

Shaping the Youngest Minds: Educator Shortages in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

The prevalence of educator shortages has long been a topic of research and policy discussions in Illinois. Across multiple years, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) have collected data and reported on the magnitude, severity, and impact of shortages statewide. Our prior research has used these data to closely examine where educator shortages are concentrated with two aims: (1) to understand which student populations are impacted and (2) to inform the development of strategies that target hard-to-fill positions (e.g., Beilstein & Withee, 2022a and 2022b; Withee & Beilstein, 2023). This research, however, has focused primarily on vacancies in elementary, middle, and high school. Here, we turn our focus to staffing challenges in early childhood classrooms, and more specifically, in preschool and kindergarten.

An extensive body of research has investigated the benefits of early childhood education for young children's learning and development. Regarding preschool, much evidence demonstrates that high-quality programs promote improved outcomes for children's school readiness, reading and mathematics learning, and socio-emotional development, among other positive impacts (Meloy et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Similar benefits have been found for full-day kindergarten as well, when compared to half-day kindergarten. Full-day kindergarten instruction has been associated with improved academic outcomes and socio-emotional skills for children (Cooper et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2006).

These benefits extend across a range of programs that serve different student populations, including children who need the most support (e.g., Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013; Reynolds & Temple, 2008). However, not all evaluations of early childhood programs have yielded positive results, leading scholars to call for more research examining which programmatic and instructional features contribute to better long-term outcomes for children (Bassok et al., 2016; Burchinal et al., 2024; Cooper et al., 2010). Additionally, for preschool, scholars note that the quality and success of programs depend largely on their design and implementation (Meloy et al., 2019). But, despite mixed evidence, state and federal governments have built on the bulk of research supporting publicly-funded early childhood education and developed many initiatives that broaden families' access to these programs.

In Illinois, Gov. JB Pritzker has invested heavily in preschool expansion efforts. For example, in the current fiscal year 2024, Pritzker allocated \$250 million toward Smart Start Illinois, a multi-year initiative that aims to provide all children in Illinois with a seat in

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a pre-kindergarten classroom. Within the next several years, the goal is to serve an additional 20,000 children (Office of the Governor JB Pritzker, 2023).

Investments have also been made to increase families' access to full-day kindergarten. Under House Bill 2396, signed into law August 2023, all Illinois school districts will be required to offer a full-day kindergarten program by SY28 (Public Act 103-0410).

Given the sizable state investments in expanding pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten offerings in coming years, the Educator Shortage Survey inquired about current staffing challenges at these grade levels. In this report, we examine the extent to which district superintendents reported difficulties hiring pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers in SY24.

Method

Data Source

We examine data from the annual Educator Shortage Survey for SY24, administered by IARSS in collaboration with ISBE, the Illinois Workforce and Education Research Collaborative (IWERC) at University of Illinois, and Goshen Consulting.

Although the Educator Shortage Survey has historically focused on staffing levels in K-12 districts, this year included new survey items about instructional offerings and hiring in early childhood education. In this report, we analyze the following four Likert-scale survey questions related to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs:

Pre-Kindergarten

- For SY23 and SY24, did your district include pre-kindergarten (ages 3 – 5) level of instruction?
- In your experience, how difficult is it to find pre-kindergarten teachers, relative to other elementary teacher positions?

Kindergarten

- Does your district offer full-day kindergarten?
- In your experience, how difficult is it to find kindergarten teachers, relative to other elementary teacher positions?

Sample

The Educator Shortage Survey was sent to 960 education leaders at all public schools, special education cooperatives, and area career centers statewide in Fall 2023. By December 2023, 760 education leaders responded to the survey, at a response rate of 79.2%. Chicago Public Schools was among the districts that did not respond to this year's survey.

For this report, we limit the sample to only include districts that offer early childhood education, consisting of 759 elementary and unit districts, and the response rate for these districts was 81.6% (n = 619). For a complete breakdown of respondents by type of agency and district characteristics, please refer to the full report (ISBE et al., 2024).

Analytical Approach

We present high-level, descriptive findings for these four survey questions showing the percentages of respondents grouped by specific Likert-scale categories. When relevant, we draw comparisons based on district characteristics, specifically district size, from the ISBE Illinois Report Card for SY23 (ISBE, 2023).

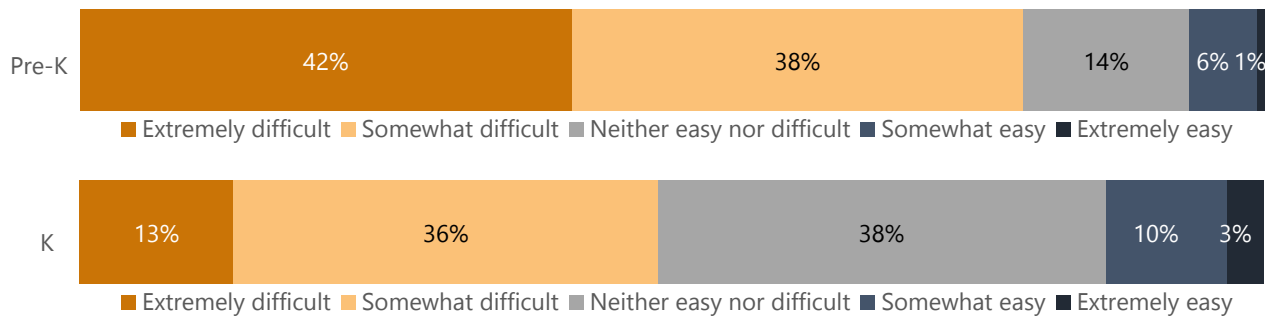
Results

In SY23 and SY24, pre-kindergarten instruction was offered by a majority of districts, or 84.3% (468 of 555) of responding districts statewide. Notably, a high proportion of district superintendents said that they struggled to find pre-kindergarten teachers. Across all responses, 79.6% (379 of 476) of district superintendents reported moderate to extreme levels of difficulty staffing pre-kindergarten classrooms, relative to other elementary positions (see Figure 1).

Full-day kindergarten instruction was also widely offered among responding districts statewide: 94.4% (519 of 550) of districts said they provided full-day kindergarten in SY24. Nearly half (48.8%, 266 of 545) of all responding district superintendents cited some difficulty finding kindergarten teachers, relative to other elementary positions (see Figure 1).

As a close point of comparison, 83.5% (598 of 716) of education leaders indicated a minor to very serious problem filling open teacher positions, across all grade bands and categories (ISBE et al., 2024). However, we note that this finding does not directly correspond with the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten staffing results because the phrasing and Likert scales differed among survey items.

Figure 1. District superintendents’ ratings of their experiences (i.e., difficulty or ease) finding pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, relative to other elementary positions.

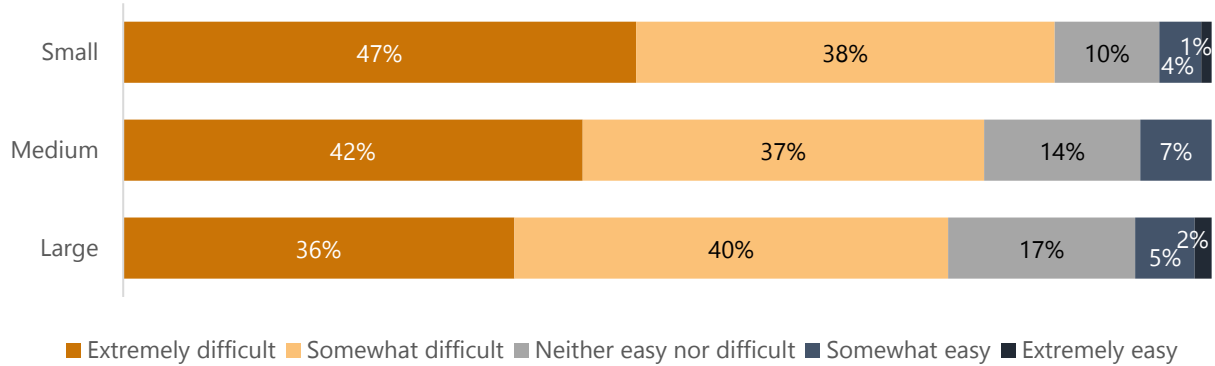


A deeper analysis of districts by varying size (i.e., small, medium, and large⁴) reveals similar challenges for pre-kindergarten (see Figure 2). Compared to medium and large districts, a greater percentage of small districts experienced challenges hiring pre-kindergarten teachers, with 85.6% (89 of 104) of small districts reporting difficulty. Though, we note that medium and large districts were not without issues: 79.1% (193 of

⁴The Illinois Report Card from ISBE classifies districts by size. For elementary and unit districts, small districts serve less than roughly 500 students, medium between 500 to 1,500 students, and large more than 1,500 students.

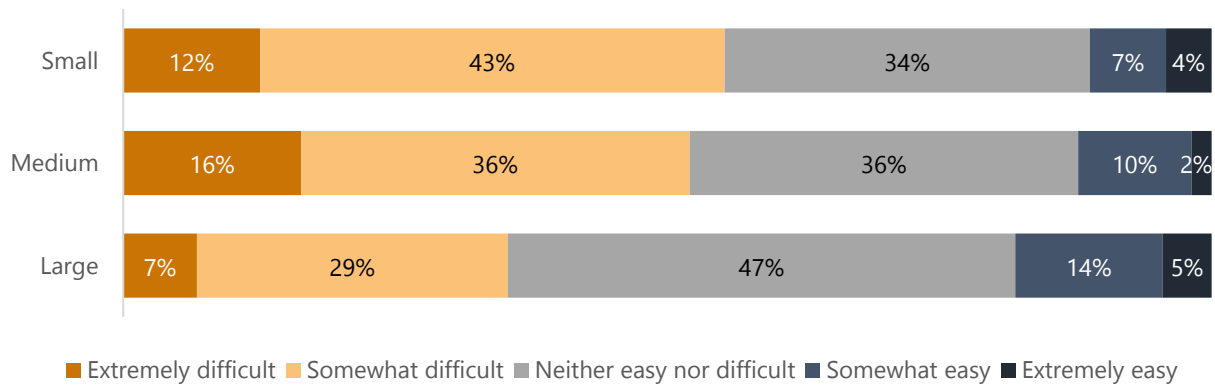
244) of medium districts and 75.8% (97 of 128) of large districts also struggled to find pre-kindergarten teachers.

Figure 2. Comparison of superintendents’ ratings of their experiences (i.e., difficulty or ease) staffing pre-kindergarten teachers by district size.



There was also notable variation in the difficulty districts faced staffing kindergarten classrooms by district size (i.e., small, medium, and large). Small and medium districts reported greater challenges compared to large districts (see Figure 3). More than half of responding small (55.2% or 79 of 143) and medium districts (52.0% or 140 of 269) had trouble finding kindergarten teachers, compared to one-third of large districts (35.3% or 47 of 133).

Figure 3. Comparison of superintendents’ ratings of their experiences (i.e., difficulty or ease) staffing kindergarten teachers by district size.



Conclusion

Understanding the challenges districts experience staffing early childhood classrooms today is important given the increasing need for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers in coming years. For pre-kindergarten, the state’s goal is to serve an additional 20,000 children over the next four years (Office of the Governor JB Pritzker, 2023), which amounts to roughly one-fourth of the total children served in SY23. In SY24, a large majority of district superintendents reported difficulty finding pre-kindergarten teachers. By comparison, finding kindergarten teachers in SY24 appears to be less onerous. However, it should be noted that roughly half of district superintendents did report difficulty staffing kindergarten teachers in SY24.

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