

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Trends Across North Carolina and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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For more information, visit: www.ncforum.org, socialequity.duke.edu, and www.bradyeducationfoundation.org



Introduction

Research has continuously demonstrated that teachers are the most important school-related factor affecting student learning and achievement.¹ However, in North Carolina and across the nation, districts and schools struggle to recruit and retain effective teachers, especially teachers of color.² For more than a decade, declining enrollments in educator preparation programs and rises in teacher vacancies and attrition rates, coupled with population growth and increasing demand for teachers, have foreshadowed an impending crisis for the teaching profession. This was a significant challenge even before the COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented disruptions in all aspects of K-12 education. Since the pandemic began, reports about growing teacher shortages have been widespread across the country. Yet, there is a need for more comprehensive and up-to-date data on the state of the teaching profession that reflect the current nuances and realities in schools across North Carolina. In an effort to fill this gap, our team analyzed statewide data and conducted a series of focus groups with district superintendents and leaders of educator preparation programs to address the following research questions:

1 To what extent and in what ways has the state of the teacher pipeline in North Carolina public school systems shifted since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2 To what extent and in what ways has enrollment in North Carolina Educator Preparation Programs shifted since the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary waiving of entry and licensure requirements?

The challenges to recruiting and retaining a high-quality, diverse teacher workforce are far reaching and will have significant short- and long-term consequences for students. It is our goal that the findings and the recommendations for policy and practice detailed in this report will lead to action by North Carolina policymakers to restore and strengthen the state's teacher workforce.

Data Sources and Methodology

Teacher Attrition and Vacancy Rates

Quantitative data on teacher vacancy and attrition rates come from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Annual State of the Teaching Profession Report (all years).^{*} Additional vacancy data cited comes from an annual survey conducted by the North Carolina School Superintendents Association (2021-2023).

NCDPI currently defines a teacher vacancy as an instructional position (or a portion thereof) for which there is not an appropriately licensed teacher who is eligible for permanent employment.³ However, this definition has changed in recent years and previously did not include positions filled by teachers with a temporary or provisional license or retired educators. Thus, while we report DPI's data on vacancy rates across multiple years, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about differences in vacancy rates over time.⁴ The North Carolina School Superintendents Association (NCSSA), on the other hand, compiles data on vacancies separately from positions that are filled by someone who is not certified to teach in their role. District response rates for the NCSSA survey used for this study were 87.8% in 2023 and 85.2% in 2021 and 2022.⁵ For both sources, data are self-reported by districts.

Educator Preparation Program Enrollment Data

EPP enrollment data is provided by NCDPI's EPP Dashboard.⁶ The dashboard tracks a number of trends in EPP programs, including enrollment and completion data broken down by race, pathway, degree type, and license group. Importantly, these figures only trace back to the 2013-14 school year; longer-term data show an overall downward trend in EPP enrollment over time.⁷

Focus Groups with Educator Preparation Program Leaders

We conducted and analyzed data from focus groups with 14 leaders of Educator Preparation Programs. Programs represented in our study include public and private institutions of varying sizes from all across the state. Five of the programs represented are housed within minority-serving institutions.

Focus Groups with School District Superintendents

We conducted and analyzed data from focus groups with superintendents serving districts across the state. Participants include 31 leaders representing a diverse sample of districts with respect to location, size, rurality, and student demographics.

To the extent possible, we analyzed these data with an eye towards how these trends relate to issues of educational equity - including teacher diversity and (in)equitable access to effective teachers across schools and districts with different racial and socioeconomic demographics.

* Note: DPI's State of the Teaching Profession Report is released in February of each year, and includes attrition data for the prior year and vacancy data from the fall of the current school year. DPI's most recent report released in February 2023 presents attrition data from 2021-22 and vacancy data from the fall of 2022. Per discussions with DPI staff, prior reports incorrectly label vacancy data as being from the same school year as the attrition data. Our analyses reflect the accurate years.

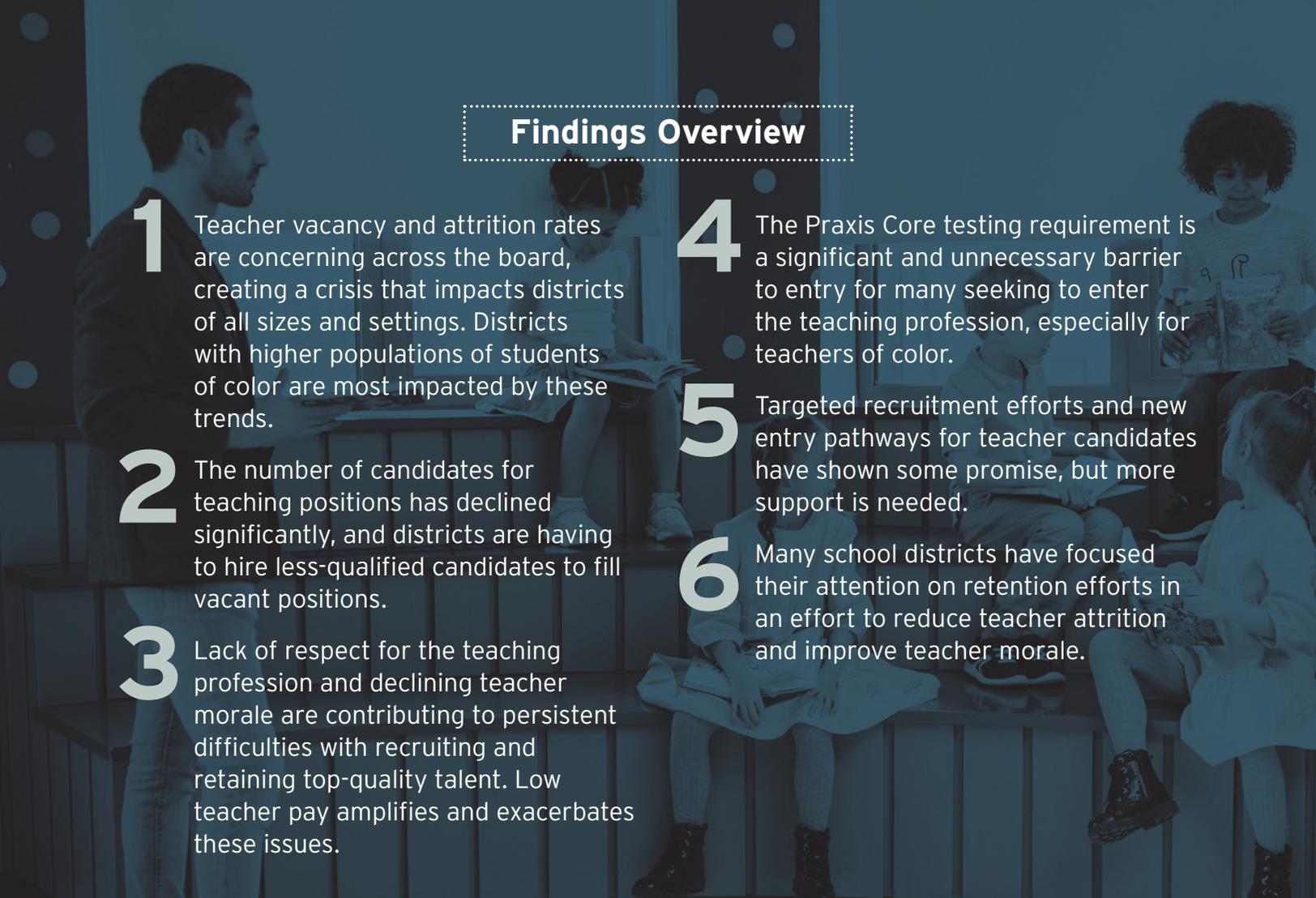
Findings

Our analysis of statewide data and focus group discussions we conducted with education leaders from both Education Preparation Programs (EPPs) and public school districts across the state painted a realistic picture of the current state of the educator pipeline in North Carolina, with several key trends emerging. Overall, when it comes to the state of the teacher pipeline in North Carolina, as one participant said, “two things are true at the same time.” The teacher pipeline is in crisis. At the same time, school districts and partners have developed innovative strategies to mitigate the impact, which need to be strengthened and scaled.

Participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and illuminated problems with teacher recruitment and retention that have plagued our school systems and educator preparation programs for many years. Vacancies in schools are worse than many have ever seen, including for those who have had extensive careers in public schools. As we will discuss further, the pandemic appeared to have led many in the profession to question whether or not teaching was adding or detracting from their quality of life, often resulting in departures. The negative narratives around teaching and public education steered many away from seeking a career in education.

On the other hand, the pandemic and resulting challenges for schools necessitated new efforts to recruit, train, and retain educators that have led to some positive changes. These two truths—an education crisis and hopeful changes and innovation—can, and do, exist at the same time for many EPPs and school districts. It is clear that we find ourselves at a turning point; while many leaders are taking matters into their own hands to the best of their ability, significant policy changes will be required to meaningfully and effectively sustain and grow the teaching profession.





Findings Overview

- 1** Teacher vacancy and attrition rates are concerning across the board, creating a crisis that impacts districts of all sizes and settings. Districts with higher populations of students of color are most impacted by these trends.
- 2** The number of candidates for teaching positions has declined significantly, and districts are having to hire less-qualified candidates to fill vacant positions.
- 3** Lack of respect for the teaching profession and declining teacher morale are contributing to persistent difficulties with recruiting and retaining top-quality talent. Low teacher pay amplifies and exacerbates these issues.
- 4** The Praxis Core testing requirement is a significant and unnecessary barrier to entry for many seeking to enter the teaching profession, especially for teachers of color.
- 5** Targeted recruitment efforts and new entry pathways for teacher candidates have shown some promise, but more support is needed.
- 6** Many school districts have focused their attention on retention efforts in an effort to reduce teacher attrition and improve teacher morale.

1 Teacher Vacancies and Attrition: "We are in a Crisis."

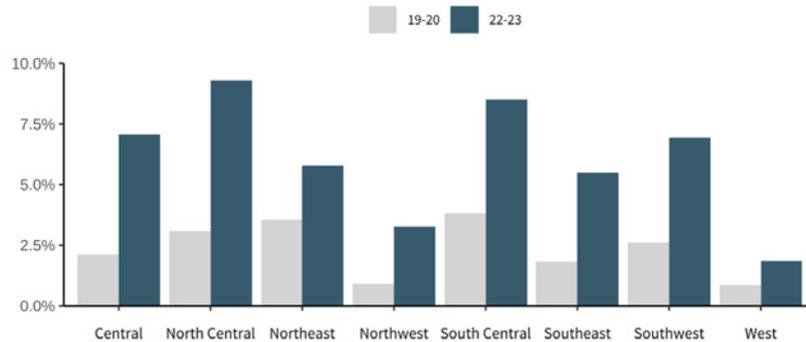
Across the state, districts have had a more difficult time recruiting and retaining qualified educators since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Superintendents from districts of all sizes and settings highlighted the difficulty in filling teaching positions in our focus groups. They noted that positions in some subject areas, such as Exceptional Children (EC), math, and science, have historically been more challenging to fill, and they remain so. But hiring challenges now extend to every grade level (including elementary roles, which traditionally have been easiest to fill), every subject, and both certified and non-certified positions.

The North Carolina School Superintendents' Association surveys districts before the start of each school year to identify the number of teaching and staff vacancies across the state. In the fall of 2023, with 101 districts reporting, superintendents across the state reported 2,840 unfilled K-12 teaching positions,⁸ compared with 3,619 in 2022 (with 98 districts reporting) and 2,355 in 2021.⁹

According to data from the Department of Public Instruction, which defines vacancies as any position that is unfilled or filled with an unlicensed teacher, across all regions of the state, vacancy rates increased from their pre-pandemic numbers, including a statewide increase of 157% from the 2019-20 school year to the 2022-23 school year. Prior to the pandemic, vacancy rates statewide had largely stabilized with only an 11% increase in the three years before the pandemic.¹⁰

HIGHER VACANCIES IN ALL REGIONS

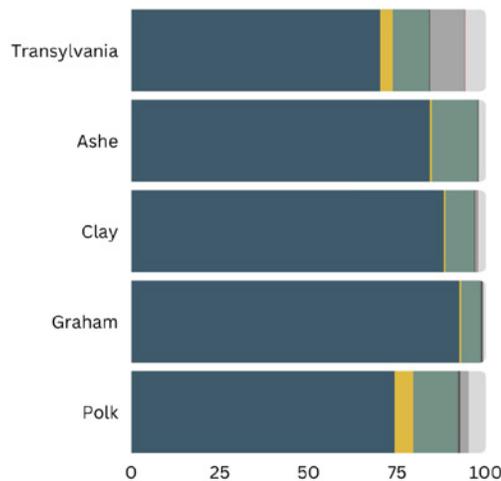
NC Vacancy Rates by Region Pre- and Post-Pandemic



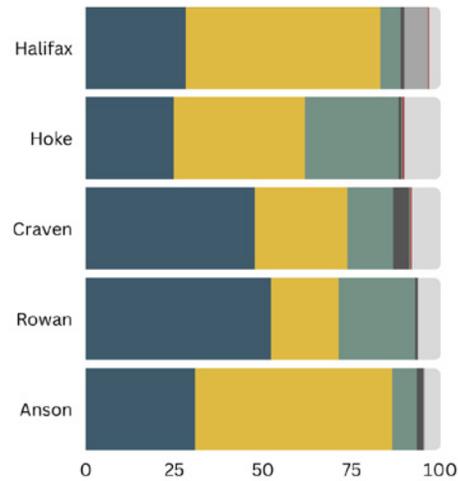
Data Source: DPI State of the Teaching Profession Report [2018-19](#), [2021-22](#)

In the 2022-23 school year, the five districts with the lowest vacancy rates in the state were all located in the West and Northwest regions. Four of these districts had a reported vacancy rate of 0%. Each of these districts with low vacancy rates relative to the rest of the state serve student populations made up of more than 75% white students, a stark contrast to the demographics of the five districts with the highest vacancy rates.¹¹ The districts with the highest vacancy rates in the state are more centrally and easterly located and serve more diverse student populations. Four out these five districts have student populations that are made up of a majority of students of color in the 2021-22 school year.¹²

Lowest Vacancy Rates



Highest Vacancy Rates



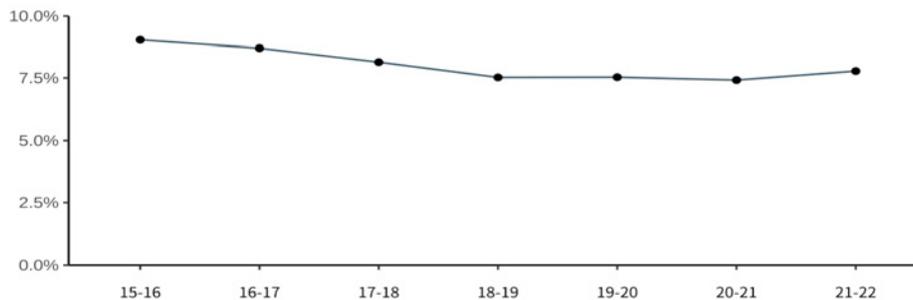
■ White
 ■ Black
 ■ Hispanic
 ■ Asian
■ American Indian
 ■ Pacific Islander
■ Two or More

Data Source: NCDPI Statistical Profile Table 10, [2021-22](#)

Attrition rates show a similar trend. Between the 2015-16 and 2020-21 school years, the statewide attrition rate had consistently declined. Post-pandemic, however, the attrition rate has begun to climb across the state. Since the onset of the pandemic, five out of eight regions have experienced an increase in attrition, despite every region seeing a decrease in the two years prior to the pandemic.¹³

POST-PANDEMIC ATTRITION CLIMBS

After consistent decline in attrition rates statewide, NC experiences rising attrition rates post-pandemic.



Data Source: NCDPI State of the Teaching Profession Reports, [Years 2015 through 2022](#)

Superintendents noted that many factors contribute to teacher attrition. One that was highlighted several times was mental health challenges, for both students and educators. Student mental health issues have contributed to additional challenges for teachers when it comes to classroom management and addressing student behavior, particularly given inadequate staffing in other areas such as school-based mental health positions. Working conditions and challenges facing their students have also put further strains on educators' mental health. As one superintendent noted, educator mental health "... has been worsened by extra long work days. [In our district,] TAs and non-certified staff, for example, are working a 12-13 hour day because they're driving buses, also." EPPs have also struggled with how to continue to provide support for their graduates once they enter the classroom. As one leader pointed out, "Sometimes our graduates can barely survive teaching right after graduation." The environment for schools and teachers during and post-pandemic exacerbated this difficulty.

Some smaller districts, however, have recovered somewhat and have fewer vacancies now than they did after an initial increase in the early days of the pandemic. Superintendents from these districts attributed this, at least in part, to their ability to foster a sense of belonging and community between leadership and staff. As one leader put it, "It's easier for us to recruit and retain because our county is in a good location. We're close to [a major city]. People want to live here... but that works against us too, because [a large district with a large supplement] is next door. So we market ourselves as 'small town' with 'personal connections.'" Another small district has had particular success in retaining teachers and keeping vacancy rates low with a longevity bonus.

2 Teacher Candidate Quality: "We Must Expand the Candidate Pool."

What is universally consistent across all districts, even in areas in which vacancies have stayed relatively low, is that there are a limited number of applicants for open positions. This is a significant change from how things were in the past. As stated by one superintendent, "the [recruitment] pool is shallow. I remember the days of having one position and 17 applicants. I [recently] had a position posted at elementary schools, and got just one applicant." Another noted that their district "...used to have 100 minimum applications for some positions, now we may have just five."



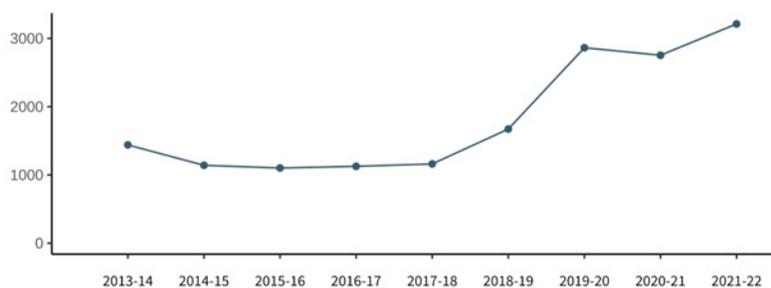
Along with the dwindling number of applicants for vacant positions, leaders from across the state say the quality of candidates has declined: “Teacher quality is an issue. We used to be choosing between good and great candidates, and we felt comfortable putting them in front of students. Now it’s fair at best... We’re now going across district lines for at least a temporary solution to recruit high-quality teachers.”

Some districts noted that a greater proportion of applicants for teaching positions were not prepared through traditional pathways and may not even be fully certified: “... the quality of certified folks is not as good as what we were able to find in the past. I became a superintendent [decades ago]. Then, if I had an elementary teaching position vacant, we’d have 10-12 quality folks apply. Now, we have to go searching for just one, and hope they’re certified... but you don’t know what you’re going to get. There are no signs that this is getting better.”

Student participation in alternative teacher preparation programs confirms this trend, showing a considerable increase in enrollment in recent years.¹⁴ Data from the N.C. School Superintendents’ Association supports this observation when it comes to practicing teachers, as well. The number of residency-licensed teachers hired has increased significantly over the past few years, jumping from 1,942 in 2021 to 3,618 in 2022 to 5,041 in 2023.¹⁵

Enrollment in Alternative Programs Increasing

Total EPP first-year enrollment in alternative programs



Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. [EPP Dashboard](#).

Districts reported that they are grateful to be able to place teachers and address vacancies with educators entering through alternative pathways – and many become excellent educators. However, these teachers have not yet gone through adequate training, which places additional strain on districts to invest heavily in professional development and mentorship in order to effectively support them – something that is particularly challenging during this time in which they are very underfunded and understaffed.

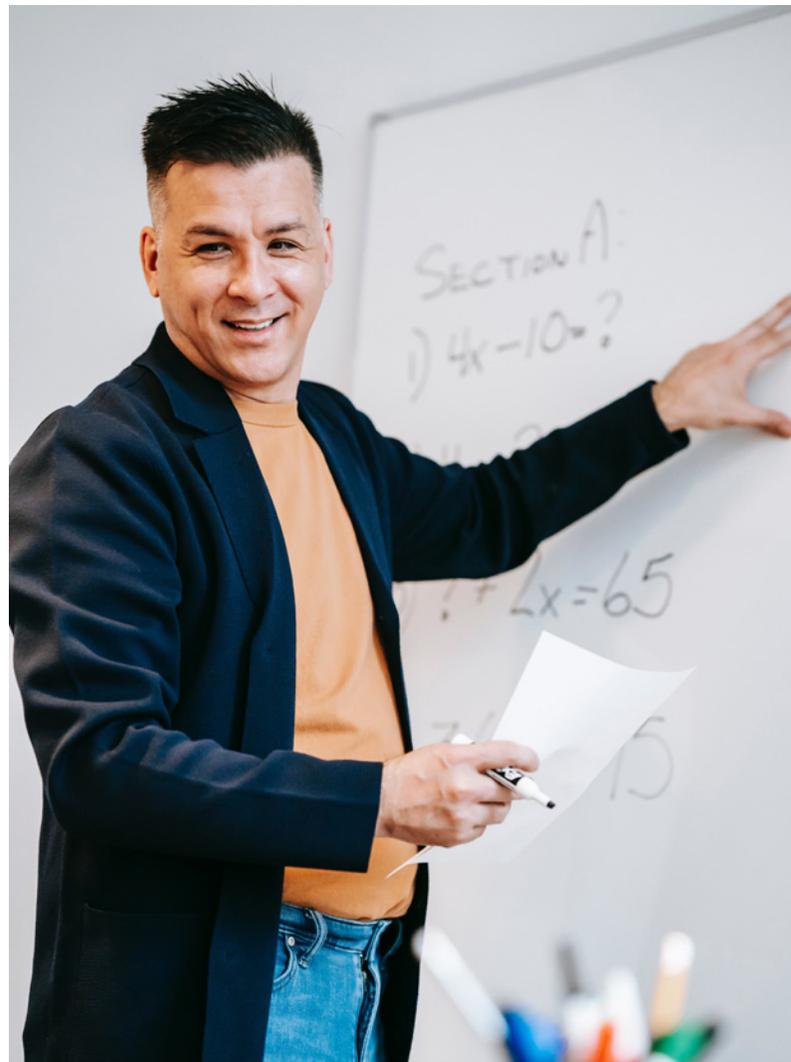
3 Lack of Respect for the Profession: “Being a Teacher is Not Adding Quality to Your Life.”

There are concerns around the public and their support of public education. Public schools end up being mischaracterized. This is demoralizing and frustrating for teachers. It undermines the profession and drives away folks who are interested in teaching. There’s a big teacher pipeline concern, and a definite need there. We need a large influx of teachers.

Many existing barriers to entering and remaining in the teaching profession have intensified over the past few years. One of the most significant, as illustrated by a superintendent in the quote above, is the public perception of teaching and of public education. One educator preparation program leader highlighted how the recent narratives around teachers shifted quickly from praise and gratitude at the beginning of the pandemic to a situation where “teachers were cast as enemies and social pariahs” by the end of the pandemic, and were personally attacked and blamed for school closures.

While leaders, both from EPPs and districts, acknowledge that the pandemic certainly impacted teacher shortages, they also noted that the pandemic made people reflect on the quality of their lives, which may have impacted their willingness to enter and remain in the teaching profession. As one district leader noted, “One million people have died from the pandemic. Now, we are all thinking more deeply about the quality of our lives and how we can improve it. Right now, teaching certainly isn’t that.”

Overall, district leaders perceive that there are fewer candidates choosing to pursue teaching



after the pandemic. The effort and intention is there - one district in particular highlighted their efforts to encourage their own students to enter teacher preparation programs - but “they’re not even taking offers for full scholarships.” There are a number of reasons for this, but one that is significant and growing is competition with other fields with higher pay and more flexibility. For example, one leader has noticed that recruiting for science and math positions is even more difficult than before, right now, because of industry competition.

Many districts are plagued by similar trends, and agree that “until we get a truly comparable teacher salary [with other industries], we won’t be able to combat our pipeline problem.” One leader stated, “there is no incentive to go into teaching, and no incentive to stay,” noting that the teaching profession is not competitive with other area jobs that offer \$70-80k salaries for candidates with a two-year degree. Post-Covid, with more remote opportunities available in the corporate world specifically, “People can make six figures... there is more competition, and more opportunity.” Many leaders found this trend to be true in their districts, as well; there is a broad trend of teachers leaving their profession for jobs offering better pay and working conditions. They recognize that they are in a “...competitive marketplace. Teachers have more private opportunities to leave the classroom but stay in their field. They can work for ed tech companies.” This sentiment was shared by many focus group participants, who agree that “Even if we took away all requirements and made it as easy as possible to complete the [education] program, many people will never consider entering the profession because of the \$37k starting salary. This is not a market salary.”

The new and difficult reality, that “Teaching used to be a ‘30 years in a classroom’ kind of career, but it’s not anymore” presents a unique challenge and opportunity for both EPPs and school districts. As one EPP leader stated, “We must show students in our EPP programs that this is a career with many opportunities for growth.”

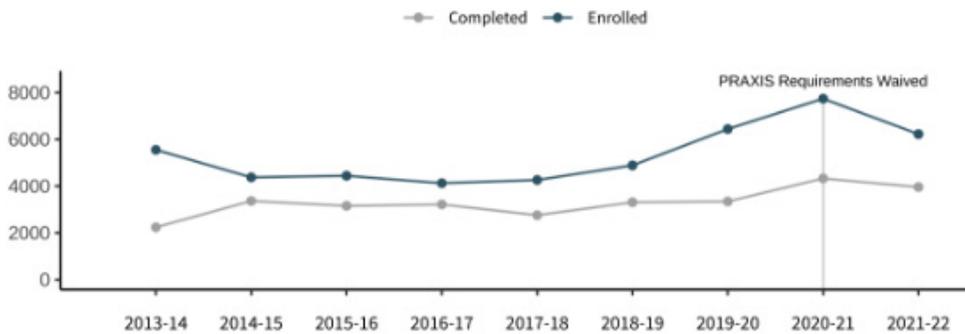
4 Praxis Core as an Unnecessary Barrier to Entry: “This exam is a big barrier, particularly for students of color.”

Education researchers have found little evidence that teacher certification exams, particularly those that measure basic skills (such as the Praxis Core), are useful predictors of teacher effectiveness. At the same time, these exams can serve as unnecessary barriers to entry into the profession, especially for teachers of color.¹⁶ North Carolina law requires that educators pass the Praxis Core basic skills exams in order to gain admission into a traditional educator preparation program.¹⁷ Teachers also must pass other exams, some in their specific content area, in order to gain full licensure.¹⁸

During the pandemic, the Praxis Core requirement for entry into educator preparation programs was waived for the 2020-21 school year. EPP leaders made clear that this had a significant impact on enrollment. One noted, “When Praxis core was removed as a requirement, we saw a 400% increase in applications to our teacher education program. This exam is a big barrier, particularly for students of color.” Data from DPI’s EPP Dashboard show a notable spike in enrollment during the 2020-21 school year, which was even more pronounced among North Carolina’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, overall enrollment in North Carolina EPPs increased by 20 percent (and 30 percent for Black students), while enrollment in HBCU-based programs increased by 63 percent.¹⁹

Enrollment Spikes During PRAXIS Waiver

Total EPP first-year enrollment and completion over time.



Data Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. [EPP Dashboard](#).

Other EPP leaders noted similar trends in their own programs, and called for permanent removal of this testing requirement, which would require action by the state legislature, as well as the State Board of Education. There is a perception among some that removal of Praxis Core as a testing requirement would lower expectations for aspiring teachers, but EPP leaders argue that this is simply not the case. One EPP leader pointed out that they have not seen any evidence connecting Praxis scores to performance in the field, which aligns with existing research.

5 Recruitment Strategies: “There isn’t just one solution... We have to make what used to be an attractive occupation be attractive again.”

Presented with a crisis, education leaders in both EPPs and school districts have confronted their new reality by coming up with new ways to recruit talent and improve their programs and offerings. When recruiting students into their programs, some EPPs highlighted new efforts to diversify the teacher pipeline. Programs targeting the recruitment of teachers from historically underrepresented groups have grown. Many of these programs are partnerships between districts and EPPs, demonstrating that leaders throughout the pipeline are starting to more closely consider their demographics.

Innovation at EPPs is also occurring with entry pathways and program structure, to provide more options for non-traditional students and career switchers. As one participant noted, “there’s a need for these candidates, as they bring their own skills and experience into the classroom.” One program leader in particular highlighted that prior to the pandemic, they had been a traditional, first-time student, full-time freshman institution for a long time. Now, 25 percent of what they do is online as part of an effort to broaden access and bring in other people who may not otherwise be candidates for their program. Some EPPs have closed down undergraduate programs, forced to consider other options instead (MAT program extensions/fifth year programs, high school preparation, etc.) Additionally, some EPPs have created entirely new programs to meet students where they are. These options often take the form of non-traditional preparation, such as lateral entry or residency programs, enabling students to work in the classroom while preparing on a more gradual, flexible schedule.

Rather than totally shifting to alternative prep, however, a focus remains at some larger institutions on comprehensive preparation. Offsetting the cost of this is critical, as these EPPs don't want to prepare their students to enter a profession with debt (particularly those coming from underrepresented communities, where this debt can have generational impacts).

EPPs are also rethinking how they market and promote their programs, leaning heavily on social media. One leader noted that "the smartest thing we ever did was using recruitment money to hire undergrads to run our social media, specifically live social media for a day." School systems are considering marketing, too. One district shared that they have "... tripled our communications department, and are doing more intentional work in the community to talk about what is good about our school system." School systems are also shifting where and how they recruit, seeking teachers across county and state lines. Others are going further, as they send HR employees overseas to recruit new teachers.



Districts are also building and expanding "Grow Your Own" programs, in which they help identify and train students in their districts as early as middle and high school who may want to become teachers. While specifics vary, these programs generally involve partnerships between the local school district, community college, and four-year institution and offer incentives and support for students to study to become teachers and return to teach in their home districts.²⁰

All school districts have gone to great lengths to attract new educators in a variety of ways. Counter to historical trends, this need has also recently applied to districts long known for their larger local salary supplements and traditionally lower vacancy rates. For example, many have offered sizable signing bonuses using ESSER funds, larger local supplements when possible, and additional bonuses for the most difficult-to-staff subjects. However, these efforts have not produced meaningful results, and are not sustainable, particularly when using ESSER funds, most of which will expire in 2024. In the end, these leaders are unsure how they'll recruit new talent as it appears that the crisis is not going away anytime soon.

While leaders acknowledge that increased compensation across the board is necessary, they also recognize that money isn't the only answer to recruitment anymore. As one district leader noted, "We have a nine percent supplement - this is competitive in our area, except for Charlotte. We also did a \$10k signing bonus, which didn't help." Another district leader shared similar sentiments: "Everyone is trying to increase salary, but money is not working. We have to make what used to be an attractive occupation be attractive again. There isn't one solution; you have to pay teachers more, and respect them more, too." One district leader noted that they've steered away from large signing bonuses, as they "alienate existing staff" and have not been successful. As such, many are shifting much of their focus to teacher retention.



6 Retention Strategies: “Retention is the new recruitment.”

Many districts noted that while their former (pre-pandemic) focus was on recruiting teachers, they have shifted much of their attention to retention to combat rising vacancy rates and found some success with a few key strategies. Retention efforts and a focus on school culture have been very impactful for smaller districts, in particular. One district has used ESSER funding to establish longevity bonuses for all employees, tiered based on experience with the district. Because of the positive reception and decreased attrition they’ve seen, this district has begun petitioning their county to continue this incentive after ESSER funds expire. Speaking to the success of this program, the district superintendent notes, “We haven’t had a day without buses for kids. Meals have been served, instruction has been provided each day, and operations have been maintained. I attribute this to our longevity bonus.”

Staying in touch with and acting to improve employee morale proves critical for retention. One district highlighted a teacher climate survey, administered twice yearly. Another district leader has dedicated much of their time to visiting all of the schools in their district weekly, highlighting that “I’m a firm believer in building up teachers and building a culture of value. [With school visits,] I’m seeing a shift in the district with people who are staying. We did do retention bonuses - nothing extraordinary, but effective People feel valued, appreciated, and loved.” One district has re-positioned a central office role to focus surely on retention, tasked with making sure employees are heard and their needs are met.

While these efforts have proven effective, significant limiting factors remain; districts are cash-strapped, restricted in how they utilize funds and structure support, and are thus limited in what they are able to commit to recruitment and retention efforts.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we confidently recommend a number of steps to combat the teacher workforce issues that our state is facing.

1 **Collect More Accurate, Timely, and Informative Data on Teacher Vacancies and Attrition.**

Currently, official data on the State of the Teaching Profession is collected by the North Carolina Department of Instruction and released once a year in February. The data reflect teacher vacancy rates from the fall of the current school year and attrition rates from the prior year. Given the ever-changing state of teacher vacancies and turnover, this lag in data reporting makes it difficult to analyze the current situation at the district and state levels in order to effectively assess and respond.

These data should be updated at least monthly, reported on an online dashboard, and be disaggregated by race, years in the profession, and subject area. Vacancies must also be broken down by actual unfilled positions and those that are filled by a teacher who is not fully licensed (whether they have a residency license, emergency license, permit to teach, or are a long-term substitute).

There is also a need for more comprehensive data concerning specific reasons why teachers leave the profession, which could be collected via exit surveys or interviews. These data should also be disaggregated by race and reported on a yearly basis in order to inform district and state action.

Finally, we recommend that DPI collect more actionable data on teacher job satisfaction, disaggregated by race, on the Teacher Working Conditions Survey to better inform policy and practice to address recruitment and retention challenges.

2 **Provide Adequate, Equitable, and Flexible Funding to All North Carolina School Districts.**

A large gap persists in funding for rural and high-poverty districts. As one rural school district leader noted, “Our poorest and most rural counties struggle to recruit teachers to their communities. Those teachers are needed so desperately. So make sure that when considering legislation and funding for schools, we must be aware of disparities between counties.” Steps must be taken to ensure that schools and districts are funded equitably. In recent years, the NC General Assembly has provided significant funding to support lower-wealth districts to provide higher teacher salary supplements. This is a step in the right direction, but more support is needed.

District leaders in our focus groups also emphasized the need for greater flexibility of state funding, which would allow them to better meet the unique needs of the students in their districts. One participant explained, “We get support for recruitment and partnership support, but there are heavy restrictions on how the money can be allocated. If we could use more of that money to support staffing, for example, that would be helpful. We need more funds to support experimental recruitment efforts that have been successful.”

3 Ensure Financial Viability and Stability for Teachers.

To attract and retain top-quality teaching talent, we must increase teacher salaries and benefits to make the profession competitive with other fields. As one leader noted, “Salaries vary from school system to school system. Each deals with different challenges. But NC has the lowest beginning teacher salary in the southeast. A 4.25 percent [increase] won’t even get you started. Needs to be a 20-25 percent increase.” Another leader agreed that “NC needs a better salary and compensation schedule over time. Raising salaries even marginally would attract teachers; even saying \$40k would be so much better. Mid to high \$40s, \$47k for starting would be huge.”

The Forum recommended in 2023 that the NC General Assembly increase state-funded base pay for teachers by 24.5% to reach the national average²¹ and eliminate the teacher pay penalty.²²

Reinstating master’s pay is also a must, and leaders from both EPPs and school districts agree; “Master’s pay is huge - that will help us be more competitive out of state.” In addition, we must provide attainable loan forgiveness for teachers who graduate from an approved teacher preparation program and remain teaching in North Carolina for 2-3 years.

4 Eliminate Unnecessary Barriers into the Teaching Profession.

Based on prior research and our own analysis, we recommend eliminating requirements for teacher licensure exams that are not predictive of educator effectiveness, particularly the Praxis Core. For other licensure exams, we support the recommendation of the DRIVE Taskforce to allow candidates to demonstrate competency through multiple performance measures.²³

5 Expand Programs for Teacher Recruitment, Preparation, and Professional Development.

We must continue to broaden and strengthen options for teacher candidates to train and excel in the profession. Multiple leaders called for a drastic expansion of the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program, agreeing that the program should be expanded to every traditional public and private educator preparation program in the state. Every private and public school in this state should have access to that program.” The recently-passed 2023 North Carolina State Budget continues a trend of incremental expansion, adding two additional universities and opening additional subject areas (K-6). We hope this trend will continue, with a goal to open the program to prospective teachers at all UNC System schools in all subject areas, and to structure financial support as scholarships, rather than forgivable loans.

Additionally, we recommend providing funding and support for Grow Your Own and other recruitment programs at the local level, as well as institutional and logistical support at the regional and state levels. Many preparation partnerships across the state have shown promise in recruiting, training, and retaining a diverse educator workforce in their local communities, and we should build on and expand these programs.²⁴

6 Respect and Value Teachers.

We agree with education leaders across the state who recognize the need for significant action to address our challenges with the teacher pipeline. In addition to increased compensation and financial stability for educators, we must address the largest underlying challenge: a perceived lack of respect for educators and low teacher morale.

As stated by one education leader, we must “Put systems in place that demonstrate that we value teachers... systems and programs to promote the profession. We’ve got to get quality teachers into the pipeline.” Elevating the profession with programs that recognize the value that teachers bring and the professional nature of their work is of key importance. Increasing pay and building accessible, high-quality training programs and professional support for teachers, as described previously

in this report, are central to this idea. But there are also workplace factors contributing to high vacancy rates that must be addressed. Put simply by a school superintendent: “Don’t add so much work for teachers. Do not add a requirement to post lesson plans online.” The state must also work to fill vacancies in other roles (such as counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and nurses) that have contributed to teachers becoming overwhelmed and burned out.

Conclusion

The state of the teacher pipeline in North Carolina public school systems has shifted significantly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the issues that have arisen are not new; rather, the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing conditions, bringing new attention to a system that has long been under pressure.

It is crucial that we take action, not just for short-term relief but also for long-term sustainability. This will require systemic and comprehensive changes to how teachers are compensated, supported, recruited, and valued.

Our findings support significantly increasing teacher salaries. But while this is absolutely crucial, it is not enough. Bonuses are not enough. Our current crisis was not caused by a single issue, nor by the pandemic alone. It’s the result of a variety of factors and must therefore be addressed with a variety of measures that fully respect and value our educators. We face a critical juncture, which offers a unique opportunity for North Carolina policymakers to make bold choices to restore and strengthen the profession for now and for the generations to come. Our students, educators, schools, and communities deserve it.

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