

# 'Never seen it this bad': America faces catastrophic teacher shortage

[Hannah Natanson](#)



An empty classroom in Massachusetts. (Adam Glanzman/Bloomberg News)

An empty classroom in Massachusetts. (Adam Glanzman/Bloomberg News)

Rural school districts in Texas are switching to four-day weeks this fall due to lack of staff. Florida is asking veterans with no teaching background to enter classrooms. Arizona is allowing college students to step in and instruct children.

The teacher shortage in America has hit crisis levels — and school officials everywhere are scrambling to ensure that, as students return to classrooms, someone will be there to educate them.

"I have never seen it this bad," Dan Domenech, executive director of the

School Superintendents Association, said of the teacher shortage. "Right now it's number one on the list of issues that are concerning school districts ... necessity is the mother of invention, and hard-pressed districts are going to have to come up with some solutions."

[Students this year need summer school. Some districts can't staff it.](#)

It is hard to know exactly how many U.S. classrooms are short of teachers for the 2022-2023 school year; no national database precisely tracks the issue. But state- and district-level reports have emerged across the country detailing staffing gaps that stretch from the hundreds to the thousands — and remain wide open as summer winds rapidly to a close.

The Nevada State Education Association estimated that roughly 3,000 teaching jobs [remained unfilled](#) across the state's 17 school districts as of early August. In a [January report](#), the Illinois Association of Regional School Superintendents found that 88 percent of school districts statewide were having "problems with teacher shortages" — while 2,040 teacher openings were either empty or filled with a "less than qualified" hire. And in the Houston area, the largest five school districts are all reporting that [between 200 and 1,000 teaching positions remain open](#).

Carlton Jenkins, superintendent of the Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin, said teachers are so scarce that superintendents across the country have developed a whisper network to alert each other when educators move between states.

"We're at a point right now, where if I have people who want to move to California, I call up and give a reference very quick," he said. "And if someone is coming from another place — say, Minnesota — I have superintendent colleagues in Minnesota, they call and say, 'Hey, I have teachers coming your way.' "

Why are America's schools so short-staffed? Experts point to a confluence

of factors including pandemic-induced teacher exhaustion, low pay and some educators' sense that politicians and parents — and sometimes their own school board members — have little respect for their profession amid an escalating educational culture war that has seen many districts and states pass policies and laws restricting what teachers can say about U.S. history, race, racism, gender and sexual orientation, as well as LGBTQ issues.

"The political situation in the United States, combined with legitimate aftereffects of covid, has created this shortage," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "This shortage is contrived."

The stopgap solutions for lack of staff run the gamut, from offering teachers better pay to increasing the pool of people who qualify as educators to bumping up class sizes. But many of these temporary fixes are likely to harm students by diminishing their ability to learn, predicted Dawn Etcheverry, president of the Nevada State Education Association.

"When you start to double classes, teachers don't have that one-on-one with the students, that personal ability to understand what the student needs" — both academically and socially, Etcheverry said.

Danika Mills, a former school-based therapist and state director of Unite Us, a technology company that connects health and social services providers, said this diminishment in the quality of education is coming at the worst possible moment. America's schoolchildren are still struggling to recover from the coronavirus pandemic, she said, and the havoc months of online learning [wreaked on students' academic progress](#), [social skills](#) and [mental health](#).

"We know students of all ages suffered steep declines in academic achievement during the pandemic and now is the time to course-correct those changes," Mills said. "Instead, I think and fear we may be facing an even bigger decline."

## [Behavioral issues, absenteeism at schools increase, federal data shows](#)

Nevada's Clark County School District, which [serves 320,000 students](#), is one of many school systems taking a scattershot approach to staff shortages by trying several solutions at once. In hopes of shrinking its roughly 1,300 teaching vacancies, the district has [raised the starting teacher salary by](#) \$7,000 and is offering a \$4,000 "relocation bonus" to new teachers who move from out of state or more than 100 miles. In an interview, Superintendent Jesus F. Jara said the district is also granting employees a "retention bonus" of up to \$5,000 for staying in their jobs.

But, with school slated to start in a week, the district is still only 92 percent staffed, Jara said. And — despite "around-the-clock" efforts from his human resources team — he does not believe the district will close the gap in time.

"I'm still worried, I am still losing sleep at night, and I'm not going to fill the rest of the 8 percent of our classrooms by Monday," Jara said.

Come [Aug. 8](#), the district will be forced to deploy patching measures, Jara said — including pulling administrators from the central office to work as substitutes and combining multiple classes together in large spaces such as auditoriums or gymnasiums.

"Band-aid-wise, I think they're doing whatever they can," said Jeff Horn, executive director of the Clark County Association of School Administrators. "It's a mess."

Other districts and states are attempting more unorthodox fixes. A new state law in Arizona, [signed by Gov. Doug Ducey \(R\) last month](#), allows college students to take teaching jobs. A similar law, which took effect in Florida on July 1, [offers K-12 teaching jobs to military veterans who served for at least four years](#). The veterans do not need bachelor's degrees but must have earned at least 60 college credits while maintaining a grade-point average of at least 2.5.

Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association, said the need for teachers in his state is dire: His association estimates there are at least 8,000 teacher vacancies this year, up from 5,000 the year before. But Spar does not believe the veterans program is “really a solution,” as it may lead to unqualified individuals entering classrooms.

“I think we all appreciate what our military veterans have done for our country in terms of protecting our freedoms both here and abroad,” he said. “But just because you were in the military does not mean you will be a great teacher.”

Meanwhile, the school board and superintendent in Arizona’s Tucson Unified School District are considering making up for a dearth of math teachers — the system is missing 24 of them, along with 102 other teachers — by sending a small number of students into online learning for part of the day. The district may hire virtual math teachers from a Chicago-based online education company, [the Tucson Sentinel reported](#). The superintendent did not respond to a request for comment.

And in Texas’s Mineral Wells Independent School District and Chico Independent School District, officials have switched to a four-day school week for the upcoming academic year. In both districts, which are small and rural, school leaders said the change is meant to attract and retain teachers amid significant staff shortages, [the Texas Tribune reported](#). Neither district responded to a request for comment.

In Wisconsin’s Madison school district, superintendent Jenkins said that, a month away from the start of school on Sept. 1, officials are still working to fill [199 teacher vacancies and 124 non-teaching positions](#).

But no children will lack an adult in the classroom come fall, he said, because the district has managed to recruit 269 qualified substitute teachers — primarily by raising substitute pay rates this spring. Jenkins said he hopes that, over the course of the year, the district can convince at least some of

these substitutes to convert to full-time teachers.

"We're just going to go after them," Jenkins said. Initial enticements will include "some immediate supplies. Every teacher likes their calendar, right? So we're providing calendars, little things for them — and we have some other things planned that I don't want to reveal, because I don't want to ruin the surprise."

### [Schools are struggling to meet rising mental health needs, data shows](#)

In Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia's largest district, Superintendent Michelle Reid said 97 percent of teaching positions are filled about three weeks before the semester begins.

Reid said the district of nearly 179,000 students is now making an "all-hands-on-deck" effort to fill those jobs.

"We are recruiting and processing applications and hiring educators around-the-clock, really," she said. "It's our intent to continue to recruit and hire teachers daily as we approach the start of the school year."

Nonetheless, the district has begun developing backup plans, Reid said. Although the details vary campus to campus, one possible strategy is to send administrators with teaching licenses back into classrooms — but "we hope we will not have to utilize that."

Leslie Houston, president of the Fairfax Education Association, said she has never in her career seen so many teachers leaving the job because they feel disrespected, primarily by politicians and some parents.

"When people were beating up on teachers and just being real nasty about what we're doing and what we're not doing," Houston said, "I don't think they were really thinking, 'Who will teach my children?' "

correction

A previous version of this article incorrectly identified the Tucson Unified School District as the Tucson Independent School District. This article has been corrected.