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Filling Classroom Vacancies Requires Better Solutions

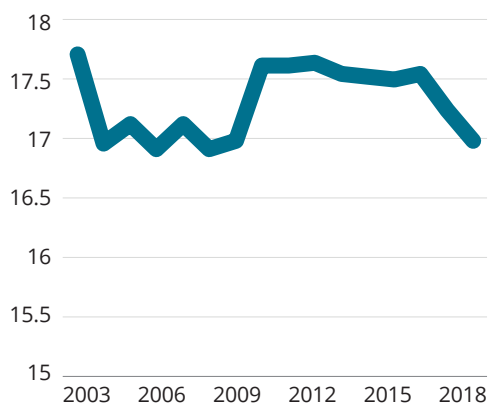
By Ben DeGrow

Summary

Some Michigan classrooms lack a teacher with full credentials, even though many people with teaching credentials aren't teaching. Rather than focusing heavily on producing more teachers, the state should find ways to entice some of those teachers into the classroom.

Main text word count: 715

Michigan Student-Teacher Ratio Trend: 2003-2018



Source: Michigan Center for Educational Performance & Information, Statewide Student Counts (Grades K-12) & Staffing Summary, Full-Time Equivalencies Data - includes Teachers, Special Education Teachers, and Career/Technical Teachers

Once again, Michigan schools are having trouble finding enough certified teachers, so they are filling more classrooms with instructors who lack the required credentials. But some schools are worsening the state of emergency by hiring more teachers to serve fewer students.

According to Bridge Magazine, data from earlier in the school year suggests Michigan public schools will surpass last year's use of more than 2,500 long-term substitutes, classroom fill-ins with some college education who have not met state certification requirements. This number is compiled by the state, which has to give local districts permission to employ these instructors for extended periods of time. The number of long-term substitutes used in 2018-19 more than doubled from two years earlier, evoking grave concerns of a general shortage of certified teachers.

It's true that the number of education degrees acquired in Michigan has steadily fallen to half the level of a decade ago. That could mean not enough teachers are being prepared to maintain current student-staffing ratios, but it's too early to jump to the conclusion that the state needs to double the production of certified teachers. Research of national trends points out that over the previous three decades, twice as many people graduated with a degree in education as were hired to be teachers. To the extent Michigan fits this pattern, the decline in graduates with education degrees may mean our state has actually reached an equilibrium between supply and demand for the teaching workforce.

The downward trend may also highlight the need to allow more paths into the profession that don't depend on traditional teacher preparation programs. The Bridge article highlights a small but promising alternative program to train and certify college-degree holders to take over public charter school classrooms full-time. Charter schools are disproportionately struggling to fill classrooms with certified instructors. Yet district schools might also benefit from having more alternative teacher preparation options to attract potential instructors who wouldn't undergo the standard regimen.

The Bridge story acknowledges, based on an earlier Citizens Research Council report, that "there are enough students graduating from Michigan's university-based teaching programs to replace teachers who retire and quit."

But the article does not look at public schools' overall hiring patterns. From 2017 to 2019, the number of teachers statewide grew by 1.6% while the number of students declined by the same rate. Nearly a third of all conventional districts lost students but still added full-time teaching positions. Some districts, particularly in more populated and affluent areas, are seeing many applicants for some general education positions.

Michigan's student-teacher ratio has fallen back to the same range that held between 2004 and 2009. Today, there are about the same number of students for each teacher as a decade ago.

We don't have a precise statewide picture of which subjects and grade levels rely most heavily on long-term substitutes. But a recent survey says that districts are having the most trouble filling special education positions.

According to the Michigan Department of Education, in 2018-19, there were 25,573 state residents aged 22 to 64 with active teaching certificates who were not working in a public district or charter school. More than 4,700 of those inactive teachers had a state endorsement to teach special education. Unfortunately, though, these numbers don't reveal much, either about the individuals' availability and desire to work or their experience and relative fitness to teach effectively.

The task of filling a special education job is also difficult because many different skills are needed to serve the diverse population of students with special needs. Michigan offers many different types of special education endorsements. A certified specialist in helping students with sensory processing disorders or visual impairment, for example, may not be willing or able to relocate to a district that has posted for such a position.

The apparent mismatch between vacancies and available candidates in this high-need subject area highlights the need for a different approach. To ensure they get the best possible talent in harder-to-fill specialties, local school boards and district leaders should differentiate salaries and offer other pay incentives.

They could redirect funds by reducing administrative or other positions, as well as by phasing out the automatic pay bump for acquiring a master's degree. Research consistently has shown that this credential has no association with a teacher's effectiveness.

A full and honest look at the numbers defies simple explanations of a teacher shortage. Instead, it calls for smarter policies to tackle real local challenges.

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