

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: March 4, 2021

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This report is embargoed until 2:30 PM PT on Thursday, March 4, 2021

COVID-19 IS WORSENING ALREADY CRITICAL TEACHER SHORTAGES, POTENTIALLY JEOPARDIZING SCHOOL REOPENINGS

New research sheds light on pandemic's impact on severe teacher shortages in California and nationally, and policy solutions to grow the teacher workforce

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers' attention is increasingly focused on efforts to safely reopen schools for in-person instruction and address lost instructional time for students. However, critical teaching shortages, a challenge that predates the pandemic but has worsened in many districts since its emergence, may jeopardize schools' ability to safely reopen or stay open.

Longstanding shortages, which are often most acute in high-need fields and high-need schools, appear to be growing more severe due to a range of pandemic-related factors, including rising early retirements and resignations and a reduced pipeline of incoming teachers, according to new research by the Learning Policy Institute. In California and across the country, many districts are meeting hiring needs with teachers on substandard credentials and permits or increasingly relying on substitute teachers, who are also in short supply.

That matters because the failure to recruit and retain well-prepared teachers undermines student achievement, with the most severe impacts on students from low-income families and students of color. It also jeopardizes school reopening because in-person learning may require a greater number of teachers to accommodate physical distancing or provide intensive tutoring.

The new report, [*California Teachers and COVID-19: How the Pandemic Is Impacting the Teacher Workforce*](#), investigates the impact of the pandemic on key aspects of teacher supply and demand, including increasing resignations, retirements, turnover, and vacancies, and the number of new teachers joining the profession. Researchers interviewed leaders from eight of the largest California districts, which collectively serve nearly one in six California students. In addition, researchers interviewed leaders from nine small, rural districts since these are also frequently subject to shortages.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has further strained an already faltering pipeline of qualified teachers," said LPI President Linda Darling-Hammond. "Resuming in-person instruction and meeting the needs of students will require a stable, high-qualified teacher workforce. It's more important than ever that states and districts invest in proven solutions that address ongoing teacher shortages."

The report describes five findings based on common themes that arose in the interviews:

1. Teacher shortages remain a critical problem.

2. Teacher pipeline problems are exacerbated by state testing policies for teacher licensure and inadequate financial aid for completing preparation
3. Teacher workload and burnout are major concerns.
4. Growing retirements and resignations further reduce supply.
5. Teacher residencies and preparation partnerships have proved important to recruitment.

Leaders in both urban and rural districts described educators going above and beyond to continue to educate California students amid the pandemic. Still, ongoing teacher shortages make that a challenge. Since the onset of the pandemic, some districts are experiencing upticks in retirements, resignations, and leaves of absence. Shortages in small, rural districts are especially severe, particularly in specific subject areas such as math and science.

As districts shift to in-person instruction, many expect shortages to worsen even further with the need to reduce class sizes for physical distancing, which requires additional staff. Adding to the challenge, many district leaders described a severe substitute teacher shortage that puts additional strain on the teacher workforce.

Research has identified effective key strategies that develop a reliable pool of well-prepared recruits who are more likely to stay in the profession. The report provides six policy recommendations to address shortages. Among them: building high-retention pathways into the profession and providing financial supports to make entering the profession affordable.

“Teacher shortages were not created overnight, nor will they be solved with quick, band-aid solutions,” said LPI Researcher and Policy Analyst Desiree Carver-Thomas, who co-authored the report with LPI Research and Policy Associate Melanie Leung and LPI Senior Researcher Dion Burns. “Policymakers should attend to both long-term solutions for growing a high-qualified teacher workforce and to meeting the immediate needs of a state school system reeling from a year of instability and strife.”

High-retention pathways into the profession include teacher residencies and grow-your-own programs. Districts that had such programs in place noted how important they have been for maintaining a strong and predictable supply of well-qualified educators. In California, these include the Teacher Residency Program and the Classified School Employees Credentialing Program. Financial support for teacher candidates, such as California’s Golden State Teacher Grant Program, can be an effective strategy to both recruit and retain new teachers for high-need subjects and locations.

While the report focuses on California, the challenges highlighted will be familiar to education leaders across the U.S.

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