

The State of the Educator Workforce in Michigan

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT K-12 STAFFING CHALLENGES

Through a grant from the state of Michigan, the Michigan Alliance for Student Opportunity contracted with Public Policy Associates and researchers from the University of Michigan and Michigan State University to conduct a comprehensive examination of K-12 staffing shortages in Michigan. The purposes of this study were to investigate the scope of staffing challenges in all sectors of Michigan's education system (teachers, administrators, support staff, substitute teachers, etc.) and identify how other states and districts have responded to these challenges.

This year-long study included analysis of state-level (primarily data collected by the State) and local administrative personnel data; surveys and interviews of central office administrators, school leaders, teachers, substitutes, and other staff, as well as an intensive review of the existing research literature and the strategies of other states for strengthening the K-12 labor force.

Key Findings

STAFFING SUPPLY

Both state administrative data and reporting from district administrators and school leaders (principals) suggest that adequately staffing schools has become more challenging in recent years. There has been an increase in vacancies and a decline in the number and quality of applicants for open positions. Shortages are particularly severe for special education and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) teachers, substitute teachers, paraprofessionals, and bus drivers. Economically-disadvantaged districts appear to have fared the worst.

STAFFING DEMAND

Increased competition over teachers, based on the data included in this study, appears to have led to widespread teacher mobility, and even deliberate recruitment away from districts (i.e., "poaching") by neighboring districts. This phenomenon may be disadvantaging districts serving more low-income students, potentially exacerbating educational inequality.

SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS

Instructional coverage of classrooms due to teacher absences and vacancies is a problem for many districts. Both survey and administrative data indicate that teacher absence rates increased in many districts, while the substitute teacher fill rate declined. Substitute teachers cited pay and behavioral problems as their biggest concerns.

IMPACT OF SHORTAGES

Teacher vacancies and absences have a substantial impact on student learning, school operations, and climate and culture. Severe staffing challenges can also contribute to a negative feedback loop, in which over-stressed teachers need more time off or begin considering other jobs.

RESPONSES TO SHORTAGES

Pandemic relief funds seemed to allow district leaders to adopt shortage mitigation strategies, but these funds will soon be exhausted. Although districts often see the wisdom of proactive strategies, short-term pressures often force them to resort to triaging or bandaging an issue without fixing it.

LIMITED STATE AND DISTRICT DATA INFRASTRUCTURE

The current limits to state and district data systems make it difficult to accurately track teacher vacancies, teacher absences, instructional coverage, and substitute placement, much less develop evidence-based strategies for improving staffing.

Recommendations

BASED ON THESE FINDINGS, EXAMPLES IN OTHER STATES, AND THE INSIGHTS OF THE RESEARCH LITERATURE, THE REPORT RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES TO MICHIGAN'S K-12 STAFFING SHORTAGES:

1. Stabilize and enhance resources post-COVID (mitigating any “cliff effect” caused by loss of federal and/or state financial support)
2. Expand efforts to provide resources for hard-to-staff subject areas, school districts, and strengthen the teacher pipeline
3. Account for “poaching,” absences in addition to vacancies, and other problem areas in the formulation of policy
4. Improve working conditions and professional status of instructional staff
5. Consider permanent district/building substitute teachers, and improve the expertise of substitute teachers
6. Strengthen data and evaluation systems (such as an integrated statewide human resource system for districts)
7. Streamline data collection and research coordination (to overcome “research fatigue” by educators)

