

Is There A Teacher Shortage In Alaska?

By Neal Fried and Holly Stinson

The simplistic response to the question "Is there a teacher

shortage in Alaska?" is no. But in reality, this topic is too complicated to answer in such a casual fashion.

What Constitutes a Shortage?

According to the classical definition of an occupational shortage, a teacher shortage exists when there is an insufficient quantity of people to fill teaching positions at existing salaries. Using this definition a "teacher shortage" does not exist in Alaska. However, it is necessary to go beyond this naive conclusion because the teaching profession is so diverse, and the conditions of employment vary. In Alaska, geographic location and cultural differences are two examples of these varying conditions.

Urban and Rural School Districts Were Surveyed

To capture some of this diversity a survey was conducted of 37 school districts representing 87% of the state's public primary and secondary teachers. The districts were divided into three groups: those in urban communities (greater than 2,500 population) on the road system, those in smaller communities on the road system, and those in communities (of any size) not connected to the road system. Communities served by the Alaska Marine Highway were considered to be on the road system. Survey results from the small road-connected communities were similar to the urban communities, so most of the discussion emphasis will concentrate on the different experiences of the urban versus rural school districts.

Complementing the survey was Alaska Teacher Placement Bureau data from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. We also gathered Alaska Department of Education statistics, along with local and national literature on the subject.

Urban Alaska Is Swamped By Teaching Applicants

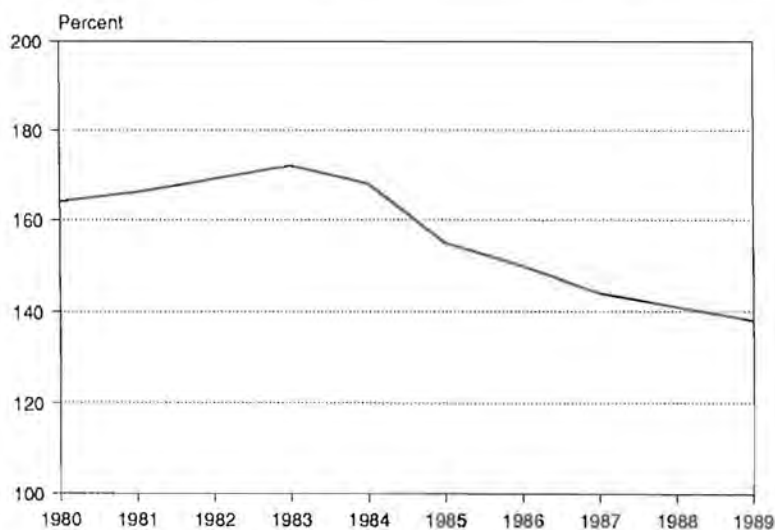
When a teaching position becomes available in most urban school districts, they are inundated by applicants. Few of the urban districts have difficulty filling positions. They generally enjoy low turnover and most have a large local pool of certified teachers to choose from.

Anchorage, a school district with 2,400 teachers, typically has 70 openings for teachers per year. During the past year the number of openings climbed to 200; 125 of these openings occurred because of the early retirement program. There was also a fallow three-year period in the 1980s when there were only 10 openings for secondary teachers in the entire school district. When open-

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Figure • 1

Average Teacher Salaries in Alaska As Percentage of National Average



Source: National Education Association.

T a b l e • 1

**Average Teacher Salaries in Alaska
by Region, 1989**

Southeast	\$39,314
Southcentral	\$40,250
Southwest	\$42,074
Interior	\$42,332
Northwest	\$45,797
Alaska	\$41,325

Source: Association of Alaska School Boards.

ings occur in Anchorage there is a local pool of 1,500 certified teachers to choose from. To become a school teacher in the Anchorage School District appears almost analogous to an actor attempting to become a movie star.

The stories of other urban school districts may not be quite as dramatic but their accounts are not much different. For example, the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District has 1,200 applications on file. The Kenai Peninsula Borough School District had 5,000 applications for 173 openings for the 1990-91 school year. Even a smaller district such as Skagway collected more than 1,800 unsolicited applications during the last year.

Some Teachers in Short Supply

Some urban school districts did have trouble recruiting for certain specialties. Most urban and smaller districts had difficulty finding qualified counselors, special education teachers and speech pathologists. And a number of urban school districts felt there was a shortage of minority candidates. Most of these specialty-specific shortages occur across all districts in Alaska and, in many cases, across the nation as well.

It was, however, equally surprising that computer, math and science teachers did not very often make the shortage list in the urban and smaller school districts. In one national study, Alaska was only one of five states that reported surpluses in these specialties.

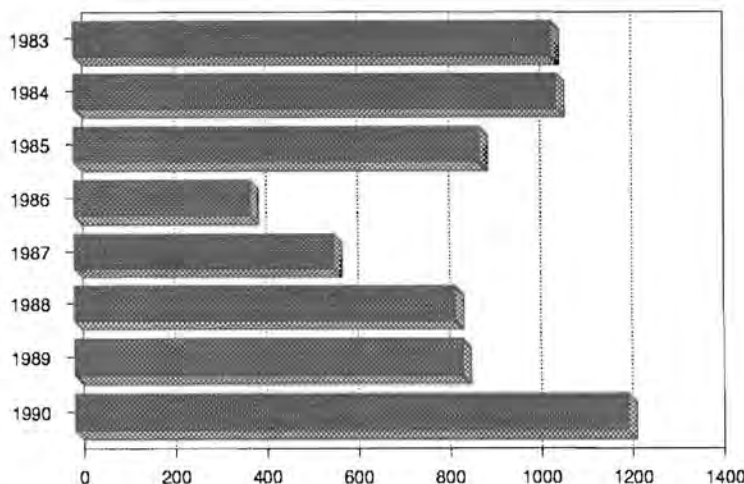
The reason why there is no shortfall in these particular disciplines is the same reason why an overall teacher surplus exists in Alaska. For several years a positive climate for Alaska's educational establishment has prevailed vis-a-vis the rest of the nation. Teachers' salaries have consistently been higher in Alaska than the national average. (See Figure 1 and Table 1.) Benefits, such as retirement after 20 years of teaching, also tend to be more generous. Other pluses include relatively well-funded schools and growing enrollments. These factors have all helped create a healthy, attractive climate for teachers in Alaska's urban school districts.

The Story Is Different In Rural Alaska

On the surface the findings in rural districts were not altogether different from the urban school districts. When questioned whether there was a teacher shortage, only three rural schools surveyed felt one existed. Nearly all the school districts were able to fill their teacher openings and start the year out fully staffed.

F i g u r e • 2

**Openings for Teachers in
Alaska's Public Schools**



Source: Alaska Teacher Placement Bureau.

Average Teacher Salaries by State 1980-81 to 1989-90

	1980-81	1989-90	Change	1989 of U.S. Avg.
U.S.	18,409	31,304	70%	100%
Alabama	15,506	25,500	64	81
ALASKA	30,270	43,153	43	138
Arizona	17,800	29,600	66	95
Arkansas	13,670	22,009	61	70
California	20,965	38,996	86	125
Colorado	21,005	30,700	46	98
Connecticut	18,100	40,496	124	129
Delaware	18,797	33,480	78	107
District of Columbia	23,640	36,450	54	116
Florida	16,193	28,525	76	91
Georgia	16,218	27,892	72	89
Hawaii	22,070	32,047	45	102
Idaho	15,650	23,494	50	75
Illinois	20,150	33,014	64	105
Indiana	17,973	30,493	70	97
Iowa	16,610	26,747	61	85
Kansas	15,975	28,671	79	92
Kentucky	16,540	26,275	59	84
Louisiana	16,700	22,993	38	73
Maine	14,501	26,881	85	86
Maryland	19,863	36,092	82	115
Massachusetts	24,973	34,225	37	109
Michigan	21,012	36,010	71	115
Minnesota	18,585	32,190	73	103
Mississippi	13,477	24,363	81	78
Missouri	15,994	27,229	70	87
Montana	16,560	25,081	51	80
Nebraska	15,659	24,751	58	79
Nevada	21,590	30,587	42	98
New Hampshire	13,780	28,939	110	92
New Jersey	19,140	36,030	88	115
New Mexico	17,610	25,120	43	80
New York	21,550	38,800	80	124
North Carolina	16,175	27,814	72	89
North Dakota	14,356	23,016	60	74
Ohio	17,640	21,170	20	68
Oklahoma	15,662	23,070	47	74
Oregon	18,176	30,563	68	98
Pennsylvania	18,550	32,809	77	105
Rhode Island	20,302	36,057	78	115
South Carolina	15,030	27,076	80	86
South Dakota	14,410	21,300	48	68
Tennessee	15,395	27,052	76	86
Texas	16,261	27,502	69	88
Utah	17,537	23,652	35	76
Vermont	13,654	28,798	111	92
Virginia	16,209	30,926	91	99
Washington	22,277	30,475	37	97
West Virginia	15,658	22,842	46	73
Wisconsin	17,972	32,320	80	103
Wyoming	19,290	28,184	46	90

Source: National Education Association.

However, recruiting and retaining teachers is a different story in rural Alaska. Rural districts have a higher turnover for teachers than urban districts. According to the survey, the rural school districts replaced approximately 20% of their teachers each year. This compares to 8% in urban and 9% in smaller districts. Many teachers leave after only a few years of teaching. The longevity for rural teachers is 6.9 years compared to 11.3 years in urban districts. Numerous teachers use their experience in rural Alaska as a stepping-stone to jobs in urban districts. For example, some rural school districts did not directly lose any teachers because of the early retirement program but they did lose teachers who left to fill openings that occurred in urban Alaska as a result of the program. Some observers commented that a cadre of teachers also move from one rural school district to another in almost gypsy-like fashion. Because of the higher turnover rate in rural school districts, a proportionately larger number of teachers have to be found each year.

Many Reasons Exist For Rural Alaska's High Teacher Turnover

The small size and isolation of many of the communities in rural school districts contribute to high teacher turnover. The lack of a career ladder frustrates some teachers. A shortage of housing can also be a problem. The stress that results from the meeting of two cultures must also be factored in. For these reasons many teachers find rural Alaska a difficult environment to teach in. At the same time, because of this tougher environment, one could argue that a more experienced teacher work force is needed in rural Alaska.

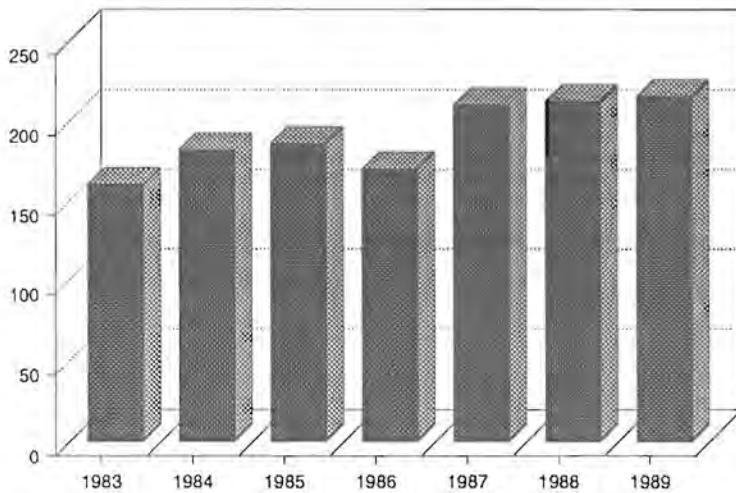
So, although a "teacher shortage" may not exist in the classical sense, a "revolving door" problem does in many districts. And one could make the argument that there is a shortage of committed educators with the needed experience in many rural school districts.

Shortages Are More Intense In Rural Districts

The rural school districts experienced the same spot shortages as their urban counter parts but with greater intensity. In urban districts it was "difficult" to find a speech pathologist but for a rural district it was "very difficult". Because of the small size of many rural schools, they frequently look for teachers certified in more than one area. These teachers are more difficult to find, especially one certified in the two particular specialties that a district might need.

Figure • 3

Education Graduates from University of Alaska



Source: University of Alaska.

Most of the school districts also feel there are not enough Native teacher applicants. Only 3.2% of public school teachers are Alaska Natives while 21.8% of students are Alaska Natives. School districts would like to see a higher ratio of Native teachers to students not only to bring this ratio more in line, but also because they believe it would help them solve some of their turnover problems. There is also the more nebulous topic of quality teachers. A number of small districts felt it was difficult for them to find qualified (as opposed to simply certified) teaching staff.

Recruiting Is A Major Effort For Rural School Districts

If the amount of effort expended recruiting teachers could be quantified, rural districts would be at the very top of the scale. Nearly 47% of the rural districts felt they had a moderate to very difficult time finding replacements each year compared to 18% in urban districts and 17% in small districts.

The rural districts seldom have a large local pool of qualified teachers to choose from. Only 37% of the rural school districts indicated they had a local pool to select from versus 64% in urban districts and 100% in small districts. This means they either have to go elsewhere in the state or out-of-state to find qualified teachers. According to the survey, rural districts had to hire far more teachers outside the state than urban Alaska. All the districts surveyed had to recruit out-of-state for some of their specialized positions.

The big events of the year for teacher recruiting are the Teacher Job Fairs sponsored by the Alaska Teacher Placement (ATP) Program of the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. These fairs are a clearinghouse for the placement of teachers and other educators throughout the state, with an emphasis on rural districts. Potential education candidates from around the state and country, and most school districts in Alaska, are represented. In 1989 ATP referred 844 candidates to local school districts during their two job fairs. ATP also acts as a clearinghouse throughout the year. Repeatedly, rural districts mentioned ATP as their main vehicle in finding teachers. For the school year 1990-91, ATP placed 74% of the 500 new hires in rural districts.

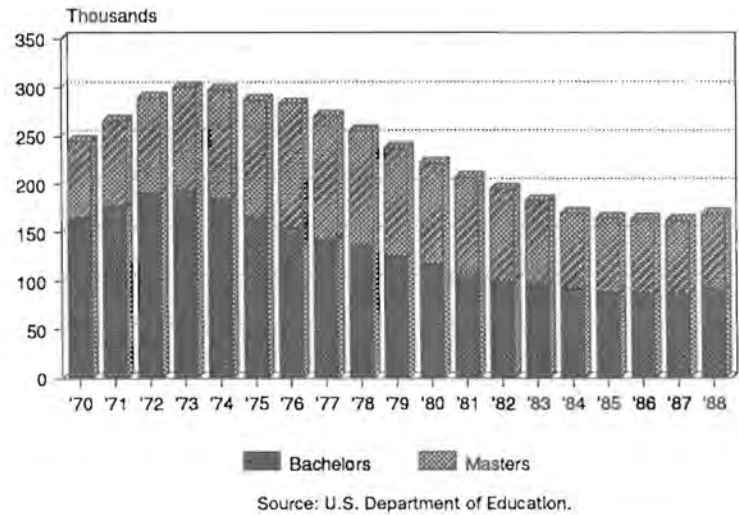
Several of the rural school districts also start recruiting early in the year to be assured of a full complement of teachers for the following school year. For example, the Northwest Arctic Borough school district tried to offer contracts to prospective teachers earlier than most of the other districts this past year to improve their odds. Many of the rural districts also mentioned that when a vacancy occurred in mid-year they had a great deal of difficulty finding a replacement.

Possible Solutions to Specialty Shortages and High Turnover

Most of Alaska's school districts have no need for immediate solutions to combat teacher shortages because the problem does not exist. For reasons already described, Alaska is usually able to attract enough teachers to avert shortages.

For specialties that all the districts are having difficulty filling, higher pay or some other incentives may provide a short-term solution. Most of the specialties in this group represent areas where the demand has increased dramatically in the recent past. Therefore, it may be a function of the supply catching up with the demand, more so than a need to provide additional incentives.

Education Degrees Awarded In United States



Solutions to the problem of a high turnover rate in rural districts are more complex. Professor Judith Kleinfeld, a researcher with the University of Alaska, points out "the most obvious way to get teachers into rural communities who will like living there and who will get along well is to prepare as teachers people from the communities who want to teach there". Kleinfeld goes on to say "despite extensive programs and millions of dollars spent to accomplish this, the yield in numbers of Native teachers has been low". This is despite the fact that there are often few salaried jobs in these communities, and of these few jobs teaching positions are among the highest-paying. Kleinfeld believes more information is needed to assess the reasons for the lack of Native teachers.

Another point often made is that teachers without any rural Alaskan experience should be better prepared for village life and the special needs of small schools before they enter this environment.

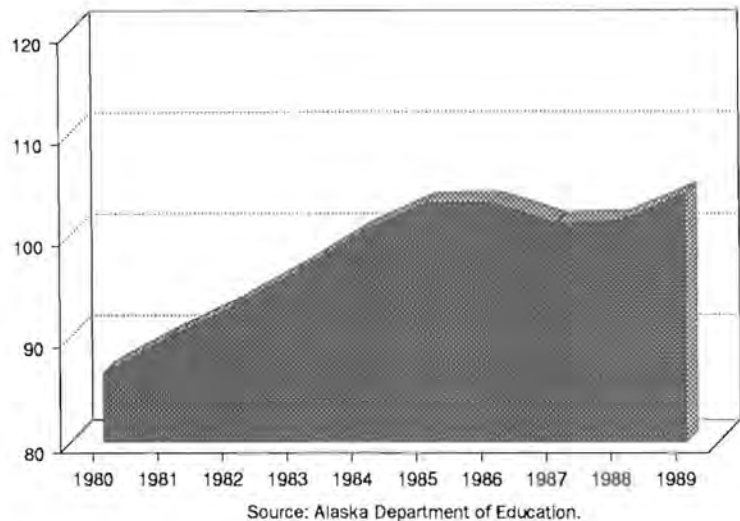
Other possible solutions could include higher pay, merit pay and better benefits. Many rural school districts already pay higher salaries than the urban districts. (See Table 2.) These solutions would be expensive for these districts that are already dealing with a high cost delivery system. Some feel that if the certification process were liberalized there might be a larger local pool of teachers to choose from. Others feel that if teacher training could be brought closer to these communities the local supply of teachers would grow.

In an attempt to alleviate the problem in rural Alaska, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks began its Cross Cultural Education program in 1970. The program, known as XCED, has given rural Alaskans the opportunity to acquire an education degree without leaving their community. An overwhelming majority of XCED graduates become rural teachers, but their total number (approximately 150 since the program began) is small enough to have only made a dent in the problem.

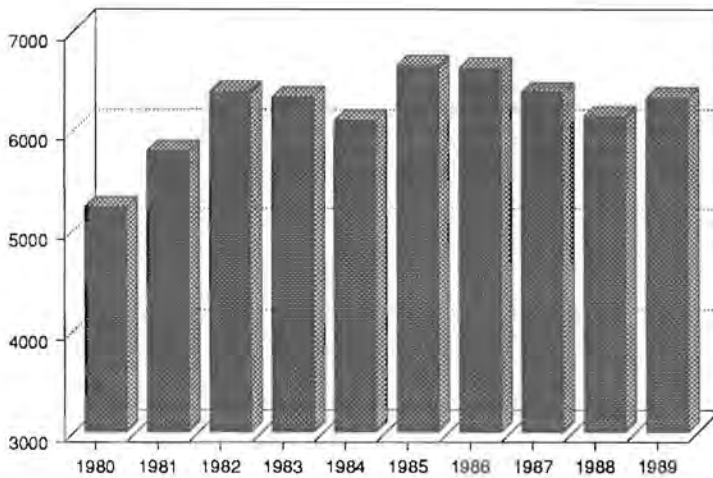
Will Teacher Shortages Plague Alaska In The Future?

For the past decade predictions of teachers shortages were made in Alaska and nationally, but they failed to materialize. During the past three years several districts were concerned the early retirement program would cause shortages. The number of positions did climb but shortages didn't result. (See Figure 2.) Although 70% of the districts don't anticipate shortages in the future, some educators are concerned that shortages could become common.

Students in Alaska's Public Schools



Public School Teachers in Alaska



Source: U.S. Department of Education.

One reason often cited why the supply may decline is the shrinking teacher salary differential between Alaska and other states. During the past five years teacher salaries increased much more rapidly elsewhere in the country than in Alaska, causing the differential to shrink. (See Figure 1.) Tight budgets in Alaska kept teacher salaries in check, while a strong education reform movement helped boost teacher compensation elsewhere in the nation. Over the past decade Alaska's teacher salaries grew 43% versus 70% nationwide. (See Table 1.) The Alaskan teacher salary differential and benefit package remain substantially higher than the national average, but if this trend continues Alaska's competitive position will weaken.

Another concern often cited is that the pool of teachers may become smaller. Four years ago this could have been a legitimate concern but this trend has reversed itself both in Alaska and around the nation. The number of students enrolled in the University of Alaska's education

department is increasing. More students are graduating with education degrees, both from the University of Alaska and nationwide. (See Figures 3 and 4.) This probably comes from an increase in salaries, the education reform movement and a growing awareness of the profession.

This does not take into account the group of former teachers out in the labor market working elsewhere or raising families. There is a large group trained to teach who never taught. According to *American Education* this number may be as high as 40%. The Alaska Department of Education maintains over 25,000 education certificates of various types are on file. Yet there were fewer than 8,000 certified staff in Alaska's public schools in 1989.

On the demand side there is the prospect of a growing school enrollment. Given the present demographics of Alaska, school enrollments should continue to climb steadily, particularly in the primary grades. This is not a certainty, however, it depends on how Alaska's economy performs. For example, Alaska's school enrollment dropped in 1987 because of the recession. (See Figure 5.) The number of teachers also fell. (See Figure 6.) This is not necessarily the case in rural Alaska though, because rural population totals are not quite as sensitive to economic conditions.

Summary: Alaska Should Have Enough Teachers, but Rural Areas Will Struggle to Find & Keep Them

Given the current supply of teachers and what appears to be the future supply prospects, Alaska should continue to be able to meet most of its teacher needs. There is reason for concern that rural districts could begin to have problems if their compensation differential continues to narrow. Rural districts will also continue to struggle with a high turnover unless solutions are found.

The supply/demand picture of any profession is affected by many factors — the job market prospects of other occupations, the health of the state or national economy, the status of the occupation, budgets, and demographics. Because these factors are always in flux, there is no sure answer to the question of whether teacher supply will meet demand in the future.