

# Addressing the Teacher Shortage Crisis: One Regional University’s Approach to Mobilizing a Response to Partnering School Districts

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## Abstract

*Many researchers have studied the attrition problem that has been impacting teacher retention in K-12 classrooms for years, looking for ways to stem the tide of teachers leaving the workforce (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). However, almost half of educators continue to leave the workforce after three to five years of classroom teaching. After the COVID-19 lockdown, that number has increased, posing a difficult situation for school districts needing to hire effective, certified teachers. However, the question remains: how can institutions of higher education prepare effective educators to go into classrooms and remain there for the duration of their career? Research has demonstrated that teachers with more experience have a greater impact on students’ academic growth than teachers who have less than three years’ experience in a classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Ensuring that teachers are prepared to be effective teachers who remain in classrooms beyond the five-year mark is critical to student learning, especially students in lower socio-economic schools who may lag behind their more affluent peers. Researchers at a regional university in Texas determined that meetings with superintendents across a large swath of central Texas might assist all stakeholders in preparing effective teachers to enter and support the workforce in their area. This paper highlights strategic meetings and key findings that have been put into practice to work toward a certified and effective teacher workforce.*

Keywords: teacher attrition, partnership-building, effective teacher workforce

Many states are currently experiencing a teacher shortage, and districts across states are competing to hire qualified, certified teacher teachers. Carver-Thomas et al. (2022) noted that “due to a shortage of fully qualified teachers in California, positions have increasingly been filled with underprepared teachers who have not completed the requirements for full credentials—either interns or those teaching on 1-year permits or waivers” (p. v). The teacher shortage began before the COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia & Weiss, 2019), but the situation has been exacerbated by several issues. Pressley (2021) noted that teacher burnout is due to a variety of factors including anxiety over the pandemic,

anxiety around communicating with parents, and support from administrators. However, Pressley noted that “there was no difference in teacher burnout stress based on ethnicity, location, years of teaching experience, and instruction type” (p. 327).

This teacher shortage is happening across the United States, but for specialized teaching areas such as special education or bilingual education, finding teachers is more difficult (Kennedy, 2020; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In Texas, bilingual educators are critical to supporting the academic growth of students. Kennedy (2020) noted that the number of English learners (ELs) in the state of Texas

rose 38% from 2007 to 2017, and “Texas is one of a small handful of states that mandates some form of bilingual education to serve highly concentrated groups of ELs who share the same non-English home language” (p. 338). It is essential that universities preparing teachers through Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) work with their partner districts to identify needs and/or critical shortages to ensure all students have qualified and certified teachers in their classrooms. One regional university organized meetings with over 40 districts in the surrounding area to determine what supports would assist districts. There were many ideas and suggestions shared, but there were some points of confusion and/or miscommunication. Ensuring accurate communication is essential in finding a solution to the teacher shortage crisis.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Teacher attrition has been a concern for the past four decades or more, and professionals have studied this problem with a focus on identifying ways to decrease teacher attrition in the workforce (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Studies report that teacher attrition, or the number of teachers lost in the first three to five years of their career, is anywhere between 30% (Andrews & Quinn, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2003) to 50% (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The purpose of the study by Ingersoll and Smith (2004) was to identify one support to decrease attrition and keep teachers in schools. They reported on empirical evidence about how induction affects the turnover of new teachers. The term mentoring should not be used synonymously with induction programs; mentoring is a part of teacher induction, and induction falls into the category of professional development (Wong, 2003). Though the terms are often used to convey the same meaning, they are two distinct terms. Although districts have provided increased support for beginning teachers over the past decades, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the attrition rates have continued to rise, at an increased pace in many areas.

The national teacher shortage across the United States is an ongoing issue made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Kennedy, 2020; Pressley, 2021; Williams et al., 2021). However, this issue aligns with the declining enrollment in higher education caused in some part by state cuts to higher education and rising tuition (Jackson & Saenz, 2021). To ensure students have a teacher in their classrooms, districts of innovation in

Texas and other states are hiring teachers without certification (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022). Importantly, Castro and Edwards (2021) noted that this “raises important questions about scaling up efforts for some online and for-profit TPPs without carefully examining organizational decline, and specifically, why at least four sample programs closed or received warnings from the state” (p. 22). Amid these crises, EPPs are directly impacted. Lower enrollment impairs the ability to provide qualified teachers for local school district partners. Likewise, EPPs at institutions of higher education are in direct competition with for-profit entities to provide educator preparation for those persons wanting to enter the teaching profession. For those seeking educator certification, there is confusion about the difference between the non-profit and for-profit EPPs that directly affect their preparation for the teaching profession.

EPP’s invest time, resources, and energy to maximize the design and delivery of their teacher certification programs. Course content is reviewed, aligned to state standards, and sequenced to optimize preservice teacher preparation. Field experiences are developed and supervised to maximize experiential learning and practice. Programs are carefully designed to ensure preservice teachers move through programs in a seamless manner from admittance into an EPP all the way to state certification and employment. Nevertheless, barriers still exist in ensuring districts have qualified and certified educators in a timely manner. Classroom teachers have been overwhelmed for many years, but the COVID-19 pandemic brought a new type of anxiety and weariness to classroom teachers across the nation (Pressley, 2021). Although teachers pivoted quickly to online teaching (Doonan & Kenneally, 2022), the technological learning curve during a health crisis impacted their emotional health and well-being. Doonan and Kenneally noted that going forward, “it will be critically important for policymakers and the state, local and federal levels to fully understand the issues confronting the K-12 workforce, along with ways to recruit and retain these workers” (p. 14). New stressors were added to the long list of concerns teachers had been coping with for years, including low pay, high expectations, demands on time, and feeling as if they have no voice in the decisions that rule their professional life.

Retirement during the height of COVID-19 increased the lack of certified teachers available for the United States

workforce (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). In Texas during the 2021 fiscal year, 458,133 teachers retired compared to 445,000 in 2020 (trs.texas.gov). Those in the three-to-seven-years of experience group quit, realizing that they were not so far invested that they could not make the career change. Finding ways to support educators through increased pay and/or work-life balance, increasing the number of certified teachers graduating each year, and retaining teachers in the profession are all part of the solution. However, another key piece in this ongoing problem might be more robust planning between superintendents running small, rural, or large, urban school districts and deans in colleges of education housing EPPs. Through effective and ongoing communication between these two entities, superintendents and deans, new ways to collaborate may emerge to ensure qualified, certified teachers are prepared to enter and stay in the teaching profession.

### **Identified Potential Solution**

To help address the teacher shortage concerns, the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development (CHED) from Texas A&M University-Central Texas selected key faculty and staff to meet in the fall of 2021. The team, under the direction of the dean, planned a proactive series of “Lunch-Listen-Learn” regional meetings for the spring of 2022 that included superintendents across the central Texas area. These meetings were designed to take identified stakeholders into the field to meet with area school districts and to identify select staffing needs beyond what is normally expected because of retirements, spousal transfers, etc.

### **Roadshow Planning**

The internal planning began in October 2021 when the Dean of the College proposed a traveling roadshow that would take faculty in charge of graduate and undergraduate programs, along with directors of field experience and certification, into the field to meet with key officials. The geographic area included school districts in Central Texas, and superintendents of these districts were invited to attend and present their present and future critical staffing needs. The draft agenda for each of these meetings included time for faculty to briefly present information about the certification programs that the University currently supported that might help assist districts in filling shortage areas. This was to be followed by engaging district

officials in discussing what personnel they needed now (as many districts had permanent substitutes in classrooms) as well as what they anticipated their needs to be for the 2022-2023 school year. These discussions were planned to continue during a working lunch provided by the University to maximize the two-hour meeting time that was scheduled. A calendar of roadshows was drafted that showed the first regional meeting occurring in the last week of January 2022 and occurring every two-to-four weeks through the end of April.

**Round One.** The first roadshow meeting occurred on February 8, 2022, and targeted Central Texas school districts near the East Williamson County Higher Education Center (EWCHEC) located in Hutto, Texas. The initial meeting set in January was delayed due to COVID-19 vaccinations being offered by the districts. Fourteen districts were invited to participate, and eleven participants attended. Once the dean presented the purpose for the meeting and brief presentations by the faculty, it did not take long for participants to engage faculty to discuss their short-term and long-term needs and how the university could mobilize and be responsive to their concerns. Key takeaways from this meeting included: (1) reactivating the university’s alternative certification program (ACP) to streamline the time it took to get a candidate ready for an intern certificate; (2) having a focused effort beginning in eighth grade to encourage students to become a teacher and possible new TAFE chapters; and, (3) offering coursework at EWCHEC to accept students from a teacher academy/early college high school program. A summary of the major takeaways was sent to all the participants a few days after the meeting.

**Round Two.** The second roadshow meeting targeted school districts in Bell County and surrounding areas on March 1, 2022, in Temple ISD using the same agenda and format as the initial February 8 meeting. Many of the ideas shared by these district officials repeated those voiced at the first meeting in February, however, some new takeaways were suggested by district officials. Specifically: (1) investigating embedding reading academy training in the preparation sequence of courses in the ACP; (2) school districts offering to pay the costs of paraprofessionals who had a four-year degree and wanted teacher certification; and, (3) encouraging university field supervisors to provide quality feedback and support

specifically in classroom management, communication with parents, and professional behaviors of new educators. A summary of the major takeaways was sent to all participants.

**Round Three.** The third and final roadshow meeting occurred on March 22, 2022, in Lampasas ISD, targeting districts in the western portion of the identified geographic area. Once again, the same agenda and format were followed. Many of the points that were made at the previous two roadshow meetings were highlighted. Worth noting was that the host school district had already identified paraprofessional candidates that they would like to start immediately in the ACP. A summary of the major takeaways was sent to all participants.

**After Action Plan**

The most important concern shared by all superintendents was a need for faster paths to certification. After the first meetings, key members of the team worked to set up an Alternative Certification Program (ACP), and 14 graduate students entered the ACP program in the summer, of 2022. Many of these students are already teaching in surrounding districts on internship or emergency certification as they register to take their state certification exams. There is another plan underway to recruit the next cohort through district support, with ACP candidates beginning coursework in the second semester of fall, 2022.

A post-event follow up survey was developed and distributed electronically to all participants of the three road show meetings. The survey was brief and targeted to provide data to guide the university team to better serve the regional school district partners and to assist planning forward for the second round of road show meetings to occur beginning in the fall of 2022. The survey included 15 total items, 14 of which were Likert items on a five-point scale, and one open-ended response. Of the 14 Likert items, the first two items had a general introductory purpose regarding overall usefulness of roadshow meetings and participant intent to attend future roadshow meetings. The remaining 12 Likert items focused on intentionally targeted issues and themes identified by the participants during the roadshow sessions. These 12 Likert items were grouped into three categories: Part I Takeaway Themes/Issues Identified by Participants, Part II Further Investigation of Teacher Shortage Theme, and Part III

Reflections on the Regional University Partnerships/Programs. Twenty-one participants responded to the survey. IRB approval was not secured because the survey was to clarify the perspectives of participants who attended any of the three road show meetings and did not require access to identifiable private information. The survey can be accessed at: [https://cttamus.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3ypUy3dbA SfoKDs](https://cttamus.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3ypUy3dbA SfoKDs).

Part I included 4 survey items designed to measure and clarify the themes and issues identified by the participants during the roadshow meetings. Survey item response options consisted of *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neither Disagree nor Agree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*. Table 1 below provides the frequency distribution of responses regarding participant-identified takeaway themes and issues.

**Table 1**  
*Response Frequencies for Takeaway Themes/Issues Identified by Participants*

Item	SD (n)	D (n)	N (n)	A (n)	SA (n)
Addressing Teacher Shortage is an important issue in my school district.	0	0	0	4	17
Finding/Using an Alternative Certification pathway is an important issue in my school district.	0	0	0	8	13
Having a student organization to promote the Teaching Profession is an important issue in my school district.	0	0	4	10	7
Having a Teacher Academy or Early College High School is an important issue in my school district.	0	1	6	9	5

*Note.* SD=*Strongly Disagree*, D=*Disagree*, N=*Neither Disagree nor Agree*, A=*Agree*, SA=*Strongly Agree*

Based on the frequency distribution of responses in Table 1, addressing teacher shortage is clearly an important issue with 17 of 21 responses *Strongly Agree* and 21 of 21

responses *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Additionally, finding and using a viable pathway to alternative certification is of importance, with 13 of 21 responses *Strongly Agree* and 21 of 21 responses *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Lesser importance is associated with the themes/issues of having a student organization to promote the teaching profession and having a teacher academy or early college high school.

Part II included 4 survey items designed to measure and clarify the further investigation of teacher shortage themes and issues. Survey item response options consisted of *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neither Disagree nor Agree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*. Table 2 below provides the frequency distribution of responses regarding further investigation of teacher shortage themes and issues.

**Table 2**  
*Response Frequencies for Further Investigation of Teacher Shortage Theme/Issue*

Item	SD (n)	D (n)	N (n)	A (n)	SA (n)
Growth in enrollment is a contributing cause of teacher shortage in my district.	0	3	3	7	8
End-of-career teacher retirement is a contributing cause of teacher shortage in my district.	0	1	7	8	5
Failure to retain current teachers/early exit is a contributing cause of teacher shortage in my district.	2	3	3	8	5
Low number of certified teacher applicants is a contributing cause of teacher shortage in my district.	0	0	2	8	11

*Note.* SD=*Strongly Disagree*, D=*Disagree*, N=*Neither Disagree nor Agree*, A=*Agree*, SA=*Strongly Agree*

Based on the frequency distribution of responses in Table 2, teacher shortages experienced in the participating districts are most impacted by a low number of certified teacher applicants, with 19 of 21 responses *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Additionally, growth in enrollment is identified as a contributing cause for teacher shortage, with 15 of 21 responses *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Lower

frequency responses are associated with end-of-career retirements and failure to retain current teachers.

Part III included 4 survey items designed to measure and clarify participant reflections on university partnerships and programs. Survey item response options consisted of *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Neither Disagree nor Agree*, *Agree*, and *Strongly Agree*. Table 3 below provides the frequency distribution of responses regarding reflections on university partnerships and programs.

**Table 3**  
*Response Frequencies for Reflections on TAMUCT Partnerships/Program*

Item	SD (n)	D (n)	N (n)	A (n)	SA (n)
The A&M University-Central Texas fast track Alternative Certification Program will help address teacher shortage in my district.	0	0	3	11	7
A&M University-Central Texas bringing certification programs/courses to the East Williamson County Higher Education Center (EWCHEC) facility in Hutto, Tx will help address teacher shortage in my district.	1	1	11	6	2
My district is currently promoting the A&M University-Central Texas certification programs (teacher, principal, superintendent, school counselor) to district employees.	0	1	4	12	4
I would like to receive additional information about the A&M University-Central Texas certification programs (teacher, principal, superintendent, school counselor).	0	0	2	16	3

*Note. SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Disagree nor Agree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree*

Based on the frequency distribution of responses in Table 3, participants want to receive information about university certification programs, with 19 of 21 responses *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Additionally, participants believe a university-based fast track alternative certification program will help address teacher shortage in their district, with 18 of 21 *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*. Conversely, bringing certification programs and courses to East Williamson County yielded a frequency distribution with 8 of 21 *Agree* or *Strongly Agree*.

When a College of Education housing EPPs has close contact with the districts they serve, it is possible to work together to support the needs of K-12 learners. There has not been a more important time for universities to team up with district partners to ensure elementary, middle, and high school students have effective certified teachers in their classrooms. Pedagogy is an art, and teaching is difficult, perhaps one of the most difficult occupations presently. Preparing educators with an arsenal of research-based instructional strategies through EPPs must be at the forefront of the teacher shortage crisis. Through working with district partners, university-based EPPs will better understand district needs.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The results and feedback from the regional meetings were critical, and through directives and needs stated by the superintendents and their primary designees, the CEHD team was able to plan a new program to support the needs of area districts. The speed with which this task was accomplished was amazing and daunting. Along with the team having a better understanding of difficulties faced by districts, districts also left meetings with a better understanding of requirements and hurdles faced by faculty in the EPP.

Key information gathered during the Roadshow visits indicated that in light of the serious shortage of classroom teachers, districts were willing to offer financial support to aspiring teacher candidates through enhanced substitute teacher pay. This provides districts with substitutes working toward certification through an accredited EPP, while also supporting students financially. This plan

allowed a school campus to have extra personnel available on critical days while allowing a teacher candidate valuable teaching experience and an enhanced access to income.

The next steps for the College of Education roadshow featured a return trip to the locations of the original regional meetings held in the spring of 2022 to provide a follow-up report on what was accomplished based on the feedback provided at each of the meetings. To date, the university has already returned to two of the three meeting sites in the fall of 2022 (and a third follow-up meeting planned in February of 2023) with formal reports on the actions taken by the university to provide immediate relief to help address the teacher shortages experienced by the partner districts. It was clear from the districts that reactivating the university-based alternative certification program for teachers was of prime importance and a key first priority as a short-term strategy. This was followed by the long-term strategy of establishing a chapter at each of the high school campuses of the Texas Association of Future Educators (TAFE) which promotes careers in teaching beginning in the eighth grade. In addition, the university is working to collaborate with high school campuses that have an early college high school program to include a teacher academy as an area of focus in the early college high school curriculum that would encourage high school students to pursue teaching as a career.

### **Conclusion**

One theme was very clear from the three roadshow meetings: there is a crisis in the classroom as teachers leave the profession faster than they can be replaced. This faster-spinning, revolving door created by the COVID-19 pandemic is hurting the quality of education for students. This is true for all districts across the United States, regardless of location or size of the district. There is a desperate need to hire teachers, and more importantly, to keep qualified teachers in K-12 schools. As a full partner with area school districts in this crisis, one EPP continues to find ways to work with district partners to ensure qualified educators are ready to be hired by surrounding districts. Through honest dialogue and discussions at a Roadshow planning, it is clear that school districts and EPPs are in this together, are stronger together, and must find ways to work towards solutions together.

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