

Key Observations from *Career Changers in the Classroom*

People who transition to teaching from other jobs/careers (career changers) are an essential part of the education system. During the next decade, the U.S. faces the prospect of losing up to half of its current teachers to retirement, while attrition rates for new teachers continue to climb. Already challenging teacher shortages will only grow worse unless policymakers and educators develop policies and programs that more fully tap the potential of this group.

When it comes to career changers, one size definitely does *not* fit all. While the common picture of a career changer is likely to be a middle-aged or retired executive looking to give back to the community, the reality is more complex. Just under one-third of career changers (30 percent) started teaching when they were 32 or younger, and nearly two-thirds (64 percent) started at age 42 or younger. This means that career changers have different educational and financial needs, and no single policy or program will effectively address all of them.

Teacher pay is not the only issue facing career changers in their decision to teach. Pay clearly is an issue for many prospective teachers. For two-thirds of career changers, the move to teaching resulted in no salary change or a salary increase. Career changers have other needs, however, that require attention. For example, more than half of career changers (55 percent) cite loan forgiveness as an important benefit, but fewer than one-third (31 percent) were offered that benefit.

Career changers feel that their preparation programs are good overall but are not keeping pace with contemporary issues. Nearly nine in ten career changers rate the overall quality of their programs as good or excellent. At the same time, only about one-quarter of career changers gave their programs a “C” or better in preparing them for some of the real world challenges of the classroom, such as dealing with behavioral issues, teaching English language learners, and incorporating standards into the curriculum.

Preparation programs are beginning to catch up, but they need to move faster. Newer career changers (in the classroom for six years or less) assign significantly higher ratings to their programs in terms of preparing them for contemporary challenges. This suggests that universities are making strides in adapting their teacher preparation programs. But when fewer than half of newer career changers say they received above-average preparation for using technology and using assessment data to inform teaching and learning, that is a clear sign that universities need to pick up the pace when it comes to dealing with these issues. Greater recognition is also needed that *all* teachers increasingly require preparation to work with growing populations of students whose first language is not English and who need special individualized attention to help them learn.

University-based teacher preparation programs prepare more career changers to teach than many observers may think, and they must be part of the solution. Nearly all career changers (92 percent) receive their training at a university-based program. With universities continuing to be the primary training provider for career changers, more emphasis needs to be placed on innovative university-based models that produce results. Programs like the Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellowship, which early in its development is already attracting a significant proportion of career changers (six out of every seven Fellows in the first cohort), focus on intensive classroom-based preparation at the master’s level, with ongoing mentoring. These features speak particularly to career changers’ needs.

K-12 schools and districts are not off the hook when it comes to supporting career changers as they enter the classroom. Research has clearly established that mentoring—or the lack of it—is a key factor in teacher turnover. Although 53 percent of career changers said they had worked with a mentor, many of them reported relatively minimal mentoring. School districts are taking steps to improve their mentoring efforts, but these efforts need to be scaled up to prevent an increase in turnover among career changers.