



## The Teacher Labor Market During the Pandemic: Teachers, Counselors, and Principals

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Over the past decade, Oklahoma's public schools have experienced drastic budget cuts—one of the largest in the country. As a result, schools across the state were forced to reduce expenses. Teachers were made to manage increasingly large class sizes, take on additional responsibilities, or move between multiple schools. These strategies, while helping to reduce costs, have proved unpopular with teachers and have actively hindered instruction. Despite two pay raises, teachers continue to leave the profession, a trend that has only worsened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. To reverse this trend, and keep talented, experienced teachers in schools, pandemic relief funds should be carefully invested to address needs and dismantle inequality.

### Oklahoma's Teacher Workforce

Oklahoma's workforce growth in the teacher labor market showed some promise after two consecutive pay raises during the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years. The declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools, however, disrupted more than 700,000 and 54,000 Oklahoma learners and educators, and effectively quashed the teaching workforce growth.

As a result, teacher vacancies in the state's schools are growing again, and many will remain unfilled. This will further compromise the quality and consistency of students' education—students learn best in smaller class sizes, with experienced and well-supported teachers, something that becomes less likely in the face of mass shortages. Thus, understanding the dynamics of the teacher workforce has become essential—particularly when considering how to spend the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds awarded to State and local educational agencies to address the impact of the pandemic.

The [2021 Oklahoma Educator Supply & Demand Report](#) focuses on data trends for several key variables of the teaching workforce, before and during the pandemic, and provides analyses that can provide insight into how best to spend COVID-19 relief funds. The report also evaluates the depth of the excess demand in comparison to supply separately for teachers, counselors, and principals in the past several years, which can further illuminate the current needs for the school system of Oklahoma.

### Meeting the Needs of Students and Teachers

The report illustrates several ongoing trends, all of which are crucial to understanding how the teacher workforce will continue to evolve, and how best to meet the needs of the state's students and teachers.

***The number of vulnerable students and students with higher or complex needs continue to grow.***

- Enrollment in grades 9-12, virtual schools, mid-high poverty schools and of English learners continued its steady growth even (and in some cases, especially) during the pandemic.
- The racial and ethnic composition of public school students continue to change, with Hispanic students and students of two or more races, especially in city schools, gaining more representation.
- Across years, pupil-teacher ratios increased as the schools' poverty concentration levels decreased and as their urbanicity status increased.

***Teacher turnover and vacancies present an ongoing challenge to meeting the needs of students.***

- Among all primary positions, middle school science & STEM had the second highest turnover rate at 31 percent in 2020-21.

- Teacher turnover is highest in schools in cities and in schools with high concentration of low-income students.
- Despite the overall positive trends, about 10 and 3 percent of schools in 2020-21 did not have a school counselor or principal, respectively.

***The teacher workforce is diversifying and growing, but still in flux. Investment in teacher supports and training help keep educators in the profession.***

- Despite the drop in the number of public-school teachers in 2016-17 due to major state funding cuts and again in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching workforce in 2020-21 was about 3 percent, or close to 1,200 teachers, higher than in 2012-13.
- The retention rate for teachers, counselors and principals are highest for educators who hold standard or multiple valid certificates concurrently (traditional and alternative); yet certification participation rates are declining.
- The education workforce is getting younger and more diverse but at a pace slower than that of the students, especially those of Hispanic descent.

## **Recommendations**

The Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds awarded to State and local educational agencies to address the impact of the pandemic provided a unique opportunity to make investments to mitigate learning loss and improve effective teaching and learning.

One key investment would be in addressing the teacher shortage, which should include recruiting college-educated professionals that feature high-retention pathways into teaching, from diverse backgrounds, and in teaching fields that are needed the most (middle schools, science & STEM). It's also critically important to support the existing workforce and invest in adequate staffing levels, including school counselors and principals, especially in schools in cities and in schools with high concentration of low-income students. With these concrete steps forward, Oklahoma's students will have better access to the support and resources they need to thrive in schools.