

# America's teacher shortage will outlast the pandemic

[Erica Pandey](#) 7 hours ago - [Economy & Business](#)



The pandemic triggered a teacher exodus, and the shortage of instructors is still squeezing America's schools.

**The big picture:** Demand for teachers is drastically outpacing supply. Many teachers are retiring or quitting the profession due to pandemic-era stress, and universities aren't minting new ones fast enough.

**Why it matters:** Schools are hurriedly navigating the shortage, switching to virtual learning or closing down on certain days entirely. And the quality of students' education is at stake, as Axios' Erin Doherty [reports](#).

- "It's a problem that existed pre-pandemic, it has been exacerbated by

the pandemic, and the teacher shortage will not disappear with the pandemic," says Michael Rice, Michigan's state superintendent of public instruction.

**By the numbers:** Nationally, there were 575,000 fewer local and state education employees in October 2021 than in February 2020, according to [the latest jobs report](#).

- And while health concerns and the stress of flitting between virtual and in-person education drove teachers, school support staff and administrators out in 2020, they're not coming back to school even as the pandemic subsides.
- A net 65,000 public education employees left the industry between September and October alone, [per the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

**What's happening:** Nearly every sector is dealing with a pandemic-era labor shortage, but the problem is especially acute in public education.

"Teacher salaries had fallen in the few years even before the pandemic, reducing the supply of teachers," says Susanna Loeb, an education economist and director of Brown University's Annenberg Institute. "So the shortage of teachers may actually be greater than the shortage in other areas, which are more pandemic related."

- "Part of the difficulty is short term, but part could be longer term and varies quite a bit across states in the U.S."

**The wage gap** between teachers and the rest of the comparably educated workforce was about 21% in 2018. That disparity was a much smaller 6% back in 1996, according to [an analysis](#) from the Economic Policy Institute.

- And while teacher pay has gone up this year, the group's wage gains of

[0.7%](#) in the last quarter were just half the 1.5% average for all civilian workers.

- All that's pushing existing instructors to pivot to new careers and [discouraging new college graduates](#) from becoming teachers.
- "Our state universities aren't producing enough teachers for the state," Justin Fryer, superintendent of Lisbon Public Schools in North Dakota, tells Axios.

**The effect:** Schools — and students — are suffering. When teachers take days off or have to enter quarantine due to COVID-19, districts can't backfill them. "Finding substitutes has been a tremendous problem," Fryer says.

In some cases, it pays more to work at McDonald's than be a substitute teacher in the U.S., [Bloomberg reports](#). On top of that, substitute teachers are often older, retired instructors, who are understandably fearful of entering high-risk areas like classrooms amid a pandemic.

- Three schools in Ann Arbor, Michigan, have [added back remote learning days](#) to deal with staffing shortages.
- Denver Public Schools is starting a period of online learning — and kicking off Thanksgiving break a day early due to the squeeze, Axios Denver's Alayna Alvarez [reports](#).
- Seattle and Bellevue, Washington schools gave students [Friday off](#) because of staffing shortages.

**Fixing the broken labor market for teachers** comes down to funding, experts say.

- More significant pay increases will help recruit and retain teachers, and funding for training programs can help school support staff become instructors.
- A bus driver became a teacher in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and a second-

shift custodian became a teacher in Clifton, New Jersey, Rice says. Support staff who have a passion for and experience with working with kids can make excellent teachers if districts have the funds to send them back to school, he adds.

**The bottom line:** Says Rice, "We have to rebuild a profession that has been chipped away at."