

Limited certificated teachers in Washington: Barriers to becoming fully certificated and needed supports

Many states, including Washington, are attempting to reduce teacher shortages by encouraging limited certificated teachers to become fully certificated. Before investing in further support for these teachers to seek full certification, Washington policymakers want to understand the interest of limited certificated teachers in becoming fully certificated, the barriers they face to doing so, and the supports they report needing in order to pursue full certification. This study presents the results of a statewide survey of limited certificated teachers on those topics. More than two-thirds of respondents expressed interest in becoming fully certificated—many in a subject area in which there is a staffing shortage. Respondents who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated identified substantial barriers to doing so, including time and financial concerns. This was true particularly for limited certificated teachers of color, who identified a broader range of supports needed to pursue full certification than White teachers did. The findings have important implications for the state's efforts to reduce teacher shortages and to increase the diversity of its teacher workforce and for designing state policies and programs to help limited certificated teachers become fully certificated.

Why this study?

Washington state faces a growing teacher shortage, especially in bilingual education, math, science, English language development, and special education (Cross, 2017). About 97 percent of school district human resource directors reported struggling to fill positions or facing a teacher shortage crisis during the 2016/17 school year (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016).

In addition, Washington's teacher workforce is much less diverse than its student population. In 2015/16 only 10 percent of fully certificated teachers were people of color, while 44 percent of students were people of color (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2016).

Encouraging limited certificated teachers to become fully certificated is one strategy for reducing teacher shortages and increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce. Schools across the nation employ teachers with limited or temporary teacher certifications for short periods when fully certificated teachers are not available. Washington had 1,834 limited certificated teachers in 2017, including teachers with conditional teacher certificates, emergency teacher certificates, and emergency substitute teacher certificates. If some of them became fully certificated, that could enlarge the permanent teacher workforce (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2017).

Helping limited certificated teachers become fully certificated might also increase the number of teachers of color and the number of bilingual teachers. Limited certificated teachers are more likely than fully certificated teachers to be people of color or bilingual (Clewell & Villegas, 1998; Clotfelter, Hemelt, & Ladd, 2016; Flores, Keehn, & Pérez, 2002; Goe, 2014).

What was studied and how

The study examined four research questions:

1. What percentage of limited certificated teachers are interested in becoming fully certificated to teach in Washington?
2. What subject areas and grade levels do limited certificated teachers who express interest in becoming fully certificated want to teach?
3. What barriers to becoming fully certificated do limited certificated teachers who express interest in doing so perceive?
4. What supports do limited certificated teachers who express interest in becoming fully certificated report needing in order to pursue full certification?

The study is based on responses to a survey administered in 2017 by the State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board to the state's 1,834 limited certificated teachers. A total of 1,073 limited certificated teachers completed the survey, for a response rate of 59 percent. Teachers in urban and suburban schools are overrepresented among respondents, and teachers in town and rural schools are underrepresented. Therefore, the results are not representative of all limited certificated teachers in Washington.

The study team analyzed survey responses using descriptive statistics, calculating the percentage of respondents who answered each item. Because of the small proportion of teachers in each race/ethnicity category other than White and associated concerns regarding data confidentiality, the study team combined the race/ethnicity categories other than White into a single category, teachers of color, who made up 23 percent of survey respondents. Results were compared for teachers of color and White teachers, and differences of at least 5 percentage points between groups were classified as meaningful.

Findings

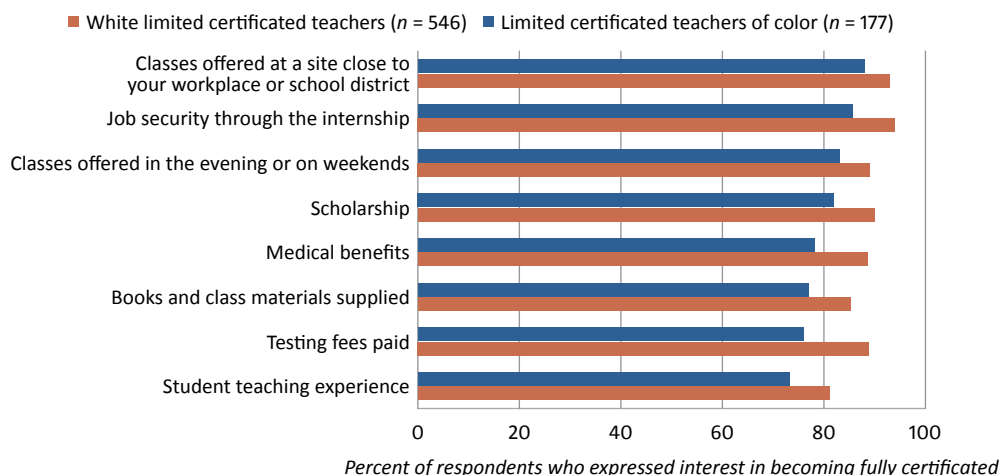
This section presents the findings related to each of the study's research questions.

- **More than two-thirds of limited certificated teachers expressed interest in becoming fully certificated.** About 68 percent of the limited certificated teachers who responded to the survey expressed interest in becoming fully certificated, 15 percent said they were not interested, 15 percent said maybe, and 2 percent said they did not know.
- **A little over two-thirds of limited certificated teachers who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated wanted to teach a subject area in which there is a staffing shortage.** Among respondents who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated, substantial percentages wanted to teach special education (25 percent), some field of science (20 percent), math (19 percent), English language development (15 percent), and bilingual education (10 percent). And 88 percent of respondents who wanted to teach some field of science and 82 percent of respondents who wanted to teach math expressed interest in doing so at the secondary school level. In addition, a higher percentage of teachers of color than of White teachers expressed interest in teaching bilingual education (29 percent versus 4 percent) or English language development (19 percent versus 13 percent).
- **Limited certificated teachers who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated identified substantial barriers to doing so, including time and financial concerns.** About 70 percent of respondents who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated indicated that the need to continue working to support their family was a moderate or large barrier, and 66 percent indicated that affordability was a moderate or large barrier. Perceived barriers differed between teachers of color and White teachers. A much higher percentage of teachers

of color than of White teachers indicated that entrance and/or subject area exams were a moderate or large barrier to full certification.

- **Among limited certificated teachers who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated, teachers of color identified a broader range of supports needed to pursue full certification than White teachers did.** At least 75 percent of respondents who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated rated 12 types of support—from student teaching experience to affordable tuition—as important or very important. In general, the responses aligned with perceived barriers—with more than 90 percent of respondents saying they needed supports such as affordable tuition, continued salary, and flexible course offerings. Several supports were rated important or very important by a higher percentage of teachers of color than of White teachers: testing fee waivers, medical benefits, job security through the internship, scholarships, books and class material supplied, student teaching experience, classes offered in the evening or on weekends, and classes offered at a site close to the workplace or school district (figure 1).

Figure 1. Among limited certificated teachers surveyed in Washington in 2017 who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated, teachers of color and White teachers identified supports needed to pursue full certification at different rates



Note: Values refer to the percentage of limited certificated teachers who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated and rated the support important or very important to becoming fully certificated. The figure shows only supports for which the difference between teachers of color and White teachers is at least 5 percentage points.

Source: Authors’ analysis of responses to item 1 in section I, item 24 in section IV, and items 39-2, 39-4, 39-5, 39-8, and 39-9 in section VII of the Limited Certificated Teacher Survey administered in 2017 by the State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board.

Implications

Helping interested limited certificated teachers become fully certificated could substantially expand the teacher pool, which is especially important given the state’s recent enrollment growth. The number of limited certificated teachers surveyed who expressed interest in becoming fully certificated (729) is equivalent to more than a quarter of the number of new entrants to the teacher workforce in Washington in 2014/15.

Providing support for limited certificated teachers to become fully certificated could also advance the state’s goal of having a more diverse teacher workforce by increasing the number of teachers of color. Seventy-four percent of the teachers of color surveyed expressed an interest in becoming fully certificated.

Financial supports may be vital in strategies to support limited certificated teachers in becoming fully certificated. Given that more than 90 percent of respondents indicated that they face financial barriers to full certification, the state could consider offering low-cost online courses, which would allow limited certificated teachers to work

full time while taking the courses at a convenient time and pace. Such courses could address the biggest supports that limited certificated teachers need in order to pursue full certification: affordable tuition, continued salary, and flexible classes.

Other supports that states could consider providing include testing fee waivers, medical benefits, books and class materials, and scholarships—all of which higher percentages of teachers of color than of White teachers reported needing.

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This brief was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under contract ED-IES-17-C-0009 by Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest administered by Education Northwest. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The full report is available on the Regional Educational Laboratory website at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Yoon, S. Y., Scott, C., & Greenberg Motamedi, J. (2019). *Limited certificated teachers in Washington: Barriers to becoming fully certificated and needed supports* (REL 2020–013). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest.