

# One Way to Ease the Teacher Shortage: Pay More, Some Districts Say

Systems throughout the nation don't have enough teachers — especially in struggling schools. But there are many ways to address the problem.

By Thomas Toch

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This article is part of our Learning special report about how the pandemic has continued to change how we approach education.

When Martisha Martin, a history teacher, moved from Broward County, Florida, to Washington, D.C., seven years ago, she chose to work at H.D. Woodson High School on the city's impoverished eastern edge. She was drawn to the school's commitment to strengthening urban education — and the prospect of a bigger paycheck.

Now at Stephen E. Kramer Middle School, one of Woodson's feeder schools where all students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, Ms. Martin is among dozens of District of Columbia Public Schools teachers receiving \$20,000 annual bonuses for highly effective performance in select schools.

"I was very intentional about selecting a school when I moved to D.C. that would give me the highest bonus incentives," said Ms. Martin, who recently moved into the Kramer neighborhood from suburban Maryland. "You get to help high-needs students, and the money helps."

Most public-school teachers are paid based on their college credits and the years they've taught. But when the 48,000-student public school system in the nation's capital wanted to get more top teachers into its most challenging schools, it started doing what the private sector has long done to attract and keep talent: paying more.

And the strategy has worked: attrition among the targeted schools' most effective teachers is no higher than that at public schools in Washington's affluent communities, officials say.

School districts have faced enormous challenges in staffing the nation's nearly 100,000 public schools since the start of the pandemic. Many, as a result, have started the school year with shortages. The stressors of teaching during the pandemic and working on the front lines of the culture wars boosted attrition. Low unemployment levels are offering would-be teachers job opportunities outside of education, and substitutes have been in short supply.

But schools have been awash in federal funds to aid pandemic recovery. As a result, many state and local policymakers have taken sweeping steps to increase the supply of teachers — including admitting applicants without college degrees.

School officials and researchers say the shortages are primarily in areas where they have existed for years — rural communities, schools serving low-income students and students of color, and in subjects such as special education, foreign languages and advanced math and science.

And those shortages have been accompanied over the years by substantial surpluses in other subjects, grade levels, or parts of the country, notably in elementary education and well-resourced suburban enclaves. Researchers from the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (Calder) found that a decade ago only a third of newly trained teachers found jobs.

The mismatch in supply and demand, researchers say, points to long-neglected flaws in the teacher labor market: aspiring teachers frequently don't know what jobs are going to be available to them when they complete their training, while states and school districts have neglected to use financial incentives to persuade candidates to take jobs and stay in them.

"Information and incentives are basic ingredients of market systems, and teaching lacks both," said Dan Goldhaber, Calder's director and a leading researcher on the teaching profession.

But the pandemic has pushed states and school districts to address these longstanding shortcomings, Mr. Goldhaber and others said. Increasingly, education leaders are joining the District of Columbia Public Schools in using "market mechanisms" to target shortages more effectively, turning to salary incentives and other market-oriented solutions to attract teachers.

## Teaching Teachers About the Job Market

Because newly credentialed teachers tend to seek work in the same locales where they're trained (unlike college professors, for whom there is a national market), aligning teacher supply and demand requires giving aspiring teachers a clear picture of local job markets early in their college careers, said Heather Peske, president of the nonprofit National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) and a former senior associate commissioner of education in Massachusetts, where she led the state's efforts to strengthen its teacher corps.

But teacher candidates often don't get that information, Dr. Peske and other experts said, because most state education agencies and many of the 1,700 colleges, universities, and other institutions that train the bulk of the nation's more than three million teachers don't track local and regional teacher supply and demand and steer students toward credentials that are the most likely to translate into jobs.

States and districts are dealing with the problem in a variety of ways:

- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education gives colleges and universities a strong incentive to address the problem — only approving new teacher training programs if they involve fields where there are shortages, Dr. Peske said.
- The Colorado Department of Education posts a wealth of teacher supply and demand information on an interactive web portal, broken down by school district, grades, and subjects taught, with maps highlighting every Colorado college's supply of new teachers in every field and their proximity to school districts with shortages, the NCTQ reports.
- New Jersey plans to help illuminate the best paths into teaching by publicizing passing rates on teacher licensing exams taken by graduates of each of the state's colleges. (In contrast, Iowa and other states have abandoned the entrance exams to increase the flow of new teachers.)
- The Charleston County School District in South Carolina is partnering with the University of South Carolina to use federal Covid-relief aid to train teacher assistants and other school staff to teach math and other subjects where there is a need.

## There's Plenty of Money

With billions of dollars in federal Covid-relief aid available, many states and school districts have sought to reduce shortages — and in some instances thank teachers for enduring the instructional demands of the pandemic — by increasing teachers' paychecks through bonuses, raises, and college loan forgiveness. Nearly a third of the nation's 100 largest school districts have embraced the strategy, a forthcoming FutureEd analysis found.

Research has found that raising compensation works. A study of Florida shortage initiatives by Li Feng and Tim Sass of Calder concluded that a state loan-forgiveness program and a bonus program aimed at teachers in shortage subjects reduced teacher turnover. Annual bonuses of \$2,500 were enough to lower attrition among special-education teachers.

That's perhaps not surprising. The National Center on Education Statistics reports that the average annual teacher salary was just \$65,090 in the 2020-21 school year.

According to new research by the Economic Policy Institute, a think tank partially funded by teacher unions, teachers' average weekly inflation-adjusted pay has increased by just \$29 since 1996, compared to \$445 per week for other college graduates.

Among the recent financial incentives:

- The Colorado Department of Higher Education is targeting rural shortages by offering \$10,000 stipends to teacher candidates who work in rural communities for a year, with half the cost covered by the state and the other half by the candidates' colleges.
- In 2020, Hawaii began paying special education teachers, who are in short supply nationwide, \$10,000 more than their peers. In one year, the move drew 300 new special educators to the state's schools, cutting the shortage by half, according to the NCTQ.
- Last year, The 158,000-student Wake County Public Schools in North Carolina took a similar step, giving special education teachers \$3,500 signing bonuses if they stayed in the district. But the district is also paying up to \$5,000 in "retention and recognition" bonuses to every full-time district employee, one of many school districts distributing federal largess to teachers and teacher candidates whether they fill shortages or not, a strategy that experts question. "If you need math and science teachers, or you struggle to get teachers to work in rural areas or high-poverty neighborhoods, why spend money on elementary teachers, where there's an oversupply?" Dr. Peske asked.

## Teachers Need Housing Too

The Austin Independent School District in Texas is tackling a major challenge in many urban centers: the high cost of housing.

Norma Castillo, assistant superintendent of human capital systems in the 75,000-student district, said the district planned to use a portion of revenues from a local tax increase for rental vouchers and mortgage assistance for teachers and to repurpose warehouses, closed schools, an outdated performing art center and other district buildings for affordable teacher housing.

"If we retain who we've got," she said, "we won't have a recruitment problem."

The District of Columbia Public Schools, one of the few school districts in the country with a rigorous teacher evaluation system, is working hard to retain its best teachers rather than every teacher.

In addition to substantial bonuses for working in high-needs schools, the district has created a career ladder that allows highly effective teachers to get to the top of the pay scale after eight years in the classroom and take on new roles and responsibilities, ranging from mentoring new teachers to leading school-based improvement work, the sorts of professional opportunities that teachers say keeps them in the profession.

At Kramer, where teachers have been able to get mental health counseling since the start of the pandemic, only one of the school's nine highest-rated teachers didn't return this year. Principal Katreena Shelby calls financial incentives "icing on the cake" for committed teachers.

The district's performance pay system lets top teachers earn upward of \$140,000 a year. And if that's not enough to signal teachers' importance, before the pandemic the school system put on an annual gala for outstanding teachers and their families. For several years, it was held at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Even with these incentives, and a large media campaign to attract teachers, the district started the year with 150 vacancies in its 4,600-teacher work force, up by 50 to 70 openings from prepandemic years, said Nancy Wright, director of talent acquisition and retention strategy, and the district had to be less selective.

For their part, teachers' unions, influential voices on state and local staffing policy, tend to back expensive strategies that benefit every teacher rather than concentrate resources where there's clear need. An American Federation of Teachers shortage task force in July recommended higher across-the-board pay, smaller classes, and a reduction in the use of student achievement to measure school and teacher performance.

The challenges of the past couple of years have made the already demanding work of teachers that much tougher, Ms. Castillo and other local experts said.

But Dr. Goldhaber and other researchers see a silver lining in the growing number of policymakers responding to teacher shortages by tailoring solutions to local needs and using incentives to a greater extent than they have in the past.

"People are starting to think differently about teaching as a labor market," Dr. Goldhaber said. "That's good for students."

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