



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

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