

In Real Time, a Crisis in Public Education: Teacher Shortages in Missouri and Kansas

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Introduction

Nationwide public school teacher shortages, including those in Missouri and Kansas, started before the onslaught of COVID-19 yet were exacerbated by the pandemic. Shortages are found in all elementary, middle school and high school grades, including special education. An increasing number of public school teachers who are no longer teaching have quit classroom teaching, were fired, retired, transferred, died, or were separated from teaching due to their disability. Reasons for leaving classroom teaching include gaining employment in more financially advantageous, socially prestigious and safe professions.¹

The percentage of teachers who have quit their profession has been on a relative increase since 2009. “Although there has been considerable volatility during the pandemic era, the rate reached a record high of 1.3 percent in March 2022. These data provide a clear indication that educators quitting—not leaving for other reasons—is driving a significant part of the current educator shortage.”²

Teachers quitting the education profession has definitely led to the shortfall of teachers in public education. Reasons why teachers have quit and why undergraduates are not choosing to major in education are further explained in this article.

Contributing Factors to the Teacher Shortage in Missouri and Kansas

Rick Ginsburg, dean of education at the University of Kansas, said, “Kansas was experiencing teacher shortage issues present nationally. A federal report said 53 percent of public schools

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¹ Stacey Pelika, “6 Charts that Explain the Educator Shortage,” *NEA Today*, September 30, 2022, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/6-charts-explain-educator-shortage>.

² National Education Association, *Elevating the Education Professions: Solving Educator Shortages by Making Public Education and Attractive and Competitive Career Path* (National Education Association, October 2022), accessed August 11, 2023, <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/solving-educator-shortage-report-final-9-30-22.pdf>.

were understaffed in the current academic year. A National Education Association (NEA) survey in 2022 found 55 percent of teachers had given thought to a career change. In 2019, a Phi Delta Kappa poll showed 55 percent of teachers didn't want their children to follow them into teaching."³ The public education teacher shortage in Missouri, like Kansas, has been a prevailing problem for many years, escalating since the spring of 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19.

The teacher shortage in public education is a pervasive and complicated problem. Reasons for the teacher shortage range from low teacher pay to stress and burn-out from the changes in their teaching roles due to the COVID-19, to being micromanaged in their classroom teaching. Too many teachers have unsupportive administrators, elected officials and parents who create barriers to their success in teaching. These contributing factors, among other reasons for the current teacher shortage are further explained as follows.

Low Pay

NEA President Rebecca Pringle said, "As the nation's public schools struggle with a looming teacher shortage that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the best indicators of attracting and retaining teachers is looking at the starting and average salaries for the profession."⁴ Pringle is advocating for a national teachers' salary of \$40,000. Among its numerous reports and position statements, NEA annually collects data from each state's department of education to rank and compare public school teachers' beginning salaries and average yearly salaries. The average beginning public school teacher salary is \$41,770. Montana has the nation's lowest beginning teacher salary of \$32,495 and New Jersey has the highest state beginning teacher salary of \$54,053. Kansas beginning teachers earn an average of \$39,100, a ranking of twenty among the fifty states. Missouri ranks a low forty-eight in comparison to the other fifty states with a beginning teachers' salary of \$33,234.⁵

An analysis of an annual report in the publication *Education Week* ranks the national average teacher's salary for 2021 as \$65,090. New York public school teachers average a salary which ranks as the highest nationwide with a salary of \$87,738, whereas Mississippi ranks lowest among the states with an average public school teaching salary of \$47,655. Within the national rankings, Kansas is thirty-ninth with a public school teaching salary of \$53,932. Missouri ranks an even lower forty-fourth, as their public school teachers earn an average of \$51,557.⁶ Salary ranges can vary widely depending on the city and many other important factors, including the

³ Tim Carpenter, "Kansas Public Universities Finalizing Plan in Response to Shortage of K-12 Teachers," December 27, 2022, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://kansasreflector.com/2022/12/27/kansas-public-universities-finalizing-plan-in-response-to-shortage-of-k-12-teachers/>.

⁴ Reggie Wade, "State-by-State Data Show Gaps in Teacher Salaries, Student Spending: NEA," *Yahoo Finance*, April 27, 2021, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/state-by-state-data-shows-gaps-in-teacher-salaries-student-spending-nea-175635145.html>.

⁵ NEA Collective Bargaining and Member Advocacy Department, "Teacher Salary Benchmarks," April 26, 2022, accessed January 29, 2023, <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/teacher-salary-benchmarks>.

⁶ Madeline Will, "Teacher Salaries are Increasing. See How Your State Compares," *Education Week*, April 26, 2021, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://edweek.org/teaching-learning/teacher-salaries-are-increasing-see-how-your-state-compares/2021/04?s>.

teacher's education degree(s), state teacher certifications held, and the number of years the teacher has been a classroom teacher.

The “teacher wage penalty” is a nationwide phenomenon. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimates wage gaps comparing the states nationwide. Six years of federal data was accumulated from 2016 to 2021 to devise a big enough sample size to evaluate. “The institute has been tracking the ‘teacher pay penalty’ for 18 years, and in 2021, it reached a new high: 23.5 percent less than comparable college graduates,” according to an article in *Education Week*.⁷

Teachers’ Salaries in Missouri and Kansas

During 2020-23, approximately 300,000 Missouri teachers left teaching. One of reasons that teachers left their profession is low teacher’s salary.⁸

By law Missouri sets a limit of a minimum annual salary for public school teachers for first year teachers at \$25,000 and for teachers with a MA degree with 10 years of teaching experience in public schools is \$33,000.⁹

Stress and Burn-out

Public schools in Missouri and Kansas initially responded to COVID-19 by closing their brick and mortar schools and continuing instruction through remote learning. Teachers had little training, skills or time to prepare to teach electronically. The stress of accommodating instruction to an online format took its toll on teachers’ mental health. During the first few years of the Coronavirus, teachers were regarded as heroes by many students’ parents as they saw teachers tirelessly teaching creative lessons to their homebound students. Over time, this changed. As Daniel Klaassen wrote in the Kansas Action for Children Blog, “Two and a half years later, the narrative has shifted from praising teachers’ tireless contributions helping raise the next generation to criticism by some policymakers and disgruntled special interest groups attacking their lesson plans, library selections, and professional judgment.”¹⁰

According to a 2020-2021 survey by The RAND Corporation (research and development) American Teacher Panel, during the pandemic stress was cited as the major reason teachers left the profession. “Perhaps as a result [of the pandemic], one in four teachers were considering leaving their job by the end of the school year—more than in a typical prepandemic year and a higher rate than employed adults nationally. Black or African American teachers were particularly likely to plan to leave. Also, teachers were more likely to report experiencing

⁷ Madeline Will, “The Gap Between Teacher Pay and other Professions Hit a New High. How Bad is it?” *Education Week*, August 22, 2022, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-gap-between-teacher-pay-and-other-professions-hits-a-new-high-how-bad-is-it/2022/08>.

⁸ Elizabeth Bleier and Julie Gronquist-Blodgett, “Missouri Teachers Deserve Better Pay and Sufficient Support,” *Missouri Independent*, May 9, 2023, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://missouriindependent.com/2023/05/09/missouri-teachers-deserve-better-pay-and-sufficient-support/>.

⁹ Missouri NEA, *Teacher Salary Research*, accessed Sept 22, 2023, <https://www.mnea.org/research>.

¹⁰ Daniel Klaassen, “Kansas’ Teacher Shortage has Worsened, Hurting Kids’ Learning Opportunities,” Kansas Action for Children Blog, November 2, 2022, accessed January 24, 2023, https://www.kac.org/kansas_teacher_shortage_has_worsened_kids_learning_opportunities.

frequent job-related stress and symptoms of depression than the general population,” the report found.¹¹

Stressors for classroom teachers include the use of unfamiliar technology for remote instruction, balancing multiple modalities of instruction, worries about their personal health as well as that of their students when returning to in-class instruction, and a concern about the challenges of transitioning to remote teaching in addition to the economic necessity of having secondary jobs for some. Job-related stress and symptoms of depression are remarkably higher among teachers compared to that of the general adult population in the United States.

In an article by Abigail Johnson Hess, teacher Henry Rivera Leal stated that, “People are posting about how burnt out they are, how frustrated they are, how close to the edge they are.” In addition, he said, “You go into it [teaching] because it’s something that you want to do. And we’ve reached the point where that’s been exploited.”¹²

A contemporary and too often occurring stress for teachers is the terror of school shootings.

“Since 1970, there have been 2,057 incidents involving the discharge of a firearm on school property and 680 people have died.”¹³ These numbers continue to increase the fear of gun violence in the schools which impact the stress and safety of the teachers, students, staff, and administrators.

Patricia Woods was a classroom teacher for nine years in the southwestern part of Missouri. She was threatened by students, cursed by them and physically restrained by a student on his lap in front of the other students in her class. “Woods was not alone in navigating those types of altercations. Almost 22% of educators say they have been threatened, and 12% say they have been attacked by a student at their current school, according to a 2019 report from the Economic Policy Institute.”¹⁴ As a result of persistent stress Woods experienced burn-out, leaving the teaching profession for a corporate job.

Cindy Deutsch taught kindergarten in Wichita, Kansas, for thirty-seven years and has recently retired. She said that as teachers they are micromanaged a lot and told exactly what they are to teach and when they are to teach it. She stated that a major frustration was a focus on testing even the youngest of students, her kindergarteners. Deutsch said that when she began teaching, her students’ report cards contained four categories in the subjects of reading and writing. In the

¹¹ Elizabeth D. Steiner and Ashley Woo, *Job-Related Stress Threatens the Teacher Supply: Key Findings from the 2021 State of the U.S. Teacher Survey* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021) accessed January 23, 2023, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-1.html.

¹² Abigail Johnson Hess, “I Felt Like I was Being Experimented on’: 1 in 4 Teachers are Considering Quitting After this Past Year,” *CNBC Make It*, June 25, 2021, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://cnbc.com/2021/06/24/1-in-4-teachers-are-considering-quit-after-this-past-year.html>.

¹³ Amy Rock, “K-12 School Shooting Statistics: 52 Years of Data,” *Campus Safety Magazine*, October 5, 2023, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://www.campusafety.com/safety/k-12-school-shooting-statistics-everyone-should-know/>.

¹⁴ Ralph Chapoco, “Missouri Faces Teacher Shortage as Wages, Demands Drive Educators Away,” *Missouri Business Alert*, February 20, 2020, accessed February 4, 2023, https://www.missouribusinessalert.com/news/business/missouri-faces-teacher-shortage-as-wages-demands-drive-educators-away/article_941c01d2-2795-56c9-8d15-d929f073203f.html.

final years of her teaching there were more than twenty reading and writing categories on a student's report card. Deutsch provided the following analogy comparing teaching a student to that of caring for a cow. She said, "We weigh the cow, and we weigh the cow, but we don't have time to feed the cow because we're weighing the cow so much."¹⁵

An excessive amount of student testing, along with the contemporary reality of school boards and the public at large creating a "culture war," often banning selected books, results in continued stress for teachers. These facts along with other external influences controlling and in some cases legislating what subject matter can be taught in schools leads to teachers feeling a heightened amount of stress. This intense stress often results in burn-out for too many teachers. Some special interest groups and politicians respond to what they consider schools' liberal orthodoxy and teaching practices. These influences, such as those of the Moms for Liberty organization, are having a growing impact on public education. Extreme conservative approaches attempt to control the verbiage teachers use with their students along with the textbooks and literature used in their classrooms.¹⁶ The contributing factors which have led to a teacher shortage in Missouri and Kansas are indicative of a broader nationwide trend.

Suggestions To Solve Teacher Shortages

Teacher Salary Increase

There are policies that can be adopted to increase public school teachers' salaries. For example, the teachers' pay scale can be differentiated depending upon the needs of the school and the qualifications of the teachers. When teachers teach in high-need schools or in demanding subject matters such as in STEM, they could be paid a higher salary through a differentiated pay scale. A differentiated pay scale could result in increasing teacher retention. Performance-based pay programs can skillfully be implemented for teachers who demonstrate strong quality teaching, carry out additional responsibilities besides teaching in the school, or assume the role of an instructional coach.¹⁷

Four-day School Week

One of the strategies of handling the public school teacher shortage is implementing a four-day school week, which is an alternative to the traditional five-day schedule. It has become popular lately because it is helpful not only for rural school districts but also for urban school districts which constantly suffer from teacher shortages and budgetary limits.¹⁸

¹⁵ Suzanne Perez, "Burned-out: As More Educators Leave, Kansas Faces its Worst-Ever Teacher Shortage," July 5, 2022, accessed June 13, 2022, <https://www.kmuw.org/news/2022-07-05/burned-out-as-more-educators-leave-kansas-faces-its-worst-ever-teacher-shortage>.

¹⁶ Paige Williams, "The Right-Wing Mother Fueling the School-Board Wars," *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2022, accessed November 7, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/07/the-right-wing-mothers-fuelling-the-school-board-wars>.

¹⁷ Michael Hansen, "Ways to Reform Teacher Compensation, Beyond a \$60,000 Minimum Salary," The Brookings Institution, March 8, 2023, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ways-to-reform-teacher-compensation-beyond-a-60000-minimum-salary>.

¹⁸ National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), "Four-Day School Week Overview," June 28, 2023, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.ncsl.org/education/four-day-school-week-overview>.

Nationwide, almost 900 school districts are implementing a four-day school week and the number of school districts scheduling such weeks is increasing. In 2020, there were 650 districts with four-day school weeks, and in 2023, there are 876 districts in twenty-six states that implemented a four-day school schedule.¹⁹

In the academic school year 2023-2024, 161 school districts in the state of Missouri have implemented a four-day school schedule. For example, the Independence school district in Kansas City serves 14,000 students and has become the largest school district to shorten the school week. Consequently, the number of teacher applications in the district has increased as a result of changing the weekly schedule to longer hours within a four-day school week.²⁰

Missouri school districts must deliver the instructional time of 1,044 hours required by state law. School districts have the flexibility to schedule the school week as they wish, for example, Monday to Thursday or Tuesday to Friday. School districts can elect to add thirty-five extra minutes onto each day to meet the state instructional time requirement. Since 2019, Warren County R-III School District in Warrenton, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, approximately 3,000 students go to school from Tuesday to Friday. For parents who need child care service on Monday, the school district offers free of charge child care. The four-day weekly school schedule is a factor in the teacher retention rate being increased from 15 percent to 20 percent.

School Climate

School climate is a multifaceted concept. It refers to the culture, quality, and character of the school that encompasses multiple layers of goals, standards, values, and interpersonal interactions among students, parents, and school personnel. It is a foundation for school success which contributes to the students' academic achievement and socio-emotional wellbeing, promoting teachers' autonomy, and creating a safe environment. Specifically, the concept of school climate is related to three critical aspects of school success, as follows:

- **Engagement.** Strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools and strong connections between schools and the broader community.
- **Safety.** Schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use.
- **Environment.** Appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy.²¹

Reasons why education sector employees, including teachers, plan to leave or stay is closely related to the school climate. Two of the predominant reasons that teachers are willing to stay in

¹⁹ CBS News, "More U.S. school districts are shifting to a 4-day week. Here's why," August 7, 2023, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/school-districts-4-day-week-teachers-parents/>.

²⁰ Natalie Wallington, "About 140 Missouri and 25 Kansas districts have 4-day school weeks. Here's where," *The Kansas City Star*, August 24, 2022, accessed September 7, <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/education/article264703479.html#storylink=cpy>.

²¹ National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, "School Climate Improvement," accessed September 7, 2023, <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement>.

their professions are “meaningful work” and “colleagues/community.” When teachers perceive that their work and the mission of the organization are aligned with their educational philosophy, they are satisfied with their current teaching position. An additional reason that teachers continue to stay in their job is when a collaborative relationship develops with coworkers who have shared goals and genuine concerns. Along with the low monetary compensation, other factors such as being overwhelmed with work responsibilities, a work-life imbalance, and a lack of support and resources contribute to lower teacher retention.²²

Teacher burnout and attrition are closely related to how the decision-making process or communication channel is structured in the school. When the power is vertically structured, or the communication is mostly delivered from the administrative top down to teachers, they can feel isolated or marginalized, which negatively affects the teacher’s mental health and is evident in their job performance. Teachers’ mental health and job performance is associated with their students’ learning outcomes and their students’ social-emotional development. In many cases, collaborative work relationships among teachers or learning from one another such as in a peer observation experience can provide effective learning opportunities for teachers.²³

To foster a positive school climate, it is important to collect relevant data to identify areas in the school climate needing improvement. This needs assessment can easily be accomplished through conducting a survey which asks the opinion of teachers, parents, and administrators. A collaborative relationship among teachers, parents, and administrators creates a positive and reassuring school climate which positively improves teacher retention.²⁴

Conclusion

As the NEA states, “The educator shortage crisis is real, and it requires immediate and sustained attention to identify and implement long-term solutions to improve educator recruitment and retention.”²⁵

This teacher shortage crisis is exacerbated by the lower number of undergraduate students majoring in education during the past few decades. These undergraduate majors serve as the “educational pipeline” to fill needed teacher vacancies. Figure 1 identifies this nationwide decline in education majors since 1970 when there were 176,307 undergraduates receiving a

²² Jake Bryant, Samvitha Ram, Doug Scott, and Claire Williams, “K–12 Teachers Are Quitting. What Would Make Them Stay?” McKinsey & Company, March 2, 2023, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/k-12-teachers-are-quitting-what-would-make-them-stay>.

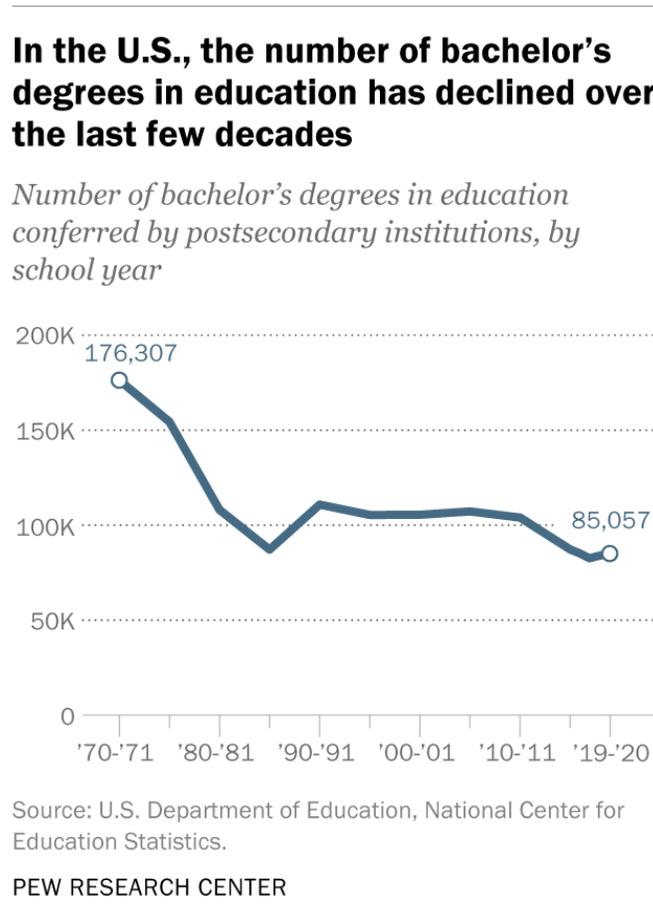
²³ Sarah Gonser, “Building a Culture that Respects Teachers and Reduces Stress,” *Edutopia*, February 5, 2021, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/building-culture-respects-teachers-and-reduces-stress/>.

²⁴ Abigail Swisher, “Building a School Climate That Makes Teachers Want to Stay,” National Counsel on Teacher Quality Blog, April 14, 2022, accessed September 7, 2023, <https://www.nctq.org/blog/Building-a-school-climate-that-makes-teachers-want-to-stay>.

²⁵ National Education Association Report, “Solving Educator Shortages by Making Public Education an Attractive and Competitive Career Path,” October 4, 2022, accessed August 12, 2023, <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/solving-educator-shortages-making-public-education-attractive-and-competitive-career-path>.

bachelor’s degree in education at postsecondary institutions to a considerably lower number of 85,057 pre-teachers graduating in 2020.

Figure 1: Decline in Undergraduate Students Choosing to Major in Education.²⁶



The reasons that some undergraduate students are not choosing to become teachers are those same reasons teachers are choosing to leave the profession. Teachers experience low pay, safety concerns, stress and burn-out and as a consequence, public school classroom teaching can seem less attractive as a life-long career. There are complex reasons for the growing teacher shortage in Missouri and Kansas and needed actions, if heeded, can rectify this dire situation in public education.

²⁶ Katherine Schaeffer, “A Dwindling Number of New U.S. College Graduates Have a Degree in Education,” Pew Research Center, September 27, 2022, accessed August 11, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/09/27/a-dwindling-number-of-new-u-s-college-graduates-have-a-degree-in-education/>.