governments cannot often focus on one specific cluster. Thus, being able to generalize across a varied field for a common solution can become beneficial for all parties involved.

Why They Leave

High-need teachers choose to leave for many reasons, but through surveys and interviews, the common factors can be narrowed down. For instance, a study of French Immersion teachers in Canada (Ewart, 2009) surveyed recent graduates of a French

teaching program. When asked about factors that challenged integration into the profession, 61% of the Canadian French Immersion teachers listed classroom management, making it the highest factor in this sample (Ewart, 2009). This could be related to a lack of support from administrators, as classroom management and disciplinary action--from teachers, and then administrators--can go hand in hand. Moreover, the third most common factor in the French Immersion study--lack of resources (48.3% of respondents)--could also be attributed to a lack of administrative support, as administrators are often responsible for providing employees with resources, such as training to support special needs students. This raises the question of how much support is needed from these administrative employees, and how much they are actually able to provide.

The need for administrative support is an endless cycle. Administrators--in this case, specifically principals and assistant principals--often must have multiple master's degrees before even being hired. They have a hefty list of responsibilities daily: administrators are in charge of being disciplinarians, as well as mentors (for students and teachers), and are assigned to students who have difficulty or need special accommodations. Even with their large list of obligations, each group they oversee expects and requires a large amount of support from them. Teachers themselves are responsible for classroom management, creating lessons, teaching lessons, grading, and providing extra help for students, and are mandated reporters and responsible for fulfilling Freedom of Information Act requests.

While administrative support is important, the ethnicity and racial makeup of the survey participants could also provide insight, as "either explicitly or implicitly, most of

the research on teacher recruitment and retention has focused on White teachers” (Irizarry, Donaldson, 2012). In a United States survey focusing on the differences between factors that cause White and Latina/o teachers to leave the profession, 56.90% of Latinas/os compared with 46.16% of Whites disagreed or strongly disagreed that a lack of discipline in their placement schools pushed them to leave teaching ($p = .08$) (Irizarry, Donaldson, 2012). At a 10% significance level, this result can explain some of the lack of teachers of color (TOCs) in the profession, as what was marked as the most challenging factor in the Canadian survey (classroom management) is shown to affect these minority teachers at a more extreme level. Another strong difference was that “24.13% of Latina/o teachers but just 13.87% of Whites agreed or strongly agreed that salary was a factor in their decision to leave teaching ($p = .006$)” (Irizarry, Donaldson, 2012). Even at a 1% significance level, this data strongly suggests that Latina/o teachers--like those in the study--could often be drawn out of the profession not necessarily for a particular struggle in teaching, but by other jobs where they could earn a higher salary.

Teaching is a profession that allows for very limited advancement and has only a small increase in salary as time progresses. Most educators are not in the profession for the salary, however, salaries are not always representative of the areas where schools are located and can often be unsupportive of the cost of living for the district or state. This creates a dilemma for many teachers, who must choose between the job that they love and the ability to afford to live close to where the school is located. While getting a second, part-time job may seem like a feasible solution--though one that should not be necessary for a full-time job--most educators do not have time for one, as they need to

grade and create a high volume of lessons during their time to keep up with their students. Though teachers may be able to find a summer job such as being a camp instructor, the childcare and other costs could outweigh the extra income, and extra time with family in summer may be a leading factor in choosing a teaching career.

When They Would Stay

When asked to identify factors that facilitated integration into the profession, 82.1% of 118 Canadian French Immersion teaching graduates identified support from colleagues as a factor (Ewart, 2009). "Colleagues" here does not include the previously identified overextended administrators, but other struggling teachers. Support (as the study did not specify) could also be defined in multiple ways: as help in the duties of teaching, or as recognition of struggles and emotional support. If all the teachers are fighting just to survive their day--as the aforementioned pile of responsibilities indicates--they are not able to provide support to their colleagues in sharing duties, as they are barely able to do so for themselves. Hence, if the type of support needed is primarily emotional, colleagues could more easily provide this, likely what produced this survey outcome as teachers could see themselves playing this role for their colleagues as well. This could of course be encouraged by the administration through colleague social events and more support for mental/emotional health outside of colleagues alone.

This study also surveyed factors that would have facilitated integration into the profession; 30.5% of respondents said a "more attentive administration" would have been a factor (Ewart, 2009). This piece of data could imply one of two things. First, the administration may have been trying to support teachers, but in ways they did not need,

or, second, they were not offering enough help, or possibly acknowledging the teachers' struggles. Though they may not have time to aid the teachers if the administration was not validating their struggles, they were not fulfilling their job, as it relates to the staff. Seeking input from staff about their needs may also help the administration to make improvements where they can and to increase job satisfaction, rather than wasting their efforts on the wrong things.

Other Factors

While all these factors mainly impact teacher retention, teacher shortages are also an important issue. The leading cause of shortages is a lack of qualified, certified individuals. "Nationally, less than 8% of U.S. undergraduates take [Foreign Language] courses and 1% obtain a [Foreign Language] degree" (Van Houten, 2009). The lack of degrees in high-need subject areas (such as foreign languages) leads to a low number of qualified teachers, which makes the shortages more extreme, and retention becomes more important. Some other areas that require specialized education and are commonly experiencing shortages include special education, and certain secondary subjects and electives (such as STEM fields where there are potential for high-paying jobs outside of teaching). The overall number of teaching degrees in the U.S. fluctuates each year, which makes it quite difficult for schools to predict when shortages will occur, and to plan accordingly.

Limitations

The studies both have a high likelihood of bias. They took volunteers from their target population, creating voluntary response bias, which could polarize the data drastically. This also leads to plausible non-response bias, which occurs from those with unpolarized opinions not responding, as they don't feel strongly about the issues. In this case, the studies sent the survey to their whole population, and around one-half to two-thirds of the teachers responded (which is a reasonably good response rate, but not bias-proof). Additionally, the framing of the questions and possible responses may have caused an even greater response bias, as each respondent could have a different interpretation of the options they were given, and two respondents could have the same factor as the most challenging, but choose different answers--like listing classroom management or disciplinary support from administrators. Furthermore, some studies did not list all of the options presented in the survey in the final articles if those options had a low enough number of respondents/ranking. The inclusion or addressing of these could have allowed for a better understanding and interpretation of the data, through consideration of low or non-factors.

Sample sizes in and of themselves can also cause issues with the reliability of surveys. In the Canadian French Immersion study, 118 out of 207 graduates responded to the survey, and in the Latina/o study, 2,029 of 3,283 "teachers enrolled in the 2000, 2001, and 2002 TFA cohorts" participated--these cohorts were discussions led by Teach for America (TFA), and teachers involved had between four and six years of teaching experience. These larger sample sizes allow for extrapolation to a population of similar characteristics, however, they make independent responses between each participant

obsolete, as collaboration or discussion between colleagues may have occurred. As a result, all studies should be regarded with caution.

High-Need, Low-Data

Another prevalent issue in the discussion of high-need teacher studies and hiring is that some of the high-need areas are so specific that their population cannot create “valid” data. For example, a study was conducted on teachers who recently left the Correctional Facilities Classroom (Kamrath, 2018). The results raised interesting points on administrative support at that level, as well as large class sizes. However, since eight participants are not nearly enough to be statistically valid, the findings from this study cannot be utilized as population-wide ideas. Studies like these are mainly used as a case study and starting point for future research.

Policy: Where it Is Now

Policy change is crucial to the hiring and retention of high-need teachers, but it is difficult to predict which policies will be the most effective for the targeted groups. While districts can accomplish many goals on their own, some policies can only be utilized if they are agreed upon at the state and federal levels. For example, districts may be able to offer monetary incentives, create more flexible Professional Development opportunities, and recruit teachers earlier, however, alternative certification routes and transferable licensing can only be implemented through state and federal governments. Furthermore, all of these policies come with drawbacks which may not be feasible for all situations.

Monetary incentives can draw education students towards high-need areas such as STEM and special education, without much struggle in many cases. A hiring bonus for these fields can also motivate STEM majors to choose to become educators instead of entering higher-paying fields that may be promised with their degrees. Moreover, incentives for high-need teachers in struggling schools have shown in some cases to decrease the likelihood of experienced professionals leaving the teaching profession by as much as 28 percent (Clotfelter, 2010). While these stimuli may seem like an ideal solution to one of the consistent issues of modern-day education--the low salary--many districts are not able to allocate these funds without cutting major finances from other critical areas. They can also cause other teachers to feel undervalued, as they perform similar jobs for significantly lower pay.

Professional Development (PD) is an opportunity for educators to continue to learn and adapt to student and class situations. PD is often time-consuming--taking up full workdays--and is rarely adapted to individual teachers or schools. Online PD programs allow teachers to engage in their work, as they are more personalized and are accessible from anywhere with an internet connection. The programs can be just as effective as their in-person counterparts and are an excellent solution to some of the less favorable parts of teaching, the "desk work." Of course, online PD is not engaging for every employee and their style of learning, but they are a great starting point for increased accessibility and effectiveness of PD lessons.

Many schools in high-need areas rely heavily on late hiring, which lowers teacher retention rates and student achievement, as the teachers are not in the classroom for the entire year. Rural and low-income schools have difficulty attracting education

graduates, especially if they were not raised in a similar or nearby area, or were student teaching in one. Targeted, more aggressive recruitment by these schools and districts could be beneficial, especially if utilized out-of-state or in higher-populated areas, and earlier than competing schools. Unfortunately, many schools in high need of teachers have small budgets and may not have time for employees to allocate to recruitment, causing them to fall further behind other employers.

Most teacher certifications--especially those in high-need areas such as special education--are tedious to acquire and can prevent people from joining education later in their careers. Alternate routes of education may encourage more students to pursue high-need education degrees and can often get high-need teachers into the classroom faster. While alternative certifications may lack tools that a typical education program provides, in schools that are desperate for teachers in high-need fields, some certification is better than none. This route could ultimately prove useful for hiring but not necessarily retaining high-need teachers, if they are not paired with other retention techniques (such as additional PD and support from administration and colleagues).

In the U.S., every state has different requirements for what qualifies as a "certified teacher." This makes it extremely difficult for teachers to move across the country or even to a county neighboring their own, or even worse across a state line. As a result, rural and Title I schools (schools with a high proportion of low-income students) can only recruit teachers from within the state, limiting their pool drastically. This could especially be an issue in states where the majority of their schools are in rural areas. A federal policy on licensing would most likely receive criticism, as it would limit the ability

of states to legislate their education, however, its benefits largely outweigh the loss of local self-governance, when considering the critical state of teacher shortages.

Conclusion

With the main factors of high-need teacher shortages and low retention rates identified--scarcity of specialty teachers certified, low administrator support, low monetary gain in certain cases, and higher sensitivity among minority teachers for these components--the issue of how much assistance administrators are responsible for providing still stands, but could be addressed through two possible methods. First, schools could hire more administrators, so that the roles of an administrator are divided between multiple people, each individual can spend more time and focus on their own job's requirements. Alternatively, the schools could shift some of the administrative tasks to a position with fewer obligations--such as from the principal to the vice principal--freeing up the load of the administrators while not overwhelming the other party. Both options of course have drawbacks. The first would require more of the school's budget allocated to administration, which could lower teachers' or other staff's salaries in the process, even possibly lowering the number of teacher positions available. The second option could easily get out of hand and end up with the job responsibilities of the second employee becoming too much. Conclusively, this issue could most likely not be settled without increased funds for the schools they target. However, alternate PD training could take away some of the burden from administrators, giving them more time to help their teachers, but this cannot be predicted without evidence.

In essence, this essay has served its purpose of comparing and contrasting studies about teacher retention and shortages across different fields of high-need teachers. Though much work and analysis are still needed to provide solutions for this issue, all of the information can be representative of the primary concern: what factors contribute to high-need teacher retention and shortages, and potential methods for resolving the issue. Some of the main factors identified appear to be low or mismatched administrative support, low salaries and little career advancement, difficulty in classroom management, and additional strain experienced by minority teachers. While these studies most likely had biases and as such must be assessed with caution, the data that they collected still provides useful insights into the world of high-need teaching.

Some of the recognized factors are accounted for in the government policies put in place, however, the next step must be to analyze their effectiveness in reducing shortages and lowering retention. Likewise, the policies investigated here do not touch on all of the factors highlighted in the studies, so they cannot be held as the one and final solution to such a complex problem, especially without conclusive research. Some solutions may be more effective in different situations, depending on which factor is creating the biggest issue (low amounts of minority teachers, STEM or special education teachers, recruitment to a rural area, etc.). While teacher shortages and retention are multifaceted issues, with collaboration between all levels of government and by monitoring the current types of shortages, we can target policy to be most effective and adapt to the continuously changing landscape. Because education is so crucial to the success of each individual and society, the world must settle for nothing less.

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