

Encouraging More High School Students to Consider Teaching

By: MICHELLE CROFT, GRETCHEN GUFFY, AND DAN VITALE

Teachers are an essential and influential part of student learning. A good teacher can add as much as one and a half years of learning in one academic year,¹ whereas a poor quality teacher can set a student back months.² But despite the value teachers can provide to their students, states and districts face numerous challenges in recruiting new teachers well positioned to contribute to their students' academic growth.

One challenge to recruitment is salary. Teacher pay has gained media attention as a result of teacher strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma.³ Calculating starting teacher salaries adjusted for cost of living, EdBuild determined that the average cost-adjusted starting teacher salary for the 2012–2013 school year was approximately \$33,000⁴—more than \$10,000 less than the average starting salary for college graduates generally (\$45,739).⁵ Recent data indicates that pay, when adjusted for the cost of living, has decreased in certain states from 2000 to 2017.⁶

Another challenge in recruiting teachers is an apparent and/or perceived decline in job security. In 2009, federal policy shifted from simply classifying all certified teachers as "high quality" to incentivizing states to adopt new teacher evaluation and retention systems that take students' academic achievement (as measured by student growth measures) into account.⁷ States largely responded to these incentives and adopted new evaluation systems that aimed to better differentiate among teachers,⁸ and some simultaneously repealed teacher tenure protections. A recent study found that these changes to evaluation systems and tenure policies have dissuaded some new teachers—mostly from less selective universities—from entering the profession.⁹

Further increasing the difficulty of recruiting new teachers may be the decline in teacher job satisfaction, which in 2012 fell to 39% from a high of 62% in 2008.¹⁰ School funding may have been a factor in the decline: teachers in schools where budgets had decreased in

Michelle Croft is a principal research associate in State and Federal Programs at ACT.

Gretchen Guffy is a senior director in State and Federal Programs at ACT.

Dan Vitale is a policy analyst in State and Federal Programs at ACT.

the last twelve months reported lower satisfaction rates than teachers in schools where the budget stayed the same or had increased.

Given these many challenges, and that teacher shortages affect some subject areas and geographic locations more than others,¹¹ it is important to better understand to what degree different facets of teaching attract or dissuade students

from entering the teaching profession. This study, of how high school students perceive teaching as a profession, is intended as a step towards improving this understanding.

Top Majors

Using ACT data collected by the student pre-test administration questionnaire from 2007 to 2017,¹² we analyzed results of those students who were “very” or “fairly” sure about their college major. Overall, interest in pursuing an education major has declined among high school graduates.¹³ In particular, for the last six of those years, out of 19 different college major categories,¹⁴ education has been the eighth most popular category of college major, whereas it had previously been in the top four (Figure 1).

Top Ten Intended Majors, 2017

1. Health Sciences (23%)
2. Business (10%)
3. Engineering (9%)
4. Social Sciences (9%)
5. Sciences—Biological & Physical (8%)
6. Arts, Visual and Performing (7%)
7. Undecided (7%)
8. Education (5%)
9. Computer Science & Mathematics (4%)
10. Health Administration & Assisting (4%)



Figure 1. Ranking of education as an intended college major among ACT-tested high school graduates, 2007–2017

Who wants to be a teacher?

To gauge student interest in and perceptions of the teaching profession, we surveyed a sample of students participating in national administrations of the ACT test during the 2017–2018

school year. Students who indicated that they were interested in teaching or who indicated they were undecided were oversampled so that there would be a sufficient number of education majors in the sample. Due to the oversampling, half

of respondents reported at least some interest in becoming a K–12 teacher: 21% were “definitely” interested; 9% were “moderately” interested; and 20% were “somewhat” interested. The remaining 50% were “not at all” interested.

Notably, the 29% of students who were either “moderately” or “somewhat” interested in becoming a K–12 teacher (hereinafter referred to as “potentially” interested) averaged a 23.29 Composite score on the ACT—approximately 1.5 points higher than the Composite score of the students who were “definitely” interested.¹⁵ More important, the group of potentially interested students had high rates of ACT College Readiness Benchmark attainment compared to those who were “definitely” interested (Figure 2). Students who meet an ACT College Readiness Benchmark in a given subject have a high probability of earning a B or higher in first-year college courses in that subject area.¹⁶

To be clear: we are not suggesting that all students planning to become teachers are *academically* unprepared; over 40% of students planning to become teachers meet at least one Benchmark. However, academic knowledge is only one essential component of teaching.¹⁷ To provide the next generation of students with a high-quality education, it is important to recruit academically prepared students both by making the teaching profession more attractive to academically prepared students as well as by generally increasing college readiness among all students. Neither of these goals are easy to achieve, but both are critical to ensuring that academically prepared students enter the teaching profession.

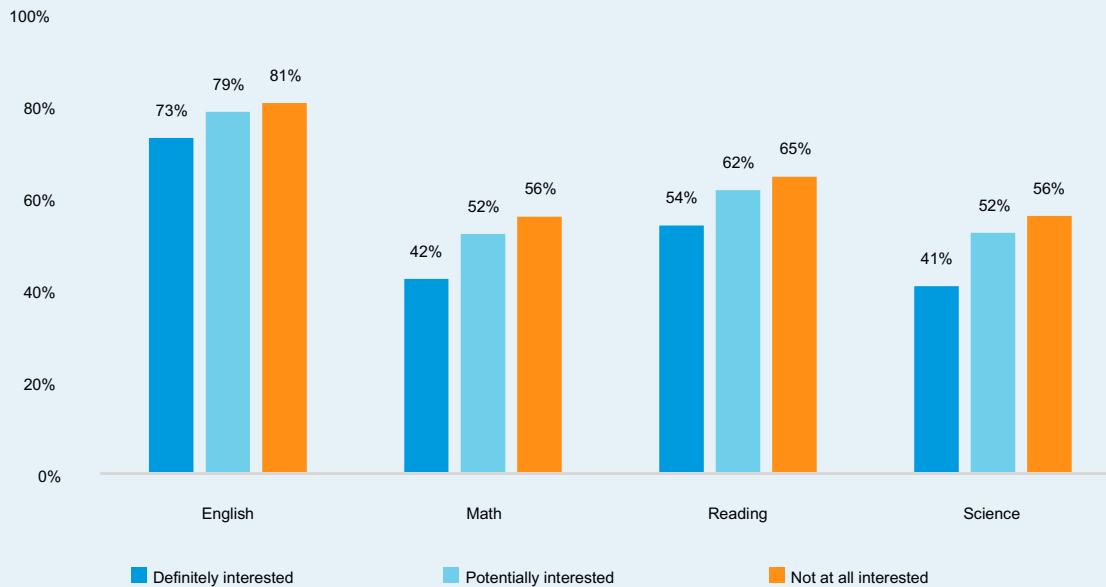


Figure 2. Percentage of ACT College Readiness Benchmark attainment among survey respondents who took the ACT test in 2017 or 2018, by level of interest in becoming a K–12 teacher

When asked to rank the top three reasons they were interested in teaching, interested students were most likely to report that they enjoyed working with children and young people (60%), wanted to make a difference in or give back to their community (51%), were inspired by one or more of their own teachers (42%),

or had a passion for a specific subject (41%) (Figure 3).

Notable differences between the reasons cited by “potentially” and “definitely” interested students included that the former group were more likely than the latter to cite passion for a specific subject (43% vs. 37%) or “to show others how to

do things” (23% vs. 12%) as one of their top three reasons, while the latter group were more likely to cite being inspired by a teacher at school (46% vs. 39%) or that they enjoy working with children and young people (68% vs. 55%) as one of their top three reasons.

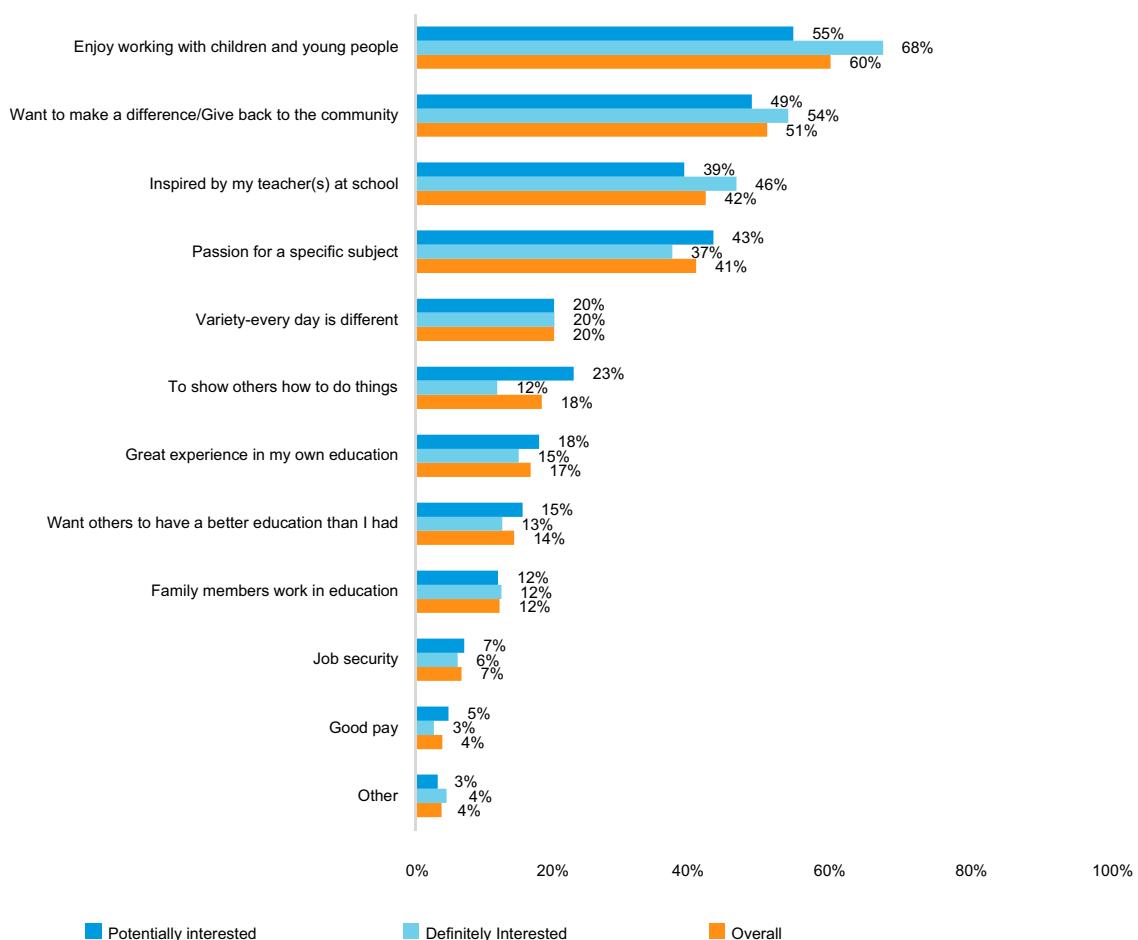


Figure 3. Top three reasons cited by survey respondents for reporting an interest in becoming a K-12 teacher

Note: Select items were omitted from the figure due to a low number of responses.¹⁸

Why aren't students interested in teaching?

The overwhelming reason that students are not interested in teaching is salary. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those not interested in teaching cited pay as one

of the top three reasons they were not interested in teaching (Figure 4). Other frequently cited reasons included not much opportunity for career advancement (43%) and that they would not be good at teaching (40%).

The concern about salary was also expressed by those "potentially" interested in teaching. When asked what would increase their interest, 72% of this group cited better pay as one of their top three reasons (Figure 5).

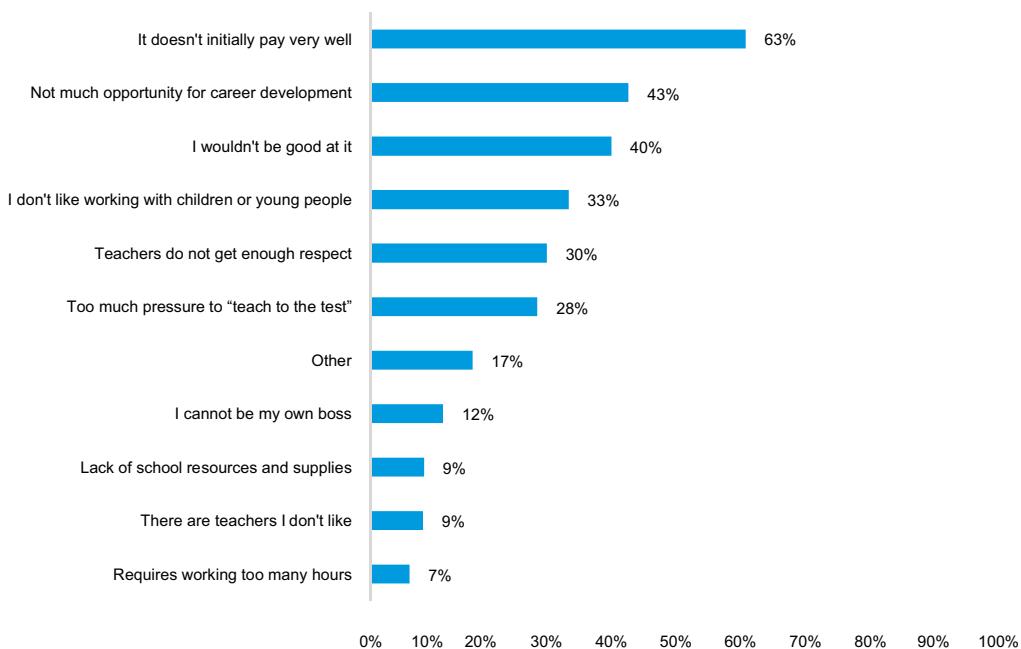


Figure 4. Top three reasons cited by survey respondents for reporting a lack of interest in becoming a K-12 teacher

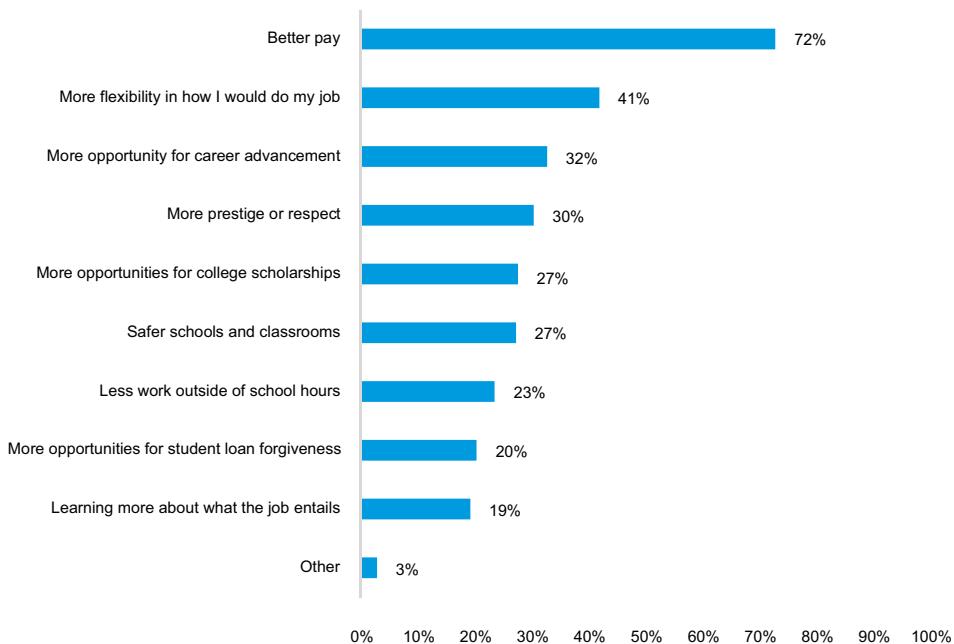


Figure 5. Top three reasons cited by "potentially" interested survey respondents as factors that would increase their interest in becoming a K-12 teacher

Addressing concerns about starting salary

By far, the biggest challenge for teacher recruitment is starting salary. “Potentially” interested students reported wanting a lower starting salary than students not interested in teaching; however, the starting salary would need to be increased to \$50,000–\$59,000 to *improve* interest

in teaching among the majority of these students (56%; Figure 6). Thirty-nine percent of students not interested in teaching would also consider teaching if the starting salary was raised to this range.

Another potential approach to addressing the challenge of low starting salary might be to increase students’ familiarity with the

teacher salary schedule—that is, the pace at which teacher salary increases with longevity in the position. Students were asked to rate various aspects of teaching on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was “Not familiar at all” and 5 was “Extremely familiar.” On average the students who were potentially interested or not interested in teaching reported being only “slightly” to “moderately” familiar with the teacher salary schedule (Figure 7). It is possible that if students knew that teaching offers an opportunity for salary growth, they may be more interested in pursuing teaching as a career.

The figure also shows that students were relatively unfamiliar with other aspects of the teaching profession such as benefits (e.g., health coverage, retirement pensions). Although teacher pensions require reform,¹⁹ they are a benefit that could help compensate for low starting salary for those teachers who plan to stay in the same district throughout their career.²⁰

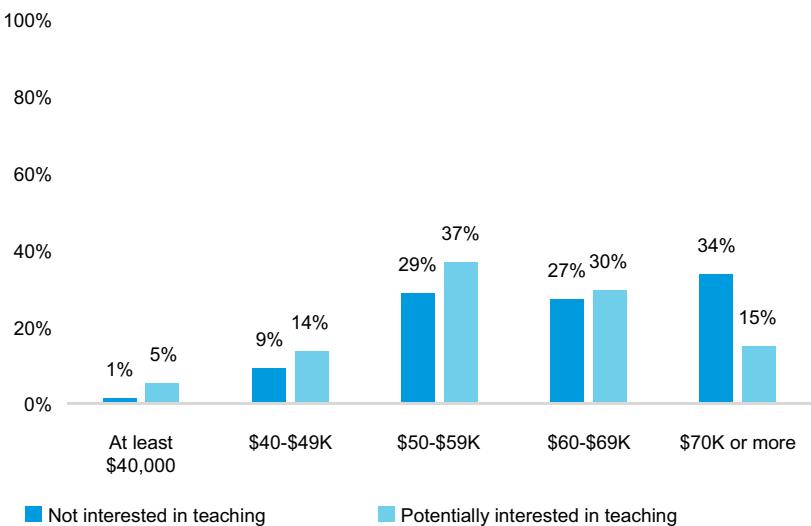


Figure 6. Preferred starting salary for K-12 teaching among survey respondents

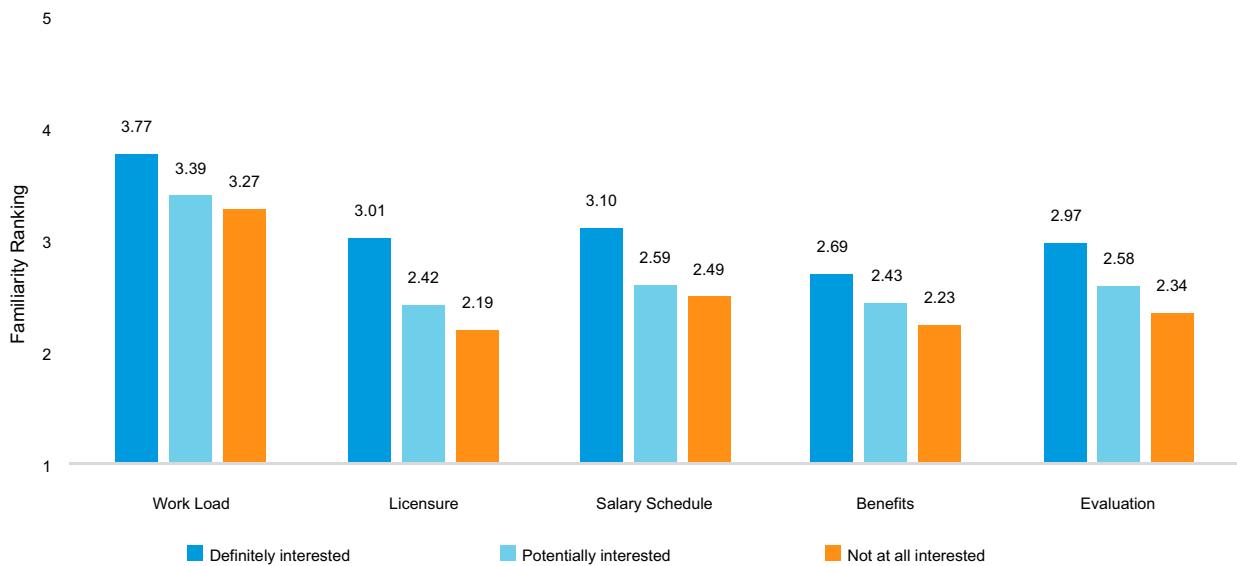


Figure 7. Average familiarity with aspects of the teaching profession among survey respondents

Recommendations

Our research indicates that education as a major has declined in popularity among ACT-tested high school graduates, and that the students most interested in being K–12 teachers are less academically prepared than other students. The recommendations below are intended to improve teacher recruitment efforts with an eye toward attracting students who can be most successful in the classroom.

1. Increase salary for beginning teachers.

As discussed, salary was identified as a major reason that students were not considering teaching. To compete for higher-performing students' interest, the average starting salary for teachers should be raised. Based on results from our survey, starting salary would need to

be increased to at least \$50,000 to be a substantial drawing factor, or about \$5,000 more than the average starting salary for recent college graduates generally.

2. Implement targeted career pathways and “grow-your-own” programs.

Students in our survey were not very familiar with a number of aspects of teaching. Career pathways targeted to teacher training, and “grow-your-own” programs (which facilitate recruitment and training among teacher candidates already residing in the school district) may help give the significant group of “potentially” interested students a better idea of whether teaching would be a good fit for them.²¹ Particularly since these students tended to be passionate about a particular subject but are less sure that they would enjoy working with children or young people, such programs would provide

them an opportunity to both demonstrate their passion and gain hands-on experience working with children in a classroom setting.²² These programs have the added potential to increase diversity and can be targeted in local communities that are facing teacher shortages.²³

3. Additional information about teacher's full compensation package.

The students in our study focused primarily on the starting salary of teachers and were not familiar with other financial benefits of teaching. Schools of education should consider including some of these other benefits when recruiting students, and drawing explicit comparisons to how total benefit packages, including salary, compare between teaching and other entry-level jobs after graduation from college.

Notes

1. Eric A. Hanushek, “Valuing Teachers: How Much is a Good Teacher Worth?” *Education Next* 11(3) (2011), 40–45.
2. Id. According to Hanushek, a poor teacher may contribute one-half an academic year.
3. Jess Bidgood, “West Virginia Raises Teachers’ Pay to End Statewide Strike,” *The New York Times* (March 6, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/06/us/west-virginia-teachers-strike-deal.html>; Reuters, “Oklahoma, Kentucky Teachers Skip School as Frustration Boils Over,” *Reuters* (April 2, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oklahoma-education/oklahoma-kentucky-teachers-skip-school-as-frustration-boils-over-idUSKCN1H90QW>
4. EdBuild, *Power in Numbers—Cost-Adjusted Revenue*, <http://viz.edbuild.org/maps/2016/cola/states/#salary>
5. Andrea Koncz, “Salary Trends Through Salary Survey: A Historical Perspective on Starting Salaries for New College Graduates,” *National Association of Colleges and Employers*, (August 2, 2016), <http://www.naceweb.org/job-market/compensation/salary-trends-through-salary-survey-a-historical-perspective-on-starting-salaries-for-new-college-graduates/>
6. Jenny Abamu, “The Data Tells All: Teacher Salaries Have Been Declining for Years,” *EdSurge* (April 5, 2018), <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2018-04-05-the-data-tells-all-teacher-salaries-have-been-declining-for-years>
7. See Michelle Croft & Richard Buddin, “Applying Value-Added Methods to Teachers in Untested Grades and Subjects,” *Journal of Law and Education* 44 (2015), 1–22.
8. In 2017, all but 11 states required measures of student academic growth. 30 states required growth to be a significant factor within evaluations and 10 required some growth within the evaluation. Kate Walsh, Nithya Joseph, Kelli Lakis, & Sam Lubell, *Running in Place: How New Teacher Evaluations Fail to Live up to Promises* (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2017), https://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Final_Evaluation_Paper
9. Matthew A. Kraft, Eric J. Brunner, Shaun M. Dougherty, & David Schwegman, “Teacher Accountability Reforms and the Supply of New Teachers,” Working Paper (2018).
10. MetLife. *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership* (Metlife, 2012) <https://www.metlife.com/content/dam/microsites/about/corporate-profile/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf>

11. Lieb Sutcher, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Desiree Carver-Thomas, *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.* (Learning Policy Institute, 2016),
<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching>
12. The college major analysis uses data from all ACT test-takers; whereas the survey results described later in the paper include a sample of students who took the ACT on a national test date during the 2017–2018 school year.
13. There were additions to the major categories starting in 2010. Also, during that time period, a number of states began testing all students within the state. Therefore, it is possible that one or both of these changes attributed to the decline in popularity for education as a major.
14. Students are provided a list of possible college majors. ACT then groups the majors into various categories.
15. The ACT composite score for students definitely interested in teaching is 21.77—approximately 1.5 points lower than students somewhat or moderately interested in teaching. ACT performance has been found to be positively associated with future success as a teacher. Brian Jacob, Jonah E. Rockoff, Eric S. Taylor, Benjamin Lindy, and Rachel Rosen, “Teacher Applicant Hiring and Teacher Performance: Evidence from DC Public Schools,” NBER Working Paper 22054 (2016), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22054.pdf>
16. Jeff Allen, “Updating the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks,” *ACT Research Report Series* (2013), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ACT_RR2013-6.pdf
17. Deborah Loewenberg Ball, Mark Hoover Thames, & Geoffrey Phelps, “Content Knowledge for Teaching: What Makes It Special?” *Journal of Teacher Education* 59 (2008), 389–407.
18. Omitted items included: “My friends are interested in becoming teachers;” “Limited career options in my community after graduating;” “To be recognized by others as a teacher;” and “This career is challenging.”
19. Chad Aldeman and Kelly Robson, “Why Most Teachers Get a Bad Deal on Pensions,” *Education Next* 2017, <http://educationnext.org/why-most-teachers-get-bad-deal-pensions-state-plans-winners-losers/>
20. In addition to pensions, health care costs may be partially responsible for stagnant wages. Rebecca Kolins Givan & Pamela Whitefield, “Teachers are at a Breaking Point. And It’s Not Just About Pay,” *Education Week* (April 16, 2018), <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/04/16/teachers-are-at-a-breaking-point-and.html?print=1>
21. Stephanie Aragon, “Targeted Teacher Recruitment,” *Education Commission of the States* 2018, https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Targeted_Teacher_Recruitment.pdf
22. Jenny Muñiz, “Diversifying the Teacher Workforce with ‘Grow Your Own’ Programs,” *New America* (Feb 28, 2018), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/diversifying-teacher-workforce-grow-your-own-pathways/>
23. Muñiz, “Diversifying the Teacher Workforce.”