

REIMAGINING THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is yet another watershed moment for the educator workforce. The challenges confronting districts are profound: declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs, persistent shortages in critical content areas, underrepresentation of teachers of color, and spreading educator burnout. These issues, long in the making, were laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic and currently exacerbated by decreases in funding options to counter these trends given decreased student enrollment and federal grants.

The University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE) and the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy (USHCA) are supporting forward-thinking school systems across the country to rise to this watershed workforce moment. Many of these systems leveraged stimulus funds to reimagine traditional staffing structures to better respond to students' learning needs and are now problem-solving how to continue evolving staffing strategy in a more resource constrained environment. This paper builds on these examples and brings together national trend data, practitioner innovations, and policy research to present a current view of the educator workforce landscape and considerations for results-oriented leaders.



- ◆ **Systemic mismatches:**
Student enrollment is declining nationally, yet districts face acute and chronic shortages of qualified educators, especially in special education, multi-lingual education, STEM, and rural schools.
- ◆ **Funding cliff:**
Emergency ESSER funding allowed districts to temporarily expand staffing, improve student support, and pilot innovative staffing models. As these funds and up to 250,000 education jobs sunset, school systems must take a hard look at resource and staffing reallocations that maximize return on investment.
- ◆ **Pipeline concerns:**
Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has fallen dramatically over the past decade, and completion rates, even in alternative pathways, remain troublingly low. Additionally, several economic and structural barriers, such as low salaries and limited access to affordable and high-quality preparation programs, limit the attractiveness of the profession.
- ◆ **Equity imperatives:**
Teachers of color make up only 21% of the workforce, while over half of all U.S. public school students are students of color. Retention of educators of color is hindered by isolation, lack of mentorship, and school climate concerns.
- ◆ **Workforce expectations and job conditions:**
Generational shifts in workplace values, combined with evolving roles and responsibilities for teachers (including technology integration and mental health support), require schools to rethink time use, autonomy, and support structures.
- ◆ **Promising innovations:**
Districts nationwide are piloting high-leverage, replicable strategies including Grow Your Own programs, teacher residencies, team-based models, co-teaching structures, and classified-to-certified pathways. These efforts are demonstrating early success in retention, satisfaction, and student outcomes.

Isolated innovation, though, is not enough. Without systemic alignment, across funding, policy, licensure, leadership development, and HR strategy, promising efforts will not scale or endure.

The paper spotlights many inspiring examples of shifts to inform how school systems might modernize their approach to the workforce and concludes with a research-based call to action for education leaders organized into five core priorities:

- 1 Design and fund the educator workforce of the future**
- 2 Rebuild and diversify the talent pipeline**
- 3 Improve the daily experience of teaching**
- 4 Recommit to addressing racial disparities in representation and outcomes**
- 5 Treat workforce strategy as a driver of learning**

Education leaders, policymakers, and funders can act now to ensure an effective, flexible, and resilient educator workforce, and by extension, student success.



BACKGROUND

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT STATE OF THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

The United States stands at a pivotal moment with its K-12 educator workforce. Even as the country emerges from the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, school systems continue to face deep and persistent challenges in preparing, recruiting, developing, and retaining teachers. These challenges are exacerbated by an array of demographic, economic, fiscal, and professional shifts, which often vary by region. Understanding the broader context in which today's educator workforce operates is essential to developing creative and sustainable staffing solutions that address both student learning needs and the well-being of the professionals who serve them.

DIVERGING DEMOGRAPHICS: STUDENT ENROLLMENT VS. EDUCATOR STAFFING

One of the most important contextual shifts is the mismatch between trends in student enrollment and the size of the educator workforce. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), public school enrollment declined from 50.8 million in fall 2019 to 49.4 million in fall 2020 and remained relatively flat through 2022. Projections indicate a continued decline, with up to three million fewer students expected by 2031 compared to 2013.

Yet this overall drop in student numbers has not led to a reduction in the number of teachers. On the contrary, demand for educators remains high due to persistent shortages in key areas such as special education, mathematics, science, and bilingual education. As of 2022-2023, approximately 3.2 million teachers were employed in U.S. public schools, a workforce that includes both full-time and part-time educators. Including private schools, the national teacher workforce stands at just over four million. The disconnect between declining enrollment and continuing teacher shortages points to systemic inefficiencies in how schools are staffed and supported.

2022-2023

3.2 Million

Teachers Employed

If the size of the workforce tracked student enrollment declines, districts would need about a half million fewer teachers, positions that principals and districts currently put tremendous effort into recruiting.

THE POST-PANDEMIC FUNDING CLIFF AND THE ESSER EFFECT

During the height of the pandemic, Congress authorized nearly **\$190 billion in emergency relief** funds for K-12 education under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program. A substantial portion of this funding was directed toward labor costs by districts. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, nearly half of ESSER III funds went toward staffing-related expenditures, including hiring additional teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, social workers, and support staff.

These investments were crucial. In Washington State alone, for example, districts hired approximately 12,000 new staff using ESSER funds, including 5,100 new teachers. Many districts used the funding to reduce class sizes, provide targeted academic interventions, and expand mental health support. Yet as the ESSER funding ended, education leaders faced the need to reduce an estimated 4% of all K-12 education jobs, approximately 250,000 positions. Additionally, federal cuts to education research and programs in some communities further reduces staffing and human capital innovation projects that depended on that funding.

DECLINING INTEREST IN TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

The nation also faces a serious pipeline problem. Interest in entering the teaching profession has dropped significantly over the last two decades. Between 2009 and 2015, enrollment in teacher preparation programs declined by more than 40%. Though there has been modest recovery in recent years, with a 12% increase in enrollment between 2018 and 2022, this growth is not evenly distributed across states and is insufficient to meet national demand.

Completion rates have also struggled to keep pace. Many candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs do not finish, and alternative certification routes often see even lower completion rates, especially among for-profit providers. This raises concerns about both the supply and the quality of preparation new educators receive.



ECONOMIC AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Several economic factors continue to deter individuals from entering or remaining in the teaching profession. These include low salaries, limited access to affordable high-quality preparation programs, and high levels of student debt. In many communities, teachers struggle to afford housing near where they work, further exacerbating retention issues.

The [Economic Policy Institute](#) found the largest ever gap between teacher pay and that of similarly educated workers, even controlling for differences such as length of work year, pensions, and insurance:

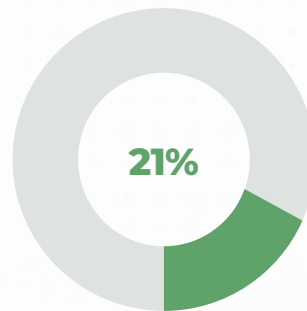
in 2023, teachers made 26.6% less than other professionals.

Workplace conditions are another significant driver of attrition. Teachers today are expected to address not only academic instruction but also students' well-being needs. They must differentiate instruction for diverse learners, integrate new technologies, and adapt to shifting expectations, often with inadequate time, support, or compensation. As a result, burnout levels are high. In a [2024 RAND survey](#), more than **75% of teachers** reported frequent job-related stress.

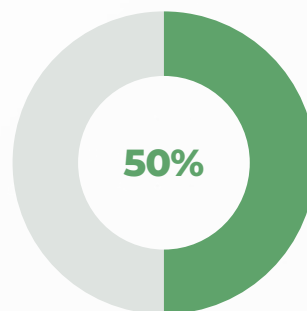
CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS OF COLOR

While student populations have become increasingly diverse, [the educator workforce remains predominantly white](#). Teachers of color account for only about 21% of the national workforce, even as students of color represent more than 50% of public school enrollment. This racial mismatch has implications for student achievement, school climate, and equity.

Moreover, teachers of color [leave the profession at higher rates](#) than their white counterparts. Nationally, the attrition rate for teachers of color stands at around 19%, compared to 15% for white teachers. Contributing factors to this difference include feelings of isolation, lack of mentorship, systemic bias, and unfavorable working conditions. Addressing these barriers is critical to achieving greater representation and equity within the workforce.



Teachers of color represent only about 21% of the national workforce



Students of color represent more than 50% of public school enrollment.

GENERATIONAL SHIFTS IN WORKPLACE EXPECTATIONS

Younger educators, particularly those from Millennial and Gen Z cohorts, bring different expectations to the workplace. They prioritize flexibility, meaningful career growth, and work-life balance. These preferences often clash with traditional school schedules, hierarchical staffing structures, and limited professional development pathways. Traditional step-and-lane salary schedules, defined benefit pension plans, and seniority-based assignments are simply not attractive to many younger educators – and potential educators. Districts that fail to adapt risk losing potential talent to other fields or non-traditional education roles.

Conversely, veteran teachers nearing retirement may require different types of support to remain in the profession longer. Tailored professional development, reduced workload options, and phased retirement options can help retain experienced educators while easing transitions for new hires.



THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND AI IN CLASSROOMS

The rapid proliferation of educational technology and artificial intelligence is transforming classroom dynamics. Teachers are now expected to master blended learning and monitor student data in real time and increasingly expected to integrate AI-driven tools into daily instruction without yet realizing consummate potential AI benefits of reducing their administrative loads. While these tools offer significant potential, they also introduce new demands and training requirements. Many educators report feeling unprepared to use technology effectively, and concerns about workload intensification are common.

Policymakers and district leaders must ensure that technology enhances rather than hinders teacher effectiveness and student learning. This includes investing in professional development, clarifying expectations, and co-creating technology use policies with educators.



PROMISING PRACTICES AND INNOVATIONS

Despite these challenges, school systems across the country are pioneering staffing strategies that offer hope. “Grow Your Own” programs, for instance, help paraprofessionals and community members become certified teachers through subsidized coursework and mentorship. Teacher residency programs embed aspiring educators in classrooms for a full year of mentored experience. Several districts have forward-thinking co-teaching models, teacher leadership roles, flexible scheduling, team-based instruction, and expansion of non-traditional tutoring and instructional support roles to promote collaboration, coaching cultures, and distributed workloads that enhance collective ownership over enhancing student learning. By working together to grow one another’s teaching practice, leverage high-quality materials, differentiate instruction, and reduce non-value-added tasks such as independently designing lessons and student groups, these innovations hold promise to make the design of teaching roles more sustainable and responsive to students’ needs.

Still, the sustainability of these initiatives depends on systemic support. Without changes in policy, funding, barriers to entry, and school design, innovative staffing solutions may remain isolated examples rather than the norm.



CASE STUDIES

CONTEXT CONSCIOUS STRATEGIES LEAD TO SUCCESS

Demographic trends, declining interest in the profession, inequities in teacher representation, and rapidly evolving expectations are placing enormous strain on the system. At the same time, innovations and community-driven solutions are demonstrating that sustainable, student-centered models that deliver significant increases in student learning are possible. PLE and USHCA find that the more effective school systems are shifting their focus beyond simply filling traditional teacher vacancies to being honest that this moment calls for different solutions and role designs and then identifying, cultivating, and growing talent to support students from a variety of sources.

Education leaders, policymakers, and funders can work together to build on these efforts. This means investing in pathways that expand access to the profession, addressing the conditions that drive teachers out, and creating school systems that reflect and support the diversity of the students they serve. Only by responding to the full complexity of today's context can we reimagine a future educator workforce that is both resilient and transformative.

ALLIANCE MIT MIDDLE ACADEMY, LOS ANGELES (CA)

FOUR-DAY WORKWEEK FOR TEACHER PLANNING



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Alliance MIT implemented a four-day teacher workweek with one remote planning day to combat workload stress.

IMPACT

- Ninety-seven percent teacher Net Promoter Score.
- Increased lesson quality and reduced teacher resignations.
- Improved student behavior



We feel more prepared and less overwhelmed.

Jonathan Tiongo, Executive Director, Alliance MIT

AURORA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (CO)

PAY-FOR-SUCCESS RESIDENCY PROGRAM



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Aurora launched a residency model linking funding to long-term teacher retention outcomes.

HOW IT WORKS

- Resident teachers pay a \$500 fee; the district covers the remainder if they stay for 3+ years.
- Structured mentoring and gradual release from apprentice to lead teacher.

IMPACT

- Eighty-four percent retention rate of residents, surpassing alternative certification routes.
- Thirty percent of residents identify as BIPOC.
- Reduced long-term hiring costs.



We weren't just filling vacancies, we were building a workforce designed to stay.

Rico Munn, Former Superintendent

CITY SCHOOLS OF DECATUR (GA)

REDUCING CERTIFICATION BARRIERS



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

CSD partners with universities to offer tuition assistance and mentorship to paraprofessionals pursuing certification.

IMPACT

- Enrollment rose from 2 to 12 in Moreland University's program.
- Lowered tuition by over 25% for staff.
- Part of broader staffing modernization investments that led CSD to be one of only 102 school systems in the country to outperform pre-pandemic reading and math scores by 2024.



Without this support, I couldn't have pursued my certification while working full-time.

EASTPOINTE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS (MI)



GROW YOUR OWN THROUGH HIGHER ED PARTNERSHIPS

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

ECS, through a state grant, supports paraprofessionals in earning certification in partnership with Northern Michigan University.

IMPACT

- Seventeen paraprofessionals enrolled, many certifying this year.
- Strengthened retention through investment in internal staff.



This partnership helps us invest in staff members who are already committed to our Eastpointe community and care deeply about our children.

Christina Gibson, Superintendent

ECTOR COUNTY ISD (TX)



GROW YOUR OWN + OPPORTUNITY CULTURE

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

ECISD launched multiple teacher pipeline programs, including a tuition-free Registered Teacher Apprenticeship and paraprofessional-to-teacher tracks, while also implementing Opportunity Culture to extend the reach of high-performing teachers and provide advancement without leaving the classroom.

IMPACT

- Reduced 350+ long-standing vacancies and achieved a 98% fill rate.
- Introduced leadership roles with increased pay and instructional reach.
- Supported rapid improvement in student achievement, contributing to the elimination of all “F” and “D” rated schools.



By investing in our people and rethinking roles, we changed the trajectory of both our workforce and our students.

Superintendent Scott Muri

FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS (GA)



PARAPROFESSIONAL TO TEACHER PROGRAM

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

A five-semester, virtual program with Gordon State College enables paraprofessionals to become certified teachers.

IMPACT

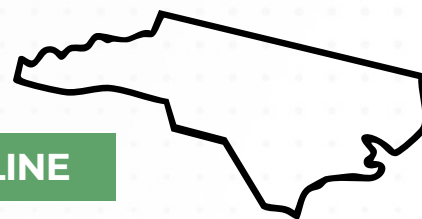
- Thirty paraprofessionals support each year.
- Includes Chromebooks and test prep support.
- Eliminated financial barriers to certification.



This model helps us develop and retain exceptional internal talent.

Gonzalo LaCava, CHRO

GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS (NC)



HIGH-IMPACT TUTORING AS A TEACHER PIPELINE

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

GCS partnered with UNCG and NC A&T to engage over five hundred college students as tutors, many of whom later pursued teaching.

IMPACT

- Tutored over 11,000 students, improving academic performance.
- Built local civic engagement and early-entry pathways into education.



This initiative improved student learning and strengthened our local teacher pipeline.

Faith Freeman, STEM Director

KERNVILLE UNION SD (CA)



ACHIEVEMENT LEADERS AND CO-TEACHING

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Kernville uses veteran mentors and co-teaching models to support early-career teachers.

HOW IT WORKS

- Achievement Leaders provide mentorship.
- Co-teaching spreads instructional responsibility.
- Weekly data meetings guide teaching adjustments.

IMPACT

- Reduced early-career burnout.
- Improved literacy and math outcomes.



Having an Achievement Leader has been a game-changer.

Steve Martinez, Superintendent

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (CA)



COMMUNITY-POWERED EARLY LITERACY TUTORING

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

OUSD embedded early literacy tutoring into classrooms by partnering with FluentSeeds and Oakland REACH. Through the Literacy Liberator Model and Fellowship, trained family and community members deliver differentiated literacy instruction to accelerate learning, especially for Black and Latine students. Due to strong early results, the district plans to expand the program to math in Fall 2024.

IMPACT

- Tutored students experienced literacy gains of 79% to 188% of typical growth
- Increased access to differentiated instruction across schools
- Kindergarteners made the most substantial progress.
- Students with tutors outperformed peers without small-group instruction



This model helped us turn families and neighbors into literacy changemakers in our classrooms.

Program Leader, OUSD

SAN RAMON VALLEY USD (CA)



TEAM-BASED TEACHING FOR RETENTION

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Team-based teaching allows educators to specialize and collaborate instead of teaching all subjects alone.

IMPACT

- Inclusion for students with disabilities that felt natural, not stigmatizing.
- Quicker, more personalized academic support.
- Higher educator retention through subject specialization.
- Improved instruction via peer collaboration.



The visible collaboration of my teachers isn't just a pleasant observation; it's a powerful equation where shared effort reduces their workload and proactive engagement while reducing student behavioral challenges.

Osi Juergens, Principal

A CALL TO ACTION

FUNDAMENTAL, NOT INCREMENTAL CHANGE IS NEEDED



Redesign and sustain the workforce ecosystem.



Plan beyond funding reductions:

Conduct ‘learning on investment’ reviews to prioritize ESSER-funded roles that improve student outcomes and educator well-being. Secure sustainable funding for student support roles including mental health staff, paraprofessionals, and instructional specialists, perhaps at the expense of teacher-support roles such as coaches.



Deploy strategic team-based staffing driven by teacher voice:

Shift from rigid, certification-driven staffing models to more flexible, team-based configurations. Co-teaching, paraprofessional support, and small-group instruction models can improve student access and teacher sustainability. One of the partners who participated in this research offered, “Everything is just easier when there are teams.”



Prototype future-focused roles:

Design and test emerging educator roles that align with artificial intelligence, blended learning, and student data integration. Use job-embedded, real-time upskilling models like micro-credentials to support rapid adaptation.



Expand and diversify talent pipelines.



Grow-Your-Own pathways:

Invest in community-rooted - even school level - talent pipelines from paraprofessionals and high school students to parent leaders and career-changers. Remove financial and bureaucratic barriers through tuition support, flexible scheduling, and licensure reform.



Rethink credentialing:

Lower barriers to entry. Expand access to alternative and emergency certification with research-backed oversight. State and district policies should allow for talent with relevant content expertise and lived experience to enter classrooms via streamlined routes.



Modernize recruitment:

Build targeted, data-driven outreach strategies to attract diverse talent for hard-to-staff subjects and schools. Include community-based recruitment and partnerships with preparation programs and employers.



Improve educator experience and support.



Reimagine workload and scheduling:

Audit time use and contracts to expand teacher-directed planning and collaboration. Pilot flexible models like four-day workweeks, job-sharing, or hybrid instructional roles where feasible.



Invest in retention culture:

Offer retention bonuses, high-quality mentoring, and differentiated roles to retain effective educators. Prioritize schools with high turnover through extended induction, planning time, and leadership coaching.



Promote belonging and growth:

Strengthen leadership pathways and team-based professional learning. Create structures that elevate voice, promote autonomy, and center a culture of continuous improvement.



Ensure workforce decisions address inequitable outcomes.



Diversify the educator workforce:

Consider how affinity groups, mentorship networks, pipeline programs, role designs, and retention efforts might help strive towards goals for a workforce more reflective of the student population that leverages and builds talent available across the local community and reliably fills openings with qualified candidates of all races, ages, and backgrounds versus today's environment with too many vacancies.



Use disaggregated data:

Collect and act on climate and retention data disaggregated by sub-group, role, and school. Use this to identify opportunity gaps in staffing and student experiences.



Challenge systemic barriers:

Renegotiate contracts and advocate for regulatory flexibility where existing policies hinder innovation, team models, or the recruitment of diverse candidates.



Position workforce strategy as core to student success.

- ✓ **Align staffing to learning goals:**
Ensure instructional strategy drives staffing models, not just funding formulas or compliance requirements. Define key metrics that link staffing to student growth, equity, and well-being.
- ✓ **Establish cross-functional teams:**
Create district workforce strategy teams that include HR, academics, operations, and school leadership. These teams should drive recruitment, retention, and redesign aligned with learning priorities.
- ✓ **Leverage data to lead:**
Use real-time staffing and student achievement data to identify mismatches, test interventions, and scale what works. HR leaders must become strategic planners, not just transactional managers.



Nearly all the educators we worked with highlighted the ‘journey’ aspect to this work. New ideas get tried and discarded - or deepened. School level leadership is essential and district level support - and encouragement - is important. But it is the teachers’ voice, and their ability to see new possibilities and secondary benefits that bring energy and creativity. At the end of the 2nd year of a teaming project, a teacher at Vista Grande reflected: “The collaboration piece has been really, really big, and beneficial. Lots of idea sharing and then seeing them through. It’s not just ideas anymore.”

The future of public education depends not only on what we teach, but on how we build and support the people who teach it. These recommendations are not just a checklist, they are a call to reimagine what is possible when we treat the educator workforce as the centerpiece of student success. Across the country, bold districts are already proving that with the right strategy, innovation, and alignment, we can create schools where every student is supported by a well-prepared, diverse, and thriving team. Now is the time to lead with clarity and courage, to modernize our systems, remove outdated barriers, and act decisively in the service of students, staff, and the communities they serve. **Let's get to work.**

