U.S. EDUCATION

'There's No Point in Going if I Have No Teachers.' How the Educator Shortage Is Affecting One New Jersey School District

Katie Reilly @katiemacreilly | Oct. 7, 2022

"Sometimes I just don't feel like going because there's no point in going if I have no teachers," says 17-year-old Abriannie Lima in Paterson, N.J.

Bryan Anselm for TIME

Shaye Brown in her home in Paterson, N.J., on Oct. 5. Brown resigned as a special education teacher in Paterson Public Schools for a higher salary at a neighboring district. She knows leaving will make Paterson's teacher shortage worse; her 9-year-old son's class in the district lacks a permanent teacher.

Shaye Brown is uniquely familiar with the nation's teacher shortage. About a week into the school year, she learned that her 9-year-old son, who is in a specialized class for students with autism, would not have a full-time teacher because of an acute shortage of teachers at Paterson Public Schools in New Jersey. Instead, a substitute teacher is filling in. And on Sept. 12, she resigned from her job as a special education teacher in the same district to take a better paying job at a neighboring school. She knows her decision will make Paterson's teacher shortage worse.

"I take being a special educator very seriously, but I have to care for my children," says Brown, who makes $59,000 per year in Paterson. Her new district, which is about two miles away in Prospect Park, is paying her $4,500 more per year. "I have to live. I have to pay my bills."

Paterson—where a third of the 26,000 students live below the poverty line—had about double the district's normal number of vacant teacher jobs at the end of the school year in June. While administrators managed to hire some 150 teachers over the summer, the district still started this school year with 125 open teaching positions, growing to 137 vacancies as teachers left mid-year. The teacher shortage is likely to keep getting worse; Brown's last day will be Nov. 11.

The problem in Paterson is reflected in districts across the country. More than half of public school principals reported that their school was understaffed entering this school

year, especially for special-education positions, according to a U.S. Education Department survey published Sept. 27. That's compared to 20% who said they were understaffed before the pandemic. But, like so much of education in the U.S., this problem isn't affecting all schools equally. Several teachers told TIME they were leaving Paterson for school districts that could pay them better and offered more resources. At least one survey has found that schools in lower-income areas are more likely to have vacancies.

No homework, classes in auditoriums

Meanwhile, students are suffering the consequences. At Eastside High School in Paterson, nearly 600 students are currently enrolled in science classes that lack a full-time teacher, with four substitutes filling in as the school tries to fill five vacancies for science teachers. A spokesperson for the district said the school's supervisor of science has been uploading lessons and assignments for those students, who receive grades via a virtual learning platform. Some students don't have a teacher for their science classes at all, and are working on assignments in the school's auditorium "under staff supervision." In addition to paying existing staff extra money to cover classes with vacancies, the district says it will soon begin paying teachers a stipend to grade work for classes without permanent teachers.

A month into her senior year at John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson, 17-year-old Abriannie Lima has permanent gym and English teachers, but has a rotation of substitute teachers in three other classes, where she says she has still has received no homework or graded assignments this year. (A spokesperson for the district says classes without permanent teachers have assignments posted online every day.) "It's hard because it's my last year. We actually haven't been in school for almost two years," says Lima. "Sometimes I just don't feel like going because there's no point in going if I have no teachers."

That's exactly what worries Brown, who fears her son will fall behind in writing and math without a certified special education teacher.

The pandemic led to some of the biggest declines in academic achievement recorded in the last 50 years and widened the achievement gap between Black students and white students. As schools try to help students catch up, their solutions include small-group instruction and individual tutoring—which are nearly impossible to offer when schools don't have enough educators. "You're talking about gaps in learning. We are still suffering from COVID," Brown says. "I feel like now with the vacancies, we're never going to be able to catch up."

Teacher shortage: An unequal problem

While surveys throughout the pandemic hinted at a looming mass exodus of teachers, that hasn't come to pass. And some experts point out that many school districts have been using federal relief funds to hire more teachers and staff than they had before the pandemic.

Researchers found at least 36,000 vacant teaching positions across the country and at least 163,000 positions that are held by under-qualified teachers, according to a working paper published by Brown University's Annenberg Institute in August. Their analysis shows the problem varies widely by state. Mississippi, for example, has about 68 vacancies for every 10,000 students. New Jersey—a state that, alongside cities like Paterson, is also home to some of the wealthiest communities in America—has just one vacancy for every 10,000 students, based on data from the 2021-22 school year.

And certain districts are struggling more acutely. Schools serving more students of color and schools in high-poverty neighborhoods reported a larger percentage of teacher vacancies than schools serving mostly white students and schools in wealthier areas, according to an Education Department survey from January. Even before the pandemic, high-poverty schools had about twice the teacher turnover rate of low-poverty schools.

Public school funding in the U.S. depends heavily on property taxes. As a result, districts serving wealthier, white students tend to be better resourced than those serving low-income students and students of color. That's partially why high-poverty districts, with less money for teacher raises and other resources, are more likely to have teacher shortages right now.

"Even if we provide class coverage, it's not the same as having your own teacher," says Paterson Superintendent Eileen Shafer, adding that the district has often dealt with vacancies, but has typically been able to fill the positions before September.

In Paterson, where about 60% of students are Latino and 25% are Black, two-thirds of students are considered economically disadvantaged, according to state data. In New Jersey, state funding makes up much of the local funding gap in poorer school districts—though Paterson is in the midst of contract negotiations with the teachers' union, which is calling for an increased starting salaries and regular raises.

While teachers have long raised concerns about being underpaid and disrespected, the wage gap between teachers and other professions has grown worse over time. In 2021, teachers earned 23.5% less than college graduates with a comparable education level, a record high since 1996, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

To try to fill the vacancies, Paterson Public Schools is holding two virtual job fairs each month and is planning to prioritize recruiting new college graduates in December and May. The district is also offering a $7,500 bonus to teachers who sign a two-year contract.

But Jess Katz, an English teacher at John F. Kennedy High School, calls the new teacher bonus a "slap in the face" to educators who worked for the district through the height of the pandemic. She recently resigned from Paterson to transfer to another district with better pay and more school resources—including a theater program, which she says JFK High doesn't offer.

That school also has no teacher vacancies, which means Katz will be able to focus on her own classes without covering for missing colleagues. Once she leaves in November, she says there will only be two remaining English teachers for juniors at her school, when there were once four. A district spokesperson says some classes have been combined to make up for those resignations and said all classes would be covered by someone certified to teach English.

"Half our juniors won't have what they need in this crucial year before senior year," Katz says. "My biggest concern is that these kids are not going to be ready for the next phase of their lives."

So far this year, Katz has been asked to use prep periods to cover for other classes with vacancies, but says she's not given enough notice to prepare lessons and is sometimes covering math or science classes outside her expertise. She usually takes attendance and supervises students while they work on assignments for other classes.

Katz worries about who will cover her classes when she leaves and whether anyone will be there to teach her juniors about writing their college application essays—something she typically covers at the end of the year. "It puts them at such a deficit, to get into college, to go into any career they want because they don't have the fundamentals that they need," she says. "This is a crucial year."

Katz says her new school is paying her $15,000 more per year. Brown says the pay raise she negotiated was worth the change because she'll be able to pay bills more easily and afford extracurricular activities for her son.

She's still hoping Paterson will make changes like regular pay raises that would keep more teachers in the district and stem the shortage. "This is where you really need to invest," Brown says. "We need a teacher in every classroom. This is not negotiable."
