

# There Is No Teacher Shortage. So Why Is Everyone Talking About It?



*Yeah, this should be fine.*

*getty*

*If I can't buy a Porsche for \$1.98, that doesn't mean there's an automobile shortage. If I can't get a fine dining meal for a buck, that doesn't mean there's a food shortage. And if appropriately skilled humans don't want to work for me under the conditions I've set, that doesn't mean there's a human shortage.*

I wrote the above three years ago in [a piece now approaching](#) a million views (because people have Feelings about this topic). Conditions have not improved since then. So why does there seem to be a new wave of teacher shortage stories?

In many states, the teacher pipeline is clearly broken. [Pennsylvania issued](#) over 16,000 teaching certificates in 2012-13; last year the state issued under 6,000. However, the numbers have been that low for the past six years, representing thousands of qualified young people who considered teaching and said, “no, thanks.”

It certainly feels as if teaching conditions are worse. The heated rhetoric is getting hotter, from attempts to [micro-manage what teachers can teach](#). Pay remains stagnant. Respect seems as if it's at an all time low. Every teacher knows a teacher who left the profession ahead of schedule, or a promising prospective teacher who chose not to enter the field at all.

But that's not a shortage. Call it an exodus, a slow-motion strike, or a wave of teachers responding to the old, "If you don't like it, then get out" with a resounding, "Okay, then." Teachers have not vanished. The supply has not been used up, like a gold mine stripped of its last nugget.

The trouble with teacher shortage rhetoric is that it mislocates the problem. If we argue that all of the nuggets have been pulled from the mine, we don't have to consider the possibility that there's plenty of rich vein left, but we can't mine it with a plastic spork.

Not only does the teacher shortage rhetoric continue, but this recent round treats it as a new phenomenon. Absent from most "teacher shortage crisis" articles is any historical context, any note that this exodus has been going on for years. [A few researchers have tried to make the point](#) that filling teaching positions is no harder than it has been, that current crisis talk is overblown. The trouble filling positions, as has always been the case, varies by certification and geography. An increasing number of voices make the argument that this is not a shortage, but a set of working conditions driving teachers from the classroom.

Something is happening, or, more accurately, something is continuing to happen, and it bodes ill for filling teaching positions, but mostly journalists and education pundits are [not doing a very thorough or nuanced job](#) of covering it.

So the highly simplified teacher shortage narrative continues. Why?

There's certainly many teachers who are offering some variation of, "We've been trying to tell you the house was on fire for years, and now you're finally noticing something's wrong?!!!" And that often veers into "teacher shortage" talk.

But the teacher shortage narrative is useful for other folks as well.

Personnel costs are generally the most expensive part of running a school, so for those who want to reform schools without spending more money, replacing teachers with computers, guides, or coaches has long been a dream. [Microschools](#), favored by [Betsy DeVos](#), just require a home and a "coach." While they have never quite caught on on the large scale, "We've run out of teachers, so we might as well switch to this other model," becomes a new argument in favor of the teacherless classroom.

Some on the far right have long argued that the teaching profession is a scam. Hillsdale College president Larry Arrn argued that teaching doesn't require trained experts [because "anyone can do it."](#) Speaking at Hillsdale, anti-CRT activist Christopher Rufo argued that [jobs in public education are](#) "patronage systems for left-wing activists."

From there, it's a short step to solutions like those [proposed in Idaho](#) and other states that have simply lowered the bar so that no formal education training is required to take over a classroom. Florida's Ron DeSantis, who has [teamed up with Rufo](#) in the past, offers a particularly cynical take—since teaching is a patronage job that anyone can do, why not award the [job to American veterans and their spouses](#).

All of these sorts of solutions rest on the premise that there is a teachers shortage, that the mine has been stripped of every nugget, that there is no crop to harvest and we must therefore change the definition of what we're looking for. All of these solutions rest on a dogged determination to misdiagnose the problem.

If we can't find a babysitter to work for \$1.50 an hour, we don't shrug and just leave our infant at home with the family dog. If we're scheduled for spleen surgery at Low Budget Hospital, we aren't okay with hearing that our surgery will be performed by somebody from accounting who plays Operation a lot, because there's a surgeon shortage.

If the fields haven't yielded enough food to feed the family, we don't declare that food just doesn't grow any more. We don't start feeding our family pictures of food pasted on cardboard. Instead, we look at our fields and how we've cared for them. We look for a more useful diagnosis than "Food just doesn't grow," so that we can bring forth a better harvest.

There is no teacher shortage. There's a teacher recruitment and retention problem. There's a "making the job attractive enough to draw in the people we want" problem. There is a problem that requires a careful, thoughtful diagnosis. There are policy and political leaders who see the current situation as an opportunity to be exploited rather than a problem to be solved. Those are not the voices we should be listening to right now.