

Strengthening Ohio's Teacher Workforce

Attracting and retaining talent through reforms to licensure and compensation

Policy Brief No. 3

Fall 2022

Jessica Poiner



Summary

Teachers are the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement, and in the wake of pandemic-caused learning losses, Ohio schools need effective teachers more than ever. But hiring and retaining teachers is easier said than done, even in the best of times. Longstanding issues around teacher licensing and compensation keep talented individuals away from the profession. This brief focuses on several ways that Ohio policymakers can better attract talent and strengthen the state's teacher workforce.



The Thomas B. Fordham Institute promotes educational excellence for every child in America via quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as advocacy and charter school authorizing in Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.fordhaminstitute.org or write to the Institute at P.O. Box 82291, Columbus, OH 43202. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

Introduction

There are no silver bullets when it comes to closing achievement gaps and strengthening student outcomes, but ensuring that every classroom has an effective teacher can help immensely. Research is clear that, when it comes to students' academic performance, teachers matter most among school-related factors. In fact, quality teaching improves not only student achievement but labor market outcomes as well.

It's worrisome, then, that districts across Ohio have been reporting teacher shortages. Headlines over the past year have indicated that many schools don't have enough adults to meet kids' needs. Staff like bus drivers and classroom aides account for some shortages, but educators are included, too—and that shouldn't come as a surprise, considering that teacher-pipeline issues were a longstanding problem, both in Ohio and nationally, well before Covid-19 struck.

In a 2018 brief published by ACT, researchers used survey data to examine the responses of students who were “very” or “fairly” sure about their college major. They found that, from 2007 to 2017, high schoolers' interest in teaching decreased significantly. Additional research by the Center for American Progress found that enrollment in teacher-preparation programs fell by more than one-third from 2010 to 2018. Ohio posted a decline of nearly 50 percent and was one of nine states where the drop totaled more than 10,000 students. Ohio also saw drops in enrollment for Black and Hispanic prospective teachers, a doubly worrisome trend given the lack of diversity in Ohio's teacher workforce and research showing that a more diverse teaching force may improve educational outcomes for students of color. To make matters worse, recent headlines indicate that an “alarming number” of teachers are considering leaving the profession.

If left unaddressed, these issues spell trouble down the road. Underserved schools with high teacher turnover rates will struggle especially hard to replace staff. Traditionally hard-to-fill positions in subjects like math, science, special education, bilingual education, and CTE could become even more difficult to fill. Ohio's rural districts and public charter schools, which often struggle to compete for talent against their urban and suburban district counterparts, will face even more daunting challenges. And schools of all kinds will find it difficult to diversify their teaching corps.

Addressing teacher-pipeline and teacher-retention issues is critical if Ohio wants to make teaching an attractive and financially rewarding career option for more young people. In this paper, we offer policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the pipeline. This paper focuses on two key areas: (1) creating more seamless pathways into the profession for out-of-state and nontraditional candidates and (2) reforming teacher-compensation policies to make salaries and benefits more competitive.¹

¹ This paper does not examine how the state could improve its teacher-preparation programs or ongoing professional development, nor does it examine accountability policies such as teacher-evaluation systems or dismissal for chronic underperformance.

Widening the teacher pipeline through licensure reform

Ohio needs a robust talent pipeline that allows schools throughout the state to staff their classrooms with effective teachers—and to do so without schools or teachers having to jump through needless hoops. Unfortunately, state licensing policies continue to make recruitment unnecessarily difficult for schools and burdensome for teachers and would-be teachers, especially those who come from nontraditional backgrounds or from other states. In some cases, the red tape imposes substantial out-of-pocket costs—running into the thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of personal time—that afflict even experienced educators who have been in the classroom for years.

The recommendations that follow would make obtaining an Ohio teaching license more seamless and less costly, could help diversify the profession, and would ultimately widen the state’s teacher pipeline. In turn, that would allow the Buckeye State’s schools to be choosier in terms of the teachers they hire to lead their classrooms.

1. Allow teachers with valid out-of-state teacher licenses to be eligible for automatic license reciprocity even if trained in a nontraditional program.

Full and automatic licensure reciprocity allows teachers who hold valid out-of-state licenses to obtain licenses from Ohio and, should they be hired by a district or charter school, immediately enter the classroom. Today, however, the Buckeye State offers only partial reciprocity. That means it’s possible for out-of-state teachers to obtain a license but only if they have at least a bachelor’s degree and have completed an approved, traditional teacher-preparation program through an accredited college or university. The latter condition creates a significant entry barrier for teachers who were trained in one of the dozens of well-regarded alternative preparation programs that exist in many states. Lawmakers should amend this requirement to allow teachers with a valid out-of-state license to be immediately eligible for reciprocity regardless of where they completed their preparation.

2. Allow teachers with valid out-of-state licenses to waive additional coursework if they pass Ohio’s Foundations of Reading exam on the first attempt.

Out-of-state teachers who wish to obtain one of the licenses for early- and middle-childhood grades (generally covering grades pre-K–9) or any Intervention Specialist license must pass Ohio’s Foundations of Reading exam *and* complete twelve semester hours of coursework in the teaching of reading and phonics through an accredited college or university. The underlying thought is sound: effective, scientifically grounded reading instruction is critical for young children. But requiring out-of-state teachers to prove via transcript that they’ve completed at least six of the required twelve semester hours before they can be issued a license is a needless barrier. So, too, is requiring teachers to complete the remaining hours before they can renew or advance their license. If teachers who hold a valid out-of-state license can demonstrate their mastery of the principles of reading by passing Ohio’s Foundations of Reading exam, then they shouldn’t be required to take—and pay for—additional coursework that covers the same material.

3. Eliminate the additional coursework currently required for teachers who hold an alternative resident educator license.

The majority of Ohio teachers were trained in traditional teacher-preparation programs housed at colleges or universities. But, as in other states, Ohio also offers an alternative licensure route for nontraditional candidates. This four-year license, known as the alternative resident educator license, is available to applicants who meet certain criteria outlined in law.

Many of these criteria are sensible. For instance, already holding a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution, passing content and pedagogy exams, and clearing background checks are appropriate expectations for any teacher. But to advance to a professional and renewable license, the state requires teachers working under an alternative resident educator license to do one of two additional things:

1. Complete twelve semester hours of professional-education coursework from an accredited college or university
2. Complete a professional-development institute approved by the Ohio Department of Higher Education

As of this writing, Ohio contains only six approved professional-development institutes, and at least half of them also require teachers to complete twelve semester hours of coursework. That means that, for the vast majority of teachers working under an alternative license, moving to a renewable professional license is impossible unless they take and pass courses provided by a teacher-preparation program. On top of this, alternative resident teachers are also required to take an *additional* three-semester-hour course on the teaching of reading. That brings to fifteen the total coursework hours that teachers must complete while teaching full-time. It's not necessary, and it's not cheap: at one institute, tuition is \$495 per semester credit, with an additional "technology fee" of \$125 per semester.

The entire point of an "alternative" licensure pathway is to allow talented individuals who weren't trained by traditional teacher-preparation programs to enter the classroom. By the time these teachers reach the point where they're ready to apply for a professional license, they've taught for at least four years in Ohio schools, passed several licensure exams *and* the performance-based Resident Educator Summative Assessment (RESA), and received years of mentoring from an experienced teacher under the Resident Educator Program. That's plenty of preparation and on-the-job training. Nor is there any evidence that the additional courses required by the state lead to better student outcomes. [Research](#) shows that teachers who complete enough additional coursework to earn a master's degree are no more effective than teachers who haven't earned one, which means this coursework mandate is nothing more than an expensive bureaucratic barrier that makes it more difficult for teachers to stay in the classroom. No teacher should be forced to pay thousands of dollars and spend hundreds of hours on extra coursework just to keep their job. Lawmakers should eliminate this superfluous and restrictive requirement.

4. Issue resident educator licenses to teaching candidates who complete state-approved alternative training programs.

The teaching profession isn't traditionally friendly to career changers. Without a bachelor's or master's degree in education—and the time and money required to obtain them—it's difficult to get into the classroom. Ohio could vastly widen and strengthen its teacher pipeline if it offered high-quality programs that recruit recent college graduates and career professionals, train them, and then place them in public school classrooms.

State law currently includes a provision whereby participants in Teach For America (TFA) who meet certain criteria may be granted a resident educator license. This means TFA corps members aren't required to go through the rigamarole of earning an alternative resident educator license even though they're trained by a nontraditional program. But TFA is the *only* alternative program that enjoys this privilege—which is probably why it's the only sizable alternative training program currently operating in Ohio. Yet plenty of other established and effective nontraditional programs operate in other states: The Relay Graduate School of Education offers a one-year alternative certification program in over a dozen cities, TNTP's Teaching Fellows programs prepare teachers in several others, and there are teacher-residency programs in such communities as Boston, Memphis, and Los Angeles. In fact, research on teacher residencies shows they can attract talented individuals into high-need schools and in-demand subjects, improve the diversity of the profession, and support retention. Residencies are a particularly valuable mechanism for recruiting midcareer professionals, as they typically pay residents salaries while they complete their training program.

To widen teacher pipelines, it's critical for state leaders to make Ohio a welcoming place for as many effective alternative training programs and residencies as possible. This could be accomplished by establishing a process for alternative training programs to gain approval through the Ohio Department of Higher Education, then amending state law to allow participants in approved programs to be granted resident educator licenses once they complete their program. Revising the law in this way would encourage highly effective training programs that operate in other states to expand to Ohio and would open the door for districts and charter networks to create grow-their-own-talent programs.

Improving teacher compensation

Teachers play a vital role in Ohio’s future as well as the futures of its millions of residents. Yet current salary policies are designed to treat all teachers the same regardless of skill, subject area, or additional responsibility. Current retirement benefits, meanwhile, favor veteran teachers and thus can be a turn-off to their younger, less-experienced peers. Together, these policies constrain schools’ ability to attract and retain an effective staff. The recommendations that follow would address longstanding issues in the profession and help ensure that compensation packages reflect the importance of the teaching profession.

Teacher salaries

Most educators will readily admit that they didn’t choose the teaching profession for money. But there’s evidence that compensation does impact career decisions. During the 2017–18 school year, ACT [surveyed](#) a sample of students to gauge how their perceptions of the teaching profession impacted their interest in entering the field. Results revealed that the primary reason students weren’t interested in teaching as a career was financial. Among those who reported being uninterested, nearly two-thirds cited salary as one of their top three reasons. Salary concerns were also mentioned by students who were “potentially” interested. In fact, 72 percent of potentially interested students said that better pay would increase their interest in teaching.

Once teachers are in the classroom, salary issues persist. Those who teach traditionally hard-to-staff subjects like math and science could make considerably more money working in the private sector. Yet because of fixed salary schedules, they are paid the same as their colleagues who teach in much easier-to-fill positions. Educators who choose to work in rural and urban high-poverty districts—places most in need of highly effective teachers—often make less than their counterparts in suburban districts. And talented young teachers are typically paid far less than their veteran peers, even though [research](#) shows that some less-experienced teachers are more effective than those with more experience.

All things considered, it isn’t difficult to understand why some talented folks might hesitate to enter the profession or may choose to leave after a few years. To help schools recruit and retain effective teachers, lawmakers should strengthen teacher compensation in the following ways.

1. Allow districts to pay teachers more flexibly by eliminating mandatory salary schedules based on seniority and credits earned.

Under current law, districts must adopt teacher salary schedules based on years of service and training. These systems have the benefit of simplicity, as teachers can predict with some certainty when and how they can earn a raise. But they also typically prescribe low starting pay for new teachers and thwart districts’ ability to reward high performers based on their effectiveness, their specialty, or market conditions. Repealing salary-schedule requirements would empower districts to determine how best to pay their instructional teams, whether based on classroom effectiveness, teaching in certain subject areas or schools, or taking on increased responsibility. Of course, districts

could stick with rigid schedules if they prefer. But with greater flexibility in the realm of compensation, school leaders could allocate funds more strategically to better serve students and recruit and retain staff.

2. Create a refundable tax credit for teachers working in high-poverty schools.

High-poverty schools need effective teachers. But issues such as lower salaries, inadequate support from administration, school culture and student discipline issues, as well as high turnover rates hinder schools' ability to recruit and retain talent. Addressing all these problems would require a host of structural reforms, but the state could alleviate concerns about low salaries by creating a tax credit for teachers who work in high-poverty schools. Such a program would allow state leaders to put more money directly into teachers' pockets without getting tangled up in salary negotiations with local unions and school boards. It would also provide a modest financial incentive for teachers to choose to work in high-need schools.

Retirement benefits

Along with salaries, retirement benefits are important elements of teachers' overall compensation package. Ohio teachers presently have three retirement-plan options:

- **Defined-benefit (DB) plan.** This traditional pension plan uses a formula based on salary and years of experience to provide teachers with a defined benefit for the duration of their retirement. Due to the design, benefits accrue very slowly at the beginning of a teacher's career but then spike as they reach retirement age. This "backloaded" structure means that, should a teacher choose to separate from the system earlier—either to take a teaching job in another state or to pursue another occupation—they leave with relatively little retirement wealth. The traditional pension tends to strongly favor teachers who work in an Ohio classroom for their entire career.
- **Defined-contribution (DC) plan.** Like a 401(k), this plan defines the employee benefit in terms of how much is contributed into the employee's account. Teachers fully own the funds in their accounts and make investment decisions. Unlike the DB plan, benefits accrue more evenly across the entirety of teachers' careers—the worker and employer contributions, plus any investment returns, are simply deposited into their accounts. Those who teach fewer than twenty to twenty-five years typically benefit from the 401(k)-style option, as the amounts they've saved are likely to be worth far more than the benefits accrued under a traditional pension. DC plans are better tailored to today's more mobile workforce and could help attract young and midcareer professionals who would likely value an option that doesn't require them to teach for three decades to receive substantial benefit.
- **Combined plan.** This plan combines aspects of both the DB and DC options.

To ensure that teachers receive the benefits they deserve, lawmakers should do the following:

1. Switch the default option for new teachers.

New teachers are asked to fill out an election form and choose their retirement plan. If they don't fill out the form, however, the system automatically enrolls them into the default option, which, in accord with state law, is the DB plan. Approximately 78 percent of Ohio teachers don't make an affirmative choice and thereby end up with a traditional pension. However, for most teachers, the combined and DC plans provide more retirement wealth than the DB plan. Lawmakers should change state law so that the default plan is either the DC or combined plan, while still allowing new hires to affirmatively opt into the DB plan.

2. Make teachers eligible for social security.

Ohio is one of [fifteen states](#) where teachers don't participate in social security. Unlike their colleagues in the other thirty-five states, who have three sources of postretirement income, Ohio teachers retire with only two: their personal savings and one of the retirement plans outlined above. Teachers deserve the same retirement safety net that their colleagues in other states and peers in other professions benefit from. And unlike Ohio's DB plan, social security is "portable," meaning that teachers don't forfeit benefits if they change jobs or move across state lines. For these reasons, Ohio lawmakers should make all teachers eligible for social security going forward.

3. Close the DB option to new teachers and offer a DC or combined option.

Besides changing teachers' default option to the DC or combined plan, lawmakers could take more assertive action and simply close the DB plan to entering teachers. Over time, this would phase out the traditional DB plan, thus reducing the serious fiscal challenges that Ohio faces in sponsoring and managing a traditional pension. This recommendation would eliminate (if offering only a DC option) or decrease (if offering either DC or combined plan) new pension liabilities associated with new hires, though legislators would need to consider ways to pay down existing unfunded liabilities. But doing so wouldn't be impossible, as other states have successfully made the transition. [Alaska](#), for example, closed its DB plan and transitioned its state workers (including teachers) to a DC plan, while states like Hawaii, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Virginia have all closed their traditional DB plan to new teachers and now offer only a hybrid DB-DC option.

Conclusion

Ohio schools need talented and effective teachers now more than ever. But longstanding teacher-pipeline issues, combined with archaic salary and retirement benefits systems that hurt younger, more mobile teachers, make it hard to recruit, hire, and retain talent. Addressing these issues satisfactorily is a challenge, to be sure, but it's not impossible. Making the changes outlined in this brief is a good place to start.

References

Aldeman, Chad, “Default Settings: How Ohio can nudge teachers toward a more secure retirement” (webpage last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/default-settings-how-ohio-can-nudge-teachers-toward-more-secure-retirement>.

Aldeman, Chad “Why Aren’t All Teachers Covered By Social Security?” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.teacherpensions.org/blog/why-aren-t-all-teachers-covered-social-security>.

Education Commission of the States, “Teachers License Reciprocity 2020, State Profile, Ohio” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://reports.ecs.org/comparisons/view-by-state/206/OH>.

Finn, Chester E., Jr, “Is differentiated instruction a hollow promise?” (last accessed July 15, 2022): <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/differentiated-instruction-hollow-promise>.

Goldhaber, Dan, “In Schools Teacher Quality Matters Most” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.educationnext.org/in-schools-teacher-quality-matters-most-coleman>.

Guha, Roneeta, et. al., “The Teacher Residency: An Innovative Model for Preparing Teachers” (last accessed May 12, 2022): https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Teacher_Residency_Innovative_Model_Preparing_Teachers_REPORT.pdf.

Hanushek, Eric A., “Valuing Teachers: How Much is a Good Teacher Worth?” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/valuing-teachers-how-much-good-teacher-worth>.

Hernandez, Donald J., “Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED518818>.

Ingersoll, Richard M., “Why Do High-Poverty Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms with Qualified Teachers?” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/why-do-high-poverty-schools-have-difficulty-staffing-their-classrooms-with-qualified-teachers>.

NYU Teacher Residency Blog, “Keeping the Teachers: The Problem of High Turnover in Urban Schools” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/high-teacher-turnover>.

Ohio Department of Education, “5 Year Professional Educator Licenses” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Teaching/Licensure/Apply-for-Certificate-License/5-Year-Professional-Educator-Licenses>.

Ohio Department of Education, “Alternative Resident Educator Licenses” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Teaching/Licensure/Resident-License-Options/Alternative-Resident-Educator-Licenses>.

Ohio Department of Education, “Finishing Residency” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Teaching/Resident-Educator-Program/Finishing-Residency>.

Ohio Department of Higher Education, “Alternative Licensure Institutes” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.ohiohighered.org/educator-preparation/alternative-licensure>.

Ohio Education Association, “2015–16 Ohio teacher salaries” (last accessed May 23, 2022): <https://ohea.org/resources/professional-resources/2015-2016-ohio-teacher-salaries-2>.

Ohio Revised Code § 3317.14.

Ohio Revised Code § 3319.26.

Ohio Revised Code § 3319.227.

Opper, Isaac M., “Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers’ Impact on Student Achievement” (last accessed May 12, 2022): https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4312.html.

Partelow, Lisette, “What to Make of Declining Enrollment in Teacher Preparation Programs” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/make-declining-enrollment-teacher-preparation-programs>.

Relay Graduate School of Education, “Alternative Certification” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.relay.edu/programs/alternate-certification>.

State Teachers Retirement System of Ohio, “About Us” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.strsoh.org/aboutus>.

Yin, Jessica, and Lisette Partelow, “An Overview of the Teacher Alternative Certification Sector Outside of Higher Education” (last accessed May 12, 2022): <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/overview-teacher-alternative-certification-sector-outside-higher-education>.