EDITOR’S NOTE
Schools are finding new ways to tackle teacher shortages. In this Spotlight, learn why educators are leaving the classroom and how districts are providing child-care, affordable housing, and transfer benefits to boost teacher recruitment and retention.

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Are Teacher Shortages Worse Than We Thought?

By Madeline Will

The teacher shortage is “worse than we thought,” researchers conclude in a new analysis of federal data.

The study, published by the union-backed think tank Economic Policy Institute, argues that when indicators of teacher quality are considered—like experience, certification, and training—the teacher shortage is even more acute than previously estimated. This hits high-poverty schools the hardest, the study's authors say.

However, other researchers have pushed back against the idea of a national teacher shortage, arguing that shortages are localized and concentrated in certain subjects, like special education and high school math and science. A 2013 analysis by Education Week found that colleges are overproducing elementary teachers.

“We don't have a national teacher labor market, we have 50 different labor markets,” said Daniel Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Education Data and Research at the University of Washington.

And in most states, the teaching force has actually grown faster than student enrollment.

Still, Elaine Weiss, a co-author of the EPI report and the former national coordinator for the Broader Bolder Approach to Education campaign, noted that schools across the country have reported difficulties hiring teachers. An Education Week analysis of federal data found that all 50 states reported experiencing statewide shortages in at least one teaching area for either the 2016-17 or 2017-18 school year.

“If schools are reporting that they need teachers, and that they are struggling to find teachers to fill those spots, ... I find it very hard to understand how there can’t be a teacher shortage,” Weiss said.

A few years ago, the Learning Policy Institute, a K-12 think tank led by Linda Darling-Hammond, who is now the chairwoman of California's board of education, released a package of reports that projected an annual national shortfall of 112,000 teachers by 2018.

The need for more educators would continue to grow well into the 2020s, the group predicted.

These estimates likely underestimate the magnitude of the problem, the EPI report says, because they consider how many new qualified teachers are needed to meet new demand. But not all current teachers are highly qualified—a term that, according to the report, means they're fully certified, they were prepared through a traditional-certification program, they have more than five years experience, and they have relevant experience in the subject they teach.

Goldhaber pushed back against the LPI study, saying the methodology used was flawed and the projections have not materialized: There aren't currently more than 100,000 people missing from the teaching force, he said.

Still, certain subjects (like special education, high school science and math, foreign language, and bilingual education) and locations (like high-poverty and rural areas) perenni
tially lack teachers. The EPI report doesn’t delve into shortages in subject areas, but it does focus on the growing lack of highly qualified teachers in high-poverty schools.

Who and Where Are ‘Highly Qualified’ Teachers?

“Highly qualified” was, for many years, an important technical term with the force of law behind it. The prior federal law, the No Child Left Behind Act, defined highly qualified teachers as those who held a bachelor's degree, state certification, and have demonstrated content knowledge. The law required that states staff each core academic class with those teachers. But NCLB’s replacement, the Every Student Succeeds Act, threw out that requirement.

Instead, ESSA says that teachers in schools receiving Title I funds just need
to fulfill their state’s licensing requirements. States are also required to define “ineffective,” “out-of-field,” and “inexperienced” teachers, and make sure that poor and minority students aren’t being taught by a disproportionate number of them.

The EPI report expands the NCLB definition of highly qualified teachers to include experience and preparation. The number of teachers who meet EPI’s criteria of highly qualified has declined over time, according to the group’s analysis of federal data.

Alternative-certification programs bring in more teachers of color, male teachers, and teachers who attended selective colleges than traditional prep programs do, past reports have found. But research has also found that alternatively certified teachers quit at higher rates and report feeling less prepared than those traditionally certified colleagues.

The shortage of teachers who meet all these criteria is most pronounced in high-poverty schools, the EPI report finds. For example, 80 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools have more than five years of experience, compared to 75 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools. And about 73 percent of teachers who work in low-poverty schools have an educational background in the subject they teach, compared to 66 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools.

It’s worth noting that high-poverty schools struggle with hiring and retaining teachers in general—not just teachers who meet EPI’s criteria of highly qualified.

But the study’s authors write that highly qualified teachers are in high demand, and are more likely to be recruited by affluent school districts that might be able to offer better working conditions. Low-income children are consistently more likely to be taught by teachers who are not fully certified or who have less experience, the report says.

Indeed, a federal 2016 report found that uncertified teachers were more prevalent among high-poverty schools and schools with high percentages of students of color and English-language learners.

The EPI authors are planning to release five more papers analyzing the conditions that contribute to the shortage of who they deem highly qualified teachers, particularly in high-poverty schools. The papers will look at challenges related to teacher recruitment, pay, working conditions, and professional development, as well as give recommendations to policymakers.

(“The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are some of EPI’s top donors. The think tank gets about 30 percent of its funding from unions, and the rest from foundations, individuals, and other organizations.”)

These papers are coming at a time when teachers across the country have been protesting against low wages and crumbling classrooms, Weiss noted.

Can Child-Care Benefits Keep Teachers in the Classroom?

Some school districts are finding a payoff in providing child care for educators

By Sarah D. Sparks

While school initiatives to boost teacher retention tend to focus on mentoring, instructional coaching, or salary bonuses, they rarely address one of the most common reasons teachers leave: family.

Yet a handful of districts nationwide have found that the upfront costs of providing child care for their teachers pay for themselves in greater teacher flexibility and retention.

“This is a huge need of that workforce,” said Taryn Morrissey, an associate professor of public policy at American University who studies child-care and labor issues. “Teaching is actually not as family friendly a position as one might imagine. Your hours might match your kids’ hours when you have school-age kids, but when you have little ones, there’s very little flexibility.”

The most recent federal data on teacher attrition, from 2013-14, show that nationwide more than 38 percent of the teachers who left the profession and nearly 23 percent of those who switched schools voluntarily did so for “personal reasons”—a higher share than for any other reason, including salary and school climate.

The federal data show that nearly 1 in 10 of those who left the classroom did so to care for family, and research suggests even teachers still in the classroom often grapple with the conflict between nurturing and educating other people’s children and doing the same for their own.

Additionally, a 2014 study by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, found child care and education for young children second only to a home mortgage in leading expenses for the average American family. More than 60 percent of those who left the classroom said their ability to balance work and life improved after they stopped teaching, the federal data show.

Work- and family-life balance is a growing concern for schools, according to teaching researcher Richard Ingersoll, because the teaching workforce has been both growing and becoming younger over the last 20 years.

“The most common teacher in the late ’80s was a 15-year veteran; the most common teacher in 2012 was in her first year,” said Ingersoll, an education and policy professor at Pennsylvania State University Graduate School of Education. “Lots of workplaces in other fields have been doing this kind of thing [providing child care], because you are trying to make it easier for young women to do that [work-life] balance.”

When his daughter was born 25 years ago, Dave Severson became one of the first male teachers in his Missoula, Mont., district to take paternity leave. Today, he said, low unemployment in the area

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has led to more family benefits in local schools, though they are still rare in contract negotiations. For example, Missoula provides six months’ paid maternity leave. The district and union partnered to set up child care for teachers during professional development days.

Cost Concerns

High start-up costs still discourage many districts from having day-care centers on site. And Severson said in tight budgets, family-friendly benefits are often among the first to go—even as extended school days become the norm.

“You’ve got to balance your family life with your school life, and teaching is pretty rigorous in time and expectations,” said Severson, now a field representative for Montana’s state teachers’ union.

The Niles Township district in Skokie, Ill., built a day-care center on its middle school campus in 2013 and has since expanded it to two sites serving about 80 children from birth to age 4, after more than a decade of requests from teachers and staff members. Ann Geothals, an English teacher at Niles North High School, said the teachers’ union worked with the district to help pay to start the program, and has prioritized it in contracts.

“This is just one of the things that keeps women and parents of young children able to work here,” Geothals said.

Niles North history and economics teacher Sarah Stucky is one of them. Stucky has enrolled her 3-year-old son Emmett in the program.

“My spouse travels quite a bit, and not having to do multiple drop-offs is tremendously helpful. And as a parent, it provides a lot of peace of mind to have your kids in the building.”

SARAH STUCKY
TEACHER, NILES NORTH HIGH SCHOOL, SKOKIE, ILL.

Just Good Business

In 1999, the Carmel Clay, Ind., district was trying to keep up with a booming student population. “We were hiring a lot of young teachers, and therefore a lot of teachers who had just had or were having children,” recalled Roger McMichaels, the district’s associate superintendent for business affairs. “We wanted our teachers to come back to work [after parental leave], but ... some would stay home because they didn’t find child care or couldn’t afford it. Young teachers make half the salary of older teachers, so when you are a young teacher, that’s a major issue.”

McMichaels pushed the district to include an on-site day-care facility for employees in a new building under construction. The school board approved the initiative by one vote, recalled Karen Kosoglov, the director at Educare, Carmel Clay’s child-care facility. Many school board members were skeptical that teachers would be interested in the service and were also wary of the high upfront costs to build and staff classes for infants and toddlers.

“Fast-forward, and we have more than 200 children,” McMichaels said. They represent about 20 percent of the 16,000-student district’s teachers and staff—not counting the staff members who took part in the program when their children were young.

Educare today serves children of teachers who range in age from infancy to 5 years old, and its own teachers get ongoing professional development from the district.
“We’re a part of the school system,” Kosoglov said.
McMichaels agreed. Educare stays open until 5 p.m., and he said a majority of teachers with children in the center use those few hours between the end of class and pick-up time to grade papers, work on lesson plans, or collaborate.
“They stay at work longer … and when they do go home, they can actually go home and focus on their family and not try to grade papers,” he said. “In effect, we are enabling the teacher to work and be less distracted, and that pays dividends in their professionalism and commitment.”

Stucky, of the Niles Township district, agreed that having day care extend to 6 p.m. means she also doesn’t have to bolt for her car when the school day ends at 3:30 p.m.
“As a result of having care in the building, I’m able to stay teaching full time, I’m able to participate in the faculty committees that meet after school,” Stucky said.
Subsidies for private child care—either for early care or sick days—are rare in K-12 education, but more common in higher education and other professions.
In a 2009 study of Cornell University’s child-care voucher program, Morrissey found that subsidies ranged from under $100 to $5,000 an employee, and the majority of the program users learned about it from a supervisor or colleague participating in it. A follow-up study in 2011 suggested nearly half of the employees who used the child-care subsidies reported having a better work-life balance after using it.
“Over the years, I’ve personally had more than one employee tell me, ‘I’ve had opportunities to leave the school district, but I wouldn’t leave because of the child-care program,’” McMichaels said. “Improving your employees’ mindset actually saves you money. If you didn’t do it for any other reason, it’s just good business.”

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Why Special Educators Really Leave the Classroom

It’s not just about paperwork, parents, and hard-to-manage students

By Christina A. Samuels

It’s easy to feel sorry for special education teachers.
Challenging students, prickly parents, crushing paperwork: They all go with the territory, and contribute to a level of attrition among special educators that is said to be much higher than that of their regular education teaching peers.
But those problems are only part of the reason special educators struggle. In surveys, research papers, and interviews, special educators say their jobs are also made difficult by factors that are well within school and district leaders’ power to change. Those include a lack of support from principals, difficulty balancing competing priorities from various supervisors, ignorance (and sometimes disrespect) of the job from peers, and a workload that takes special educators away from what they really want to do: teach children.

‘We Don’t Really Know What You Do’

These views are not universal, but they’re common. And without understanding that
Allison Kappmeyer-Sofia, a special education teacher in Northern California, said in a previous position she felt she had to constantly advocate for her students who have severe disabilities that weren’t well understood.

She explained: “I felt I had to validate everything: Why was the student on the computer while no other students were (earned reinforcement); why did the students get to eat throughout the day (very limited diets and especially grumpy when hungry); why a student needed to be taken to the restroom, not just sent there (student safety and respect for their dignity). This all shows a lack of understanding by teachers, administration, parents, and even district-level special education staff.”

The education field has been sounding the alarm for years about special educators leaving the field, and the declining number of candidates who want to enter it. The shortages are not evenly spread: Urban areas, rural areas, and schools for students with severe disabilities face the largest shortfalls.

While the number of students with disabilities has been going down—by about 1 percent between 2006 and 2016—the drop in the number of special education teachers has been much sharper. The Education Week Research Center found that in 2016, the most recent year for which complete federal statistics are available, there were about 348,000 special education teachers for 5.9 million students ages 6-21 with disabilities in the United States. The student-teacher ratio has risen from 14 students per teacher in 2006 to 17 students per teacher in 2016.

**Juggling Competing Demands**

And as they work with increasing numbers of students, special educators are required to navigate an abundance of paperwork, driven by federal, state, and local requirements stemming from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. They also often have to navigate weighty administrative responsibilities, along with tricky peer-to-peer relationships with principals and with general education teachers.

“They get into teaching to teach, and they don’t always have an opportunity to do that,” said Elizabeth Bettini, an assistant professor of special education at Boston University. Bettini, a former special educator, has written several research papers about special educators’ working conditions. “The truth is that there are many other responsibilities that take up their time.”

On average, she said, these teachers are spending about a third of their time on instruction, with administrative and supervisory tasks taking up the rest of it.

And the job itself can vary dramatically. Although all teachers have to deal with different student needs, those in regular education know that their primary job is to cover their curriculum. In contrast, special educators may be working alongside general educators to support learning, or tasked with providing small-group instruction, or overseeing students in a resource-room environment where they’re...
responsible for teaching all subjects.

Nathan Jones, also an assistant professor of special education at Boston University, explained how this variability played a role in his research. As part of the project testing a teacher-evaluation instrument, Jones and his colleagues recorded 80 special educators at work in the classroom for a year.

“No two special education teachers’ daily roles looked the same,” he said—which was a challenge, because they were trying to draw out what a “typical” day looked like for these educators.

So how can school and central-office administrators grapple with these problems?

One way is through mentorship, particularly of early-career special educators.

Lucinda Sanchez, the associate superintendent for special education for Albuquerque schools in New Mexico, said her district has seen some success through a two-year mentorship program for special educators entering the field via alternative-licensure programs.

“We have support teachers who can go out and help them in classroom settings. We do a lot of talking about strategies, how they’re feeling in their classrooms, the challenges they’re facing,” she said.

The support teachers are also meant to give the educators someone to talk to who is not in the position of evaluating them, as a principal would be.

And Sanchez said she knows firsthand how that’s needed. As an overwhelmed first-year teacher, “I walked in the door and thought, ‘What a big mistake I’ve made,’” she said. Student teaching offers some experience, but “when you see 28 personalities, with all those different needs, it’s hard to put all those theories into practice.”

Forging Connections

School leaders can also make special efforts to keep special educators connected to other teachers in their school. Lori Lacks and Heather Andersen, both special education teachers at Foster Elementary School in Hingham, Mass., praised their principal for creating a planning schedule that ensures they have prescheduled time to talk to their general education peers about student needs.

Prior to that schedule change, the connection between the teachers had been a little strained, Lacks said.

“The [regular classroom] teachers felt like they were not being supported” by the special educators, Lacks said. “We didn’t have the time to connect with them.” The new planning schedule “allows us to have that time, and that has opened the lines of communication.”

Andersen said special educators sometimes can end up isolating themselves; for example, the special education teachers at her school used to eat lunch together. The principal encouraged them to eat with the general education teachers working with students on the same grade level.

The special educator’s job, just like teaching in general, will never be easy, said James LaBillois, a former school psychologist who is now an assistant superintendent of schools in the Hingham, Mass., school system, where Lacks and Andersen teach. But tuned-in administrators and principals can make some parts of the position less burdensome, he said.

“I’ve always said that special ed. teachers are like my Navy SEALS,” or special-operations forces, he said. “There’s something unique that they do that nobody else can do. They manage everything from after-school groups, to helping kids getting off the bus, to getting work done. They need a lot of support to be able to do that effectively.”

Research Analyst Linda Ouyang contributed to this report.

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From Teacher Villages to Tiny Homes: Housing Benefits for Educators

By Katie Stoltzfus

Finding affordable housing can be a challenge on the average teacher salary, studies have shown. That situation causes many teachers to leave the classroom or to seek out less-expensive districts in which to live and work. In an attempt to address the problem, many districts are offering housing incentives as a way to recruit and keep teachers—whether that means giving discounts or putting up four walls themselves.

Districts take construction into their own hands: A growing number of districts are repurposing old school buildings or constructing new complexes for subsidized teacher-housing units, many of which are on district property or in close proximity to schools. One of the longest-running of these initiatives is in California’s Santa Clara Unified school district, where teachers are on a waiting list to get into one of the 70 townhouse units at Casa Del Maestro. The project began about 15 years ago, and has continued to expand its offerings, as a below-market option for new employees for up to seven years. In North Carolina, where educators have some of the lowest teaching salaries in the country, the State Employees’ Credit Union has partnered with several school districts to finance housing. The first project was in Hertford County, where educators and district employees have had the option to rent apartments next to the high school since 2007, which now cost as little as $650 a month.

San Francisco—spurred on by a math teacher who was homeless—pledged last year to set aside $44 million for construction of up to 150 affordable rentals on an old school site.

Tiny houses could be the right fit: The tiny-house movement has been gaining ground in recent years, as smaller houses—up to about 400 square feet and often moveable—are known for being more cost-efficient, eco-friendly, and affordable. The Vail Unified school district in Arizona is planning to build up to 24 tiny (and “luxury,” according to the associate superintendent) homes for its teachers on desert land. In a city where there are no apartment complexes and the median house price is about $260,000,
As teacher shortages continue, educators often feel the constraints of lower budgets, fewer staff members, and larger class sizes, ultimately leading to more responsibilities and bigger workloads for the teachers and administrators who remain. At Edmentum, it’s our goal to provide online tools and customized consulting to make educators’ lives easier. See how other schools across the United States are partnering with Edmentum to find effective solutions to address challenges created by teacher shortages.

Solving Recruiting Woes and Raising Graduation Rates

Goodrich Middle and High School, which serves a rural community of less than 500 in East Texas, had difficulty recruiting teachers due to its size and location. After weighing options, administrators chose to find a virtual learning partner to allow students to take some of their courses online with a state-certified teacher. They decided on Edmentum’s fully accredited EdOptions Academy for this new endeavor. With an Edmentum partnership, Goodrich has achieved a 100 percent graduation rate, and it no longer needs to worry about filling teacher vacancies and can offer students over 400 rigorous courses to choose from.

Read the full story >>>
Solving Teacher Shortages While Expanding Student Options

Telstar Regional Middle/High School was facing declining enrollment and budget constraints, largely because it was only able to provide students with limited course options focused around core curriculum and graduation requirements. The school was struggling to offer students sufficient opportunities to explore interests, pursue possible career paths, and prepare for college.

The school decided to partner with Edmentum’s EdOptions Academy to give students access to fully accredited virtual courses across a wide variety of elective, CTE, and advanced subjects, in addition to core course options. The breadth of course options and personalized attention from EdOptions Academy’s state-certified teachers have allowed students, especially those who had previously struggled to find areas of interest, to take ownership of their learning and become more engaged. The partnership has also served as an engine to increase parental involvement, and students have successfully passed EdOptions Academy courses 90 percent of the time.

Read the full story >>>
How Schools and Districts are Stretching Resources and Expanding Student Options

Bringing $500,000 in Funding Back to the District by Reclaiming Online Students

Shikellamy School District was losing students to other online school programs, resulting in a significant loss of funding dollars. To retain student enrollment, district administrators knew that they needed to provide more course options and greater flexibility, but they had limited staff, time, and budget to do so.

After having success with Edmentum using Courseware as part of its credit recovery initiatives, the district reached out to Edmentum about partnering with EdOptions Academy to start its own virtual program. Thanks to thoughtful program design and student recruitment efforts, within its first year the Shikellamy Virtual Academy brought over 75 students back into the district, resulting in a return of over $500,000 in funding.

Hear more about their program!
We work with over 8,000 districts helping to solve their most difficult challenges, including teacher shortages. Edmentum’s Courseware digital curriculum in combination with our EdOptions Academy virtual program may be just the solution you need to expand course choice and fill difficult teaching roles.

- **Hundreds of customizable and easy-to-use course offerings**
- **Courses aligned to state and national standards**
- **Unmatched visibility into pacing and progress**
- **State-certified teachers trained in online instruction**

**GET A QUOTE**
Teacher Shortages

Some districts are boosting visibility for discounted options or direct monetary incentives available in their communities. As of 2017, an expanded citywide program in Detroit offers full-time employees and contractors of regular public, private, and charter schools a 50 percent discount on houses for sale through a local housing-auction program.

Real-estate efforts geared specifically toward teachers also assist in Nashville, where the city launched the Nashville Teacher Housing website to help teachers find affordable third-party rentals and homes on the market.

And for West Coast teachers who can't afford to buy homes, a San Francisco-based startup called Landed raises money to help finance down payments so educators can live close to where they work. The startup, which has partnered with 35 school districts and counting in Northern California, Los Angeles, and Denver, is expanding thanks to financial backers such as the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

‘Teachers’ villages’ try to offer more than just living: Community spaces, shopping, and dining are just a few of the incentives some districts are trying to provide with help from developers. In Newark, N.J., a teachers’ village erected by the developer RBH Group includes three charter schools, a day-care center, more than 200 rental units geared toward regular public and charter school teachers, and such extras as spare classrooms, a gym, and retail. The group has similar future projects underway in Hartford, Conn., and in Chicago, where an empty school building could house a small grocery and offer demand-based classes for tenants in addition to living quarters. In Philadelphia, Oxford Mills—an apartment complex targeting teachers—includes a copy center and a coffee shop.

Most College Students Interested in Teaching Never Make It to the Classroom

How likely are those who consider teaching to actually make it into the classroom? New federal data highlight a leaky pipeline for would-be teachers in college.

The newly released Baccalaureate and Beyond study tracks about 29,000 U.S. students who earned a bachelor’s degree in 2015-16. A year later, nearly 4 out of 5 of graduates had started a job, and fewer than half were in full-time salaried positions. Male graduates were making an average $41,600 a year, while women earned $37,400 a year, and about 75 percent had jobs that included benefits.

That would seem to put teaching in a competitive position compared to other professions when taking salary and benefits into account. But the devil is in the details. The National Education Association, the largest U.S. teachers’ union, estimated starting salaries for teachers were $38,700 in 2016-17 and rose to $39,250 in 2017-18, generally full-time salaried positions. Teachers with only a bachelor’s degree started out earning just about that average salary, while teachers with master’s degrees started out earning about $3,600 more.

Who considers teaching?

More than 41 percent of new graduates in the study reported that they had at least considered teaching as a career in college, but less than 17 percent actually ended up in the classroom a year later. That trickling pipeline for new teachers exacerbates recruiting challenges at a time when the number of schools unable to fill teaching posts has tripled.
One other interesting tidbit: A year after finishing their degree, a higher share of graduates who were single but supporting children or other dependents actually went into teaching than graduates who were on their own or married. That may explain why more districts are offering child care benefits as a tool for hiring and keeping teachers.

**COMMENTARY**

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**It’s a Tough Time for Teachers. Here’s Why I’m Joining the Profession.**

By Harrison Gaskins

You’ve probably seen the worrying headlines about the state of the teaching profession. States like Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma, and California, which are struggling with acute teacher shortages, have also seen massive teacher strikes in the past year. Nationally, enrollment in teacher-preparation programs has fallen 35 percent over the past five years. The rate of teachers who quit the profession is the highest it’s been since the U.S. Department of Labor began tracking those figures in 2001. If you’re wondering why, in this environment, someone would embark on a training program to enter the teacher workforce, let me share my reasons. As an African-American man who is determined to shape young lives and lift up my community, I can’t think of a more powerful job.

I’d planned to work with kids ever since my days as a summer camp counselor. After graduating from college, I followed my passion. I worked with at-risk youths who were in danger of being removed from their homes because of their behavior and as a behavior specialist at an alternative school for students with significant disciplinary problems.

Most of this work was purposeful but incredibly challenging. As someone who likes to solve problems, I often felt like I was drowning in problems—from parenting issues to bureaucratic dysfunction—that were simply too deep to fix. Sometimes the hopelessness weighed on me so much, I wondered if I should stop working with kids altogether.

I feel incredibly fortunate that, instead of giving up, I sought a new environment. I joined KIPP Vision Primary, an elementary school in southeast Atlanta where 98 percent of students are African-American. As a paraprofessional, I supported one 1st grader who was struggling with emotional issues and needed extra help. Within three months, he went from being unable to focus on classwork to being thoroughly engaged in learning. When the school named me “teacher of the month,” I was proud and a bit embarrassed. I didn’t yet consider myself a teacher. I didn’t even have my own classroom.
But the leaders at KIPP saw my potential and encouraged me to pursue teaching. They suggested I consider Relay Graduate School, whose residency program allows aspiring teachers to train in the classroom, with the support of mentors.

Now in my first year as a Relay resident, while working toward my certificate, I’m teaching kindergarten at the same KIPP school. I’ve already learned a tremendous amount about how an intentionally designed school culture can ignite students’ passion for learning.

Our school places a premium on joy. It might sound trite, but there are countless opportunities to inject joy into the educational experience—and it almost always pays off. For example, after providing 30 minutes of instruction, we often grant our kids a 10-minute “wiggle break.” When students get to dance and move around, they rejuvenate. They learn to go from serious to silly and then back to serious. Simply put, they get to be kids—and scholars.

We also try to introduce lessons with catchy hooks that grab our kids’ attention. Sometimes we use songs to teach certain topics. The message is clear: Learning is fun. If that sounds like an obvious tactic, you’d be surprised how many schools make education feel like punishment.

Our school provides a strong support network for less experienced teachers like me. Veteran educators and principals regularly observe my teaching and make recommendations to help me improve my practice; that feedback loop is embedded in the culture of our school and my graduate program. When I remind myself that very few teachers have the same support, it breaks my heart because it doesn’t have to be this way.

I’ve also found that teaching is about more than increasing a student’s content knowledge. Each day, dozens of tiny kids look up to me—literally and figuratively. I’ll never forget how the little boys in my class began wearing wristwatches after they noticed mine. I know that as they grow up, they’ll get cues from popular culture about who they should become: ballplayers or rappers. I want them to think differently. I want them to know black men who are part of their communities, who are nurturers and educators.

Being a role model is a major responsibility, but it energizes me. Whereas my past experiences working with children had been meaningful but exhausting, now seeing the impact I have on my kids’ lives is a source of constant inspiration and rejuvenation.

Teachers are powerful people. The more our public education system helps teachers harness that power, the more the next generation will benefit. And who knows? Many of them might grow up to become teachers.

Harrison Gaskins is a kindergarten teacher at KIPP Vision Primary in Atlanta and a Relay Graduate School resident.
students perform worse than their peers in urban areas on nearly every meaningful measure of progress or proficiency. For example, students in areas of Australia classified as “very remote” (based on relative access to services according to the Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia) are only a third as likely as urban students to score at proficiency on standardized reading assessments in 7th grade. Rural and remote students also have lower high school completion rates, lower college enrollment rates, and lower completion of any tertiary education than less geographically isolated students.

As in the United States, among the most significant challenges facing rural and remote schools are the ongoing shortage of teachers and the difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified school personnel. Teaching positions in rural and remote regions of Australia may be a hard sell given a higher cost of living, more limited housing stock, geographic isolation, and far (and expensive) travel “home” for teachers from other parts of the country.

The Australian government at both state and federal levels has undertaken a number of initiatives to try to attract teachers into regional, rural, and remote schools and to encourage them to stay there. For example, in the state of Western Australia, teachers can receive up to $20,000 (AUD) more each year and earn six months of “long service leave” after only four years of teaching (instead of the standard ten years). Some states also offer transfer benefits to teachers who have worked in hard-to-staff schools for a period of time, which gives those teachers priority when requesting transfers to a “preferred location” (often closer to urban areas).

There are also a number of programs—including Teach for Australia, the controversial local version of Teach for America—that places comparatively inexperienced teachers in some of the neediest schools and prioritizes sending teachers to remote areas to respond to the shortages there. The evidence to date has yet to show any noticeable or sustained positive impacts from these various incentive programs (c.f., ACER, 2013), recently leading the Australian Capital Territory (an area where the Australian capital, Canberra, is located, somewhat akin to Washington, D.C.) to cut ties with Teach For Australia. However, Australian researchers and educators are teeming with other ideas that the government and school systems here and elsewhere should explore and take seriously.

Some teacher preparation programs have already begun to pursue new avenues to invest in rural and remote education. For example, the National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) and Deakin Alliances in Teacher Education organize extended student teacher placements in regional schools to “contribute sustainably to curriculum offerings and student learning outcomes that focus on the needs of the school and community.” They do this by focusing more explicitly on preparing teacher candidates to work in rural and remote areas, providing resources and courses tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of students in those areas.

Teacher preparation programs must also emphasize the benefits of having experiences in rural and remote areas. A recent study showed that some preservice teachers from urban areas were interested in rural teaching opportunities but had a number of concerns that were not adequately addressed. Universities must capitalize on the existing desire among new teachers to work in rural and remote settings through enhanced preparation and by targeting those preservice teachers who show willingness to explore teaching internships in rural contexts.

State school systems could offer leadership positions to experienced teachers with strong track records of success to attract them to geographically isolated areas.

Finally, cultivating local human capital and building a pipeline from within rural and remote communities are essential ways to both invest in local communities and solve these pressing needs.

Responding to educational challenges in rural and remote areas of the world is an issue of global import that necessitates cross-border collaboration. Strategies to respond to resource disparities, including human capital ones, must move beyond deficits notions of rural education and embrace the opportunities that rural and regional contexts offer. ■

Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj is an associate professor at Seton Hall University. She’s the author of the book Unaccompanied Minors and her research has been featured in popular outlets like the New York Times and the Huffington Post. She’s spending the year as a visiting researcher at Australia’s University of Sydney, so she’ll explore how issues of school choice, rural education, and teacher recruitment get tackled down under. Today she’s joined by coauthors Bernadette Walker-Gibbs, an associate professor at Australia’s Deakin University, and Matthew A.M. Thomas, an American senior lecturer at the University of Sydney.
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