

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Teachers Are Leaving and Few People Want to Join the Field. Experts Are Sounding the Alarm.

Source: Christina Maxouris and Christina Zdanowicz, CNN.com, February 5, 2022

Lauren Reynolds started crying when she found out her university was shuttering the early childhood and elementary education program she was in. One of the last three students in the program, she will graduate in spring.

Oklahoma City University officials announced they were suspending the programs in 2020 after a worrying pattern of declining enrollment—one that's part of a national trend.

US teacher prep programs have reported shrinking enrollment numbers over at least the past decade. Experts are sounding the alarm: The educator profession—a critical cornerstone of American life—is in crisis.

"As more and more teachers retire, we need to have others fill that role and right now, the numbers are not looking good for us," said Heather Sparks, director of Teacher Education at Oklahoma City University. "It's heartbreaking to watch."

The pandemic exacerbated the existing problems. Fears of catching Covid-19 and enforcing pandemic protocols are additions to the long list of challenges teachers face daily—from low pay and often little regard from their communities, to growing numbers of school shootings and legislative requirements about what and how to teach. Many educators have walked away in recent years and amid a dire shortage, few people want to fill their spots.

"I was driven almost because of that," Reynolds, 29, said. "I want to do right by our kids."

While some say it's too early to know the specific impacts of the pandemic, Lynn Gangone, president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) told CNN the numbers already show Covid-19 further dissuaded Americans from going into teaching. In fall 2020 and 2021, about 20% of institutions surveyed by AACTE reported the pandemic resulted in a decline of new undergraduate enrollment of at least 11%. Roughly 13% of institutions reported "significant" declines in the number of new graduate students. Regional state colleges and smaller private institutions—often found in rural communities—have seen the steepest declines.

"I don't know how bad it's going to have to get before we realize as a country that if we don't invest in education ... we will not have anyone in the classrooms to teach our children," Gangone said.

What's driving aspiring educators away

Priscilla, a northern California student teacher who did not want to use her full name for fear of the impact it may have on her career, has wanted to be a teacher since she was a teenager—but as she prepares for the test to get her credentials this spring, she worries about how long she'll be able to cope with today's demands of being in a classroom.

"There's just so much more that's being asked of teachers now," she said. "It's just like, 'am I going to burn out in my first year?' I hope not."

Covid-19 compounded existing struggles and added new hurdles for aspiring educators. Some missed in-person classroom experiences that serve as a valuable tool to prepare them for their student-teaching placements and the workforce. Others are diving into their first classroom experience by trying to figure out how to keep their students engaged after many became accustomed to tuning out after hours on electronic screens. Priscilla said much of her first year as a student teacher has involved reviewing past material to get her class up to speed. All while worrying about contracting Covid-19.

"At this point, it's more of when am I going to catch it," Priscilla said. "I'm currently substituting for my (supervising) teacher because she and her family caught Covid."

But even before the pandemic, the teaching profession struggled to attract new people: It promised high stress and low pay, and despite the scores of stories highlighting the often life-changing impacts teachers can have on their students, educators in the US have long felt unappreciated and disregarded.

"I think the perception of teaching is that there is little respect and little pay for the amount of work that has to be done," Priscilla said, adding that while her family values education, they attempted to dissuade her from pursuing teaching. "It's not as prestigious as something else, like maybe a doctor, or a nurse."

Research from the National Education Association found the average classroom teacher salary during the 2020-2021 school year was just over \$65,000. Some of the lowest paying states—offering an average salary of less than \$50,000—include Florida, Mississippi and South Dakota, according to the research. California, Massachusetts and New York, the highest paying states, offered an average of more than \$85,000.

The little compensation remains among the biggest challenges in recruiting future teachers, especially when combined with the costs of acquiring the necessary credentials added on to student loans.

Sabreena Shaller, a 22-year-old graduate from Millersville University and student state president for the Pennsylvania State Education Association, said her early education and special education degree came with hefty price tags, from the costs of standardized tests to transportation during her field experience—which included frequent Uber rides to the classrooms she was placed in during her freshman year before she decided to pay for a spot for her car on campus. Other classmates, Shaller said, struggled to find transportation means.

"We don't just need those economically privileged students as our teachers, we need the teachers who also had a struggle growing up financially, because those are the teachers that our students also need," Shaller said. "But we gatekeep our education programs for those people who can afford to be a teacher."

And it's not just socioeconomic diversity the field is in desperate need of, experts say. In 2017-18, nearly 80% of public school teachers were White, 9% were Hispanic, 7% were Black and 2% Asian, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

"Many students of color don't see themselves in the current teachers," said AACTE's Gangone.

And a recent legislative push in states across the US to mandate what can—and can't—be taught in classrooms is not helping, Gangone said. A new study found more than 17.7 million public school students in the US have had their learning restricted when it comes to teaching concepts related to race, racism and gender.

"The financial cost, but also the emotional cost of having to constantly battle and fight for our youth, for our children can be exhausting," said Sharif El-Mekki, CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development.

The problem is nothing new, El-Mekki said, and even prior to debates flaring up around Critical Race Theory (CRT), educators of color long felt policed about what they could teach, which was a deterrent for aspiring teachers.

It's important that "educator prep programs understand the whole package of what it costs and make sure that they're providing support, but then also that districts provide ecosystems that are safe, supportive and sustainable," El-Mekki added.

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the teacher shortage? Explain.
- Would you consider a career in teaching? Explain.
- Discuss a memorable teacher.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.