



Using American Rescue Plan Funds and Other Federal Supports to Address Staff Shortages

School district staff shortages across the nation are making headlines as reports have surfaced of nurse, social worker, bus driver, and cafeteria staff shortages that are affecting student access to key services and opportunities. But the federal, state, and local governments have stepped up, leveraging funding and implementing evidence-based strategies and innovative approaches.

The Challenges

According to an EdWeek Research Center survey released in October, 68 percent of principals and district administrators surveyed said they are lacking bus drivers. More than 40 percent have had challenges finding custodial and cafeteria staff. One in five struggle to hire school nurses and nearly as many are struggling to hire the mental health workers needed.

In the past two years, the pandemic has taken a toll on school employees who often work additional hours to meet staff shortages. Concerns about being around unvaccinated students, poor working conditions, low compensation, and minimal benefits all played roles in the growing shortage. But students bear the brunt of these shortages as districts scramble to fill the gaps. They may face overcrowded buses with longer commutes or lack of transportation. Lack of food services means students who rely on school meals are negatively nutritionally impacted. Students also may suffer from reduced physical and mental health services.

Effective Strategies to Ease the Shortage

School districts nationwide are adopting strategies to help address the staffing challenges.



1. Increase pay and benefits

Increase hourly pay. Consolidate part-time roles as appropriate, so that employees have the opportunity to work more hours and are eligible for benefits.



2. Provide flexibility for retirees and licensed staff from other states

Remove barriers so retirees can substitute or serve as paraprofessionals. Allow staff licensed in other states to be hired while working on obtaining in-state credentials.



3. Provide targeted incentives

Offer attractive career pathways and opportunities for career advancement, such as paid apprenticeships, financial support, and specialized training; and provide bonuses for hard-to-fill positions and retention bonuses for long-time staff.



4. Support school staff well-being

Listen to staff concerns; share school district and community health and wellness resources regularly.

Ed Week Research Center Survey

Percentages of principals and district leaders who say they have struggled to hire a sufficient number of employees for the following positions:

Substitute teachers	77%
Bus drivers	68%
Paraprofessionals/instructional aides	55%
Full-time teachers	48%
Cafeteria workers	42%
Custodians	41%
Nurses	20%
Mental health counselors	19%
Administrative assistants	12%
Other, please specify	5%
Principals/assistant principals	5%
District-level administrators	3%

Source: EdWeek Research Center



Use of American Rescue Plan Dollars

The American Rescue Plan includes funding for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund and the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program, both of which can be leveraged by states to address the teacher shortage.

Below are the four primary ways that SLFRF can be used to help schools address shortages:

- 1. Rehiring public sector workers up to pre-pandemic levels:** SLFRF may be used for payroll, covered benefits, and other costs associated with rehiring public sector staff to pre-pandemic levels.
- 2. Providing assistance to disproportionately impacted schools:** Recipients can use the funding for populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The services may include providing services to districts with high rates of poverty; evidence-based educational services; practices that address the social, emotional, and academic needs of students; and new, enhanced, or expanded early learning services.
- 3. Awarding premium pay to school employees:** Employees who receive premium pay must perform work in person and deemed to be responding to the pandemic. Premium pay may be up to \$13 per hour but cannot exceed \$25,000 over the covered period (March 3, 2021-December 31, 2024).
- 4. Providing government services, including educational services:** Recipients who experienced a decline in revenue, can use some of their SLFRF allocation to support government services which includes school or educational services and public safety.

In addition, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration is giving states the option of waiving the portion of the commercial driver's license (CDL) skills test that requires applicants to identify the "under the hood" engine components.

State and Local Practices for Transportation

- A Montana district offers \$4,000 bonuses for bus drivers and held an event called "Big Bus, No Big Deal" to allow people to test drive the buses.

- Utah's Jordan School District has raised the bus driver starting pay to more than \$21 per hour and will pay for the required training and CDL.
- New York State has developed a multiagency plan to address the state's driver shortage, including recruitment efforts for unemployed and nonschool CDL holders, additional CDL test sessions, and other expedited CDL process amendments.
- Massachusetts and Ohio have activated the National Guard to mitigate bus driver shortages, in addition to using local emergency management services to help fill gaps.
- In a pilot program, Los Angeles students will be allowed to take unlimited Metro bus and train rides at no cost. The program will cost just under \$50 million and is covered mostly through federal funds. If all 41 districts in Los Angeles County sign onto the program, more than 726,000 students will be eligible for the program.
- Las Vegas area students began participating in the "Ride On" program in October. High school students will take public transit to and from campus, boarding buses near their homes to ride existing routes along with regular riders to stops near the schools. The transportation commission has agreed to have security officers patrol bus stops and transit centers to ensure safety. The Clark County School District is budgeting up to \$1 million for the program, funded through school bus driver vacancies.

State and Local Practices for Cafeteria and Custodial Staff

- Waco Independent School District in Texas will give custodians and cafeteria workers up to \$1,000 in bonuses, based on years served with the district. Those who have worked for 10 or more years will receive \$1,000, divided in three payments beginning in December 2022. Those who have worked for five to nine years will get \$750, and those with the district fewer than five years will get \$500. The district expects \$500 in bonuses to go to custodians and cafeteria workers.
- North Carolina is using ESSER funds to help local school nutrition operations across North Carolina recruit and retain needed staff.



For more information on SLFRF, visit the Treasury's state and local website at www.treasury.gov/SLFRF. For more information on coronavirus-related relief for retirement plans, visit the Internal Revenue Service website at www.irs.gov/newsroom/coronavirus-related-relief-for-retirement-plans-and-iras-questions-and-answers. For more information on the Department of Transportation waiver, visit www.fmcsa.dot.gov/emergency/waiver-certain-pre-trip-vehicle-inspection-skills-test-requirements-certain-school-bus.