



Embracing the New Normal: Recruiting and Retaining K-12 Teachers Post-Pandemic

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Introduction

As potential future educators have grappled with turmoil across the country due to districts requiring teachers to move between in-person, online and hybrid instructional models, there are health concerns and job effectiveness issues which weigh heavily on their minds. The unprecedented disruptions to education during the pandemic are turning people away from a profession that was already struggling to attract new recruits (Goldberg, 2021).

The idea of entering the teaching field amid the pandemic causes fear that the role of teacher now brings increased risks, especially when instruction is delivered in person. These added health risks are compounded in the minds of potential educators when combined with the already stressful burden of low pay, long work hours and insufficient support from state and local leaders in the areas of mental wellness and professional development. On the other hand, teaching remotely also presents a range of challenges for educators as they strive to engage students via a Zoom screen. In most cases, the sudden onset of the pandemic forced teachers to pivot from face-to-face instruction to online with mere days of preparation.

With the sudden onset of Covid-19, K-12 systems had to pivot to digital instruction for which most systems were ill prepared. One in four Americans feel stressed about their own careers (UOPX, 2021). Additionally, experienced teachers report it was not sustainable in the long term for them to suddenly pivot to online teaching from their homes. Many found themselves trying to teach from their living room while simultaneously attending to the needs of family members who were forced to quarantine at home with them (Cerullo, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 has changed the landscape of work, and a full third of Americans feel their career has been derailed (UOPX, 2021). In what might be considered one of the few recession proof professions, K-12 teachers are rethinking their career options and questioning if the risks outweigh the benefits. This white paper seeks to outline the concerns that resonate with current and future educators as teachers transition back to the classroom full-time. The paper will also investigate what educators need from school leaders to meet their physical and socio-emotional needs in the new “normal.”

Recruitment and Retention of K-12 Teachers Post-Pandemic

There are pervasive, acute, and on-going challenges facing working adults as they navigate their careers, including but not limited to Covid-19 pandemic, the future of jobs, emotional and structural barriers (UOPX, 2021). About 44% of teachers who left voluntarily pre-retirement during the Covid-19 shutdown cited the pandemic as the primary reason for their exit and teachers younger than 40 who left early due to the pandemic were more likely to attribute the move to their pay not justifying the stress and the risks involved in remaining in the profession (Jagannathan, 2021).

Career trajectory is a likely concern for educators. Of those educators surveyed, nearly half (42%) do not see a clear path for advancing in their careers. Likewise, 48% of prospective students share this concern regarding career trajectory as an educator and having access to the opportunities they need to develop. A full 42% of educators stated they were worried that their job skills will become outdated because of advancements in technology (UOPX, 2021). This further emphasizes the need for a clear and comprehensive plan of action to address the evolving professional development needs of current K-12 teachers and realignment of teacher preparation programs in order to meet these challenges moving forward.

The number of students enrolling in teacher education programs has fallen over the past decade for a variety of reasons including low salaries, difficult working conditions, and a lack of career pathway opportunities (Carmen, Partelow & Brown, 2015). So, what are we to make of this decline? Since 2010, total enrollment nationwide in teacher preparation programs has decreased by more than one-third equating to a loss of 340,000 students (Partelow, 2019). When the 2016 – 2017 school year is compared to 2008 -2009, this equates to a 28% decline overall (Partelow, 2019).

As we all look forward to a time when the U.S. will be considered “post-pandemic,” it is important to bear in mind that while some pandemic-related issues may dissipate, that still leaves the persistent structural problems associated with teaching: long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions for some teachers. These problems will persist well beyond the pandemic if local, state, and national leaders fail to make significant and impactful changes to the teaching profession as a whole (Jagannathan, 2021).

While parents, teachers and students seek to understand what the new normal for schools will entail; university students are pondering their options as well. According to the UOPX Career Index, 50% of educators who chose to leave early were open to returning if conditions were right – specifically, seeing most students and staff vaccinated against the virus. The reality is that our education system was not built to adequately support educators and students during such a pivotal time as this. Meeting the needs of teachers by providing mental health resources, implementing safety protocols such as masks, sanitizers, and social distancing in addition to ongoing socio-emotional supports must be a priority (LaHayne, 2021).

Preparing for the Future

For years, educational leaders across the nation have proposed the need to rethink how we will educate future generations. In a post-pandemic world where knowledge is a mouse-click away, the role of the educator must change. The majority of students in today’s educational institutions are from Generation Z (ages 18-21) and are likely to be reflecting on their education as a result of a truly

global pandemic, with many recently facing cancelled exams, sporting events, and even graduations (Lanthra, 2020). According to Dell Technologies (2017), 85% of jobs potentially filled by Generation Zs in 2030 have not yet been invented. The World Economic Forum (2016) reported that 65% of the jobs filled by Generation Alphas (currently preschoolers) have not been invented yet. Therefore, it is incumbent on educational institutions and educators to better prepare learners for what the future might hold.

Mental health has negatively impacted work performance for 34% of respondents during the pandemic. This is particularly true for the younger generations including 55% of Gen Zs, 45% of prospective students and 31% of educators. Despite this high level of impact, when presented with open-end responses asking why they have not thought about changing their career path, participants who intend to stay in their current careers reported that they have not thought about changing their career path because they love what they do or plan to retire in 2-3 years. Americans believe they are resilient, prepared, and with the right tools will succeed in their goals. There are many elements to what it takes to be successful in your career, but hard work, a positive attitude, and the ability to flex are viewed as essential qualities (UOPX, 2021).

One positive outcome of the pandemic has been the renewed sense of respect parents and caregivers express towards teachers for the critical work they accomplish every day in their classrooms. Breeze (2021) proposes suggestions school leaders should bear in mind as teachers return to the classroom, each of which emphasizes the importance of being strategic and well planned in delivery to enhance teacher success. Teachers want to know how they will be evaluated. This indicates a need to provide clear guidance in what the teaching standards are and how to meet them. Just as students and parents have been emotionally impacted by the pandemic, so have teachers. Therefore, leaders must strategically agree that protecting the emotional well-being of teachers is important and then keep it a priority through ongoing support from personal mentors. Lastly, professional development will need to be specific and targeted to meet the individual needs of novice teachers, experienced teachers, and those teachers just years away from retirement (Breeze, 2021).

Helping Teachers Return Safely

Since March 2020, 63 million teachers have been impacted by Covid-19 (Breeze, 2021). Initially charged with providing ongoing instruction to students during the pandemic, those same teachers are now tasked with making sure that the reopening of schools goes smoothly. The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, UNESCO, and International Labor Organization (2020) compiled guidelines for policymakers to consider as they develop back-to-school procedures. The Teacher Task Force (TTF) put forth a series of recommendations that can be used as a guide to help stakeholders make informed decisions for a successful return to in-person learning (Teacher Task Force & UNESCO, 2020). These recommendations include, but are not limited to:

- Include key stakeholders in the planning process by involving authorities, teacher representatives, parents, local community leaders and students.
- Guarantee that the school environment is safe for learners and school staff by adopting available guidelines and protocols provided by public health agencies.
- Protect the psychological, social, and emotional well-being of teachers and students by addressing the stress and trauma associated with the pandemic.

- Help teachers adapt to the new normal by providing adequate support and resources to resume life in the classroom including remedial teaching if necessary.
- Make sure there are sufficient teachers while maintaining or increasing financial resources.
- Develop progress monitoring tools which allow teachers to inform instruction and provide timely assessment of student progress (TTF, 2020).

Recruiting Prospective Educators

For some university students previously intent on becoming educators, the pandemic has caused them to have doubts about the wisdom of entering the teaching work force. School leaders are hopeful that enrollment will return to pre-pandemic levels as more people receive vaccines and schools resume in-person learning. Unfortunately, the challenges in teacher recruitment and retention are more complex than that (Goldberg, 2021). Administrators of teacher preparation programs report that the new anxieties were most likely deterring some potential applicants as people weigh whether it makes sense to go to a classroom when there are safer alternatives available. Likewise, concerns about remote teaching are abound. The disconnect that happens while providing instruction on a screen does not align with what teachers envision the learning environment to be. Although applications may increase as schools return to in-person learning, the challenges will not magically dissipate, as recruitment into the teaching profession was problematic long before Covid arrived.

As many schools reduce class sizes by adding more teachers to ensure compliance with Covid-19 safety protocols, there is a need to incentivize prospective students. While some programs have experienced decreases that is not the case with California State University in Long Beach where enrollment increased by 15% in 2021. This is attributed to an initiative which temporarily relaxed entry requirements by allowing candidates to enter preparation programs without meeting basic skill requirements (Goldberg, 2021).

Conclusions

Moving forward, the right skillset, adaptability, flexibility, and optimism are needed to pivot from traditional delivery models to the new normal (UOPX, 2021). As decisions are made regarding return to school, the role of teachers is critical. Local, state, and national decision-makers would be wise to listen to teachers, protect their safety, and sense of well-being. These safeguards are needed to address the concerns of prospective students, as well. It is incumbent on school leaders to provide guidance and support to teacher as they learn to adapt their approaches to teaching and learning. This sustained support provides the best opportunity for success as teachers return to school after the COVID crisis.

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