



Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Missouri

State leaders commit to efforts to attract and keep teachers in the classroom.

Paul Katnik

Providing Missouri students a highly qualified, appropriately credentialed workforce has grown steadily more challenging over the past decade. Unsurprisingly, the pandemic made it even harder. Multiple surveys indicate Missouri educators' growing dissatisfaction over the last two years. These data, coupled with figures on declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs, increased vacancies, uncompetitive salaries, and declining retention rates, have prompted state education leaders to take bold steps to improve teacher recruitment and retention in Missouri.

One survey conducted by a state teacher association found that more than half of Missouri teachers have considered leaving the profession before they reach retirement age, citing increasingly difficult working conditions and not being valued as educators.¹ Data from

Missouri's teacher retirement system suggested that the state was on pace this summer to see 30 percent more retirement applications above the average over the six previous years.

Missouri is not alone in its struggles to provide each of its students a high-quality, diverse, and appropriately credentialed workforce. Unfortunately, there is abundant, compelling data that confirm the inadequacy of our efforts thus far. It is also a safe assumption that the pandemic over the last two years further stymied those efforts.

Fifty years of research have fully established and repeatedly confirmed that the quality of the teacher and their teaching is the number one school-related factor affecting student learning.² Investments in improving teacher quality have direct outcomes for students. Thus it is critical that the Missouri Department of

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Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the state board of education, governor, and state legislators take new, unprecedented steps to address our teacher recruitment and retention challenges.

Supply and Demand

Missouri is a very diverse state. It has more than 550 school districts and charter schools. Some are very small and some much larger. Our state has school communities in deeply rural areas as well as urban areas. There are drastically different needs in these vastly different communities. The teacher workforce comprises approximately 70,000 teachers serving nearly 900,000 students.

The root cause of Missouri's teacher recruitment and retention challenges can be summarized as an issue of supply and demand. The supply of new teachers is not enough to meet the demand, as more and more teachers leave the profession. Anyone in the business world would say that this is a recipe for trouble. In a school, it is particularly problematic due to the incredible effect that teachers have on student learning.

This issue is not new. Missouri's educator preparation programs clearly show a steady decline of nearly 30 percent in enrollment over the past decade. Obviously, fewer enrollments mean fewer individuals complete those programs. Over the course of that same decade, program completion rates have declined by nearly 25 percent. This decline translates to a reduced number of new teacher candidates becoming eligible for certification and entering the teacher workforce each year. In the past three consecutive school years, there was a nearly 39 percent decline in the number of appropriately certified teacher applicants, resulting in a statewide average of single-digit applicants per position.

At the same time, the annual hiring rate in Missouri school districts has consistently averaged around 11 percent for the past six years, which equates to a demand to fill approximately 8,000 teaching slots per year. This rate places Missouri above the national average of 8 percent annual attrition and nearly triple that of high-performing countries such as Finland and Singapore, which average around 4 percent.

Data from the past six years show that more than 50 percent of available teaching slots

are filled with first-year teachers, resulting in a workforce with less teaching experience. Approximately 30 percent of Missouri teachers have fewer than five years' teaching experience, and nearly half have fewer than 10 years' experience.

The elevated hiring rate and share of new teachers in the workforce contribute to retention rates that are too low. Over the past six years, on average just 60 percent of new teachers will complete year three and continue to year four in the profession; about 45 percent of new teachers will complete year five and continue teaching in year six. These data all suggest that the demand for new teachers to fill teacher vacancies will continue to increase each year. During the past three consecutive school years, there was a 3 percent increase in the overall number of teacher vacancies.

The Missouri State Board of Education has regularly reviewed the data about educator workforce supply and demand issues, which gave the board and DESE a clear rationale for directing federal relief funds toward addressing recruitment and retention. Nearly \$55 million in relief funds have been earmarked to support recruitment and retention grants across the state. Every educator preparation program and community college in the state took advantage of the opportunity. Recruitment grants were also made available to every public school district and charter school in the state to create grow-your-own programs or support established programs. Eighty-five percent of school districts and charter schools submitted applications, increasing the number of grow-your-own programs in the state from 115 (in 20.7 percent of schools) to 470 (85 percent).

The state board is taking additional steps to bolster educator recruitment and retention. The board made this pressing issue one of its top legislative priorities for the year and created a Blue Ribbon Commission made up of business leaders and other education stakeholders to further study this issue. The commission has been reviewing the data on the state's educator workforce in monthly meetings this summer and plans to generate recommendations by October.

Teacher Compensation

Another contributing factor in Missouri's recruitment and retention challenges is teacher

compensation. Currently, Missouri ranks 50th in the nation in average starting teacher salary, at \$33,234, and 46th in average teacher salary, at \$51,557.³ These low rankings are particularly challenging given that Missouri shares a border with eight other states, making it easy for teachers to drive across state lines to earn a higher salary.

Missouri statute requires a minimum teacher salary of \$25,000, lower than that in all of Missouri's border states. This minimum salary has not been changed since 2005, while the border states have each taken action to increase their state's minimum salary in the past three to four years. While many Missouri teachers make more than \$25,000, there are still many who earn \$35,000 or less—a total of just over 4,000 teachers across 82 percent of Missouri school districts. As a point of comparison, that salary averages to just less than \$17 an hour, similar to the national average pay of shuttle drivers, housekeepers, or pet groomers.

To address the two biggest reasons that teachers cite for leaving the profession, Missouri now has a \$55 million investment in grant programs and in efforts to address teacher compensation—an overall campaign called TEACH Missouri. There are two additional major components in TEACH Missouri. Those components address increasing the prospective teacher workforce through a public relations effort and local training sessions that help educators learn how to encourage high school students to see teaching as a future career.

To improve recruitment and retention, Missouri took two significant steps to improve educator quality by addressing teacher compensation. The Missouri General Assembly approved Governor Mike Parson's recommendation to provide a matching grant opportunity to all school districts and charter schools that have a teacher making less than \$38,000. Applications for this program opened in mid-June and closed in mid-July. A total of 360 school districts (65 percent) applied for these funds, which represent a \$12.5 million contribution by the state affecting the salaries of over 6,200 Missouri teachers. The program uses state lottery proceeds to fund 70 percent of what schools need to support the salary increase, with local funds covering the remaining 30 percent. This sustainable funding source potentially allows this grant to be offered each year moving forward.

In addition, the General Assembly approved funding for the Career Ladder Program, which provides supplemental pay to all teachers with more than two years of experience in public schools for duties and responsibilities for which they are not already compensated.

Valuing Teaching as a Profession

Low teacher compensation also contributes to an overall devaluing of the profession, which teachers and school administrators have consistently cited in surveys as a contributing factor to Missouri's recruitment and retention challenges and points to a clear need to raise the profile of the teaching profession.

The public relations component of TEACH Missouri is designed to improve the public perception of the teaching profession, attract the next generation of diverse and high-quality teachers, retain a greater percentage of the current teacher workforce, and develop a state-wide recruitment and retention system. This campaign includes public service announcements, grow-your-own materials for use by school districts and charter schools, and a one-stop-shop web portal for prospective teachers that will include free tools, one-to-one coaching, and financial assistance information. Candidates will use the web portal to better understand the profession, determine the most appropriate pathways for teacher preparation, and more easily navigate applying and being accepted into an educator preparation program. TEACH Missouri's ultimate goal is to right supply and demand in Missouri's educator workforce.

TEACH Missouri's other major component is Pathways to Teaching Careers. This initiative offers regional informational and training sessions for classroom teachers to help them become effective recruiters of high school students. These sessions cover the status of the teacher workforce as well strategies for identifying, recruiting, and supporting high school students with an interest in the teaching profession.

Recruitment funds are now available to communities across the state, intended to increase the supply of new teachers over the next three to five years. Hundreds of individuals in school systems and on college campuses are working together more closely to promote

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the teaching profession to high school students and other interested candidates, sharing what an incredibly rewarding career it can be. A wide variety of recruitment strategies are being implemented across the state:

- a marketing campaign funded by area consortiums to promote the region as a great place to work;
- reimagined Career Days and Recruitment Nights for past, present, and future educators to network and form mentorships;
- mentorships for current high school students that will provide support throughout their college educator preparation programs;
- substitute teaching experiences for those considering the teaching profession; and
- week-long summer events for prospective teachers.

In addition to hundreds of recruitment efforts now under way, teacher retention grants were made available to every public school and charter school in the state. Over 500 applications were submitted, representing 92 percent of school districts and charter schools. These grant funds allow school leaders to implement immediate solutions to decrease the need for new teachers. In their applications, schools selected one or more of 12 research-based and proven practices, including these:

- paying teachers stipends to complete microcredentials, which they can complete on their own schedules and can improve teacher practice;
- hosting onboarding days in the spring for new hires to meet mentors and tour buildings and the community;
- hiring additional staff to address challenging or disruptive student behaviors in a location outside the classroom;
- repurposing space at schools for onsite exercise or “calm down areas” to support the mental health of teachers;
- providing onsite daycare for staff in schools without access to child care in their communities;
- hiring school support specialists to help teachers meet greater student needs; and
- offering more teacher leadership opportunities in schools and throughout the school district.

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Evaluating State Efforts

Perhaps as important as funding these strategies through the recruitment and retention grants is the evaluation of their effectiveness. Although school districts, charter schools, educator preparation programs, and community colleges had great flexibility in developing and implementing strategies they felt would best address the specific needs of their communities, each was required to include an evaluation component that specifies how they will track whether their strategies are working and ultimately succeed.

DESE is collecting and compiling these data and will use an external evaluator to ask and answer research questions around recruitment and retention:

- What kind of strategies are being implemented?
- Are these strategies different based on school size or location?
- Which strategies seemed to work best for solving which kinds of staffing problems?
- Which strategies would be most successful in maintaining a high-quality, appropriately credentialed teacher workforce?

Over the next several years, Missouri will conduct a border-to-border study of hundreds of recruitment and retention strategies in all Missouri school communities. The most effective strategies will become the foundation of a first-of-its-kind state recruitment and retention system to continually address workforce issues. The goal is to keep Missouri from having extreme workforce challenges again. But most important of all, this system will work to ensure a high-quality, appropriately credentialed teacher for every Missouri student. ■

¹Missouri State Teachers Association, “2021 Missouri Educator Wellness Survey,” web page, <https://msta.org/Wellness-Survey>.

²James S. Coleman, “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 1966), <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR06389.v3>; Isaac M. Opper, “Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement” (Santa Monica Beach, CA: RAND, 2019).

³National Education Association, “Teacher Salary Benchmarks,” web page (April 26, 2022), <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/teacher-salary-benchmarks>; National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, “Estimated Average Annual Salary of Teachers in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by State: Selected Years, 1969–70 through 2020–21,” table 211.60, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_211.60.asp?current=yes.