What's behind the teacher shortage in US schools?
22 September 2022, by Sharita Forrest

The teacher shortages plaguing primary and secondary schools in the U.S. could be game-changers for people entering the field by boosting salaries and improving benefits and working conditions, said Nancy Latham, the executive director of the Council on Teacher Education and an associate dean in the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Credit: Jeremiah Cox

Nancy Latham is the executive director of the Council on Teacher Education and an associate dean in the College of Education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Latham spoke with News Bureau education editor Sharita Forrest about the factors driving the teacher shortage in U.S. schools.

The 2021 Illinois Educator Shortage Survey found that 88% of the 663 school districts that responded to the survey were having problems finding teachers and substitute teachers. Why are so many school districts having such difficulty filling teaching positions this academic year?

The massive shortages we are seeing are the result of many factors. Years of deprofessionalizing the field through inadequate pay; unstable long-term retirement benefits; stressed, overtaxed expectations on educators and schools; and unsafe, under-resourced work environments weakened the profession. This in combination with an employment pathway-altering event like the pandemic brought our shortages in the field to a critical high.

What backup plans are school districts devising to cover unfilled teaching positions? Are there any causes for concern about educational quality when districts use uncertified teachers?

Districts are utilizing building staff and administrators to cover classrooms. Districts are being as creative and resourceful as possible, but their options are limited. We are seeing other states make shifts that lessen the requirements for teachers such as not requiring a four-year degree. These temporary, desperate solutions will hurt our neediest learners by not providing them a high-quality teacher and by discouraging teacher persistence in the field.

Could this shortage become a game-changer as far as entry-level salaries, benefits and working conditions for future teachers are concerned?

Absolutely. If we don't deal with those long-term issues—such as salaries, benefits, retirement security, working conditions and increasing expectations—we will only see more and more shortages. These have been long-standing issues causing lower persistence at a time when there are many other employment options for teachers where these issues are not pervasive.

Unless we have the courage to face these difficult issues and the hard solutions to solve them, we will continue to deal with shortages, teacher turnover and fewer future teachers entering the field.

The report on the educator shortage in Illinois
said enrollments in teacher education programs have declined 60%. What are the College of Education and other teacher-preparation programs doing to pique high school and college students' interest in the profession?

We are seeing a general decline in students entering teacher-education programs across the state, however our enrollment at UIUC has remained consistent and strong, which speaks to the high quality of our programs and the expertise of our faculty and staff. We are constantly innovating with our school partners across the state to encourage middle school and high school students to consider the field. We are also working with teacher-preparation program leadership across the state and legislative partners to advocate for financial assistance and support for those interested in the field that does not leave them mired in debt as they enter the field.

According to the report, school leadership is a pivotal factor in teachers' decisions to remain at their schools, yet attrition is a problem among school administrators, as well, because of similar issues with workload and working conditions. The report suggests that reinventing principals' roles can improve these problems for both teachers and administrators. How so?

The school administrator role is shifting, and it is important that school leadership preparation shift as well. With the shifts we are seeing across all employment areas, there are many competitive options for employees and factors that contribute to their employment choices including salary, benefits, work environment, flexibility and remote work.

As we see teacher persistence in the field decrease, it will naturally follow that teachers interested in administration will be considering those roles and administrator preparation with less experience in the field than in previous times. In addition, administrators have to be prepared to innovate and create these competitive work environments as well as lead a much more transient, shifting workforce.

For the past two years, the state suspended the capstone evaluation system requirement for teachers' performance due to the pandemic. Would eliminating this requirement permanently or altering its criteria boost the number of preservice teachers in the pipeline and better align the evaluation system with what's being used in the field?

The current capstone evaluation primarily used in Illinois is the edTPA. This assessment has been eliminated during the COVID-19 time period. I don't believe a significant number of teacher candidates are not entering the field due to the edTPA as it has around a 90% passage rate. However, I also do not believe, in light of the passage rates, that it adds great value to the process of determining a candidate's readiness for licensure, specifically in relation to the financial cost to students.