

How Staff Shortages Are Crushing Schools

Teachers are sacrificing and patience is running thin

By Mark Lieberman

Teachers are sacrificing their lunch periods to cover unsupervised classrooms, monitor lunch lines, and get behind the wheel of school buses. Students are enduring prolonged bus rides and diminished meal options. Principals are still searching far and wide to fill dozens of open positions, including for people who quit after the school year started.

And at least several dozen school buildings have temporarily shut down due to an insufficient number of adults on the job.

These are just a few of the many effects widespread staff shortages are having on the nation's 3.2 million teachers, 91,000 principals, and roughly 3 million support staff who work for public schools, according to interviews with educators and administrators and an Education Week analysis of local media reports.

Forty percent of district leaders and principals describe their current staff shortages as "severe" or "very severe," according to a survey conducted Sept. 29 to Oct. 8 by the EdWeek Research Center.

Crucial job openings that would normally attract hundreds of applicants are going to underqualified candidates or remain unfilled, even with higher wages and recruitment bonuses fueled by federal relief aid. When people do get hired, they're taking time off more often because they're sick or were exposed to someone who may have COVID-19.

The current challenges highlight longstanding labor issues in K-12 schools and raise questions about the sustainability of fully reopened school buildings this year as the pandemic wears on. While vaccinations have dimmed the immediacy of the COVID-19 threat for many, the ongoing global crisis continues to take a substantial toll.

A longstanding crisis that shows no signs of slowing

This is hardly the first time schools have had trouble filling open positions; many have long struggled to find enough workers qualified to help students with disabilities, for instance.

But the problem right now is particularly acute, and many educators told Education Week they've never seen it worse. Subpar wages, minimal benefits, tough work environments, onerous pandemic protocols, pressing health concerns, contentious political disputes, and a broader trend of disruption in the American labor market are among the factors shaping this year's K-12 chaos.



Stephanie LeBlanc, an instructional strategist at Greely Middle School in Cumberland Center, Maine, has picked up numerous additional duties to help cover for staffing shortages at the school.

District leaders and principals are scurrying to raise wages, expand benefits, and turbocharge recruitment drives. But the most common strategy in the short term for tackling the shortage, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey, is asking employees to take on additional responsibilities. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they've done that this year.

Many educators have agreed to pitch in for the sake of the students. But that doesn't mean they're not frustrated. For instance, four teachers in Alabama sued their school district this summer for adding on responsibilities last school year without appropriate compensation.

For many who work in schools, the year has piled new stress on top of old, falling far short of expectations for the coveted return to normalcy that appeared possible as vaccines rolled out earlier this year.

"We're certainly not feeling like we're in this period of recovery that we keep hearing about," said Brooke Olsen-Farrell, superintendent of the Slate Valley district in Vermont. "We're still in this pandemic, and I think feeling the effects even more so this year than ever before."

Olsen-Farrell spoke to Education Week from her home, where she was working remotely earlier this month after her vaccinated husband tested positive for a breakthrough case of COVID-19. The next day, she said, half of the eight nurses for her six-building school system would be out

sick or on quarantine.

On the list of positions Olsen-Farrell is having trouble filling: custodians, instructional assistants, bus drivers, special education assistants, and librarians. For the latter, the district cut the middle school library program to prioritize library services for K-5 students.

A middle school social studies teacher and a high school special education teacher both quit during the first week of school.

"They just walked out in the middle of the day, saying it was too much in this kind of environment," she said. "It's just too stressful."

The middle school teacher's replacement started last week; the district has yet to replace the other teacher, Olsen-Farrell wrote in a recent email.

Many exasperated educators are expressing existential concerns about the future of the public education system.

Here's what people who work in school buildings are seeing and feeling as staff shortages persist.

Teachers are filling all kinds of gaps, on top of their regular duties

Substitute teachers were the role respondents to the EdWeek Research Center survey most often said they are struggling to fill.

At Belvidere Central Middle School in Illinois, the assistant principal shares with teachers a daily spreadsheet listing all the teachers who are absent and the timeslots that need to be filled. Thanks to a shortage of substitutes willing to step in, teachers are asked, though not required, to consider giving up their planning period to plug a hole in the schedule.

Johana Avila, a second-year instructor who teaches 6th- and 7th-grade social studies, recently covered a physical education class. It

was surprisingly difficult to wrangle the students and teach them a sport she herself wasn't familiar with, she said.

She likely wouldn't offer to serve as a substitute again. "It's almost like you feel a little bit of guilt, I should be covering, I should help out. But at the same time, we're already piled so much with coming up with homework for kids who are quarantined," Avila said. "I just feel like I need that planning time to make sure I'm giving enough for my students."

At Huntington Middle School in Huntington, W.Va., teachers are reluctant to give any substitute teachers a negative review in the required paperwork because they're "desperate" for anyone willing to work, said Angela Nottingham, who teaches 7th grade and leads the school's hiring committee for teachers.

Some teachers are volunteering to sacrifice both their planning periods and delaying plans for days off to ensure students are supervised.

"It's like baking a lasagna and baking a cake at the exact same time in the same kitchen, but you can only use one bowl," Nottingham said.

Most schools have avoided reverting back to remote learning even when staffing is thin, but some have had no choice.

Hawthorne Elementary School in Tulsa, Okla., has pivoted from in-person to fully remote learning twice since the school year started, once for three days and once for two days.

The first time, teachers woke up one morning to an email from administrators notifying them that the school building was shut down, said Katherine Maloney-Jacobs, who teaches 3rd grade reading and social studies.

The next time, teachers found out at 5 p.m. the night before—too late to ensure students took home the materials they'd need to keep learning remotely.

"The hardest part was communicating with enough advance notice that parents don't feel caught off guard, or didn't feel pressure to get their students on Zoom at a certain time," she said. "I don't want parents to feel pressured because I know everybody's dealing with a lot right now."

Chaos has prevailed even when the school building is open. On some days, Maloney-Jacobs ends up with five extra students in her class because of teacher absences. She has to quickly integrate them into her classroom routine, find more desks and chairs, and race to make additional copies of assignments.

Olsen-Farrell said she's never seen burnout among staff hit so soon after the school year starts.

"Our teachers are June tired, and it's the beginning of October, but I was saying that at the beginning of September already," she said.

Nottingham said she thinks often about the fact that she could take a job doing data entry from her living room and make more money than she currently does.

"The only thing that my boss can do is say, 'This is happening everywhere,'" she said. "I understand that, and we all understand that. But it just doesn't seem like there's any relief at all."

Administrators struggle to make the case that working in a school will be rewarding

Thirty percent of district leaders and principals who answered the EdWeek Research Center survey characterized their current staffing shortage as "moderate." Another 25 percent called it "severe," and 15 percent said the issues are "very severe." Only five percent said their schools aren't having staffing issues.

Administrators are faced with tough decisions about allocating resources and their own duties. The challenging conditions in schools don't lend themselves to pitching their work environments to prospective employees.

Several candidates at Oakwood Middle School in Statesville, N.C., have told principal Carrie Tulbert during job interviews that they could likely get paid \$7 more per hour working at Chick-Fil-A, "in a great environment serving chicken all day," than they could as a school custodian.

"Typically you could have said, 'Working in education is so rewarding. You get to be with kids no matter what job you're doing, you're impacting kids and how they feel at school,'" Tulbert said.

"Now public education is such a polarizing experience unfortunately, and a political experience, and sometimes a very antagonistic experience because of what's going on in the world, that's hard to say as a recruiter and hiring manager."

The school started the year with

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MODERATOR:

- JENN MITCHELL, Senior Director, K-12 Product Marketing



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- DEREK MCCOY, principal of North Asheboro Middle School
- KELLY PINKERTON, director of assessment and innovative learning for the Vail School District

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two unfilled teacher vacancies. They've since been filled, but there weren't many applicants to choose from, Tulbert said. "You have to find somebody with an amazing heart and passion for teaching. Most of those people are scooped up earlier in the summer," she said.

Even when districts are seeing applications, many candidates lack the proper qualifications.

"We fill them with people who have no teaching experience and who get alternatively certified," said Heath Oates, superintendent of the El Dorado Springs district in Missouri. "Sometimes this works out. Sometimes it doesn't."

Meanwhile, shortages of school nutrition workers and custodians have led to teachers cleaning their own classrooms a few times a week, and administrators stepping in to keep the chaotic breakfast and lunch lines moving smoothly.

More than two-thirds of school district leaders and principals say

educational technicians," who work with small groups of students and help out teachers, including in special education classrooms, according to Superintendent Jeff Porter.

At the district's Greely Middle School, an 11-person team in the special education department has dwindled to six. Until recently, there was also an opening for a teacher in the behavior program for students who need specialized support and a quieter environment.

Students are missing out on crucial services

Stephanie LeBlanc, an instructional strategist who coordinates students' individual education plans (IEPs), was filling in for the behavior teacher on top of her regular duties. She also recently had to cover an English class because the school didn't have enough substitutes, and the educational technicians who have been helping fill gaps were busy with other substitute assignments.

"Everybody becomes more exhausted because the breaks that we would usually get aren't happening," LeBlanc said. "That cycle causes more people to be out."

The effects of the shortage are falling most heavily on students who need a staff member with them all day. Some students have had to go to unfamiliar classrooms or miss out on crucial opportunities for academically enriching activities.

"We're still meeting all kids' base needs and our minimum requirements," LeBlanc said. "But we really can't go above and beyond and create those fun or creative opportunities."

The Slate Valley district in Vermont has had to send students with disabilities home and offer compensatory services later to make up for their lost time in the building, Olsen-Farrell said.

Students in Syracuse, N.Y., have been missing morning classes and staying in school long after the final bell thanks to a shortage of bus drivers. In Medford, Ore., football games have been canceled, and a larger-than-usual number of students who live close to school buildings no longer have the option to ride the bus.

Schools in Filer, Idaho, closed for a week without remote learning recently due to an insufficient number of teachers. At least one school or district has also shut down temporarily due to staffing concerns in California, Colorado, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, Tennessee, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Many who work in schools are hard-pressed to name an ideal solution to these problems. Olsen-Farrell would like to see her state follow the lead of Massachusetts and call in the National Guard to fill emergency staffing gaps and help with COVID testing.

"I just think there needs to be recognition for a staffing crisis in education in the United States," Olsen-Farrell said. "I think this is going to be here long after COVID is gone."

“
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CARRIE TULBERT

Principal, Oakwood Middle School in North Carolina

they're struggling to hire a sufficient number of bus drivers, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey. Forty-one percent said the same about custodians, and 42 percent said the same about cafeteria workers.

Tulbert herself has been putting her bus driving license to use two days a week, covering for drivers who are out sick. She worries about the possibility of a fight breaking out or a parent needing her attention while she's away from the building during the pickup period after classes end.

More broadly, though, she worries that her colleagues are becoming disillusioned with working in education.

"A lot of teachers are now saying, 'I don't want to be an administrator. I wouldn't wish your job on anybody,'" she said. "How do you encourage people to come into a field where we don't have enough custodians so you're going to have to clean your own classroom?"

The Cumberland-North Yorkmouth district in Maine is currently facing a significant shortage of "ed-