

# The Washington Post

## The principal is cleaning the bathroom: Schools reel with staff shortages.

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Months after the school year began, districts across the country have yet to solve crippling staff shortages that have forced a range of drastic adjustments.

In Vermont, school board members are grabbing sponges and buckets to help the short-staffed custodial crew. In Nevada, principals are covering classrooms and vacuuming hallways — one even cleaning toilets. In Massachusetts, National Guard troops have climbed [behind the wheel](#) to get [kids from home](#) to school. Around the country, [teachers are missing planning periods](#) to cover for absent colleagues, and [the demand for substitutes has skyrocketed](#).

This was supposed to be the back-to-normal school year — students and teachers returning to classrooms five days a week in a push to make up for time lost when covid-19 threw education into a free fall.

But shortages in staff that some call unprecedented are creating chaos at a time when educators are already struggling with public health imperatives: coronavirus testing, contact tracing, quarantining, mask requirements, vaccine mandates, cleaning.

The toll is glaring. Some students with disabilities are not getting legally required services. Other students find themselves in extra-large combined classes because a teacher is out. Some can't get to school at all. Still others can't see school counselors because they are temporarily reassigned.

“This is not a recovery year,” said Libby Bonesteel, superintendent of Vermont’s Montpelier Roxbury Public School District. “This is a survival year.”

### Acts of desperation

Classes [have been canceled](#) or temporarily [switched to virtual](#) mode this fall in school systems around the country because of staff shortages and widespread fatigue. Three schools in Ann Arbor, Mich., [shifted to](#) remote instruction for a day in October when about 20 percent of staffers were absent. Once, there was a districtwide shutdown.

[\*Perspective: ‘Who would want to be a teacher right now?’\*](#)

Many school districts are using thousands of dollars in cash bonuses or significant pay hikes as incentives to attract new staff members and retain existing ones. The Michigan Department of Education has pleaded with retired educators to return to the classroom. The Los Angeles

Unified School District is hiring students in teacher-preparation programs who will soon graduate, district officials said.

“This is my 28th year as an educator and my 14th year as superintendent, and I have never seen anything like this,” said Steve Matthews, the head of the 6,700-student Novi Community School District in Michigan, not far from Detroit.

At Huron High School in Ann Arbor, several students said that Principal Ché Carter and the staff are making the best of a difficult time, but that parents are sometimes working as substitutes, and when no substitute can be found, signs appear on classroom doors telling students to go to the cafeteria to work on assigned lessons.

The cafeteria has been filled with students — 100 to 200 — when Ridhima Kodali, 16, has been there. “It’s just a mob of people essentially,” she said. “It kind of worries me because of covid as well. It is also affecting our learning and putting us behind.”

The [staff shortages](#) are afflicting school districts large and small.

In Philadelphia, Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. told the school board recently that the district had about 1,870 vacancies, which fluctuates daily and includes teachers, nurses, special-education assistants and bus aides. Starting this week, administrative office workers were deployed to schools to help.

“We are trying to uphold this narrative that everything is fine — five-days-a-week school is back,” said Elizabeth Thiel, president of the teachers union in Portland, Ore. “But this year things are not normal, and it’s been really hard for educators to talk about how bad it is.”

## Hard to compete

School systems nationwide are getting billions of dollars in coronavirus relief funding passed by Congress. But even that does not fix the problem. [In many places, federal funds](#) are being steered to ventilation upgrades that help combat spread of the virus, technology improvements, tutoring, summer school, virtual academies and mental health services. Some is clearly being used for hiring and bonuses, but many school systems are reluctant to raise salaries to a point they can no longer afford after the federal money is spent.

Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the interests of more than 75 of the nation’s largest urban school districts, said the real challenge is filling empty positions with qualified workers.

Michigan’s small Novi school system cannot compete with larger districts or private-sector employers that have more to spend on salaries, said Matthews, the superintendent. He has lost personnel as a result.

“Bus drivers and paraprofessionals and lunchroom workers are able to get jobs at Amazon that pay \$18 or \$22 or \$24 an hour, and we can’t pay that rate,” Matthews said. “Why would I drive a bus when I can make a similar amount or more working for Amazon?”

Some staff shortages can be traced to what many call the “Great Resignation” — when workers stepped out of the labor force amid the pandemic — but [the vacancies](#) also follow years of teacher shortages, at a time of upheaval and overload.

Daniel Domenech, executive director of AASA, The School Superintendents Association, said educators and school staff are among [the millions of Americans](#) who have been rethinking their job choices amid the pandemic.

“Higher pay would help, but it’s more the environment that teachers and others are working under in schools,” he said. “You are seeing attacks on teachers and the debate over critical race theory and other issues. It’s just unprecedented. Parents were always the biggest supporters of teachers . . . and all of a sudden, there is this animosity.”

### [Teachers protest staffing shortages in Maryland school system](#)

The pandemic has also accelerated teacher retirements in some places, at a time when fewer teachers are entering the profession, said Jesse Rothstein, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a former chief economist at the Labor Department.

“Imagine teaching over Zoom,” he said. “It’s just not an attractive proposition.”

In Camden, N.J., parents were offered a contract for up to \$1,000 to drive their own children to school for the year, said Superintendent Katrina T. McCombs, who reported nearly 700 applications.

More than 40 bus routes are currently uncovered, according to a school system spokeswoman.

As Portland Public Schools in Oregon grappled with a shortage of qualified bus drivers, it hiked pay by \$3 per hour, said Teri Brady, director of student transportation. The jump in pay attracted applicants, Brady said, but some routes continue to be altered to include more students or canceled on a daily basis. Cancellations average five to 10 routes a week.

### [No bus driver? Schools are paying parents to drive their own kids.](#)

Anna Van Valkenburgh, a mother of five in Maryland, recalls the chaos of busing issues in her family. While her son’s bus has been reliable, she said, her daughter waited “a good 40 minutes” daily for almost a month — for a bus she never boarded.

Van Valkenburgh’s complaints about the “mystery bus,” as she calls it, went nowhere in Prince George’s County, she said, so she ended up driving her daughter and a friend every day. She asked her daughter to keep trying for the bus at first, hoping it would come at some point and fearing that if no one was at the stop the driver would not come again.

It was all for naught, she said. Other parents she knows whose children were assigned to the same bus never saw it either, she said. Van Valkenburgh doesn’t try anymore. But she worries about kids without family transportation or the advantage of parents with flexible jobs.

“These kids are trying to play catch-up,” she said, “and they can’t even get to the building to learn.”

## **Getting creative**

In Missouri, the Northwest School District, just outside St. Louis, was not getting enough takers for maintenance, child-care and cafeteria jobs this fall, so the chief operating officer one day posed a question: What if we let students know about the jobs?

That led to a [job fair](#) at the high school Nov. 3, which 28 teenagers attended, half of whom applied for a position. Superintendent Desi Kirchhofer said it helps fill the staffing gap, while giving kids jobs that pay \$10 to \$13 an hour and won't keep them working late at night. The school system is working with students and will adjust their academic or work schedule if needed. "I think it can be managed, for sure," Kirchhofer said. Seven students could start as soon as next week.

Similarly, school officials in Omaha hired [bilingual students this fall](#) to interpret during family conferences. And in Santa Fe, N.M., where the school board declared a staffing crisis, city officials are [allowing](#) city employees to take four hours of paid leave a month to pitch in at schools — with bus duty, food-service work, tutoring or in-class support, said Superintendent Hilario "Larry" Chavez.

In Quakertown, Pa., Superintendent Bill Harner says his school system needs aides, custodians and food-service workers. It recently decided on a new path: eliminating some part-time positions to give more hours to other employees, which provides them better benefits as another incentive to stay. Hourly pay is being increased for certain jobs, too.

"We're treading water still," Harner said. "The principals are playing teacher all day — not every day, but often."

In Richmond Public Schools in Virginia, Superintendent Jason Kamras said he often had fewer than 20 vacancies before the pandemic. Now, he has 90 — bus drivers, food-service workers, teachers and custodians.

"We've just had to be creative," he said.

### [Perspective: Today's teacher shortages are part of a longer pattern](#)

The district made a call-out for family and community volunteers who could serve as lunch monitors so that teachers could be relieved, Kamras said.

In Vermont, where Bonesteel is a superintendent, not only does the accounts payable manager help clean classrooms, but so do school board members and parent volunteers. As does Bonesteel, who has covered recess and classes — and run vaccination clinics.

Bonesteel's district is plagued by staff vacancies: one-third of its custodians, one-third of food-service workers and 20 percent of paraeducators.

"When you're down people in a small district, it really matters," she said. "Every school district in Vermont is not fully staffed. All of us are feeling it."

One day in October, Bonesteel pushed a lawn mower across the grass outside Montpelier High School. She knew the assigned custodial worker had already put in many hours of overtime and still had work to do at another school.

"If it gives our guys an hour here or there, then we're going to do it," she said. "It's totally all hands on deck right now."

## 'A breaking point'

For many teachers, the problem is more than vacancies. Absences related to the pandemic, for illness or quarantine, also leave critical jobs uncovered. In many areas, teachers are asked to use planning periods or lunch breaks to fill in for a colleague who is out.

Some say they don't have time to go to the bathroom.

In North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, a wave of teacher resignations and retirements — and a severe lack of substitutes — led to “the unprecedented step” of paying teachers \$35 for each class they cover during a planning period, teacher Justin Parmenter said. Still, it doesn't solve everything.

“It's an approach that is helping to put a temporary teacher in the classroom, but it's not an ideal solution because it means the teacher then loses valuable time they need to plan, grade, and communicate,” he said.

In Portland, between Sept. 1 and Oct. 5, there were 1,326 unfilled requests for substitutes, said Thiel, the teachers union president. During the same period two years earlier, there were 164.

### [Teachers protest staff shortages in Maryland school system](#)

In Maryland, teachers in Montgomery County rallied outside school system headquarters in late October to protest shortages. Nearly 50 percent of substitute requests went unfilled in the first two months of the school year, officials said.

“Turning out because we're burning out,” one teacher's sign said.

Among changes that teachers in the state's largest school system have called for: a pause on new initiatives this school year, an increase in pay for substitute teachers and a bump in pay for educators who cover a colleague's class during a planning period. Now, they get \$15.

“People are exhausted and at a breaking point,” said Danillya Wilson, a first-grade teacher.

Principals are overloaded, too. At Woolley Elementary School in Las Vegas, Joseph J. Uy has filled in for missing staff members by cleaning restroom toilets, working in the cafeteria, vacuuming hallways and teaching classes.

He understands the stakes of the pandemic. Early this year, Uy landed in the hospital with covid-19. He was treated there for 10 days. But when he was finally sent home, his mother was admitted with an infection.

She did not survive.

“My staff was there to cover for me,” Uy said, “and now I am here to support them as much as possible.”