



The Crisis of the Illinois Educator Shortage: A Thematic Discourse Analysis of Superintendent Insights

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Abstract

Across the nation, teachers, administrators, staff, students, and communities are feeling the effects of the educator shortage crisis. According to the Educator Shortage Survey conducted by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS), 79 percent of Illinois school districts report that they have a minor to very serious problem with the educator shortage (IARSS, 2023). In many areas, superintendents are driving buses every morning, teachers are losing preparation time to substitute in other classrooms, and administrators are finding no applicants for positions that have been vacant for over a year. Ultimately, Illinois students themselves are feeling the negative effects of larger class sizes, fewer learning supports, and the lack of highly qualified teachers. This article reports the findings of a thematic discourse analysis of superintendent thoughts on the causes and impacts of the teacher shortage in Illinois. The themes that emerged in that analysis include the lack of qualified applicants, working conditions in inequitable relation to salary and retirement, politically motivated lack of respect for teachers, and the scarcity of substitutes and non-licensed staff.

Keywords: education, teacher shortage, educator shortage, Illinois superintendents

Acknowledgements: The utmost gratitude is given to the following individuals: Eric Sheffield, Ph.D., for advising and reviewing this ongoing project, and Rong Zheng, Ph.D., for generating and including visuals from the compiled data set.

Introduction

The story of “What it means to be a teacher” is an ever-changing one, and it is personal to the one telling it. Teachers do more than deliver content. They inspire and empower their students, and instill characteristics such as kindness, courage, and respect in them. As Illinois is facing one of the worst educator shortages in its history, the teaching profession has taken on many narratives, both positive and negative.

Educator shortages (whether at the state or federal level) are nothing new. Like other professions, these shortages ebb and flow with time and historical events. Currently, the teacher shortage is at a crisis level. Districts across Illinois are exerting many efforts as they attempt to fill positions that have long been vacant. Efforts include everything from sign-on/staying-on bonuses, loosening licensure requirements, allowing retired teachers to work full time again, to not exhausting current staff with duties that are outside of their contracts. Although these efforts may provide short-term relief, there is no guarantee they are the “cure” for the shortage. Additionally, these efforts are intended to address problems that drain districts of their resources, whether financial, time, or staff morale. Teachers are leaving the profession at a rapid rate, which can negatively impact the quality of education for current and future K–12 students. Students in special education are most at risk of subpar instruction. These students have specific learning needs and supports indicated in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP); the lack of quality educators especially affects the system’s ability to meet their unique needs, negatively impacting their learning.

The teacher shortage in Illinois reflects alarming data. The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools lists the following statistics (Table 1):

Table 1

<i>The Illinois Educator Shortage</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2728 teaching, support staff, and special education positions are unfilled or filled with a less than qualified hire (meaning they do not possess their Professional Educator License). This is one-third of the total posted positions in Illinois, translating to 30 percent of classrooms filled with underserved students. This is the highest percentage in the last six years. (IARSS, 2023)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 79 percent of superintendents state they had a teacher shortage in the fall term of 2022. Of this 79 percent, 45 percent of superintendents say it was worse than last year. (IARSS, 2023)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 95 percent of superintendents say they have the same or fewer applicants for open positions compared to the 2021–2022 school year. 68 percent said they had fewer applicants across the board. (IARSS, 2023)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 92 percent of superintendents report a substitute teacher problem. (IARSS, 2023).

My research, centered around the Illinois educator shortage and the effect it is having on school districts, consisted of discourse analysis, and, more specifically, thematic coding analysis of 103 pages of Illinois superintendents' comments. Superintendents are unique in their position, because they directly oversee school happenings while being attentive to the State's education policies. I chose this group for my analysis because of their close contact with public school districts in Illinois. An action plan can be informed by conducting this kind of qualitative research on superintendent insights. Superintendents act as a bridge by sharing their experiences and opinions relating to the educator shortage. Legislators, regional offices of education (ROE), universities, and districts can take the emerging themes presented in the article from the superintendents and apply those practices to help offset the teacher shortage.

Literature Review

As the severity of the educator shortage heightens over time, there is an increasing amount of research detailing the supply and demand of teachers across the globe. In addition to this, there are supplementary resources like news reports, articles, charts/graphs, even blogs by teachers for teachers, supporting the narrative of the shortage from state to state. The research questions posed and answered in these publications either draw broad conclusions about the shortage, or they specialize in a certain subject area, demographic, location, or program within the system of education, such as alternative licensure programs. Despite existing research on the teacher shortage, there are several areas of the shortage that have not been explored. There is finite research about Illinois' teacher shortage. Additionally, there is limited qualitative research solely highlighting the perspectives of superintendents. Most literature heavily reviews current and former teachers' perceptions of the profession. Up until this point, a comprehensive thematic discourse analysis of Illinois superintendent insights had yet to be done.

History of Educator Shortages

The history of teacher shortages provides context for the current shortage affecting Illinois and the United States. Educator shortages in the United States have often occurred in waves according to significant events within history. That being said, such shortages do not always coincide with historical happenings. There are a variety of archived news articles predicting shortages based on student enrollment and the rate of teachers leaving the profession. Interestingly enough, the efforts that have been used to alleviate past educator shortages are similar in nature to efforts used today.

In the 1840s, the westward expansion era, the teaching profession was desirable to young and unmarried women. There was such an abundance of women willing to teach that the school boards of these one-room schoolhouses

would fire current teachers and hire new teachers quickly at lower starting salaries in order to keep salary costs low (Quay, 2002, p. 31). This contrasts greatly to present times, as districts today often struggle to find even one applicant for an open position. Fast forward to World War II, the shortage of educators reached crisis level as teachers were leaving the profession for better paying jobs. A significant number of emergency certifications were given to ill-prepared teachers just to alleviate the need (Hash, 2021). This mirrors the extreme stop-gap measures taken now in Illinois to make the education profession more accessible to individuals who might pursue qualification requirements.

Another historical event that illustrates the fluctuation of the shortage was the Great Recession in 2009, during which budget cuts and layoffs led to many fewer jobs than applicants (Evans, et al., 2019). Unfortunately, high-needs schools were hit the hardest (Knight, 2017). Even hard-to-fill staffing areas such as special education or math and science would receive hundreds of applicants for one position, leading to the perception that education was a “jobless” degree. Towards the end of the 2009 Great Recession, the number of job openings in public education started to increase while the number of hires remained stagnant (Pelika, 2022). This has changed drastically, as we are now in an educator shortage crisis. In March of 2020, a gap between job openings and hires that had begun in 2018 widened sharply with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pelika, 2022). An additional area of concern is that the national educator shortage has lasted longer (over a decade) than previous shortages and has resisted steady efforts, including in Illinois, to reverse it.

Methods

The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) has partnered with affiliated educational firms annually since 2017 to survey public school superintendents for their Educator Shortage Survey (IARSS 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023). The IARSS uses this data to provide the public a detailed report of the survey’s findings, along with a comment section listing superintendents’ responses to questions about the teacher shortage (IARSS, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023). The 2023 Educator Shortage Survey was emailed to all public-school superintendents in the state of Illinois. Data was collected from September 6th, 2022, to October 18th, 2022, by Goshen Education Consulting, a third-party education consulting practice. The survey was posted publicly on the IARSS website on January 28, 2023. The entire data set (and past years’ data) are available to the public. The survey received an 80 percent response rate with 690 Illinois public school districts responding. At the end of the report, the survey lists responding superintendent comments to prompts classifying them according to the area in which the district lies, the type of district it is, and the rurality of the district. The classifications and the survey prompts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2*IARSS Educator Shortage Survey (IARSS 2023)*

Areas	Types	Ruralities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Central • Northeast • Northwest • Southeast • Southwest • Suburban Cook • West Central 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elementary • High School • Unit • Parochial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City • Rural • Suburb • Town
Prompts		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What short-term effects on staffing is your school district experiencing coming out of the pandemic? • What long-term impacts of the pandemic on staffing do you predict your district will experience? • Please share any additional comments you have on the SEVERITY of staff shortages in your district. • Please share any additional comments you have on the RESPONSES your district has taken when faced with a shortage of educators. • As a district superintendent, your perspective on staffing is invaluable. Do you have any suggestions on solutions to the educator shortage (whether in your region or across the state)? • Please share any additional comments you have about the CAUSES for the educator shortages in your district. 		

Research Approach

My research consisted of analyzing 103 pages of open-ended question responses from superintendents. I performed the qualitative research method of discourse analysis, and more specifically, thematic coding analysis, to identify emerging themes from the superintendents. This included reading the superintendents' responses multiple times until the themes could be identified from the comments. Four themes emerged from this analysis: a lack of qualified applicants, unacceptable working conditions, a politically motivated lack of respect, and a shortage of non-licensed support staff. I then highlighted all comments regarding the themes and color coded them accordingly.

Generation of Bar Charts

Utilizing the compiled survey data, a structured data file was created to facilitate the generation of bar charts. This file consists of eight columns and 2074 rows. The columns include “Area,” “Type,” “Rurality,” “Lack of Applicants,” “Lack of Non-Licensed Staff,” “Politics/Respect,” “Working Conditions,” and a revolving column of survey questions related to the teacher shortage.

The first three columns, “Area,” “Type,” and “Rurality,” provide information about the districts’ location, grade levels, and community. The remaining columns, “Lack of Applicants,” “Lack of Non-Licensed Staff,” “Politics/Respect,” and “Working Conditions,” represent themes derived from responses to the survey questions. These theme columns serve as indicator variables, assigning a value of one if the response is related to a specific theme and zero otherwise. A single response may correspond to more than one theme. The subsequent analysis involves creating bar charts based on the structured data file to visualize the theme distribution for each of the classification columns (Area, Type, and Rurality).

Limitations

One limitation is that the survey was conducted solely in the state of Illinois; therefore, it cannot define the national severity level of the educator shortage. Another limitation is that the survey was administered exclusively to public schools identified by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). This classification did not include statewide schools such as the Illinois Math and Science Academy or private schools within the state of Illinois. Additionally, just two public Charter schools in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system responded to the survey. The CPS district itself did not participate in the IARSS survey. CPS is recognized as the largest public district in Illinois. Although not represented in the survey, CPS’ impact throughout the State is clearly significant. Also, it is important to note that the prompts in the 2023 Educator Shortage Survey spanned 110 pages in the report. For this project, the survey question “How does your district plan to continue these temporary positions AFTER the funding has ended?” was omitted, leaving 103 pages for review. The final limitation is that this survey was only sent to individuals who held the role of superintendent. Although this gives a holistic view of the educator shortage from an administrative angle, it does not include the experiences faced by principals, teachers, students, and related individuals.

Results

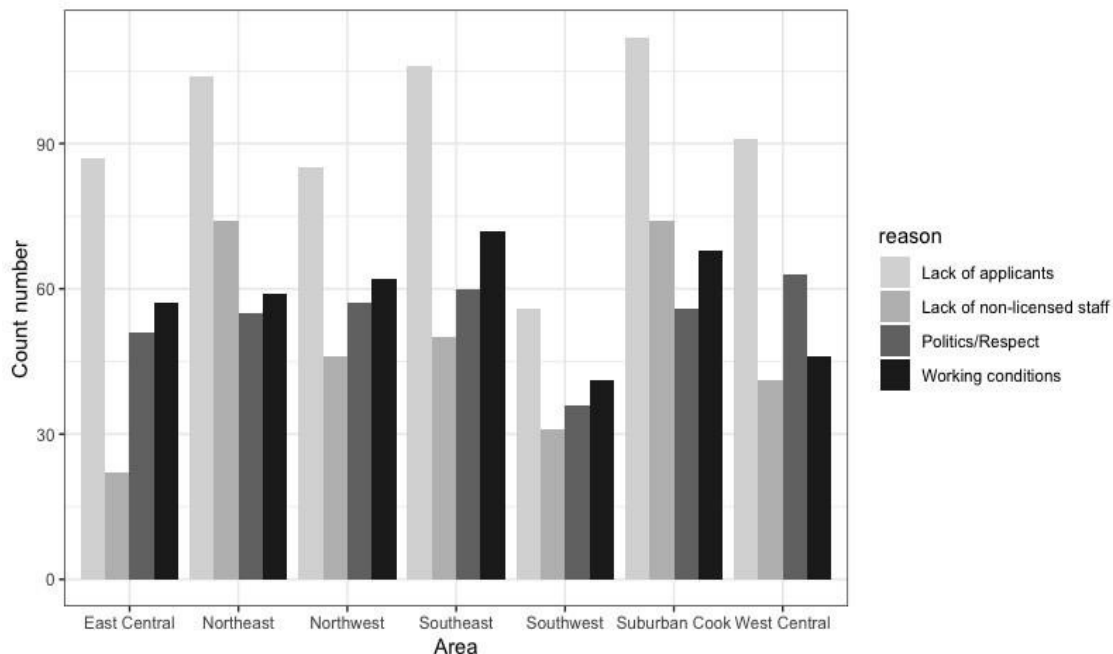
Themes

Theme 1: Low Pool of Highly Qualified Applicants

The first theme that emerged from my analysis was the diminishing number of qualified candidates applying to vacant positions. The low number of applicants leaves districts with a smaller talent pool, limiting the quality of education in the classroom. The response rate on the theme “Lack of Qualified Applicants” was significantly higher among the superintendents’ comments than on other themes addressed in my research.

Figure 1

Reasons across area



Superintendents stated that their districts are in a position where they are scrambling to find anyone to serve in the classroom. Administrators and hiring committees are forced to be creative in hiring individuals for their schools. One superintendent shared (IARSS, 2023):

We just aren’t getting any applications for any positions in the district. We are having to go **find them, steal them** from other [districts], and **look for willing bodies** that we can get qualified. (Unit Superintendent in West Central, Town Area)

This superintendent's comment touched on the practice of "poaching," or school districts undermining other districts by recruiting current staff to come to their school. Other superintendents in the survey actually compared this ethically questionable hiring process to *The Hunger Games* in the way teachers are highly sought after. Most comments from superintendents highlighted the gravity of the situation by saying they are looking for anyone—even just a "warm body"—for their classrooms. One superintendent confirmed the severity of the shortage by sharing that this was the first time in ten years that there were zero applicants for a posted position (IARSS, 2023). Many superintendents are grappling with the fact that sometimes they do not have a choice of bad applicants: they have no applicants at all.

The superintendents reinforced the urgency of the shortage by recognizing that the lack of highly qualified educators affects students who do not receive the best, or even adequate, instruction. Superintendents believed that due to the combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty of finding quality educators in the classroom, there is a significant amount of learning loss in populations of students.

Theme 2: Working Conditions, Salary, and Retirement

The second theme that emerged from my analysis was working conditions for teachers both in school and in relation to salary and retirement. Superintendents noted in their comments that educators are leaving the field because, in addition to demanding working conditions, they do not believe the salaries and retirement plans are worth it. Districts are struggling with high turnover rates, oftentimes losing teachers to less-demanding and higher-paying jobs elsewhere.

Sub theme: Working conditions

Superintendents identified several factors that contribute to working conditions of educators. First is the physical environment of schools and classrooms in which the teachers work. Superintendents recognized that not all schools have the funds and resources to update their buildings' facilities, meaning that educators are working in conditions without air conditioning, updated technology, or adequate resources for planning. The physical environment is not the only thing pushing teachers away from the profession. Stressors such as managing student behavior contribute to the emotional and mental overload of teaching. Superintendents noted that they have seen an increased number of disruptive behaviors in students. Many pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as the source of this problem when it caused a gap of behavior-based instruction and social-emotional learning (SEL). Currently, teachers are losing instructional time to address student behaviors. This leads to teacher burnout, which is defined

as a “response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Characteristics of burnout included exhaustion, a feeling of cynicism, and a lack of attachment to, and pride in, the job, prompting a sense of failure (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

An additional product of these behavioral challenges is the load it puts on support staff, non-licensed staff, and administrators. Superintendents expressed the need to hire additional personnel such as paraprofessionals, administrators, and substitute teachers to respond to the demands of dealing with disruptive student behavior. Unfortunately, because there is a shortage of people to fill these positions, current administrators and teachers are burdened with handling these behaviors.

Sub theme: Salary

The argument for increasing teacher salaries has gained momentum in recent years, especially in response to the teacher shortage. The superintendents’ comments covered this topic well, as pay was mentioned consistently across the board, no matter the area, rurality, and type of school. Opinions regarding salary differed as superintendents commented on the strengths and struggles related to teacher pay. For example, an overwhelming number of superintendents agreed that teachers should be paid more, but they highlighted the limitations that districts face when actually trying to implement this. One superintendent compared teacher salaries to the outside workforce, reflecting:

Teacher wages are . . . **unsustainable** in the competitive marketplace. [I]t is a much less desirable career for many than it once was. Districts **cannot afford** to continue raising wages [because of budget constraints, but they cannot afford not to] in a marketplace where **higher paying jobs** do not even require a college degree or licensure. (Elementary Superintendent in Northeast, Suburban Area)

Many superintendents echoed this concern, noticing a large amount of turnover due to staff leaving for better-paying jobs that require fewer physical, mental, and emotional demands. Some teachers are leaving the field of education completely, because they are not seeing a salary equal to the challenges of the job. In addition to this, educators are frustrated when jobs that require less education than a teacher promise higher salaries.

Sub theme: Retirement

The topic of teacher retirement benefits in the superintendents’ comments often paired with salary concerns. In January of 2011, Illinois teachers moved from Tier 1 retirement benefits to Tier 2 (TRS, 2023). In Tier 2, teachers

are required to work until they are 67 years old with 10 years of service (TRS, 2023). Teachers may retire as early as age 62 with 10 years of service, but must accept a six percent reduction of retirement benefits for every year the person is under 67 (TRS, 2023). Superintendents pointed to the shift of retirement tiers as the first cause of the teacher shortage. One superintendent listed the many concerns of the new retirement requirements, stating:

The new [retirement] requirements are a **disaster in the making**. WHO wants to be teaching at the age proposed by the State on our new teachers? **More importantly, what parents will want their child to learn from an elderly teacher that may not have the capability to get on the floor and read a book?** (Elementary Superintendent in Southeast, Rural Area)

Several superintendents shared these concerns, citing reasons of health concerns and the inability to keep up with the ever-evolving culture of education. Superintendents also agreed that moving to Tier 2 retirement would hurt efforts to recruit new teachers. They do not expect that young individuals attending college would want to commit to a career with such a high retirement age and decreased financial benefit. One superintendent explained the widening gap between the average college graduate and a teacher-education graduate:

The salary disparity between the average college graduate's potential starting income and a teacher's starting salary with a BA/BS [is **increasing**]. TRS Tier III [*sic*] retirement age for full benefits is unrealistic especially **when competing with a neighboring state** like MO. (Unit Superintendent in Southwest, Suburban Area)

This superintendent also noted that if teachers are not leaving the profession completely, they are leaving Illinois to teach in neighboring states such as Missouri, Iowa, Indiana. Superintendents added these states surrounding Illinois offer better wages, fewer requirements for licensure, and earlier retirement.

The sub themes of working conditions, salary, and retirement benefits are closely related. When thinking about the financial benefits of teaching, superintendents recognized that raising salaries or changing retirement tiers is not enough. Both must coincide with each other. A superintendent commented:

Obviously, there is a **SERIOUS teacher and school personnel shortage** in Illinois. It is a problem that is **not** going to be fixed by **increasing salaries**. We absolutely need to **improve the environments** in our schools. (Elementary Superintendent in Southeast, Town Area)

Superintendents echoed that bettering the pay of teachers is not enough. Working conditions affect teachers' views of salary. Both must be considered, to ensure the decline of teacher burnout across the board.

Theme 3: Politically Motivated Lack of Respect for Educators

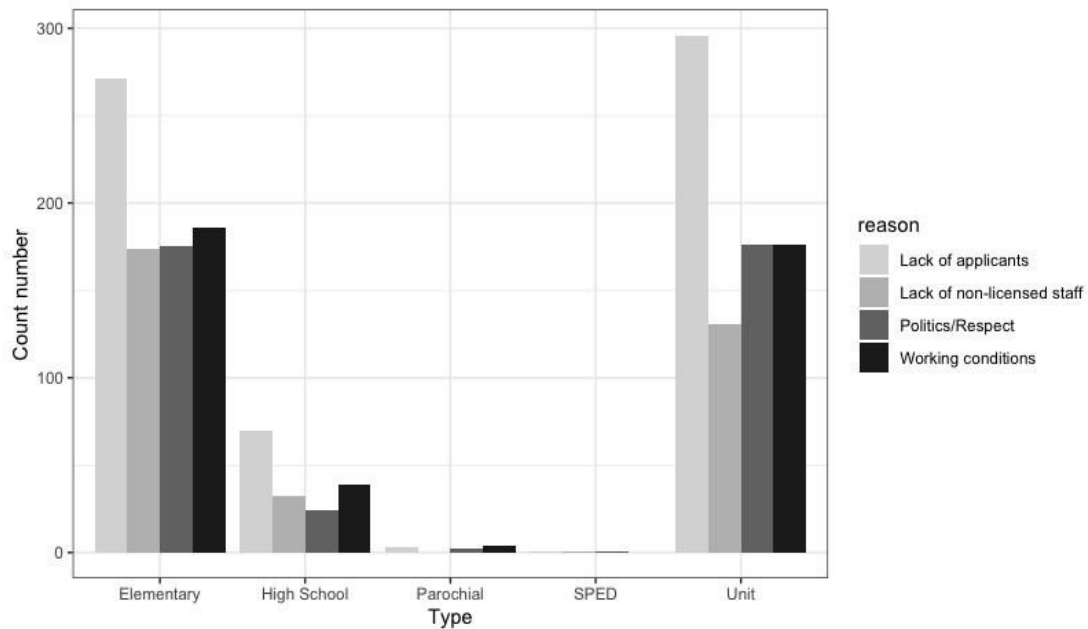
The COVID-19 pandemic, accusations that critical race theory is being taught in schools, and book bans are just some of the highly politicized topics that affect the field of education. In the wake of these political conversations, superintendents acknowledged a wave of politically motivated lack of respect for public education that is driving teachers away. These superintendents believed that it is hurting recruitment efforts in their districts and tarnishing the name of public education as a whole.

Sub theme: Politics

Superintendents pointed to a problem with negative political discourse at the local, state, and federal levels. They believed this is one reason for teachers leaving the profession: they no longer feel supported by communities, parents, and legislation. Many politicians are using the topic of education as a “pawn” to advance their popularity with followers (whether the claims are true or untrue). One suggested:

Education will continue to be a campaign issue as we get closer to midterms and the next presidential election. Between book bans, CRT, transgender issues, etc., school leaders and teachers are burning out and hesitant to enter the field. (High School Superintendent in West Central, Town Area)

Superintendents, other administrators, and teachers suffer from these polarizing effects. Teachers who are already exhausted with the challenges of the educator shortage are feeling this judgmentalism and leaving for professions that are not as heavily criticized. Superintendents closely related educator working conditions with politics and respect. These two themes had similar rates of repetition across types of district, as Figure 2 illustrates.

Figure 2*Reasons across type*

Districts are not only grappling with the rhetoric of politicians wanting to appease agendas of political parties, but they are also scrambling to be in compliance with an increasing number of legislated mandates. Superintendents noted 57 times in their comments the challenges of keeping pace with mandates. During the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents claimed that the mandates associated with masks and vaccinations were tiring to educators as they were grappling for student and parent compliance. Moreover, superintendents stated that COVID-19 mandates are not the sole issue. Many added that they believe the instructional mandates from the State are excessively “micromanaging” teachers. The superintendents described these as “red tape” mandates that are “curricular” or “operational” in scope. These mandates are being imposed despite schools already being overburdened with staffing problems.

Sub theme: Representation in media

Through my analysis of superintendent comments, I found that media was an influential factor that contributed to the declining respect for educators. The superintendents split this larger idea into two categories: parental involvement on social media, and news outlets’ representation of the profession. Superintendents claimed that social media posts and engagement from parents have changed the tone of parent/school relationships. A superintendent added that education professionals are exhausted, tired of being the target of negative social media campaigns (IARSS, 2023). Social media also have changed the

methods for communicating between parents and teachers. If the content of a specific post is negative, it influences parents' perceptions of their children's school. Administrators are tasked with "policing the fallout" of these posts.

Along with social media, superintendents stated that general negative media portrayal is hurting the climate of public schools and not aiding in eliminating the teacher shortage. Superintendents blamed the scrutiny placed on education by news outlets as a negative influence towards recruiting and retaining teachers. It also acts as a stressor for current teachers, as they are weighed down by constant criticism. One superintendent said:

We have bashed education for decades and COVID showed how **valuable in-person learning is**. We need a positive education campaign to fix the damage and **encourage** people to enter. (Unit Superintendent in West Central, Town Area)

Despite the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic posed to schools, superintendents believe that it also reminded parents and community members of the value of educators. Those same superintendents suggested that a positive social media campaign highlighting educators could undo some of the hardships caused by the polarizing and difficult climate surrounding public education.

Sub theme: Respect

Superintendents frequently mentioned the overall idea that there is a dwindling respect for educators from the general public. Politics, mandates, social media, and news outlets are the many factors contributing to the decline of respect for public educators. This disrespect can present itself locally to teachers in the form of negative interactions with parents and community members. Schools are encumbered with the strain of the teacher shortage, a strain made worse when educators feel frustrated by the negative discourse and leave the profession.

The superintendents named a wide variety of culprits contributing to the problem of diminishing respect for educators. The most significant reasons include student behavior, parent relations, curricular changes and mandates stemming from legislation, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of all the comments, superintendents agreed on one thing: teachers deserve respect.

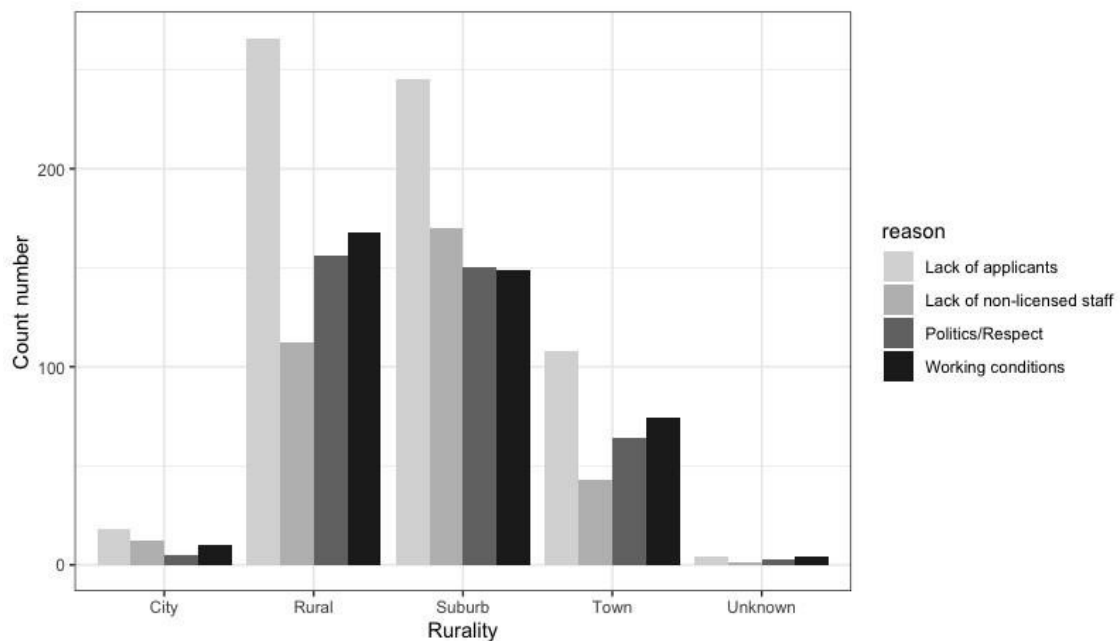
Theme 4: Shortage of Substitutes, Paraprofessionals, and Non-licensed Staff

The final theme that emerged from the discourse analysis is the lack of individuals serving as substitutes, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, and other non-licensed staff. Not only are districts struggling to fill these vital positions, but this shortage also poses problems in schools as current certified staff are having to take on additional roles. One superintendent admitted also to being

a bus driver to alleviate the shortage in their district (IARSS, 2023). Adopting added responsibilities expedites the burnout felt by teachers and administrators. The repetition of the keywords “paraprofessional,” “substitute,” and “bus driver” occurred 610 times within the superintendent comments. Figure 3 illustrates the theme of the non-licensed staff shortage appeared more frequently with districts in the suburbs.

Figure 3

Reasons across rurality



Superintendents reported that one of the causes for the non-licensed staff shortage is the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendents found that people who held a non-licensed staff position before the pandemic are not returning at the same rate as others. Superintendents attributed the problem to staff finding better pay and hours in a job with fewer work demands.

To address the substitute and paraprofessional shortage, ISBE loosened the requirements for holding one of these positions (Public Act 102–0713, 2022). The same has not been done for bus drivers. Superintendents stated that the requirements to obtain a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) and the need to get a School Bus Endorsement are too rigorous for current drivers to keep up with, and make it too daunting to recruit new drivers. They recommended that the same actions to mitigate the paraprofessional and substitute shortage be taken to address the bus driver shortage.

Sub theme: Burnout of current staff

Educators are having to compensate for vacant non-licensed staff positions by working outside of their contract hours and job descriptions. Administrators are covering teachers' classes when they cannot find a substitute, and teachers are supervising classrooms, lunches, and recesses during their scheduled preparatory time, during which they are supposed to plan instruction. This is taking away time and resources for teachers to conduct the day-to-day duties of their job comfortably. Not only is there a non-licensed-staff shortage; in addition, current staff are stretched thin to the point of burnout, leading to high turnover.

Discussion

Low Pool of Highly Qualified Applicants

As the bar charts reflect, there is overwhelming agreement among superintendents that quality teaching applicants are scarce. Illinois currently implements several stopgap measures (or temporary policies) to negate the longstanding and severe educator shortage. Stopgap measures include lowering fees attached to reinstating licenses (Public Act 102–0710, 2022), increasing the number of days substitutes can teach consecutively (Public Act 102–0712 & 102–0717, 2022), loosening requirements for obtaining licensure (Public Act 102–0713, 2022), and the Retiree Return to Work program (TRS, 2021).

The lack of quality educators especially affects students in special education, as they have learning needs and supports indicated in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that must be met. School districts that do not have the staff or resources to fill those educational needs can be in violation of the requirement to offer Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students, a mandated legal right for students with disabilities.

It is no surprise that there are few highly qualified individuals ready to hire, as colleges and universities are turning out fewer teaching candidates every year. And even if a student graduates with a Professional Educator License (PEL), there is no guarantee they will choose to enter the field of education. A study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago found that only 18 percent of individuals would recommend a young person enter the profession of education, citing reasons including low pay, lack of resources, high workload, stress, lack of safety, and other factors (NORC, 2022).

To recruit new teachers, universities are making PELs more accessible. Alternative routes to licensure are starting to become widely implemented in Illinois universities. This allows individuals who hold a bachelor's degree to work in a school on a provisional license, get paid a beginning teacher's salary, and take classes through an accredited program (ISBE, 2023). This is typically

a one-to-two-year residency program before individuals are granted their PEL and can be hired officially within a school (ISBE, 2023). Illinois has also funded grants to local schools to support “Grow Your Own” programs (ISBE, 2022). Grow Your Own programs recruit teaching candidates from high-needs schools by supporting them throughout obtaining their licensure, in hopes that they return to schools with significant teacher vacancies. This is another statewide effort to strengthen Illinois’ educator pipeline.

Working Conditions, Salary, and Retirement

The constant raising of salaries while offering staying-on bonuses and signing-on bonuses can cause deficit spending, if the district does not have proper funds. This negatively affects recruitment in districts of need, which oftentimes have smaller budgets. While this has been a priority for school districts, at the rate of the current educator shortage, this practice is simply unsustainable.

In the 2022–2023 IARSS Educator Shortage Survey, superintendents noted that teacher workload is a slightly larger contributor to the shortage than compensation is. Out of responding districts, 40 percent reported that the demanding workload has a major or severe impact on the educator shortage (IARSS, 2023). Of the reporting districts, 39 percent indicated that teachers finding better compensation in other professions has a major or severe impact on the educator shortage (IARSS, 2023). It is important that school officials recognize that a better working environment is just as desirable as, if not more than, a better salary. Although financial benefits are not something to ignore, districts can also use their resources to foster a better working environment and boost morale of staff. This can help them in their recruitment and retention of educators.

Politically Motivated Lack of Respect for Educators

Education has been the focus of recent political conversations. The “story” of what it means to be a teacher is being told by politicians, rather than educators themselves. As parents and/or guardians are hearing a negative rhetorical narrative, their perception of their children’s schools is altered. This is hurting that crucial parent-teacher relationship that is vital to a student’s success. Some of the issues that districts are facing are book bans, topics surrounding gender identity, and the objection to critical race theory supposedly being taught in schools. All of this is coming after the global COVID-19 pandemic, when schools—being providers of “essential services”—were at the forefront of the mask and vaccination mandate debate. With already challenging working conditions, educators are tired of being weighed down by the media and, rather, desire respect and praise for their work.

Shortage of Substitutes, Paraprofessionals, and Non-licensed Staff

Illinois' highest-needs student populations are affected by the non-licensed staffing shortage the most. Special education teachers may, depending on their caseload, need additional paraprofessional help in the classroom. Paraprofessionals help with parts of instruction, serving snacks, reading with students, addressing disruptive behaviors, attending to personal needs of students, and other tasks designated by the special educator. During the shortage, special education classrooms are not receiving the paraprofessional support they need, if the district cannot find applicants. This is putting an additional strain on special educators, who already have a higher expectation placed on them for addressing students' learning needs in accordance with their Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Moreover, special education teachers will indicate in a student's IEP the amount and type of paraprofessional support the student will need throughout the day. If a district cannot service the paraprofessional support accordingly, the school is not in compliance with the student's IEP. This poses serious educational deficits for students in special education classes, along with potential reprimands towards the school and teacher.

Conclusions

When reflecting on the four emerging themes, it is essential to emphasize that all of these themes work together in a web-like structure. School districts are unable to find highly qualified applicants to fill the increasing number of vacancies. Open positions in districts are on the rise because people are leaving the field for better working conditions and financial benefits. Districts are not getting newly graduated education majors because of the increasing pressure of people discouraging them from going into the field of education, citing reasons such as the demands of the work and the lack of respect for the profession. The lack of respect that is caused by local, state, and federal politics directly affects the working conditions of teachers. This causes teacher burnout which is exacerbated by the fact that they must take on extra responsibilities including substituting, driving buses, and other non-professional duties. This is the current story of what it means to be a public-school teacher in Illinois. This is why an educator shortage exists.

By looking at the teacher shortage problem as a web-like structure, the conclusion can be drawn that in order to eradicate the shortage, all themes must be addressed at once. For example, raising the salary of an educator is not the sole solution for ending the shortage, because teachers will still face poor working conditions and a lack of respect that may drive them out of the profession. When designing a solution for improving working conditions and increasing salary and benefits, districts are addressing the top two reasons for the shortage as indicated by superintendents (IARSS, 2023). Educators, superintendents, legislators,

parents, community members, and other stakeholders must take a multi-faceted approach to the educator shortage.

First and foremost, districts must look into retaining teachers in addition to recruiting them. Although both are important, losing experienced teachers negatively impacts mentoring programs set in the school for new teachers. Districts that do not have mentoring programs need to establish and implement them to retain quality educators. Districts that already have mentoring programs should evaluate the programs' efficacy to make sure they are serving teachers to the highest degree. Districts additionally can offer sign-on bonuses and longevity bonuses both to recruit and retain teachers simultaneously in their districts.

Salary-wise, superintendents agreed that they believed teachers and non-licensed staff are underpaid. However, they also stressed the financial burden this puts on school districts. The desire to raise educators' salaries to match those in the corporate world is an admirable yet overly optimistic goal, which reveals a systemic problem. Superintendents called on the State to look continuously for ways to sustain public school districts' funding, as this is where salaries are sourced. Last, the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) needs to explore ways to offer better incentives to teachers in the Tier 2 retirement plan, a big problem in recruiting educators.

Superintendents also recommended in the comments the easing up of licensure. There are several ways universities, regional offices of education (ROEs), and the State (ISBE) can aid in this. Universities can expand on "2 + 2" and "Grow Your Own" programs and increase scholarship assistance, while ROEs and ISBE can review and adapt processes of mandates such as required trainings and obtention of professional development.

Finally, there needs to be a substantial change to society's mindset about public education. At present we are living in an emotionally and politically charged landscape. Districts, communities, and legislators have to promote to one another the value of public schools. Everyone must shed light on the altruistic and crucial things teachers, administrators, and non-licensed staff do to enhance the lives of youth. The impact that schools have on their community cannot be ignored either. Schools have a way of bringing towns together around extracurricular activities, programs, and academic events. When we lift up public education in society, it is then that we will see progress in our schools and can beneficially rewrite the story of what it means to be a teacher.

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