

COMMENTARY

Are Floridians Ready to Go Back to School? Not Without More Teachers...



COMMENTARY

Schools are not immune to the workforce shortages plaguing all sectors of our economy.

In preparation for the start of the school year, hiring enough teachers and staff members to satisfy vacancies has been a challenge for school districts. In February, the Florida Department of Education projected a need to fill about 9,000 teacher vacancies before the start of the upcoming school year.¹ As of June 2022, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity identified 5,837 online ads for a variety of teaching roles, a number up 53 percent from last June.² Schools are also struggling to fill other positions, such as cafeteria staff, resource officers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, and instructional aids.

The wellbeing of Florida's K-12 education system should be a concern for all taxpayers. Composing 44.4 percent of general revenue spending for Florida's FY2022-23 state budget, education is one of the biggest consumers of taxpayer dollars.³ When used effectively, education dollars make way for an enhanced workforce, higher earnings, and greater self-sufficiency. A teacher shortage can hurt the prospects of such outcomes.

¹ Florida Department of Education, "Identification of Critical Teacher Shortage Areas for 2022-23."

² Florida Department of Economic Opportunity, "Florida Jobs in Demand Requiring a Bachelor's Degree," retrieved from <https://www.floridajobs.org/workforce-statistics/products-and-services/help-wanted-online>, accessed on July 25, 2022. The total number of online advertisements is the accumulation of advertisements for the following occupations: Middle School Teachers, Except Special and Career/Technical Education; Elementary School Teachers, Except Special Education; Secondary School Teachers, Except Special and Career/Technical Education; Teachers and Instructors, All Other; Special Education Teachers, Middle School; and Kindergarten Teachers, Except Special Education. The online postings may include duplicate listings for the same position.

³ Florida TaxWatch, "The Taxpayer's Guide to Florida's FY2022-23 State Budget," July 2022.

Florida's Teacher Shortage

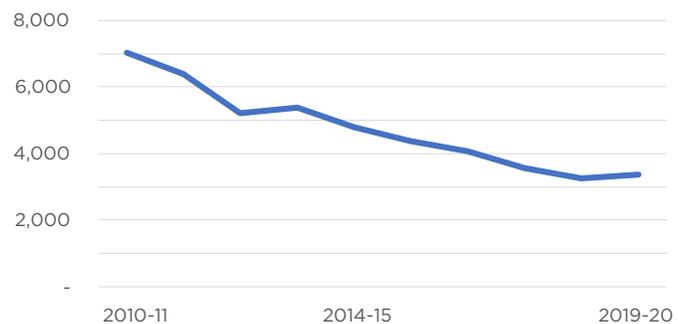
Florida has long been struggling with teacher shortages. Florida's teacher shortage are considered most severe in subject areas "where substantial proportions of teachers who are not certified in the appropriate field are being hired to teach such courses, where significant vacancies exist and where postsecondary institutions do not produce enough graduates to meet the needs of Florida's K-12 student population."⁴ Required by Florida law, the State Board of Education identifies critical teacher shortage areas each year. For 2022-23, the following were ranked at the top of the list:

1. English;
2. Exceptional Student Education (ESE);
3. Science-General;
4. Reading;
5. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL);
6. Math; and
7. Science-Physical.

Each of these subjects is responsible for developing foundational academic skills, and they are crucial to student achievement. To ensure students have access to high-quality education opportunities, the following factors should be addressed.

A Decline in New Teachers. Within the yearly Critical Teacher Shortage Areas reports, data are gathered from teaching programs across Florida to determine the number of newly certified teachers for different academic areas. Comparing the total program completers identified in each report, a startling downward trend is revealed (see Fig. 1). Solving the teaching shortage will not only require addressing ways to attract and retain teachers at schools but will also need ways to attract students into teacher preparation programs.

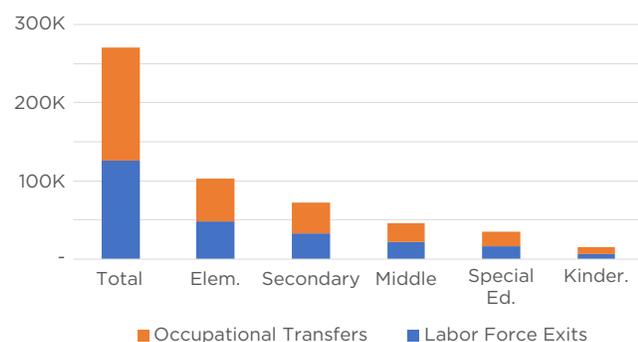
Fig. 1. The Number of Newly Certified Teachers is Declining in Florida
Number of Teachers



Source: Florida Department of Education, "Critical Teacher Shortage Areas," reports from 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23.

Teachers Leaving the Profession. Even once teachers are trained and active, a considerable portion choose to leave the profession. In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated how many teachers were expected to leave their teaching occupations between 2016 and 2026 (see Fig. 2). About half of the separations are to leave the labor force while the other half departed to pursue new careers.

Fig. 2. More than Half of Teachers Leave to Pursue New Occupations
Number of Teachers



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

⁴ Florida Department of Education, "Identification of Critical Teacher Shortage Areas for 2022-23."

Together, these separations are so profound that they are responsible for about 8 in 9 of the average 300,000 job openings per year.⁵

How Does the Teacher Shortage Affect Schools?

Vacancies

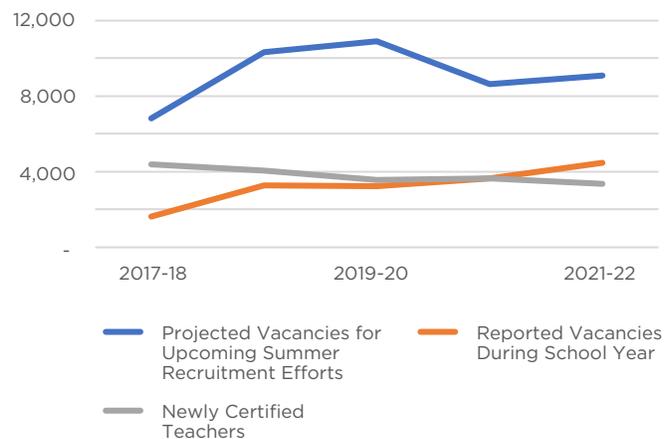
When a teacher leaves a position, whether to take a different teaching position or leave the profession, the result is a vacancy. Teacher shortages make the state more prone to vacancies due to the limited availability of new hires. The State Board of Education tracks two types of vacancies: reported vacancies and projected vacancies (see Fig. 3).

Reported vacancies are empty positions reported in the midst of the school year. Since active teachers typically try to find jobs before the start of the school year, reported vacancies are a reasonable proxy for how many more teachers the state needs. Looking at Graph 3, Florida’s mid-school year vacancies have begun to outpace the number of newly certified teachers, with 4,489 reported during 2021-22.

To help the state prepare recruitment efforts, projected vacancies are used to determine how many positions need to be filled before the upcoming school year. Most teachers quit at the end of the school year, making the projected vacancies much higher than reported vacancies. After a drop in projected vacancies in 2020—perhaps due to difficulties finding stable jobs at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic—Florida is once again witnessing a rise, reaching 9,029 projected vacancies for 2021-22. As teachers leave their positions, an indeterminable number will leave the teaching profession altogether, worsening the teacher shortage.

Without a ready pool of applicants, vacancies cause rippling consequences. Administrators use time and money to find short-term and long-term ways to adapt.⁶ Meanwhile, the disruption of finding and on-boarding new teachers can cause a loss of student learning time. The remaining teachers may feel pressured to take on new responsibilities, such as increasing class sizes (though the size must abide by the bounds set by Florida’s constitution), teaching an additional class during planning periods, serving as substitute teachers—possibly while maintaining their own class—and mentoring new teachers. These newfound responsibilities can fuel stress and burnout, which may not only lead to the departure of additional teachers but can also cause community members to perceive education as a field not worth pursuing.

Fig. 3. Reported Vacancies Outpace Newly Certified Teachers
Number of Teachers



Source: Florida Department of Education, “Identification of Critical Teacher Shortage Areas,” 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23.

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Projections for teachers: How many are leaving the occupation?” October 2018. The remaining job opportunities are created by employment growth, which is based upon the projected increases in student enrollment.

⁶ See, Learning Policy Institute, “What’s the Cost of Teacher Turnover?” September 2017. The Learning Policy Institute estimates the loss of one teacher to equal \$20,000.

Teachers Out-of-Field

When the right candidate cannot be found, schools may accept less qualified candidates. Florida's teacher shortage is so severe that about 10 percent of teachers active during the 2021-22 school year lacked certifications appropriate to their field (see Table 1).⁷

Table 1. Florida Courses that are Taught Without Certification in Appropriate Field (2021-22)

Certification Area	Number of Courses Taught by Teacher Not Certified in Appropriate Field	Percentage of Courses Taught by Teacher Not Certified in Appropriate Field	Newly Certified Teachers to Projected Vacancies
All Certification Areas	59,117	10%	
Elementary Education	26,353	9%	69%
ESE	11,487	17%	26%
English	5,460	16%	16%
Math	3,395	10%	18%
Social Sciences	2,106	7%	47%
Reading	1,374	18%	33%
Science-General	1,471	12%	4%
ESOL	527	17%	28%
Science-Physical	505	15%	17%

Source: Florida Department of Education, "Identification of Critical Teacher Shortage Areas 2022-23."

The gap between preparation and expected certification calls into question whether courses taught by teachers with and without appropriate certifications are comparable. Teachers without appropriate certifications for their field instruct 10.36 percent of courses at Title 1 schools, which is 3.46 percentage points higher than their presence at other schools. If their lessons are less effective, their over-representation at Title 1 schools could hinder the learning of at-risk students.

"For half a century, teacher quality has been recognized as the single in-school factor that has the greatest impact on student achievement. Studies on teacher quality have consistently demonstrated that an effective teacher produces additional student learning gains compared to an average teacher."⁸

Why is Florida Struggling to Find Teachers?

There are several factors commonly cited as reasons against pursuing or continuing teaching careers. First is compensation. The latest data release from the National Center of Education Statistics shows Florida's average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools at \$49,583, ranking second to last among the states and 17 percentage points below the national average.⁹ Adjusting for changes to currency, Florida's average annual teaching salary has fallen by about 13 percent since the 2009-10 school year.¹⁰

Another frequently discussed deterrent, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, is the considerable pressure the job places upon mental health. In February 2021, a survey found 78 percent of

⁷ Florida Department of Education, "Identification of Critical Teacher Shortage Areas," years 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23. In Graph 1 and Table 1, "Newly Certified Teachers" refers to persons completing an educator program two years prior to the baseline year. For example, for 2021-22, the newly certified teachers completed their program during 2019-20. This is how the data are compared in FDOE's reports.

⁸ RMC Research Corporation, "Florida Teacher Preparation Programs," January 2022.

⁹ National Center of Education Statistics, "Table 211.20. Estimated average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by state: Selected years, 1969-70 through 2020-21," August 2021.

¹⁰ National Center of Education Statistics, "Table 211.20. Estimated average annual salary of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools, by state: Selected years, 1969-70 through 2020-21," August 2021.

U.S. teachers claiming frequent job-related stress, which is 38 percentage points higher than all U.S. adults. Symptoms for depression among teachers nearly tripled the percentage for all U.S. adults.¹¹

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic becoming more manageable, 90 percent of respondents claimed burnout to be a serious problem this year.¹²

A recent survey suggests that more teachers are ready to depart. In January 2022, the National Education Association found that 55 percent of educators are considering leaving their profession earlier than planned.¹³ With rising costs and inflationary pressures burdening the bills, as well as lingering COVID-19 health concerns and new instructional expectations enhancing stress, attracting and retaining teachers could become an increasingly difficult challenge.

How Has Florida Reacted?

Florida has attempted to bolster its teacher workforce by offering affordable teacher preparation programs, alternative teaching pathways, and smooth transitions of certificates from other states. In 2022, Florida took additional steps to soothe its teacher shortage.

Increasing Pay. \$800 million was allocated to raise Florida’s minimum teacher pay and to boost the salary of veteran teachers.¹⁴ The focus of the allocation is to raise teachers’ floor salary. In doing so, the average starting salary will be at least \$47,000, marking a leap to 9th highest average starting salary in the nation.¹⁵

After raising the minimum salary, remaining funds will be used to raise the salaries of veteran teachers. The impact upon the salaries of veteran teachers is unclear. If experienced teachers are not retained, schools could lose sources of mentorship and institutional knowledge.

Supporting Homeownership. Among 50 critical professions, educators are eligible participants in the Florida Hometown Heroes Housing Program. The program helps first-time, income-qualified homebuyers by assisting down payments and closing costs. The assistance is a loan—not a gift—but the loan has zero percent interest and does not need to be paid until mortgage payments are complete. Additionally, the program offers loans to help lower first mortgage rates.

In November 2022, Florida voters will have the choice to further increase the affordability of homeownership. If passed, a constitutional amendment will allow for additional homestead property tax exemptions for a list of public servants, including classroom teachers.

Facilitating Pathways from the Military to Teaching. Years of state and federal legislation have promoted transitions to teaching for military personnel and veterans, and often times their spouses, through fee waivers, certificate extensions, and programs such as Troops to Teachers. In 2022, Florida forged an additional pathway to teaching: military veterans qualify for a five-year, nonrenewable temporary educator certification if they served at least 48 months of active-duty and earned at least 60 college credits. For the first time, no bachelor’s degree is required. While this may help ease teacher vacancies, lowering educational requirements may influence the quality of education received by students and increase the number of courses taught by out-of-field teachers.¹⁶

11 RAND Corporation. “Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply,” 2021.

12 National Education Association, “NEA survey: Massive staff shortages in schools leading to educator burnout; alarming number of educators indicating they plan to leave profession,” retrieved from <https://www.nea.org/about-nea/media-center/press-releases/nea-survey-massive-staff-shortages-schools-leading-educator>, accessed on July 25.

13 Ibid.

14 “Veteran teachers” is a term used to describe teachers with multiple years of teaching experience. The term is unrelated to military veterans.

15 Executive Office of the Governor, “Governor Ron DeSantis Announces Pay Raises for Florida Teachers,” March 2022.

16 The Florida Senate, “BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT CS/SB 896,” February 2022.

How Have School Districts Reacted?

School districts have also taken action to bolster their teacher workforce. Common tactics include conducting job fairs, advertising alternative teacher pathways, giving bonuses and raises, and renegotiating contracts. To secure necessary funding, some counties—such as Hillsborough and Duval—will vote on whether to increase property taxes on August 23rd.

As concern for teacher vacancies grow, a few districts are instituting unique changes:

Building Affordable Housing. As rising prices make house-hunting increasingly difficult in Southwest Florida, Collier County plans to help teachers by building essential temporary housing on a 35-acre parcel of unused property. The temporary housing can help teachers afford to live in the county and enable them to save money until they are able to afford their own house, an aim made easier with the help of the Hometown Heroes Program.¹⁷

Inviting Teachers from Other Countries. Florida often recruits teachers from other states, but since the whole nation struggles from the weight of teacher shortages, Osceola County has begun looking beyond the country. Working with TeachAlliance, Osceola County Public Schools are recruiting teachers from Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean. By focusing upon recruitment in this region, school district officials hope that the teachers will be able to connect with the district's large Latin American student population. Officials expect 140 of Osceola County's 400 open teaching positions to be filled with the help of TeachAlliance.¹⁸

Strengthening the Talent Pipeline. Hillsborough County School District built partnerships with nearby universities and colleges to launch the Transformation Fellowship Program. The program intends to attract hundreds of college-level students to serve as tutors, mentors, and staff members in the district's high-need schools. The Transformation Fellows benefit from specialized training, professional development, and a paycheck, while the schools receive extra support for their students and build relationships with prospective teachers.¹⁹

Removing Disincentives. Since 2011, Escambia County School District has required all employees to remain tobacco-free. As of July 2022, this policy has been temporarily lifted to increase the applicant pool. While smoking is still not allowed on school grounds, staff are allowed to smoke tobacco off-campus during their personal time.²⁰

¹⁷ Gulfshore Business, "Collier County School District creates essential housing initiative for teachers," retrieved from <https://www.gulfshorebusiness.com/collier-county-school-district-creates-essential-housing-initiative-for-teachers>, accessed July 26, 2022.

¹⁸ FOX 35 Orlando, "Osceola County Public Schools is looking abroad to fill teacher openings," retrieved from <https://www.fox35orlando.com/news/osceola-county-public-schools-looking-abroad-to-fill-teacher-openings>, accessed on July 26, 2022.

¹⁹ Hillsborough County Public Schools, "Transformation Fellowship Program," retrieved from <https://www.hillsboroughschools.org/Page/7893>, accessed on August 2, 2022.

²⁰ WEAR, "Crisis in the Classroom: Escambia County Schools drop tobacco policy to boost employment," retrieved from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/escambia-county-schools-drop-tobacco-policy-in-hopes-of-boosting-employment/ar-AAZLm4T?cvid=3882ef3b14074b9b8fd45eb514a27c5b>, accessed on July 26, 2022.

Looking Ahead

This past school year, Florida schools achieved unexpectedly high gains,²¹ but there is still work to be done. Evaluating 3rd Grade Reading scores—a critical year for predicting long-term student achievement—reveals that only 53 percent of the students read at or above grade-level, a percentage lower than the year preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. As Florida aims to reap the benefits of K-12 education, schools need high-quality, effective teachers to guide student achievement.

There are no easy solutions for state and local leaders grappling with the effects of teacher shortages, and as leaders try to balance quality versus quantity, Florida residents will feel the impact of their choices. If the applicant pool remains limited, administrators may be less likely to replace ineffective teachers and schools may be more prone to mid-year vacancies that disrupt student learning. If the applicant pool is expanded by lowering teacher education requirements, schools may be at risk of offering a lower quality of education to students. If monetary means—such as raises or subsidized training programs—are used to attract and retain teachers, residents may incur the cost through additional taxes. As leaders decide the best way to confront the teacher shortages in their communities, balancing educational needs to available resources will continue to be a challenge.

²¹ See, Florida Department of Education, “Florida School Grades Far Exceed Expectations,” retrieved from <https://www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/florida-school-grades-far-exceed-expectations.shtml>, accessed July 27, 2022.

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Florida TaxWatch works to improve the productivity and accountability of Florida government. Its research recommends productivity enhancements and explains the statewide impact of fiscal and economic policies and practices on residents and businesses.

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