

Teacher Shortage Compounds Covid Crisis in Schools

Early retirements and quarantines force some administrators to recruit parents, bus drivers to baby-sit classrooms; 'it's all hands on deck'

WSJ, page 1, By Valerie Bauerlein and Yoree Koh, Dec. 15, 2020

PHOENIX—As if the pandemic weren't disruptive enough, many American schools are facing a growing shortage of teachers.

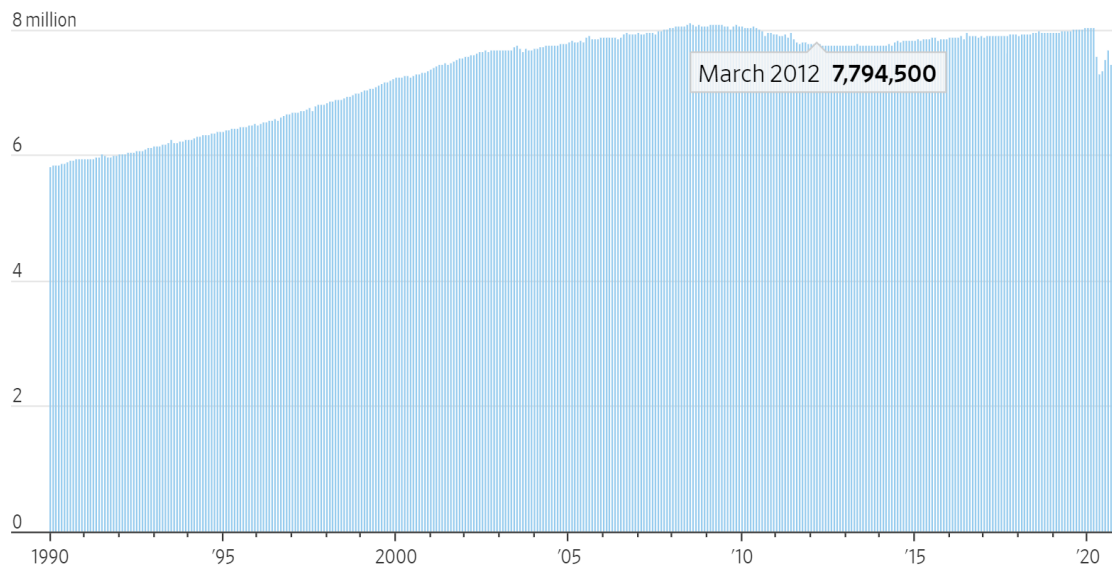
School districts are recruiting parents as substitute teachers, online class sizes are soaring to 50 children or more and bus drivers are baby-sitting classrooms. Some are considering allowing asymptomatic teachers who were exposed to Covid-19 to continue to show up.

Public-school employment in November was down 8.7% from February, and at its lowest level since 2000, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Under Strain:

In May, public education employment fell to its lowest level since August 2000.

Local government education employees



Note: October and November 2020 figures are preliminary.
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

That includes teachers who quit, retired early or took leaves of absence due to the pandemic, and layoffs of support staff such as teachers' aides and clerical workers. The staffing crunch leaves teachers educating children in person and online simultaneously, deep-cleaning their own classrooms and taking turns as crossing guards.

The consequences are burnout for teachers, frustration for parents and scant progress for students.

The shortage isn't uniform nationwide, but rather concentrated in some regions and specialties. More than 40 states reported shortfalls in math, science and special education in 2018, but fewer states reported shortages in elementary grades, according to the latest federal data. There are shortages in particular places, from cities with a high cost of living to rural areas with low teacher pay.

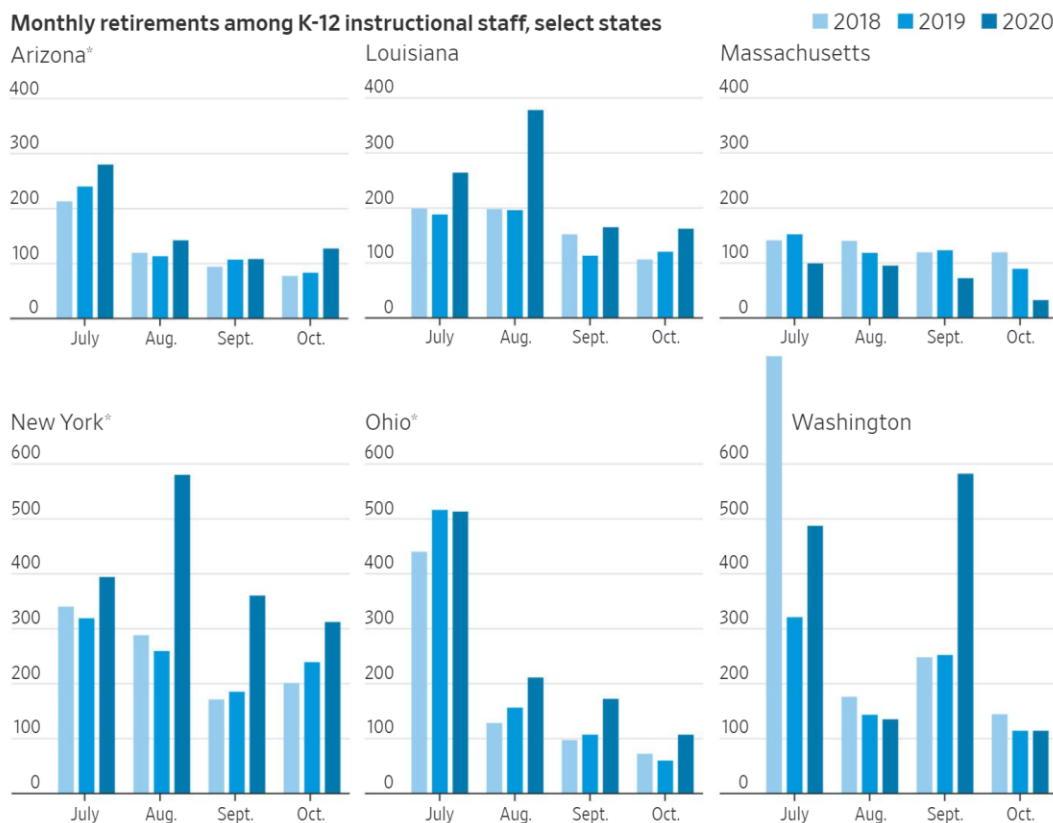
Nowhere is the impact more stark than Arizona. At the start of the school year in August, school districts weren't able to hire traditionally certified teachers for 78% of 6,145 open positions, according to a survey by the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association, an organization of human-resource managers. The survey included responses from 145 of the state's 236 school districts; there are roughly 60,000 teacher positions in the state.

Shaw Butte Elementary opens just after dawn, but nearly all the students will be learning remotely.

Half the open positions, or 3,080, were filled by emergency substitutes, recruits from other countries and student teachers. A third, or 1,728, were left vacant or covered by consolidating classrooms, paying teachers to work through their planning time or having principals pick up classes.

At least 460 teachers resigned, retired or took unpaid leave due to Covid-19 and an additional 200 either didn't show up for the first day of school or quit within a few weeks. Retirements spiked from August to October, up 24% from the year before.

In some states that allowed in-person classes, teacher retirements increased or shifted toward the fall compared to prior years.



*By date of retirement application, not actual retirement

Note: New York figures exclude New York City, which operates a separate retirement system.

Source: state teacher retirement systems

Andrea Murphy, an advanced-placement psychology teacher, took early retirement six weeks into the semester at a high school in the Mesa Public Schools district southeast of Phoenix. The 54-year-old was three years shy of 30 years' tenure, a milestone that would have added \$850 a month to her retirement check.

Mrs. Murphy said she became physically ill from stress once she was back in the school building this fall, teaching a mix of in-person and remote students. She wore scrubs, a mask, a face shield and a beanie, gear she knew was overkill but made her feel safer.

"Many of us in education have felt disposable since this Covid period," she said. "I was done." She is now studying to be a paralegal.

Staffing is a daily struggle, said Kristi Wilson, superintendent of the Buckeye Elementary School District southwest of Phoenix. Dr. Wilson, who leads a Covid-19 response task force as president of the professional group AASA, The School Superintendents Association, said her peers nationwide are also struggling to find enough teachers.

"It's everyone," she said. **"Large districts, small districts, rural, urban. A common theme is people are resigning, people are retiring, taking leave to care for sick parents and they're not able to fill those positions."**

Educational achievement has suffered, although academics say it is too soon to know how much of that is due to general pandemic-related stress or shortcomings in online and hybrid learning. Districts nationwide are reporting that in the first quarter, as many as half of middle- and high-school students are failing at least one class. **A November report on test results of more than two million math students found they had fallen behind**, needing as much as 12 weeks to catch up to where they were expected to be in the fall.

Even without the pandemic, it was unlikely the pipeline of college students studying to become teachers would keep pace with retirements and attrition.

Pipeline Problem

Stagnant enrollment in teacher education programs and lower wages compared to college-educated peers have put pressure on the supply of teachers.

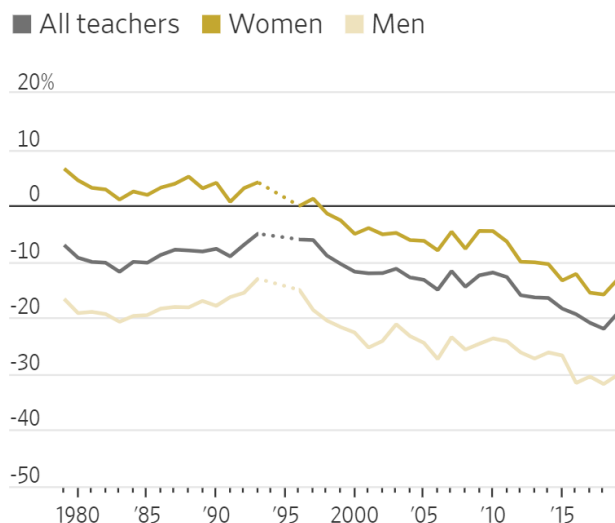
Enrollment in teacher preparation programs by academic year



Note: 1994 and 1995 pay figures are unavailable.

Sources: Education Department (enrollment); Economic Policy Institute (wages)

Public school teachers' wages, compared to non-teaching, college-educated peers



To compensate, states are increasingly relying on alternative or emergency credentials to allow people who have no formal training to become teachers. The percentage of emergency or nontraditional hires rose to 16% of teachers in the 2019-20 school year from 10% in 2013-14, according to the American Association for Employment in Education, a trade group that tracks teacher hiring.

"It's, 'If you want to be a teacher tomorrow, I'll hook you up,' " said Justin Wing, human-resources director at the Washington Elementary School District in Phoenix, of the hiring process in Arizona. "If you have a degree in accounting or whatever, you can be a teacher tomorrow. I'm not kidding."

Mr. Wing has hired a former police officer, a restaurant manager and a plumbing apprentice, among others, to be teachers, and is offering such candidates after-hours training toward traditional certification.

Since Shaw Butte Elementary switched back to all-virtual learning, kindergarten teacher Amber Fusco won't have the opportunity to hand out any new-student materials for some time.

Vacancies are exacerbated by teachers needing to quarantine and a shortage of substitute teachers, particularly long-term substitutes who fill in for months or a year in a classroom. Many experienced substitutes are retired teachers who don't want to risk infection or are tentative about online learning platforms, leaving new subs to fill the void.

In August, Missouri lowered the substitute-teaching requirement to a high-school diploma and an online training course; Iowa lowered the minimum age to 20 from 21 and education level to an associate degree from a bachelor's.

In November, Scottsdale Unified School District in Arizona asked parents to consider applying for emergency substitute certification, which requires a high-school diploma and background check.

"I thought it was a joke," said Sandra Kidd, mother of a ninth-grader at Scottsdale's Chaparral High School. "You're basically hiring a glorified baby-sitter."

Her daughter's school was one of three in the district recently to cancel in-person classes for the rest of the semester, citing staffing shortages.

"She's not getting an education," Ms. Kidd said, of her 15-year-old. "There's no way."

Amber Payne, a 21-year-old graduate student in hospitality, is subbing this fall for \$68 a day in suburban Atlanta. She said she hasn't yet used a lesson plan and typically does her own college assignments while students sit at their desks and do virtual work assigned them by their regular teacher.

"I don't think I could be an actual teacher," she said, citing the challenges of managing a classroom of 30 restless high-school students.

Arizona has the highest average class size in the U.S., with 23.5 pupils per teacher, compared with 16 nationwide, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

It has among the lowest median pay in the country, when adjusted for cost of living, at \$46,404 for an elementary schoolteacher, compared with \$60,461 in neighboring New Mexico, according to Expect More Arizona, a group of community and business leaders advocating for increased education spending. That's after a spate of pay increases on the heels of the state's trademark "Red for Ed" protests two years ago. In November, voters approved a ballot initiative raising income taxes on high earners to support education spending, but it faces legal challenges.

Construction workers take advantage of an in-person shut-down to remodel the kindergarten playground at Acacia Elementary in Phoenix.

On a recent morning at Acacia Elementary School in northwest Phoenix, principal Christine Hollingsworth greeted kindergartners at the front door as they stood on X marks waiting to have their temperature taken and fiddling with masks.

“Good morning!” she said. “I see your smiles under there!”

Ms. Hollingsworth had been up since 4 a.m., fruitlessly seeking a substitute for the art teacher, who was out with allergies.

The office manager was also absent, so teachers and other aides took turns playing that role. Ms. Hollingsworth said she tries to do her part, filling in as a substitute teacher as needed and as facilities manager for three months this fall, coaching the custodians on maintenance. “It’s all hands on deck,” she said.

Over the summer, Ms. Hollingsworth went to the Washington Elementary School District’s candidate database to see if she could fill a handful of vacancies created by teachers who didn’t feel comfortable returning to school. There were five applicants for dozens of teaching jobs at 32 elementary schools.

She said she is lucky to have seven paid student teachers through a program with Arizona State University. The students work full-time in a classroom instead of a typical part-time assisting role.

“Without these student teachers, there’s no one,” she said. “Literally no one.”

Across town, Shaw Butte kindergarten teacher Amber Fusco is one of two certified teachers responsible for in-person learning for the school’s 100 kindergartners, most of whom are enrolled in hybrid learning and are rotating in and out of school in groups. Three student teachers help her out.

Amber Fusco teaches her kindergartners online now.

On a late October day, she modeled for a dozen in-person kindergartners how to put the top on their glue stick, put their crayons away, push their chair under the table and stow their artwork in their cubby. She over-enunciated to help students learn spoken English since they cannot see her mouth through a mask.

“No more talking, while we’re walking,” she said, in a singsong voice.

The district recently switched back to all-virtual learning, citing a substantial increase in local cases of Covid-19. Ms. Fusco now spends her day coordinating remote learning and adapting lesson plans, such as how to write, recognize and speak the letter “O” through worksheets and quick bursts of live online instruction instead of games and in-person modeling, as in a physical classroom.

By the end of a normal year, Ms. Fusco’s students would know how to count to 100, recognize sight words and speak in complete sentences.

This year she said she is trying to be realistic. “The hardest thing for me is keeping all the children straight,” she said.

Shaw Butte principal Tracy Maynard moved seven of her 29 teachers to different grade levels or to combined grade-level classes to compensate for vacancies and ensure proper class size.

Two of her vacancies came from people trying out teaching as a second career. “One didn’t work out,” she said. “One made it two weeks and quit.”

Principal Tracy Maynard observes her teachers via teleconference from her office at Shaw Butte Elementary in Phoenix.

An additional staffing challenge in Arizona is that schools must provide space for students whose home situation doesn't allow for distance learning, even if the school isn't open for in-person instruction.

Republican Gov. Doug Ducey made school funding contingent on providing supervised classrooms with meals and laptops for virtual coursework as well as access to special-education and other services that might only be available at school.

Shaw Butte has two dozen students in its daily program, based in a classroom on the far side of campus. There is no teacher to oversee them, so Ms. Maynard cycles through a cohort of staff as they're available.

Her peers have deployed bus drivers and crossing guards to supervise, but Ms. Maynard is short on those, too, filling in herself as playground monitor.

Students do their virtual work, which takes 60 to 90 minutes then watch videos, fidget in their seats or go out to the playground when it isn't in use.

"It's hard for the children," she said. "They are doing a little bit of work and then they're just sitting in a room."

Ms. Maynard, head of the district principals association, said she is worried that the constant change and increased workload will force teachers out of the field, exacerbating the shortage.

"Everyone says it is like getting on a plane while you're building it," she said. "But who's dumb enough to get on a plane that is not built?"

Article source: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/teacher-shortage-compounds-covid-crisis-in-schools-11608050176?page=1>

Write to Valerie Bauerlein at valerie.bauerlein@wsj.com and Yoree Koh at yoree.koh@wsj.com