

**WHY AREN'T THEY TEACHING?
A STUDY OF WHY SOME UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA
TEACHER EDUCATION GRADUATES AREN'T IN CLASSROOMS**

POLICY BRIEF 1

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January 2013



**UAA Center for Alaska
Education Policy Research**
UNIVERSITY of ALASKA ANCHORAGE

The Center for Alaska Education Policy is part of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at UAA

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INTRODUCTION

Alaska Statute 14.40.190(b), passed as Senate Bill 241 in 2008, requires the University of Alaska (UA) Board of Regents to submit a report each regular session titled Alaska's University for Alaska's Schools that "describes the efforts of the university to attract, train, and retain qualified public school teachers." In 2012 this report documented that approximately 50% of UA initial teacher preparation graduates did not teach in Alaska public schools after completing their programs. Unfortunately, the data available could not tell us the reasons why so many graduates were not employed as teachers. In response to legislators' questions about this, the three UA Education deans (with support from the Center for Alaska Education Policy Research) made a commitment to conduct a 2012 research project to understand why graduates of UA initial teacher preparation programs did or did not teach in Alaska public schools after completing their programs. This project was conducted in response to that commitment.

EXISTING RESEARCH

There is a lack of research on reasons why initial teacher preparation graduates are not teaching across the nation. Much of the current research addresses retention issues of new teachers rather than initial employment of them. However, media outlets throughout the United States (Collins, 2011; Eaton, 2011; Hamilton, 2011; Roberts, 2011) and other countries (Dedyna, 2011; *Fairfax NZ News*, 2012; Fergus, 2012; Lepkowska, 2011) report teacher hiring freezes, school budget cuts, teacher layoffs, oversupply of teacher graduates or oversupply in low-demand areas, and stiff competition for few positions as the reasons new teachers cannot find jobs.

Some recent research has been conducted with regard to oversupply. Sawchuk (2013) explored the potential effects and policy issues related to an oversupply of new teachers, particularly elementary teachers, and discussed the supply and demand mismatch. He stated, "data, while imprecise, suggest that some states are producing far more new teachers at the elementary level than will be able to find jobs in their respective states--even as districts struggle to find enough recruits in other certification fields" (p. 1). Similarly, Ontario College of Teachers Transition to Teaching Study (2012) found "that the years of oversupply of teachers in Ontario negatively affected new teacher job outcomes more and more each year," and "each new group of teachers has entered an increasingly competitive job market" (p. 3).

In addition, a U.S. Census Bureau Report (2007) explored reasons that adults with bachelor's degrees might not be working¹. Respondents who specified a reason other than retirement were most likely to cite taking care of children/others (35%), going to school (12%), chronic illness/disability (10.3%), inability to find work (6.6%), and no interest in working (5.8%). Other reasons included temporary injury or illness (2%) and pregnancy/childbirth (1.5%). These reasons mirror what we had heard anecdotally from Alaska-prepared teachers who were not working.

¹ Adults aged 20 to 64, not working, 2004

METHODOLOGY

To look more systematically at why some UA-prepared teachers are not employed in the classroom, we surveyed 418 recent graduates about their employment and interviewed a sample of those who reported they were not teaching. The interview sample was chosen to include graduates of all UA initial teacher education program areas. We received 113 survey responses (a 27% response rate) and interviewed 21 of those respondents. We also interviewed human resource personnel who represented the five districts hiring the largest number of UA graduates.

RESULTS - ONLINE GRADUATE SURVEY

Of the 113 respondents to our survey, 90% applied for a teaching certificate upon completion of their program. The 10% who did not apply were not seeking a teaching job and cited travel, pursuit of other interests, acceptance or continuation of employment in nonteaching jobs, lack of available teaching jobs, or simply no desire to teach.

The fall immediately following their graduation, 95% of our respondents were employed. More than 4 out of 5 respondents (85%) worked in some type of education job, although only 41% were teachers (see Table 1). Of those respondents working in education, 14% worked in early childhood (pre-K) settings, 64% worked in elementary (K-6), and 66% in middle/high school settings.

Table 1. Employment Status of Survey Participants the Fall after Graduation

Answer	Response	%
employed as a teacher	47	41%
working as a substitute teacher	33	29%
working in some other education job	17	15%
working in a job outside of education	12	11%
not working	4	4%
Total	113	100%

About 72% of the 107 who were employed worked in an Alaska school, 10% worked in a school outside of Alaska, 5% worked in a childcare organization, and 13% were employed by some other business or organization within or outside Alaska. Once we account for unemployed graduates, those working part time, those working in non-teaching positions, and those working outside Alaska public schools, just 34 of the 113 graduates (30%) were working full-time as teachers in Alaska public schools the fall after their graduation.

The most frequently cited reasons for choosing to teach outside Alaska (10% of respondents) were family and personal issues, such as relocation of a spouse for work or education. Two respondents indicated they had no desire to live in Alaska and another wanted a change in scenery and climate. Two respondents indicated they were unable to find employment in Alaska, and two pursued international teaching opportunities.

We asked the 60% of our respondents (68 of 113) who were not employed as teachers the fall following graduation about their job searches and all but one responded (see Figure 1). More than 70% of them (48) had applied for a teaching job immediately after graduation. The slightly less than 30% (19) who did not apply for a teaching position most frequently cited going back to school for advanced education, lack of job availability, and uncertainty about teaching in the current educational system to explain why they had not applied. Other reasons, such as staying home to have a baby, needing a break, transferring with the military, accepting a position in a private school, and waiting on an institutional recommendation and teacher certificate were given by just one or two respondents. About half of those who had not initially applied for a teaching position (9 out of 19) later searched for a teaching job.

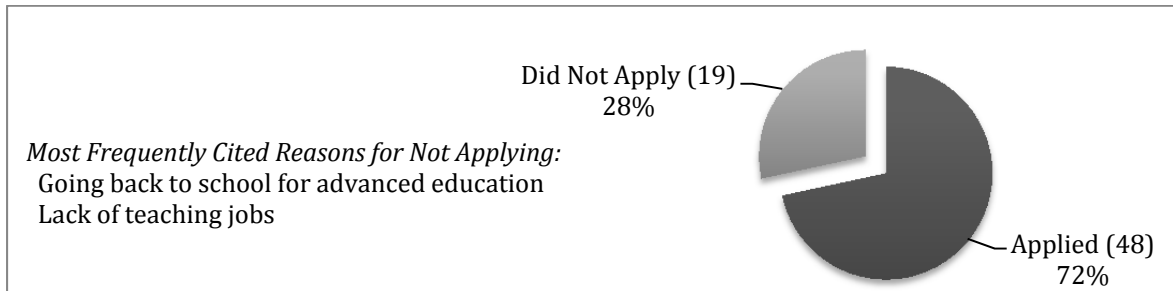


Figure 1. Percentage of those who applied or did not apply for teaching positions and were not employed as teachers the fall after graduation. This figure also lists the most frequently cited reasons graduates did not apply for a teaching position.

As shown in Table 2, of the 48 who did apply for teaching jobs immediately following graduation, more than 40% (21) applied to the Anchorage School District. About 20% (9-10) each applied to Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, the Juneau School District, the Mat-Su Borough School District, and schools outside Alaska. A little less than 20% (8) each applied to the Kenai Borough School District and other school districts in Alaska. Only about 6% (3) applied to Alaska non-public schools. Of these 48, 3 got a teaching job, 43 continued to try to get one, and only 2 stopped looking for teaching jobs.

Table 2. School District Job Application Locations of Those Not Hired the Fall after Graduation

Answer	Response	%
Anchorage School District	21	44%
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District	9	19%
Mat-Su Borough School District	10	21%
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District	8	17%
Juneau School District	10	21%
Other Alaska public schools	8	17%
Schools outside Alaska	10	21%
Alaska non-public schools	3	6%

Note. Some graduates applied to multiple locations.

We asked all those who had searched for a teaching job either immediately after graduation or later about their willingness to relocate. Of those 58 graduates, almost 60% were not able to relocate because they needed to stay in their home community (see Table 3). Of the approximately 40% (25 respondents) who were willing to relocate, 10 indicated they would teach in another state, 5 cited anywhere in Alaska, 5 indicated southcentral, 2 indicated southeast, and 1 indicated rural Alaska. Six others indicated specified and unspecified caveats on other locations in Alaska. One expressed interest in relocating to a foreign country. Most respondents (23 of 25) also identified places they were unwilling to relocate. While 3 said they would not be willing to leave Alaska, 15 said they would not move to some or all of rural/remote and/or interior/northern Alaska (see Table 3). Family/personal reasons and environment (including weather, lifestyle, and teaching/living conditions) were the major reasons respondents would not be willing to relocate to specific areas. As shown in Table 3, only about 10% (6 of 58) were willing to consider relocating to teach in a rural or remote area of Alaska.

Table 3. Willingness to Relocate for a Teaching Job of Those Not Hired the Fall after Graduation

Answer	Response	%
Unable or unwilling to relocate	33	57%
Able or willing to relocate	25	43%
Willing to relocate to some or all of rural/remote Alaska	6	
Not willing to relocate to some or all of rural/remote Alaska	9	
Not willing to relocate to interior/northern Alaska	6	

Note. Dotted line encloses responses from subset of those who were “able or willing to relocate.”

Out of the 68 who did not get a teaching job the Fall immediately following graduation, 54 gave us one or more reasons for why they were not hired. By far the most frequent answer was competition, lack of jobs, or both, cited by almost two-thirds (35 of the 54) of our respondents. Seven were unwilling to relocate and a few (2 to 4 for each reason) cited lack of experience, lack of interviewing skills, moving, having a baby, and didn’t apply.

RESULTS - INTERVIEWS WITH NON-TEACHING GRADUATES

We interviewed 21 of our survey respondents who were not employed as teachers the Fall immediately following graduation to explore why this was the case in more depth. All UA initial teacher preparation programs were represented.

Reflecting the answers above, about 80% (17) indicated there were limited teaching job opportunities, which included comments related to no openings, no offers, district budget constraints, and competition/lack of experience. Adding to those answers, one-third (7) listed other opportunities, such as travel, employment in nonteaching jobs, and family as reasons. Third, slightly less than 20% (4) expressed uncertainty about teaching. (Percentages do not equal 100 because many respondents provided multiple reasons.)

Two-thirds of those interviewed were substitute teaching, with only two indicating they were not working with children at all. Those working with children, but not as substitute teachers, cited such activities as volunteering (reading at school events and instructing rock climbing and pottery

classes), working outside the home (Head Start, paraeducator, after-school program, special education TA and Indian education tutor), and working with children in a home setting. Six of the graduates were employed in jobs that do not require teacher certification. These included research assistant, preparatory college course instructor, paraeducator, librarian, after-school program coordinator, and physical therapy assistant. A majority of those interviewed (13) indicated that they were still seeking teacher employment, most of whom (11) used district web sites as a job resource. Other resources they used included Alaska Teacher Placement (4), word of mouth (2), substitute teaching, job fairs, Craigslist, Department of Education website, ALEXsys, and a Facebook page maintained by a graduate cohort group.

When asked what UA could do to assist in their search for employment, the most frequent response (8 of the 21) was nothing or “I don’t know.” Two graduates recommended resume writing help, and one each recommended help with classroom management, assessment, interviewing practice, cover letter writing, job hunting protocol (who to contact), information about job fairs and job openings, clarification of the certification process, and honesty about the bleak job opportunities.

RESULTS - KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

To gain an additional perspective on UA graduates, we interviewed human resource personnel from the five Alaska school districts that hire the largest number of UA graduates (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, Kenai, and Mat-Su). These key informants have general knowledge of the quality of teachers hired by their districts. When asked how well prepared they found UA graduates, two were complimentary, two were neutral, and one was uncomplimentary. Paraphrased statements are included below.

- UA graduates pass screening interviews at a higher rate than the general population.
- We have had great success with UA graduates. Very few need assistance due to poor teacher evaluations.
- UA graduates are as prepared as well as any other traditional university program. There is no significant advantage to hiring a UA graduate.
- It depends on the graduate. The quality is more influenced by their preparation throughout life rather than what an education program provides.
- UA graduates are below average compared to other institutions.

Later in the interview, one of the neutral key informants indicated that the district had always been pleased with UA graduates with only a few exceptions, and thought that student teaching in the district made the transition to teaching comfortable for UA graduates.

Key informants reported both consistent strengths and weaknesses of UA graduates. Strengths included understanding the environment and diverse student populations of the district, role of the general education teacher working with ELL students, classroom management, assessment, and the connection between instruction and assessment. Other strengths cited were a passion for teaching, love of students, interest and passion for being in education, and knowledge of the state and the district in which they have applied. One key informant indicated that there were no consistent strengths that set UA graduates apart.

Despite university curricula in these areas, key informants noted weaknesses in preparation in special education, ineffective instructional practices, literacy integration at the secondary level, and

the role of the general education teacher in working with special education students. One informant reported that UA graduates seemed to have an “inherent belief” that they should automatically get jobs in the local district, and he conveyed that such an entitlement attitude was a consistent weakness. Two key informants indicated that there were no consistent weaknesses, but one of these indicated more preparation in dealing with diverse populations would be beneficial.

When asked if they shared their perceptions of graduates with UA personnel, two indicated little or no interaction with the university closest to them, one indicated participation on a statewide committee that included representation from all UA college/schools of education, one served on a college advisory board, and another had regular communication with the local campus.

Finally, key informants were asked if there were anything else UA should know related to their experiences with interviewing and hiring graduates. Two of the informants had no response. Responses by the other three informants are paraphrased below.

- UA graduates are quite prepared. The regular meetings with university students and faculty are helpful. We discuss what we look for in graduates and what is important during interviews.
- One of the larger school districts in Alaska hires the best candidates before other smaller districts have an opportunity to view them.
- Graduates from the UAA campus were late submitting their applications, which caused them to miss some job opportunities.
- The overall quality of UAS graduates appears to be less than that of UAA and UAF. The number of eligible candidates from UAS has decreased over time.
- UA has done a much better job of processing institutional recommendations more quickly.

DISCUSSION

The response rate for the survey was less than 30% (113 of 418 graduates), which is too low to statistically generalize these findings, or to generalize the frequency of these outcomes to all program graduates. Still, our respondents included graduates of all types of initial teacher programs, and they were employed in public schools at rates similar to rates among all graduates of UA teacher preparation programs. We believe the results of this survey shed light on the experiences of many graduates of UA programs.

The results of our research held few surprises. Our experience with the UA initial teacher preparation programs, with teacher candidates, and with colleagues in the districts that hire most of our graduates had indicated that UA teacher education graduates, on the whole, are prepared to teach and want to work as teachers. We knew that some graduates did not go into teaching because they left the state, had children, or could not find a job in their home district and were unable to relocate. Our surveys and interviews confirmed both that UA teacher graduates were prepared to teach, and that the reasons they did not mirrored those we had heard anecdotally.

This raises the question of why so many of our graduates don't find employment, yet districts import so many teachers from out of state. Looking at new-to-district hires in 2012 (see Table 4), we see that just 23% of new hires for teaching positions in the state's five largest districts² were

² Anchorage, Fairbanks, Matanuska-Susitna, Kenai, and Juneau

from out of state, compared with 70% of hires in the remaining 48 districts. While over half of total district hires in the five largest districts were new teachers already in Alaska, just 3% of hires in other districts were new teachers in Alaska. So teachers looking for jobs in urban Alaska can't find them, and districts looking to hire teachers for rural Alaska have to look outside the state.

Table 4. New District Hires, FY12

	Big 5 Districts			All Other Districts		
	FTE of New District Hires					
	Experienced	New Teacher	Total	Experienced	New Teacher	Total
Alaskan	87	229	316	126	12	138
New to State	47	45	92	135	190	325
Total	134	274	408	261	202	463
Percent of New District Hires						
Alaskan	21%	56%	77%	27%	3%	30%
New to State	12%	11%	23%	29%	41%	70%
Total	33%	67%	100%	56%	44%	100%

Source: EED Certified Staff Data, FY12

In addition to this place mismatch between available job locations and UA graduates willing to teach in those locations, there is some subject mismatch as well. As Table 5 shows, the same number of elementary education respondents secured jobs as teachers as secondary respondents; but nearly 40% more of our respondents were prepared as elementary teachers than as secondary teachers³. Likewise, although there were only seven special educators among our respondents, over 50% of them had teaching jobs the fall after graduation.

³ Our respondents mirror UA teacher education graduates very closely on this measure. From AY 2007-2008 to AY 2011-2012, UA prepared about 50% more elementary teachers than secondary – an average of 117 per year elementary and 77 per year secondary.

Table 5. Survey Respondent Employment Status by Elementary/Secondary Level and by Regular/Special Education

	Elementary		Secondary		Regular education*		Special education	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Teaching	19	35%	19	48%	41	37%	4	58%
Substitute teaching	18	33%	10	25%	33	31%		0%
Other education job	12	22%	4	10%	16	15%	1	14%
Non-education job	3	6%	4	10%	11	10%	1	14%
Not working	2	4%	3	7%	5	7%	1	14%
Total	54	100%	40	100%	106	100%	7	100%

Note. *Includes early childhood and K-12.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

National and Alaska researchers have long documented that teacher shortages are both location and subject-specific (NCREL, 2000; McDiarmid, 2003), and these data are in line with those findings. While UA graduates are generally prepared to teach, there are some graduates who are less prepared, as reflected by one of our key informants. The largest factor, though, seems to be that too many graduates are competing for the limited positions in the state's largest districts, and too few are able to relocate to rural and remote schools where districts need more applicants. Another factor in graduates' difficulty finding jobs is that too many UA students are choosing elementary education, and too few are choosing hard-to-fill areas such as special education, secondary math, and secondary science, a common supply-and-demand mismatch issue faced by many states (Sawchuk, 2013).

Given the findings that teacher shortages in Alaska appear to be both location and subject-specific, there are some things we recommend that UA do to increase the number of Alaska-prepared teachers who actually go into the classroom.

- *Secure more funding for partnerships and initiatives between UA and small, rural/remote school districts.*

Such partnerships or initiatives would allow UA to work with smaller school districts to accomplish two objectives: 1) more actively recruit residents of rural and remote areas into teacher education programs; and 2) enhance communication between UA and small schools, to improve teacher preparation as well as teaching and learning in small schools.

- *Broaden communication with school districts about their hiring needs and about the performance of UA graduates.*

UA should ensure that local school districts, at a minimum, have representation on UA education advisory committees and boards. Awareness of district hiring needs is essential if UA is to respond to those needs, and feedback on graduate performance is important to improving programs.

- *Increase efforts to recruit prospective teachers who are willing to relocate to rural areas.*

Given that UA is unlikely to recruit enough prospective students from rural areas with small populations, it should increase broader recruiting efforts focused on candidates willing to relocate to rural areas. UA could also set targets requiring that at least 10% of those admitted to internships be willing to relocate to rural areas after graduation.

- *Fund recruitment efforts that target more prospective students willing to major in high-need subjects.*

School districts statewide need more teachers in special education and more secondary teachers in mathematics and physical sciences. UA should look for ways to attract more prospective teachers interested in those high-need areas. For example, recruitment funds might be spent on initiatives that focus on recruiting students at the middle school level to encourage and prepare them to go into high-need subjects.

- *Decrease number of graduates in areas where the demand is low and increase graduation opportunities in areas where the demand is high.*

UA may want to consider limiting enrollment in elementary education programs or limiting the number of UA campuses that offer this program. For secondary education, a strategy might be admitting students only every two to three years—rather than every year—to secondary subject areas for which there is less demand, such as English and social studies. Although limiting enrollment for elementary education and for lower-demand secondary subject areas could mean UA would graduate fewer teachers, it would also mean that the teachers who graduated would be able to secure jobs if enrollment were adjusted to reflect the current needs of Alaska districts.

With regard to increasing opportunities in subject areas where the demand is high, UA may want to consider offering undergraduate programs (baccalaureate and/or minor) in special education and a baccalaureate in secondary education in high-need subject areas.

- *Ensure that students have opportunities to work with UA career services personnel before they are ready to apply for teaching positions and again later if they are unsuccessful in obtaining a teaching position.*

UA faculty and administrators should make sure students know they have access to help with résumé writing, interviewing, and other skills they will need as they apply for teaching jobs. That may also mean that UA's career services personnel will need specific information and training in how best to help those applying for teaching jobs in Alaska. Career services can also assist unsuccessful urban teacher applicants find nonteaching jobs, particularly since urban areas have other job opportunities for those with the knowledge, skills and dispositions developed while obtaining teaching degrees (e.g., customer service, management, or tourism).

Finally, UA advisors should be open and honest with applicants and candidates about the realistic employment possibilities for both urban areas and low-demand subjects. Graduates should not be surprised by the limited job opportunities in these areas.

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