

# **The Perfect Storm: Structural and Contextual Factors Exacerbating the Teacher Shortage in Florida**

**La tormenta perfecta: factores estructurales y contextuales que exacerban la escasez de profesores en Florida**

**A tormenta perfeita: fatores estruturais e contextuais que agravam a escassez de professores na Flórida**

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Artículos de reflexión

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## **Abstract**

K-12 education is in crisis in the United States of America. At the center of the crisis looms a severe teacher shortage. To understand the severity of the crisis, it is necessary to explore the nexus among structural factors, strategic blunders, and the socio-economic environment. A case study guided by grounded theory helps us elucidate the complex nature of the phenomenon. Official statements released by school districts, the Department of Education of Florida, and professional associations are interpreted through the constant comparative method to reveal the interaction among strategy, structure, and environmental context. A tentative model of the interrelationship between factors considered to

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be important by the organizations in question was developed to help stakeholders understand the complexity of the crisis and, by doing so, engage in more constructive and effective ways during the policymaking process.

**Keywords:** teacher shortage, education, strategy, human resources.

## Resumen

La educación primaria y secundaria está en crisis en Estados Unidos. En el centro de la crisis se cierne una grave escasez de profesores. Para comprender la gravedad de esta crisis, es necesario explorar el nexo entre los factores estructurales, los errores estratégicos y el entorno socioeconómico. Un estudio de caso guiado por la teoría fundamentada nos ayuda a dilucidar la compleja naturaleza del fenómeno. Las declaraciones oficiales emitidas por los distritos escolares, el Departamento de Educación de Florida y las asociaciones profesionales se interpretaron mediante el método comparativo constante para revelar la interacción entre estrategia, estructura y contexto ambiental. Se elaboró un modelo provisional de la interrelación entre los factores considerados importantes por las organizaciones en cuestión para ayudar a los grupos de interés a comprender la complejidad de la crisis y, de este modo, participar de forma más constructiva y eficaz en el proceso de formulación de políticas.

**Palabras clave:** escasez de profesores, educación, estrategia, recursos humanos.

## Resumo

A educação K-12 está em crise nos Estados Unidos. No centro da crise, está uma grave escassez de professores. Para compreender a gravidade dessa situação, é necessário explorar o nexo entre os fatores estruturais, os erros estratégicos e o entorno socioeconômico. Um estudo de caso guiado pela teoria fundamentada nos ajuda a dilucidar a complexa natureza do fenômeno. As declarações oficiais emitidas pelos distritos escolares, pelo departamento de educação da Flórida e pelas associações profissionais são interpretadas mediante o método comparativo constante para revelar a interação entre estratégia, estrutura e contexto ambiental. Foi elaborado um modelo provisório da inter-relação entre os fatores considerados importantes pelas organizações em questão para ajudar as partes interessadas a compreender a complexidade da crise; desse modo, participar de forma mais construtiva e eficaz no processo de formulação de políticas.

**Palavras-chave:** escassez de professores, educação, estratégia, recursos humanos.

## Introduction

The United States is facing a severe teacher shortage (Czachor, 2022). Numbers vary from state to state but Florida, an affluent southern state, is representative of the challenges faced by many regions in the United States. There is considerable discussion over the possible causes of the teacher shortage. Common arguments include insecurity in schools, low teacher pay, low teacher morale, and burdensome standardized testing requirements, *inter alia*. Nevertheless, a more nuanced understanding is needed to foster informed public policy. No single factor can adequately explain the severe teacher shortage in Florida; thus, policies dealing with a single factor will invariably fail.

The present exploratory study attempts to bridge the lessons learned from different disciplines and perspectives, which have tackled the thorny problem of teacher turnover and recruitment. At the micro level, the focus has been to understand teachers' experiences and, in particular, their levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their careers (Anderson, 2006; Kantabutra & Saratun, 2013). Nevertheless, it is dangerous to extrapolate lessons from personal experiences, for a macro-level phenomenon such as the nationwide teacher shortage. Therefore, a good starting point is to explore structural elements and how they may affect the incentive and disincentive structure to enter and continue in the teaching career. A focus on the decentralized structure of the American education structure can also help understand one layer of the phenomenon (Stern & Johnston, 2013; Suttichujit, 2009; Zhao, Hoge, Choi, & Lee, 2007). A closer look at the complex interaction between elected officials at the Federal, State, and district levels provides a partial explanation for the lack of coordination to tackle the problem. Moreover, structure interacts with contextual factors such as demographic changes as well as the economic and political environment. A section of this paper explains some of the main opportunities and threats presented by the socio-economic and political environments which have exacerbated the crisis. Finally, specific case studies of strategic blunders are explored concerning education policy in the state of Florida. Emphasis is placed on policies affecting teacher recruitment and retention.

## Structural Factors

The American education system is highly decentralized (Goldin, 1999). Locally elected school boards interact with state legislatures and governors, who in turn must deal with Federal level public policies. It should be noted that the United

States developed during the height of the enlightenment period, and the founding fathers had an aversion to centralized control over culture and religion. As a result of the ethos of the time and the unique early historical development of the United States, the Constitution enshrined several important principles that would lead to a highly decentralized education system. One of the central principles is that the powers not explicitly reserved for the Federal Government belong to the State governments (Anderson, 2006). In the case of education, it is not explicitly mentioned as one of the powers of the Federal Government, and thus it is widely accepted that the individual state governments have authority over the regulation of education at both the K-12 and tertiary levels. Moreover, state legislatures have the power to determine the standards taught in schools (John A. Hird, 2004).

Another layer of administration and structure is the local school boards (Saldaña, 2021). As previously stated, the American education system, at the K-12 level, is highly decentralized. School boards have control over school districts, the basic administrative unit in the American education system. Members of the school boards are elected by local constituents and serve four-year terms. The role of school boards is akin to a legislature for the school districts. School boards have power over budgets, the appointment of superintendents, principals, and teachers, as well as power over local guidelines for schools. Thus, local school boards occupy a central place in the administrative structure of the school system. Superintendents are usually appointed and answer to elected school boards and serve as the executive branch of the school district. It should be noted that Florida is one of only two states that allow some school districts to have elected superintendents. Nevertheless, the trend has been to move away from elected superintendents to appointed ones.

Therefore, the structure of the local school district reflects the political structure at the national and state levels with three branches of government, namely the executive, legislative, and judicial. In the case of school districts, the judicial function is exercised by local district courts and by county courts depending on the case. School boards have legal officers to handle and advise the board regarding legal issues. The school board serves as the legislative branch and the superintendent and his staff serve as the executive branch. In most districts, elections for the school board are done by sub-districts. In other words, a school district is geographically divided into several geographic regions and each region elects one member to the school board. Technically school board members are non-partisan; however, in practice, candidates have the informal support of one party or another. There are no minimum educational requirements to run for the

school board. Any person who is 18 or older and who does not have a criminal record can run to be a member of the school board. This is important because it means that in contrast to other local elected positions such as for county level judge, many school board members have no experience in education, nor do they necessarily hold advanced degrees in the discipline.

There is also an important structural factor that affects the incentive structure to run for office. Serving on a school board is not considered to be a full-time job and therefore the remuneration for the service is relatively low. Salaries for schoolboard members range from \$40,000 to \$60,000 depending on the district. The current governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, has even proposed making the position completely pro bono and thus removing the financial incentive to run for office. Currently, it is possible to hold a full-time job or to own a private business while serving on the school board. Nevertheless, it is not possible to serve on the school board and at the same time work for the school district in another capacity. The result of this rule is obvious, teachers and principals cannot be members of the school board without having to leave their jobs.

Most collective bargaining agreements include special accommodations for teachers who want to run for political office. Nevertheless, even if the teacher or principal can request a leave of absence, the salary issue remains an important disincentive to run. If a teacher decides to run for office, he or she can take an extended leave of absence and his or her job will be protected; nevertheless, the person will not receive his or her usual salary while serving on the school board. The newly elected school board member will be receiving the \$40,000 to \$50,000 school board member salary. Taking into consideration that the starting salary for a teacher in Florida is \$47,500 and that due to the high cost of rent in some parts of the state, it is difficult to recruit teachers for open positions, because of the low pay, it is unrealistic to expect that a teacher would give up his or her pay in exchange of serving in the school board and thus receive a pay cut rather than a raise. On the other hand, a small business owner or a professional in a different field can keep his or her income and add the extra \$40,000 to \$50,000 to their yearly income. Thus, there is a disincentive for people with experience and knowledge about education to run for seats on the school board. This results in the anomalous situation in which most school board members lack experience and academic credentials in the field while teachers are not as politically active as in other countries, for example, the countries of the European Union (Bronstein, 2020).

Another structural factor that should be discussed is the appointment of the superintendent and other administrative staff. In the State of Florida, there are a few state-mandated rules for the appointment of such personnel. For public schools, administrative officers such as principals, assistant principals, and superintendents are required to hold a master's or doctoral degree in educational leadership from a regionally accredited university and to pass the Florida Educational Leadership Examination (FELE). Three years of teaching experience are required as a minimum and there is no requirement for the teaching experience to be at the level of education the person intends to lead. Thus, a former lower school teacher can become a principal at a high school. It is also possible to become a principal or an assistant principal without experience teaching a core subject. One such example is an assistant principal who taught home economics for three years, a subject that has been phased out since that time, and is now conducting teacher evaluations at a middle school. Another structural challenge is that some school districts limit the hiring of administrative personnel to people already in the school district. Thus, the positions are not subject to an open search but rather appointment is done internally through a complex and obscure system involving public consultation with the community but ultimately decided by area superintendents. Therefore, the most common incentive structure for advancement in Florida school districts discourages many ambitious teachers from continuing in the teaching career track and instead favors entering the administrative track.

Further explanation about the twin track in public education is necessary. A new teacher has two possible career tracks to consider in most public school districts in the State of Florida. One career track focuses on teaching and leads to the rank of department head or lead teacher. Salary raises for teachers in the teaching track are based on years of service and formal credentials, supplements for advanced degrees. On the other hand, a teacher may choose to enter the administrative track after just three years of teaching. To do so, the teacher needs to pursue a master's degree in educational leadership at a regionally accredited university and then pass the Florida Educational Leadership Examination (FELE). Those are the official minimum requirements; nevertheless, the incentive structure for entry into the administrative track favors teachers who prefer non-teaching duties. While there are many pathways to entering the administrative track beyond the minimum requirements, the usual path begins with a teacher expressing an interest to an assistant principal or principal about their career goals. Over the years, districts have added a range of non-teaching duties to teachers, such as patrolling the hallways, overseeing security during lunchtime, and helping organize

standardized testing. Some schools even require teachers to patrol the main door of the school before and after school. The first three years of teaching are the proving ground for many young graduates (Stern & Johnston, 2013). Many young teachers realize that they do not like teaching or sadly they cannot adapt to the reality of classrooms in many public schools. A natural reaction of those teachers is to focus on non-teaching duties to balance their lackluster performance in the classroom. The result is that administrators, who are in many cases overwhelmed by their duties and responsibilities, immediately identify potential recruits for the administrative track.

Thus, many potential candidates for the administrative track tend to dislike classroom teaching, which leads to the contradictory situation of promoting those who are least passionate about teaching. Moreover, the way the system is structured in terms of formal authority over instructional design and evaluation focuses on the role of the administrative track. Assistant principals and principals are entrusted with evaluating teachers on their teaching. The irony is that the people entrusted with instructional leadership chose to leave the teaching track and tend to dislike teaching. Many of those entering the administrative track only have three years of teaching experience, in most cases in subjects different from those they must evaluate, and they are entrusted with evaluating veteran teachers. This leads to very peculiar situations where an administrator with three years of experience teaching an elective must evaluate the teaching of a veteran teacher with fifteen years of experience and several *teachers of the year* awards. Thus, the incentive structure and the administrative structure lead to a very contradictory situation, which can be demoralizing for veteran teachers. Having former lackluster teachers evaluate veteran teachers creates organizational conflict and leads to low morale.

The pay scale is also very different for the two tracks. Administrators receive considerably higher salaries and thus the message that is sent to teachers is that administration is more valuable than teaching. The difference in pay between administration and teaching is not as evident in higher education where many full professors receive considerably higher salaries than many administrators and thus the difference cannot be inherent to the nature of the job (Thelin, 2011). Thus, an outstanding veteran teacher makes less after two decades of teaching than a mediocre assistant principal. There are many reasons for the wide gap in terms of pay between the two tracks. A structural factor is partly to blame, as well as the role of unions in the negotiation process. Even though teachers' unions have fought for decades for better working conditions and do provide support to their



members, one negative structural externality of their centrality in the collective negotiation of teachers' contracts is that they favor contracts that minimize differences between teachers. In other words, the goal is to negotiate uniform pay raises and to play down any differences among the members. Thus, most collective contracts for teachers avoid performance-based incentives and de-emphasize rank among teachers.

One possible track for advancement in the teaching track would be for teachers to seek advanced degrees and receive supplemental pay based on educational achievements. Most districts do have pay supplements for advanced degrees; nevertheless, on average, the supplements do not reflect the high cost and effort of achieving an advanced degree. The supplement for a master's degree is approximately \$2500 per year, for two master's degrees it is \$4000, for a doctorate, it is \$6000. Taking into consideration the high cost of graduate education in the United States, it would take many years for a teacher to recover the investment. The reason for the small supplements is the influence of the unions. Even though many ambitious teachers want to pursue advanced degrees and improve their skills, union leaders have an interest in achieving improvements in the working conditions of the majority, the lowest common denominator, of the membership, and therefore there is an incentive structure to favor raises that apply to all members rather than merit-based incentives such as advanced degree supplemental pay. Differential pay for advanced degrees is perceived by some union leaders to be a divisive issue among the members. Historically, high school teachers were paid higher salaries than middle school and lower school teachers in many districts (Goldin, 1999). Many Unions fought against the differences and today pay is the same regardless of level in most districts across the country. This is one example of how unions tend to promote conformity rather than differences based on merit.

## Contextual Factors

Structural issues provide only part of the explanation. Contextual factors such as demographic changes and socio-economic trends interact in complex ways with organizational and structural factors. The historically low unemployment rate in the United States at the time of writing of this study, 3.5%, and the even lower unemployment rate in the State of Florida, 2.7%, certainly play an important role in terms of the teacher shortage (*Governor DeSantis Announces Florida's Unemployment Rate Drops to Historic 2.7 Percent as State's Job Creation Skyrockets*, 2022). Low unemployment combined with a booming economy mark



Florida's economic growth at 6.3%, which is higher than the national average. Another important factor is the continued growth of the Hispanic community in the state.

The low unemployment rate plays an important role in terms of making the recruitment of qualified teachers more challenging. Among many reasons, the availability of well-paid jobs requiring some of the same skills required for the teaching profession means that school districts must compete for qualified candidates against a vast array of employers. Low unemployment means that recruitment is taking place beyond the traditional disciplinary and professional boundaries. In other words, it is becoming more common for headhunting firms to focus on competencies and skills rather than on specific degrees for recruitment for certain positions. One case in point is criminal justice. Security agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are actively recruiting teachers (FBI: Special Agent Expert Education/Teaching, 2022). The reason is that teachers have many of the skills required for a successful career as an FBI agent. One position for the FBI is labeled "Special Agent: Education/Teaching Background" and includes the following description "your education experience, whether K-12 or higher, can easily translate to a Special Agent career, where you'll enhance your team by identifying threats and building relationships with communities..." (FBI: Special Agent Expert Education/Teaching, 2022). The starting salary of the position is \$78,000 to \$153,000. This particular job is based in Tampa, Florida. Even though a career change from teaching to serving as a special agent may seem anomalous yet many of the skills required for teaching overlap with those required to be a special agent. Examples include but are not limited to attention to detail, communication skills, leadership skills, and classroom management skills, *inter alia*.

Other fields recruit teachers, such as management, hospitality, and real estate, *inter alia*. The skills developed by experienced teachers, make them great managers, able communicators, and tested leaders. Thus, the low unemployment rate, as well as the realization by human resources professionals that teachers have many of the most highly-demanded skills, has resulted in large-scale poaching of experienced teachers. Low unemployment combined with a relatively high inflation rate makes it easier to poach teachers to other more lucrative fields.

Poaching also happens from public schools to private schools. In certain regions of the country, due to a strong economy, and the phenomenon of highly skilled digital nomads flocking to highly attractive locations such as Florida, private schools have seen a sharp upsurge in enrollment (Gibbons, 2022). Examples of

this particular phenomenon can be seen in luxury areas of Palm Beach County and Miami-Dade. The upsurge in demand for private schools results in hiring pressure. Elite private schools hire experienced teachers with advanced degrees. Even though salaries tend to be similar to those offered by public schools, there are a few important differences. Private schools are not tied to rigid salary schedules and thus have the freedom to negotiate individually with prospective teachers (DeVos, 2022). Public school salary schedules favor equity and thus the gap between the top and the lowest qualified teachers is not large. On the other hand, private schools tend to prefer to hire outstanding teachers with impressive credentials, particularly advanced degrees in the fields they teach. Moreover, private school teachers offer the opportunity for teachers with advanced degrees to focus on teaching the content rather than focusing on the lowest-performing students and pedagogy. Elite private schools tend to have three strikes policies and minimum academic performance requirements and thus the average student is the equivalent of a gifted student in a public-school accelerated program. Therefore, the demographics of elite schools, in addition to financial incentives, and an emphasis on content rather than on process are a few factors facilitating the poaching of experienced public school teachers by the private education sector. Even though the numbers are small compared to the demand for teachers in the public sector, the effect is magnified by the type of teacher recruited in a time of scarcity of teachers in general. In other words, the best-experienced teachers are the ones who are targeted in a time of extreme scarcity. The result is that many public schools are left with a mix of uncertified teachers and rookie teachers.

## **Strategic Blunders**

The previous sections have discussed the role of contextual and structural factors in the current teacher shortage crisis. Nevertheless, a large part of the crisis can be attributed to strategic blunders. The ideological struggle over education has exacerbated the challenges of seeking a consensual policy-making process (Kamenetz, 2021). Even though structures determine incentives, there is no doubt that personal agency can also play an important role in the policymaking process. At the macro level, the Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, has attempted to regulate education through legislative action (Manchester, 2022; Parental Rights in Education, 2022). He has also attempted to standardize salaries from the top down; a very difficult thing to do because of the decentralized nature of the primary and secondary education systems (Trischler, 2022). Thus, the Governor has tried to provide the resources and reform the incentive structure to aid lower

levels of governments in their efforts to lower turnover and attract new teachers to the profession.

The challenge is that many principals and superintendents have misinterpreted the guidelines received from the State legislature and others are simply not equipped to implement the required measures. One example is the issue of local referenda for extra funding for education. It has become customary for school districts to propose local referenda to increase the contribution of property owners to provide extra funding for education. The usual reason is to boost teacher salaries in areas with high housing prices. This type of extraordinary funding can provide an important lifeline to lower turnover by providing funds to raise teacher salaries through supplements of between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per annum. The funds are not used solely for teachers' salaries, and it is a way for district leaders to seek funds from the public under the cover of helping teachers. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the temporary increase in taxes to fund education must be brought to a vote every three to five years and voters can turn down the request.

Taking into consideration that the minimum teacher salary in the State of Florida is \$47,500 and that most supplements provided by local referenda range from \$5,000 to \$10,000, they play an important role in ameliorating turnover. The problem of strategic blunders is clearly visible in the actions of certain superintendents and principals who ignore the fact that most property owners in Florida tend to be conservative, and due to the extremely high real estate prices in the State, they also tend to be older adults (Florida Realtors Market Data, 2022). Therefore, local actions that may antagonize voters jeopardize the passing of referenda. Examples include principals who get involved in highly charged ideological battles over the type of books used in the classroom, superintendents who prioritize infrastructure over teachers, and horror stories of principals who make teachers push trash cans during lunchtime duty. The point of those local actions is not whether they are legal or not but rather how those actions are strategically counterproductive in seeking the support of local property owners. A district that is replacing the entire fleet of relatively new buses will find it difficult to make the case to voters that it needs money to supplement teachers' salaries. Local stories of principals mistreating teachers with extra duties, which are completely unrelated to teaching will undermine the district's message of seeking to improve the working conditions of teachers. Reasons for strategic blunders by educational leaders range from lack of proper training to insulation from constituents. Many principals were educated at a time when there was no shortage of teachers and were mentored in a top-down leadership style borrowed from the

business sector. Other educational leaders simply lack an understanding of how their individual actions support or hamper district and statewide efforts. Sadly, a few rotten apples spoil the entire harvest, and at a time of severe crisis in education, local strategic blunders can have oversized effects on the overall strategy.

## Conclusions

The perfect storm is happening due to a vast array of factors such as the decentralized structure of the American education system. The current socioeconomic and political context has exacerbated the crisis, and strategic blunders at the local level have foiled many of the strategies developed at the State level to ameliorate the teachers' shortage. Thus, the complex challenges faced by educational leaders require an understanding of the inherent complexity of the problem and the ability to coordinate efforts with a range of stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels. The effects of the crisis are being felt at the school level and there will be a drop in learning indicators at the national level. This is worrying at a time of increasing international competition in which American productivity is lagging many other highly industrialized countries. PISA scores clearly show that American students are not on par with their peers in Asia and Europe, which is surprising taking into consideration that the United States invests more per student than most other OECD member countries.

Several conclusions can be tentatively reached based on the current teacher shortage crisis. Teaching is not an attractive career for many young Americans not only because of issues of pay but because of the incentive structure of the profession itself (Stern & Johnston, 2013). Moreover, the philosophy of "No Child Left Behind," which focused attention and resources on the bottom 15% of students has not produced the expected results and instead has resulted in abandoning the other 85% of students. American education at the K-12 level is costly and pours most resources on the bottom 15% rather than on most of the student population. A philosophy of student-centered education ironically results in a passive expectation that teachers must solve every conceivable problem to help students achieve unrealistic goals determined by elected officials with no or very little experience in the field of education. A second tentative conclusion is that the sharp separation of teaching from an administrative track has created a perverse incentive structure for the worst teachers to seek an administrative career and then in turn determine the working conditions of the best teachers. Furthermore, the endogamy of certain school districts in terms of hiring

administrators further exacerbates the problem by preventing the influx of new ideas and increasing healthy competition for principalships to attract the most qualified candidates.

Dealing with the current crisis requires more than a local cosmetic superficial fix, it is time for a national dialogue on the very essence of education which includes openly debating the dogmas established by the “No Child Left Behind” revolution (DeVos, 2022). Even though the task ahead of educational leaders is a daunting one, the following section provides a few simple yet potentially impactful recommendations to act and, through concerted efforts, rejuvenate the educational endeavor at a critical moment in American history.

## **Recommendations**

America has grown through the creative destruction of the free market and through the unbridled spirit of its people. Competition begets excellence and it does not preclude cooperation. Nevertheless, competition cannot be relegated to institutions, but it must infuse the entire enterprise, from the individual student to the whole nation. “No Child Left Behind” corrupted the entire system by distorting the core mission of education and by replacing individual responsibility and healthy competition with passivity and a culture of entitlement. The entire responsibility for the failure or success of the education process was placed on the shoulders of teachers without providing the proper resources to accomplish their mission and with a sharp emphasis on accountability. Accountability for the teacher not for the students.

Thus, change can begin with small individual steps to reestablish individual accountability and a more rational distribution of resources for education. The bottom 15% cannot receive more resources than the top 85%. Moreover, the authority of teachers must be reasserted and the link between results and student effort must be strengthened. It will take a return to the American philosophy of “pulling yourself by the bootstraps” with the proper resources provided by the education system. Results cannot be artificially guaranteed. Educational success is not an entitlement. Education is an active process that requires effort and aptitude from both the student and the teacher.

Healthy competition between and among teachers must be encouraged rather than discouraged. Sclerotic union norms focused on seniority rather than ability and merit must be replaced by a culture of excellence with a clear incentive structure for teachers to improve performance and seek advanced credentials. Salary scales

and job titles must support an emphasis on merit rather than on seniority. A related change must be made to education programs at the bachelor's level with a greater balance between case studies focused on public education and private education.

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