Spotlight on Idaho’s Region 4 Teacher Shortage
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There is substantial evidence of teacher recruitment, retention, and mentoring challenges overwhelming Idaho’s school systems. Discussions of teacher shortages across the state and nation have been prevalent for several years (Ingersoll, 2001; Mortensen, 2015; Aragon, 2016), concerns have continued to build that there are not enough educators to meet school and district hiring demands. The anecdotal discussion around the teacher shortage in Idaho often paints an ambiguous picture of where the problems exist and why they may exist more prevalent in some areas than others. This study sought to collect first-hand data and spotlight the teacher shortage issues and impact of one geographic area of Idaho—Region 4—in order to develop a deeper understanding of the issue.

Region 4 takes in the Mini-Cassia area to the east, Blaine and Camas counties to the north, rural Three Creeks to the south, and Glenns Ferry in Elmore County serves as the western border of what is commonly known as the “Magic Valley”. The region serves just under 39,000 public school students distributed across nine counties and throughout 22 traditional school districts and 4 charter school LEAs.

According to data publicly reported by the Idaho State Department of Education, in 2016-2017 Region 4 led the state in filling teaching positions with alternate and non-traditional routes to certification teachers. Magic Valley accounted for about 25 percent of all the alternate authorizations to certifications; 24 percent of all provisional authorizations for teachers without certification; and about 17 percent of teachers seeking non-traditional routes to certification (ABCTE).

Research indicates that teacher preparation is one of the strongest links between student achievement in reading and mathematics, regardless of socio-economic and language status (Darling-Hammond 2000). An additional study by Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) further highlights the importance of teacher preparation with findings that certified teachers consistently produce stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers. The alternative routes and non-traditionally certified teachers who become certified after two or three years do about as well as other certified teachers in supporting student achievement gains; however, nearly all of them leave within three years.

Under the context of teacher shortages, beginning in the 1980s, policymakers in many states and school districts created alternative certification as a means to meet the demand for more teachers (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education 2002). Today, alternative routes to certification are commonplace and becoming an important addition to the traditional teacher preparation routes throughout the United States (Humphrey and Wechsler 2007).

The Context of Magic Valley
The economy of Region 4 is predominately driven by agriculture. Agricultural production and the associated food processing provide nearly 80% of the gross product for the region
In addition, the region also has a strong, internationally recognized tourism economy. World-famous Sun Valley resort is located in Blaine County and other natural conditions of Magic Valley bring countless tourists to the area. Due to the types of work available in the region, wages in Region 4 remain some of the lowest in the state (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Economists indicate this is due to several factors: a high percentage of jobs are agriculturally-based; there is little wage competition from Nevada - the area’s bordering state which eliminates any market-forced boost of wages; and there are few major employer/corporate headquarters that pull in CEO wages and professional jobs (Region IV Development Association, 2014). Weekly wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that in the first quarter of 2017 counties where Region 4 schools are located lag behind the national and state average.

Table 1: Average Weekly Wages

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Average Weekly Wage (1st quarter of 2017)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>$1,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>$775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average for all counties representing Region 4 schools</td>
<td>$708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average of counties representing 93% of student population in Region 4 (excluding Blaine and Camas counties)</td>
<td>$672</td>
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Magic Valley also has the highest percentage of Hispanics – 24.2 percent, double the statewide percentage of 12.02 percent and five percentage points higher than the nation (Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs).

Region 4 continues to struggle with overall educational attainment. Levels remain below figures for the rest of Idaho and U.S. The region’s heavy agricultural concentration initially drove a lower-skilled labor pool. Agriculture’s continuing influence and the rise in value-added food processing jobs have enabled workers in the region to make a decent living without attaining a bachelor’s degree (Region IV Development Association, 2014).

Previous studies highlight the growing concern that students from low-income and minority backgrounds have relatively less access to teacher quality, and the lack of enough teachers systematically shortchanges the most vulnerable learners (Glazerman & Max, 2011; Isenberg et al., 2013; Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Methods of Study

This study utilized survey data to investigate the teacher shortage in Region 4. The sample groups in this study were comprised of twenty-two (22) traditional school districts and four (4) charter schools located in Region 4. Surveys were sent to superintendents and lead administrators for all 26 public school districts and charters. Responses were received from 19 districts (86%) and two (50%) charter schools, with an overall response rate of 81 percent of administrators providing data for the study. Surveys asked for information on the supply and demand of teachers—by content area, grade level, type of teacher certification; teacher attrition; teacher recruitment and hiring practices; teacher mentoring and induction programs; strategies to address unfilled positions; as well as perceptions about the issues related to the teacher shortage in their districts.
Key Findings

The study examined multiple data points and saw numerous trends. It is worth noting that the data represents a small number of respondents (n=21) and some responses had missing data or incomplete data on measures. However, we were able to highlight some findings across the region.

First, the number of fully certified teachers serving Region 4 students has decreased, while reliance on teachers working towards certification using either an alternative route, non-traditional route, or provisional authorization has increased.

Second, the reported data contradicts common beliefs that the shortage is limited to specific, high needs areas like Special Education, STEM, or mathematics. Nearly 44 percent of those teachers with an alternative route, non-traditional route, or provisional certification are serving in regular elementary classrooms.

Furthermore, a portion of the survey asked superintendents about perceptions and opinions related to the teacher shortage in their district or charter. The results of those completing the survey included:

- Seventy-six percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that in general, a certified teacher is more qualified than an alternate or non-traditional route certified teacher.
- Forty-seven percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that hiring provisional authorization teachers is an effective way to fill open positions, however only 6 percent agreed or strongly agreed that hiring provisional authorization teachers is an effective way to improve student outcomes.

When superintendents were asked, “In your opinion, what the major areas (positive or negative) that relate to teacher retention?” The top three ranked areas were:

- Salary
- Colleague support
- Administrative support

Finally, the data exposes the need for robust resources to support and mentor new teachers and those seeking alternative routes to certification. When superintendents were asked a series of questions related to mentoring new teachers:

- Eighty-two percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that outside of teaching students, retaining teachers is the most important goal of a school.
- Seventy-eight percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that schools have the expertise to effectively support new teachers.
- Twenty-two percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that schools have the resources to effectively support new teachers.
- Fifty percent of superintendents agreed or strongly agreed that schools have teachers with the availability/bandwidth to act as mentors for new teachers.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the teacher shortage in Region 4 and understand the various trends and perceived factors related to the supply of teachers in this geographic area of Idaho. Our analysis
suggests the number of standard certificated teachers has declined; the number of teachers with alternative and non-traditional routes to certification are widespread across grade levels and content areas; and finally there is a significant need for robust mentoring and support for district induction programs.

Future Research
In addition, we have opened a survey for teachers, administrators, school board trustees, K-12 students, College of Southern Idaho students, parents, and patrons in Region 4 about their perspectives of issues related to the teacher shortage in their area. The sample for this stakeholder survey is made up of those individuals that self-select to take on an anonymous, online survey. The survey link has been shared with regional school districts and charters, the regional leaders of the Idaho School Boards Association, the Idaho Association of School Administrators, and the Idaho Education Association with a message to distribute it widely to stakeholders within Region 4. The data may further reveal perceptions and beliefs about teacher recruitment and retention in Region 4.

References


