



The Teacher Shortage Myth

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A nationwide shortage of teachers threatens quality education, according to the education establishment and its advocates in the media. But as with the population bomb, Y2K, and the devils of Loudon, the reality of the supposed crisis is quite different from its representation. A look at the data puts the situation into perspective.

The shortage claim has been around for some time. The National Education Association warned in 1921 that there was “an appalling lack of trained teachers throughout the country.” At the time, we had a student-to-teacher ratio of 33 to 1; we have more than halved the ratio in less than 100 years. The late Cato Institute scholar Andrew Coulson gave us a more up-to-date perspective in 2015, explaining that since 1970 “the number of teachers has grown six times faster than the number of students. Enrollment grew about 8 percent from 1970 to 2010, but the teaching workforce grew 50 percent.”

A new report from the U.S. Department of Education states that our teaching force is still growing proportionate to the student population. In fact, we now have over 3.8 million public school teachers in the U.S., an increase of 13 percent in the last four years. During that same time period, student enrollment rose just 2 percent. Mike Antonucci, director of the Education Intelligence Agency, adds that, between 2008 and 2016, student enrollment was flat but the teaching force expanded from 3.4 million to more than 3.8 million, a rise of 12.4 percent. University of Pennsylvania education professor Richard Ingersoll avers that not only is there no shortage of teachers, there is actually a glut. Ingersoll, who has long studied teacher-staffing trends, says the growth in the teaching force, which goes well beyond student growth, is financially a “ticking time bomb.” He adds that the “main budget item in any school district is teacher’s salaries. This just can’t be sustainable.”

And it’s not only the teaching force that’s ballooning: the number of other school personnel has been expanding at an alarming pace as well. Researcher and economics professor Benjamin Scafidi found that, between 1950 and 2015, the number of teachers increased about 2.5 times as fast as the uptick in students. But even more outrageous is the fact that other education employees—administrators, aides, counselors, social workers—rose more than *seven times* the

increase in students. Despite all this new staff, student academic achievement has stagnated—or even declined—over the past several decades.

The myth that America suffers a scarcity of teachers is promulgated by the teachers' unions and their supporters in the education establishment. On the California Teachers Association website, we read that “California will need an additional 100,000 teachers over the next decade.” But this statistic simply means that CTA expects about a 2.8 percent yearly attrition rate, and will need to hire 10,000 teachers per annum over a ten-year period to maintain current staffing levels—more of an actuarial projection than an alarming call for action. (The union adds that California must hire even more teachers to “reduce class size so teachers can devote more time to each student.” The claim that small class size benefits all students—another union promulgated myth—means more teachers, which translates to more dues money for the union.) In reality, California is following the national trend in overstaffing. According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, California had 332,640 teachers in 2010. By 2015, there were 352,000. But the student population has been virtually flat, moving from 6.22 million in 2010 to 6.23 million in 2016. True, legitimate general shortages exist in some school districts, while other districts may lack teachers in certain areas of expertise, like science and technology. Workers in these fields can earn higher salaries in the private sector; one solution would be to pay experts in these subjects more than other teachers as a way to lure them into teaching. Unfortunately, that's not possible: throughout much of the country, and certainly in California, salaries are rigorously defined by a teacher union-orchestrated step-and-column pay regimen, which allows no room for flexibility in teacher salaries.

What's necessary is to break up the unaccountable Big Government-Big Union education duopoly. More school choice, from privatization to charter schools, could go a long way toward solving the teacher glut. The government-education complex will always try to squeeze more money from the taxpayers, irrespective of student enrollment. Its greed has nothing to do with teacher shortages, small class sizes, educational equity, or any other rationale it can come up with: paramount to the interest of the educational bureaucracy is more jobs for administrators, and more dues money for the unions, which they use to buy and hold sway over school boards and legislators. While there is a surfeit of teachers and administrative staff, clarity and transparency regarding the reality of union control of the schools are scarce indeed.