



Teachers Required for Maine's Future

Flynn Ross, University of Southern Maine

We have long known that high-quality education is essential for the future of Maine's workforce and economy. One thing the pandemic has taught us is that child care and schools are indispensable to a functional workforce that fuels that economy. But Maine schools have had temporary closures not just as a stopgap measure to slow the spread of coronavirus; schools have closed because there were not enough teachers to staff them.

Maine has been on the precipice of a teacher shortage crisis for several years, with teachers of retirement age representing fully one-third of the workforce. Although the teacher salary increases fought for in 2019 legislation have helped address this emergency, there has been a [twenty-eight percent decline](#) in enrollment in teacher preparation programs from 2010-2019 in Maine and up to [fifty percent](#) decline in some states. This decline further widens the gap between the number of retiring teachers and new teachers who can take their place.

There are several steps Maine legislators can take to help address the teacher shortage, which is outlined in the Learning Policy Institute at Stanford University's [nine-strategy blueprint](#) for strengthening the teaching profession. A team of researchers, educators, and Maine Department of Education staffers have already adopted these strategies for use in the state with different plans depending on certain contingencies, and are soon to launch an interactive website. The three greatest-impact, lowest-cost actions for which a Maine legislator can advocate are:

- Activating a statewide job board
- Expanding student loan forgiveness and tax credits
- Strengthening the teacher pipeline using Educators Rising, a successful community-based model

Activate a Statewide Job Board

A coordinated statewide job board, aligned with certification and credentialing data systems, could address the teacher shortage and issues with the distribution of teachers throughout our large, rural state. A single system interface would help tremendously in recruiting out-of-state certified teachers looking to relocate to Maine and streamline the certification and credentialing process for new teachers and teachers moving within Maine. Currently, teachers who wish to work in Maine must go through the Maine Department of Education for certification and credentialing and then find and select one of two for-profit job boards used by many – but not all! – of the state's school districts. Only then can they apply directly to our over 250 individual school districts, many of which use their own job application system. This very locally controlled process is inefficient, costly, and extremely time-consuming for applicants. Recruiting and hiring a new teacher has been estimated to cost an average of [\\$10,000 per teacher](#). The Learning Policy Institute offers a [calculator](#) for municipalities to estimate their unique costs.

A better way is possible. Other states like Oklahoma currently use statewide job boards that connect directly with their Department of Education certification system. North Carolina, [Massachusetts](#), and [others](#) actively recruit out-of-state candidates through their job boards. Legislation enacting these simple changes could make way for a critical influx of out-of-state teachers to Maine while smoothing the process of redistribution and job-seeking for teachers who already live and work here.

Expand Student Loan Forgiveness and Tax Credits

High-quality teacher preparation helps [ensure teacher retention](#) in the long term, building educator and school system expertise and capacity. However, this preparation is expensive in the short term and currently,

all of the costs are borne by the new educator, most often in the form of student loans. Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and State Loan Repayment Programs (SLRP) established strategies for recruiting medical professionals to high need and rural locations. The [Finance Authority of Maine \(FAME\)](#) helps coordinate programs like these and The Alford Leaders program, which provides student debt reduction for graduates employed in STEM fields. Legislators could act to expand these models to include teaching along with STEM fields. These loan forgiveness programs along with the [Opportunity Maine tax credit program](#) could particularly help early-career teachers who are just starting out in the profession to stretch their income by limiting what they pay in student loans and state income taxes.

Strengthen the Teacher Pipeline

We need more students to see teaching as a financially viable and rewarding career option. Across the nation, [Educators Rising](#) is a national network of community-based chapters that

recruit and prepare high school and college students to become teachers. Created by several leading educational organizations and hosted by Phi Delta Kappa, an education honors society, Educators Rising provides nationally recognized micro-credentials and curriculum for Career and Technical Education centers. The University of Southern Maine has recognized the series of five micro-credentials as equaling a three-credit college course towards a teaching degree. State legislators could support Educators Rising in Career and Technical Education centers to expand access and teacher recruitment. Research shows [sixty percent of teachers teach within twenty miles of where they went to school](#). Maine needs to recruit and prepare our own students to become the teachers we desperately need.

Maine's Economy Depends on Teachers

The economy of any state is intertwined with and dependent upon its educational system. If the Maine Economic Development Strategy is to be successful in ten years, the professional educators who prepare the workforce must be made more robust in half that time. Human capital – the value of workers' skills – is the most precious asset that a state's economy can have. If Maine is to improve its economic outlook, it must be assured that Maine schools have an adequate supply of high-quality teachers.