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# An Unfolding Crisis in the Satisfaction and Supply of Teachers in Illinois

*Insights and recommendations for policymakers in light of COVID-19*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teachers are facing a perfect storm of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their professional realities have been upended to a degree experienced by few other professionals, yet the importance of their work has never been greater. Teachers express compounding fears for their own and their families' well-being alongside their concern for the well-being of their students and communities. Although school districts across the state have worked hard to plan and implement instructional modalities that best respond to the needs of district families and communities, numerous challenges, fears, and concerns persist for classroom teachers. Put simply, the most foundational and rewarding elements of teachers' jobs—such as interactions and caring relationships with students—have changed dramatically and strained teachers' capacity to support those who are most vulnerable. Teachers are tackling these and other enormous challenges while fearing sharp decreases in funding and support.

While some of these challenges predated the pandemic, many have been exacerbated by COVID-19. This Policy Spotlight places the challenges facing Illinois educators in the context of COVID-19. It closes with suggestions for what can be done to support teachers at this crucial time. To prevent a new wave of teacher vacancies, there must be a major reinvestment in retention and support of the state's teaching workforce.



## TEACHERS IN SHORT SUPPLY

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, Illinois and other states struggled to fill large numbers of teacher vacancies.<sup>1</sup> These vacancies were widespread, affecting public schools in rural and urban communities alike. Yet the vacancies hit specific fields like special education particularly hard.<sup>2</sup> Many vacancies were concentrated in certain communities, such as districts located in high poverty areas and in central and southern Illinois.<sup>3</sup> Compounding matters, substitute teachers continue to be in short supply, causing some districts to fast-track substitute teacher training and increase pay.<sup>4</sup>

At the start of 2020, policymakers, school districts, and other organizations across the state were grappling with how to address these shortages. Then COVID-19 hit. The pandemic complicates the challenges on several fronts.

At increasing rates, teachers say they are considering leaving the profession. A June 2020 national survey by Education Week magazine found that one-fifth of the 1,907 educators surveyed said they were “somewhat more” or “much more” likely to leave teaching than they were before the pandemic began.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with reports of declining morale among teachers in recent months. In one particularly poignant account in The New York Times, a middle school English teacher said that America should brace for a

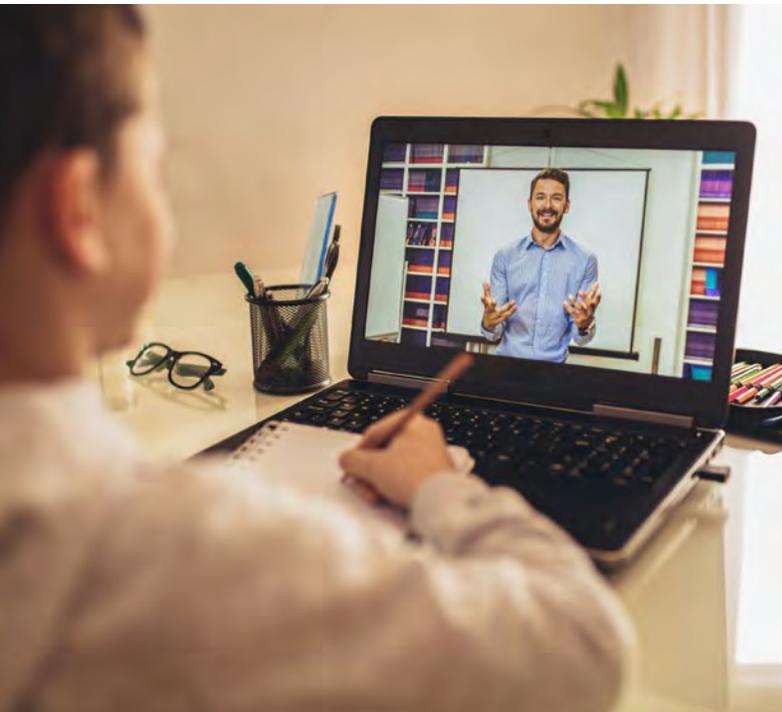
teacher shortage “like we’ve never seen before” given the combination of low pay, inadequate resources, and compromised safety during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

Illinois began the pandemic in a difficult position given preexisting struggles to hire and keep teachers. These emerging reports signal that the pandemic will have a measurable, negative impact on the satisfaction and supply of qualified teachers. This may be most acute for teachers asked to teach in person since any congregate setting involves some physical risk, and many school buildings are old and not designed to handle airborne contagions. For teachers working remotely, the preparation needed to deliver lessons that used to occur organically in a classroom has made being effective more taxing, which causes fatigue. Teachers fear they are falling short.

To unpack these issues, this Policy Spotlight describes the pandemic’s impact on public school teachers in Illinois and sketches proactive responses to stave off an intensified teacher shortage. This Policy Spotlight draws on emerging qualitative data collected by the author through interviews with educators across the state. While the true impact of the pandemic on Illinois teachers will become apparent in coming years, action taken now may help to prevent even greater losses to the teacher workforce.

## PREEXISTING CHALLENGES IN MAINTAINING THE TEACHER WORKFORCE

Teachers are, in general, less likely to leave the profession if they make it past their first few years.<sup>7</sup> Early exit traditionally occurs for a number of reasons. Among these are lack of job satisfaction, challenging working conditions, perceived lack of support from administration or school leaders,<sup>8</sup> and the challenge of balancing teaching with child care or family needs.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, teacher turnover trends are especially pronounced in low-income communities and communities of color. For example, the teaching workforce has a well-documented diversity problem, with an over-representation of white teachers despite increasingly diverse student bodies.<sup>10</sup> Research has found that *all* students benefit from having diverse teachers, and students of color particularly benefit; attendance, test scores, graduation rates, and college success are all improved.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, cycles of turnover are financially costly for school districts, and potentially costly for students for academic, emotional, and social reasons.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic intensifies causes for attrition, magnifying



the challenges that schools and educators face by increasing stress and instability.

The pandemic also presents an urgent challenge for teacher recruitment. Historically, teacher shortages have prompted many states and cities to invest in fast-track teacher preparation to provide an influx of newly licensed educators. However, quick fixes like non-university-based, fast-track teacher preparation programs have been shown to be unwise. Research has found they often give inadequate attention to pedagogical training and sometimes result in new teachers being assigned to the most challenging schools, increasing the likelihood that teachers with such training will either leave those schools or leave the profession altogether after a short time.<sup>13</sup>

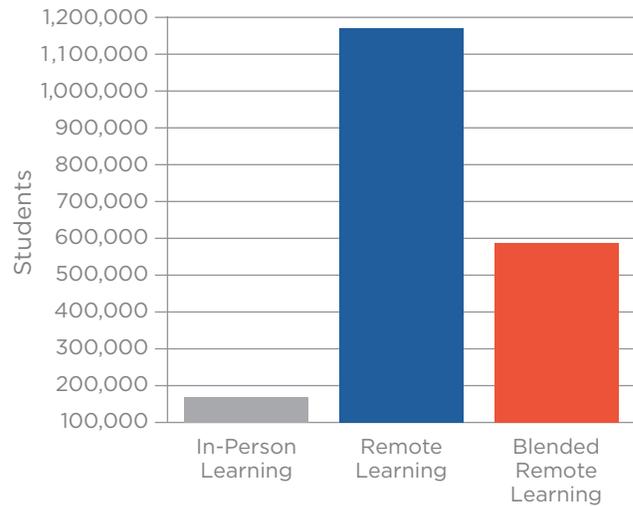
Therefore, high-quality training and credentialing play an important role. Teachers who perform well on credentialing and pre-licensure assessments are more likely to produce positive student outcomes in the classroom.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, large-scale, quantitative analyses of teachers nationwide have shown that measures of teacher preparation and certification are statistically significant factors in teacher success, even after controlling for student demographics.<sup>15</sup> These studies point to the significant impact that teacher preparation and retention policies have on solidifying a well-qualified teacher workforce.

### NEWLY INTENSIFIED CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

Following the spring 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 in Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and school districts across the state were faced with the monumental task of preparing for an uncertain launch to the 2020-2021 school year. Schools prepared a variety of plans, trying to accommodate the needs of families, students, faculty and staff, and other community stakeholders. ISBE provided guiding documents aligned with the advice available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Illinois Department of Public Health, and the State of Illinois' COVID-19 Restore Illinois phases.<sup>16</sup> However, the details of school reopening were left largely to the discretion of individual districts. In Illinois (and other states), schools adopted a range of models including in-person, remote or blended-remote learning, as shown in Figure 1.

In general, school districts situated in more densely populated areas opted for remote learning compared to less densely populated areas, which opted for blended or in-person learning during

Figure 1: Distribution of modalities across Illinois school districts, November 2020



Source: Illinois State Board of Education, "Fall 2020 Learning Plans for Districts Responding to the ISBE Survey (PreK-12)," accessed Nov. 12, 2020, <https://isp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/fceeacb37da04de4b237ed941dd7d5c4>. A map that indicates which model each school district in the state is using is available at this website.

the first quarter of the school year. These trends likely will continue to shift throughout the 2020-2021 school year as the pandemic unfolds. While variations exist among the specifics of individual plans, teachers were tasked with preparing for an incredibly complex and often brand-new method of delivering instruction. Each of the three options used presents unique benefits and challenges. Although in-person learning enables vital contact, it presents potential risks to the health and safety of students and school personnel. Fully remote learning ensures social distancing, but requires a full reorganization of curriculum, one-to-one technology at home, and stable internet access. Blended learning provides more flexibility and seems to strike a balance between the extremes of remote and fully in-person learning. However, blended learning also effectively doubles or triples the workload of teachers as they balance fragmented groups of students and intense differentiation of learning materials.

Teachers in Illinois have taken on the herculean task of renovating entire school systems while being prepared on short notice to pivot should the pandemic present the need for a new adaptation. These renovations require school personnel and systems to expend significant effort, and require continuing re-evaluation and re-design as community-wide COVID-19 infection rates surge.

The following section unpacks some of the tensions experienced by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the threats these pose to teacher retention and recruitment, before moving to recommendations for policymakers and education leaders in Illinois.

## PANDEMIC-INDUCED THREATS TO TEACHER WELL-BEING

Teachers, school support staff, and administrators are vulnerable to the same pandemic-related risk factors and challenges as others in their communities. As a recent article in the Chicago Tribune demonstrated, the political and community pressures to reopen are placing disproportionate stress on school personnel and teachers, particularly those living or working in low-income communities.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a statewide survey from the Illinois Education Association (IEA) highlights the urgency of the impending crisis for the teacher workforce. Of the more than 1,300 teachers surveyed in October 2020, one-third said they were considering leaving the profession. IEA President Kathi Griffin shared that these findings represent the stress placed on educators as they navigate threats to their own health and safety, extra heavy workloads, and some local school boards dismissing advice from school leaders.<sup>18</sup>

To examine the impact of COVID-19 on educators' lives and practices, interviews were conducted with 15 administrators and teachers from across the state in the summer and early fall of 2020. The teachers have experience ranging from three

to more than 17 years in grade levels from early elementary through high school. The 15 educators represent the diversity of communities and teaching contexts found in the major regions of Illinois. Figure 2 indicates their geographical distribution throughout the state.

While this research is ongoing, the findings presented here provide emerging insights that policymakers and others should take into consideration. Teachers are struggling with consistent child care, financial stability, reliable health care, and food security. As one educator shared:

“For a lot of people, [financial recovery from the pandemic] was starting in the summer, but many families and teachers as well, they still need extra support. Even though, in our state, everybody got the maximum amount of food stamps for the first few months, that support is now running out. And for many people in our district, they’re not able to shift back to normal.”

Another teacher shared:

“It’s been difficult for our school family not to be with each other during this time. There’s been a lot of anxiety. As public school educators, we’re blessed because we’re still getting paychecks, but our community is hurting and that will impact our work with students for a long time. But, [our administrative office] gets calls all the time about dad being laid off or other [financial challenges]. We’re seeing more and more financial difficulties district-wide, and that is a major issue for this community.”

Interviews like these reveal that teachers, just like many other people, may have had to rely on social safety nets.

These financial strains were to be expected, in part, due to pandemic-related layoffs and the slowdown in the economy. Teachers’ partners or spouses may lose their jobs even if a teacher remains an “essential” worker. However, pandemic-related financial hardship has been a reality for many teachers, especially those in low-income areas of the state, where teacher salaries are also low. Furthermore, school paraprofessionals and other non-licensed support staff are often paid much less than teachers. Additionally, many teachers, who are primarily women,<sup>19</sup> are navigating the challenge of remote or blended teaching while shouldering the responsibility to care for their own families.<sup>20</sup> Despite recent efforts to

*Figure 2:  
Location of  
teachers in  
the study*



increase teacher pay in Illinois, a teacher's salary alone may not be enough to sustain a family's needs.

In addition to financial supports, school superintendents and principals have reported a greater need to provide social and emotional support to overwhelmed faculty and staff. An educator from southern Illinois put it this way:

"If we haven't already, I can say with all certainty that we will see an increase in trauma and anxiety among our students. We've done what we can to provide meals and other services to families who are at risk, but not being able to see our kids and our kids not being able to see us, that's really tough. Especially for those kids who are most vulnerable."

This assistance goes beyond the traditional responsibilities of these positions. Administrators often care for their teachers, just as teachers care for their students. However, with increased workloads, fears about the future, and challenges connecting with students (remotely or otherwise), the emotional toll on teachers is high. As one administrator shared, "It is hard not to feel alone; we have so many layered needs in our community and our faculty and staff."

Teachers reported making challenging negotiations between their professional lives and personal safety. One educator described the intense decision-making process by saying, "It's almost impossible" to know what and how to prioritize. Many teachers are putting in double or even triple the hours per week to prepare lessons, sacrificing time with their own loved ones in the process. Yet, they still worry that the increased preparation is not going to be enough. Another educator shared that she and her partner, who is also an educator, are in high-risk categories due to preexisting immune and respiratory conditions. To return to face-to-face teaching of any kind without a vaccine was simply not an option for the couple, creating challenging decisions for administrators and teachers alike. These two teachers luckily work in a district large enough to accommodate their need to teach remotely, but one can imagine this may not be an option for numerous others in different contexts.

Likewise, in national news reports, teachers have shared that they are struggling to find space in their home to conduct online learning or are having difficulty connecting to the internet. In one account, a teacher resorted to connecting via free Wi-Fi in the parking lots of coffee shops.<sup>21</sup>



Teachers go to such lengths precisely because they are committed to their students, but we should not discount the mental health risks associated with teaching multiple hours online and then pivoting to assist one's own children and loved ones.

The central concern foregrounding teachers' work is a care for their students and the communities in which they reside. To this point, teachers' work is inherently relational, leveraging positive interactions and empathic support toward the many needs of diverse learners. However, teachers have had the very foundation of their relationships with students, as well as their professional identities upended.<sup>22</sup> Teachers are trained to respond to the needs of their students while "meeting them where they're at," but that work is now compromised by a variety of factors.

As one teacher said:

"Whether or not it's caused by the pandemic, reaching out to more kids to meet them where they're at academically, socially, and emotionally is going to be essential moving forward. And that's hard work."

This means that teachers shoulder a strong emotional burden concerning their students' health and safety. During spring 2020, many students simply fell off the radar. They did not connect with their teachers or schools during the stay-at-home orders. Some may have moved to homes outside the district, while others may have been caught in situations with trauma or high-risk behaviors.<sup>23</sup> As

mandated reporters, teachers were left knowing the vulnerabilities facing many of their students yet feeling powerless to provide a safe haven or buffering relationship in an online or socially distanced world.<sup>24</sup> These concerns have not abated with the 2020-2021 school year and may be even more pronounced and urgent for some children. As one teacher put it, “You worry ... because you might be a lifeline for some of your students.”

Although teachers are deeply concerned about their students, many reported feeling limited in what they can do to support student needs due to an impending reduction in resources and an uptick in student needs. This was true regardless of whether a teacher is working in a remote, blended, or in-person setting. Furthermore, in remote or blended environments, teachers have reported that they feel “unsatisfied,” “exhausted,” and “ineffective” in their capacity to build relationships or respond to students’ needs. Teachers also fear that when schools finally fully resume operating as they did pre-COVID, some of their students may return to school with a host of new psychological, educational, social, and behavioral challenges. Some teachers expressed concern about whether schools will be equipped to handle these issues.

All of this taken together points to the professional and emotional toll of the pandemic on teachers. It also speaks to the immense need for resourcing and support that teachers and schools will require going forward.



## PANDEMIC-INDUCED THREATS TO TEACHER PROFESSIONAL EFFICACY

Teachers’ work has been completely upended in content, delivery, and method, while the most gratifying and meaningful elements of teachers’ jobs have shrunk. However, many teachers still feel responsible to give their very best despite the compromised realities of teaching in a pandemic. This has left teachers with at least two serious threats to their professional efficacy.

First, the urgent transition to remote or blended learning disrupted teachers’ successful routines. During interviews, teachers reported working to do their best to implement learning opportunities that provide similar rigor and engagement as full-time, face-to-face teaching. However, many are worried about whether they are succeeding.

One administrator put it this way:

“It’s not that teachers don’t want to be here, or that they’re afraid of change, but they need to feel supported during that change, otherwise it’s nearly impossible. We’re asking them to do more than ever before. Whether you’re a first-year or a 25th-year teacher, you are in a new environment. There’s just not enough time in the day, and that’s where the stress comes in.”

The urgency behind the transition puts an extra layer of pressure on this challenging situation, threatening teachers’ sense of professional efficacy. Furthermore, many educators’ prior training related to technology was provided in a context of a traditional schooling modalities and schedules. The work required in adapting and re-adapting pedagogies or curriculum is steep, especially when school districts must transition from online to blended or in-person and back again as infection rates rise and fall. It will simply take time for many teachers to develop the professional skills and expertise necessary to successfully facilitate remote or blended learning. Moreover, some subjects are simply more difficult to broach when not in person. For instance, educators said they find it difficult to address the complexity of the historic racial justice demonstrations of summer 2020 while teaching online, knowing that racial and social injustice are the lived experiences of many of their students.

Second, while all teachers shared that they are working extended hours to do the best they can to craft engaging and challenging instruction, they reported struggling to conceptualize how they can

achieve the same growth in their students' skills given the challenges associated with adapted or remote learning environments. Research has found that many teachers and administrators would like to take this time to re-focus efforts on the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in order to begin repairing some of the damage wrought by the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> Yet many teachers felt they were being held to expectations that may not be realistic under the current conditions and expressed fear that they are losing energy to meet the many demands placed on them. These concerns carry implications for standardized testing of students and teacher evaluations. Teachers are concerned that their students may not be well-equipped to perform as expected due to pandemic disruptions and the digital divide. Many wondered if it is even fair to evaluate teaching in traditional ways during a pandemic. While data will remain necessary to fully understand and respond to students' needs post-pandemic, teachers feel that flexibility and grace should characterize any conversations about testing, teacher evaluations, standardized testing, and accountability. Traditional accountability pressures may only distract from the hard work of addressing students' new social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

### **PARTICULAR CHALLENGES FOR NEW TEACHERS AND FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

Finally, it should be noted that pre-service (e.g., student teachers) and new teachers face particularly acute challenges in the current reality. In recent years, state funding for new teacher mentoring and induction has withered, and many districts have struggled to maintain programs on their own. Without robust supports for teacher preparation and early career mentoring and induction, there is fear that new teachers may fall through the cracks. New teachers who graduated from educator preparation programs during spring 2020, like those who will graduate in 2021, may assume teaching positions with broad variances in training due to pandemic-related interruptions. Specifically, school closures in spring 2020 left many nascent teachers without the second half of their student-teaching experience, while continuing school closures in parts of the state have restricted the learning experiences of candidates in educator preparation programs. Illinois Public Radio reported that nearly 300 student teachers were still without placement schools as of early September 2020, despite broad efforts by the ISBE, Illinois universities, and associations of school administrators. Superintendents across the state reported that they feared enrollments in educator preparation programs



would plummet further.<sup>26</sup> This uncertainty around teacher preparation and training further undermines the stability of teachers in the state.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Teacher shortages in Illinois have been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Proactive steps to manage the numerous stresses and challenges facing teachers may help prevent a new shortage in the teacher workforce. The recommendations below only scratch the surface, but many of them are echoed by education groups at the national and state levels.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Immediate COVID-Related Responses*

##### **1. Implement or advocate for flexibility in accountability mandates**

School leaders and classroom teachers will need space and time to fully respond to more immediate COVID-19 concerns before continuing on with teacher evaluation as it has been done in the past. Educators are concerned about the pressures of standardized testing and teacher evaluation in light of the pandemic. This is understandable, considering the overall disruption to schooling during the pandemic, the increased social-emotional needs of students and adults, and the tentative nature of student attendance in remote or blended learning environments.

As an example of a possible adaptation, consider the recently released ISBE Priority Learning Standards.<sup>28</sup> It may be prudent to implement a similar set of priorities in teacher evaluation. Teachers are working tirelessly to adapt to an ever-changing

academic and social-emotional reality with their students. Further, while standardized testing data may be useful in determining the necessary interventions and supports to provide to students when they return to full, in-person learning, the data should be used only for instructional decisions.

## 2. Ensure prioritized access to COVID-19 testing for students and school personnel

A robust COVID-19 testing and contact-tracing infrastructure could provide some level of security in the school and surrounding communities.<sup>29</sup> Lessons can perhaps be gleaned from New York City public schools.<sup>30</sup> There, early fall 2020 infection rates among students and school personnel were low, which was attributed to a robust system of testing, small class sizes, and distancing between students.

Testing and contact tracing may be key to isolating community outbreaks and stabilizing instructional offerings. Although resource intensive, these basic precautions are important.

## 3. Expand access to internet accessibility and technologies to address the “digital divide”

Many educators are struggling to reach families due to inconsistent or inaccessible access with technology and the internet. As we learned in the spring of 2020, access to reliable internet service and other educational technology will be key to

lessening the digital divide.<sup>31</sup> Access to reliable internet and devices will continue to be important for schools and families beyond the current context to facilitate access to resources that are increasingly being moved to digital platforms. Particular support is needed in low-income and rural communities.

## 4. Invest in training and resources for holistic (i.e., social and emotional) learning

A recent report from the Partnership for Resilience cited the need to expand social and emotional supports for students *and* adults.<sup>32</sup> When full, in-person schooling is possible again, many teachers and children in Illinois will be returning to a newly complex landscape. This means that how we deliver education needs to adapt accordingly. Trauma-responsive education, anti-racist education, and social, emotional, and behavioral supports are more important than ever. Teachers will need continual professional development in research-based practices for holistically supportive teaching.

### *Long-Term Investments*

#### 1. Expand the ranks of teachers and other school personnel

Although a dedicated teacher can have a transformative impact on a student’s life, teachers cannot tackle the fallout of a pandemic on their own. Schools need resources to hire additional professionals who are specially trained in these areas (e.g., social workers) to support the work done in the classroom. More school social workers, psychologists, nurses, interventionists, special educators, and others will be crucial to equip schools with the structures necessary to address the holistic needs of *all* students. This would enable teachers to effectively specialize in what they have been trained to do and will give students the care they need from a well-trained professional.

Therefore, education funding must remain a top priority notwithstanding the present crisis. More education jobs were lost in April 2020 alone than during the entire period of the Great Recession, the Economic Policy Institute reported.<sup>33</sup> Voluntary vacancies like early retirements and teachers quitting thinned the ranks of teachers and staff even more. Schools might make due with a leaner workforce if student needs decline, but there is every reason to believe students will return to live teaching with increased stress and new social, emotional, and academic needs. Schools will need increased staffing, professional development opportunities, and support in order to respond.



Notwithstanding reduced state revenue, lawmakers should protect school funding since precipitously low funding levels will mean reduced supports for not only students' academic needs but also students' greater behavioral, mental, and physical health needs. Investment in school resources must be taken on with zeal, lest we risk worsening an inherently troubled situation. Lawmakers must seize this opportunity to invest in our schools and school personnel to rebuild and sustain the children and communities of Illinois.

## **2. Invest in teacher education and retention; resist the urge to employ quick recruitment fixes**

Teacher preparation programs at Illinois colleges and universities are hand-in-hand partners with school districts responding to this crisis. Their work must also be supported. Robust, well-supported teacher preparation, induction, mentoring, and coaching are key to increasing teacher retention and satisfaction.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, state leaders should invest in expansion of initial teacher preparation at Illinois colleges and universities. Teacher preparation programs at Illinois' higher education institutions also need increased investment and flexibility in licensure program requirements. Differentiated, innovative teacher preparation pathways are possible within our existing institutions with this increased investment and flexibility. Post-baccalaureate teacher licensure programs, for example, provide opportunities

for career changers or recent college graduates. Many of these have already been established at a few universities.<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, early career and continuing professional learning must be maintained as keystone educational experiences for Illinois teachers. These provide the necessary social and educative scaffolds for a sustainable career. They also further teacher leadership capacities and may help prevent burnout. Research has found that if teachers receive high-quality training and support from mentors and leaders in their school buildings, they are more likely to stay in the profession.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, retention-related initiatives are a better investment than simple recruitment and fast-track alternatives like the aforementioned non-university-based alternatives. These investments will grow and sustain a highly qualified teaching workforce that is more likely to persist.

## **3. Promote solidarity with teachers and schools and communities**

Legislators and community leaders have an opportunity now to elevate the voices of teachers and encourage solidarity with school districts. The fall of 2020 brings the confluence of an unprecedented public health crisis, economic fears, and the most intense political divisions in recent history. These social challenges directly intersect with schooling, as we have seen over the past



several months. Unfortunately, many teachers are frustrated by the public's lack of understanding of their work and respect for their profession. As one teacher said, "Folks need to know that we are going to be doing our very best for their kids. It just takes time and lots of support." Some may feel misunderstood by community members who disagree with their school's reopening plans or the local teacher union's positions on remote learning. Taken in the broader social context, these feelings of distrust present threats to teacher satisfaction and retention.

Education scholars have previously referred to this phenomenon as *demoralization*, a feeling of reduced worth and moral alignment that permeates regardless of teaching context.<sup>37</sup> To prevent demoralization, teachers and schools should be protected as among our most vital community resources. Community and state leaders must stand in solidarity with our schools and advocate for the hard work that is being done and the continued resources that will be required to address the increased need of students in a post-pandemic world. This could be as politically complex as enabling prioritized funding or as straightforward as promoting face masks and sharing the stories of teachers among constituents.

Put simply, for schools to provide safe, supportive, and equitable in-person teaching, local citizens will need to adapt to reduce the spread of the virus, appropriately resource schools, and empower educators to provide caring and responsive classrooms.

#### **4. Include greater educator voice in reforms moving forward**

The pandemic may also prompt any number of school reforms. The "new normal" will require research and policy action on a rapid timeline. It will be essential to prioritize diverse teacher voices from across the state and across the career trajectory. Collect their stories, elicit their advice, and respond to their requests. In the past, school reforms have produced a feeling of fatigue when teachers' voices were not appropriately captured. As on-the-ground enactors of reform efforts, teachers have experience and professional knowledge.

#### **CONCLUSION**

During the spring of 2020, as schools closed in compliance with Gov. J.B. Pritzker's initial stay-at-home order,<sup>38</sup> we witnessed a burst of gratitude for teachers. Social media featured lighthearted postings by parents appreciating the work of

teachers and jokingly wishing they could send their children back to school and get them out of the house.<sup>39</sup> However, as the summer progressed, concerns grew, and the challenges associated with reopening schools became clearer. As these challenges have crystallized, it has become evident that state government must invest in the professional well-being of its teachers to ensure the long-term stability and success of Illinois' public schools and communities.

Teachers are rightfully concerned that they will not be provided the structural and financial supports necessary to respond effectively to the new challenges presented by the pandemic. While many workers and professionals outside of education face similar challenges, teachers shoulder unique responsibility for a community's children. To stave off a severe shortage of high-quality teachers in Illinois, policymakers and school leaders must take steps now and make plans for the long term to ensure sufficient, stable funding, robust teacher preparation and continuing education, and holistic supports for *all* involved in schooling: adults *and* students.

The need to prioritize Illinois schools and teachers has never been more urgent. If teachers are not provided the preparation, continuing education, resourcing, and structural supports necessary to respond to the damage wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, we risk not only a teacher shortage, but a future of worsening access to opportunity, safety, and equity for generations of Illinois citizens. Our Illinois teachers are ready and willing to effect the changes necessary to rise to this challenge, but they cannot do it alone.



## ENDNOTES

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