



Findings and Policy Implications of Oklahoma's 2018 Educator Supply & Demand Report

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Over the past decade, Oklahoma's public school system has suffered one of the largest budget cuts in the nation, forcing administrators to cut costs in ways that hinder instruction and make the teaching profession less attractive. One of the most worrisome outcomes of this austerity has been a persistent teacher shortage — which, in turn, undercuts student achievement.

On July 1, 2018, for the first time in more than two decades, a state-mandated pay raise for all school staff who hold a teaching certificate went into effect. However, it is still unclear whether this step will help to correct or reduce the acute teacher shortage Oklahoma faces. This brief outlines key findings from the 2018 report on Oklahoma Educator Supply & Demand and offers related policy recommendations.

Hard-Pressed Public School Teachers Are Leaving the Profession

Enrollments in Oklahoma public schools has grown more slowly than previously during the six academic years from 2012-13 to 2017-18 academic, yet educators have, on average, become responsible for teaching more and more pupils each year. Increasing shares of educators have left the profession over the past six years, representing an average loss of more than 5,000 educators each year. In 2012-13, Oklahoma's attrition rate for educators was close to one-third higher than the national rate of 7.7 percent.

In addition to the average of ten percent of Oklahoma educators who leave the profession each year, 12 percent on average shift school districts and/or positions. Retirement is not the major factor explaining educator losses (it accounted for only one-tenth of the educator turnover in 2017-18). Measured in many ways, overall retention rates in Oklahoma are dropping for new educators and across successive cohorts of educators.

The State's Supply of Public School Teachers

The working ranks of educators have trended downward at the state and regional level since 2012-13. Especially after 2015-16, the state's reserve pool dwindled. Although 60 percent of certified educators were working in an Oklahoma public school in 2012-13, only 57.3 percent were doing so in 2017-18. Emergency certificates have rapidly increased, jumping from 34 emergency certificates issued in 2012-13 to 1,073 in 2017-18.

The distribution of educators across age groups remains mostly unchanged, but the average experience level of Oklahoma educators has declined slightly — and remains below the national average. At the same time, over the last few years the average teacher salary in Oklahoma has seen the highest drop in real terms — and the highest annual percentage decrease — compared to the national average and to averages from neighboring states.

Compared with all Oklahoma educators in each year's overall ranks, new hires are much younger; they have fewer years of experience and declining levels of educational attainment. Furthermore, from 2012-13 to 2016-17 across all institutions, fewer Oklahoma graduates earned education degrees.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Given the worrisome trends just documented, we offer suggestions for elected officials and educators who are interested in increasing the supply of teachers while promoting statewide efforts to improve teacher quality:

Connect data on career pathways from teacher preparation programs. To address teacher shortages, it is essential to understand what makes people choose this occupation and enter teacher preparation programs. We also need to know how many after graduation seek traditional teacher certification and others choose alternative routes, and the reasons for their choices. More information should be collected about graduates hired annually into public schools, including data about their demographics, tenure and retention, and turnover rates. This information will help build a more complete picture of the reserve pool of qualified individuals and help administrators address recruitment and retention issues in advance.

Measure and monitor educator quality. Balancing educator supply and demand is an urgent priority, yet efforts must also be made to improve the quality of teaching. The composition of the teaching workforce matters — including teachers' subject matter knowledge, instructional skills, fluency in multiple languages and demographic characteristics. Shortages must be measured and monitored, with the aim of improving the overall quality of the workforce and making sure that qualified teachers are appropriately deployed across schools, subjects, and grade levels.

Work to understand shortages within specific school districts. Statewide analyses should be supplemented with information from school district leaders about their priorities and plans for how to address the shortages.

Examine working conditions. A better understanding of working conditions for teachers can help policymakers identify the most pressing issues and most promising strategies for improving retention.

Expand recruitment of qualified educators. To correct immediate shortages in a cost-effective way, education leaders must develop specific, well-informed recruitment tactics. To encourage potential teachers to return to public school classrooms, outreach should be tailored to individual characteristics and circumstances.

Enhance mentoring and orientation programs for new teachers. All new teachers (and those who transition into new roles within school districts) are required by Oklahoma law to participate in an induction program. More effective guidance and information about this requirement needs to be provided to schools as well as about the ways both schools and new teachers can benefit from well-structured, evidenced-based programs.

Co-authored with Robyn Miller, Oklahoma State Department of Education Office of School Support & Accountability.

Read more in Naneida Lazarte-Alcalá and Robyn Miller "2018 Oklahoma Educator Supply & Demand Report: Trends, Projections and Recommendations", Oklahoma State Department of Education, December 2018.