



What Philadelphia's Student Teachers Say About Possible Employment in the School District of Philadelphia: 1998-2001

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In the last decade, the School District of Philadelphia has had difficulty recruiting adequate numbers of qualified teachers to fill the 700-1000 teaching positions that become vacant each year. A chief source of qualified applicants are the 400 to 700 new university graduates annually who have completed their student teaching in the system's schools. Because they form such a ready pool of prospective applicants, the Philadelphia Education Fund has surveyed these student teachers each semester since the fall of 1998 in order to document their perceptions about the attractions and barriers to teaching in Philadelphia and their plans for working there. By repeating the study over a three-year period, we can represent their views with some confidence.

In addition to reviewing survey results from the 1998-99 and 1999-00 school years, this report highlights the findings from mailed surveys of student teachers in the fall of 2000 and the spring of 2001. Both surveys were filled out as students were finishing their student teaching semesters. The Fall 2000 survey was mailed to all 305 students listed by the District's Office of Human Resources as being student teachers during that semester. Of these, 154 returned completed questionnaires, yielding a 50 percent response rate. The Spring 2001 survey was sent to 212 student teachers, 97 of whom responded, a response rate of 46 percent.¹

School Type and Grade Placement

As in previous years, most of the 2000-2001 student teachers worked in elementary schools, both K-6 and K-8 schools. The breakdown by school type by semester was as follows:

	Fall 2000	Spring 2001
Elementary (K-6)	55%	46%
Elementary (K-8)	21	25
Middle School	11	11
High School	13	16

A finer breakdown by grade level from the Spring 2001 survey showed that student teachers were disproportionately located in the early grades with 38 percent in kindergarten through second grade classrooms, 19 percent in 3rd and 4th grade classes and another 19 percent in the 5th and 6th grades. Grades 7 and 8 had the fewest takers, only 9 percent, and 14 percent were training in the high school grades (9-12). The rest were specialists teaching across many grades.

¹ The response rates were probably higher because some of the students on the list were Practicum students, not full fledged student teachers.

When student teachers in the spring cohort were asked what grades they would prefer to teach, a similar and even more pronounced pattern emerged: 44 percent preferred K-2nd grade, 36 percent preferred grades 3 and 4; 13 percent wanted grades 4 and 6; only 10 percent wanted 7th and 8th grade classrooms; and 16 percent chose high school grades.²

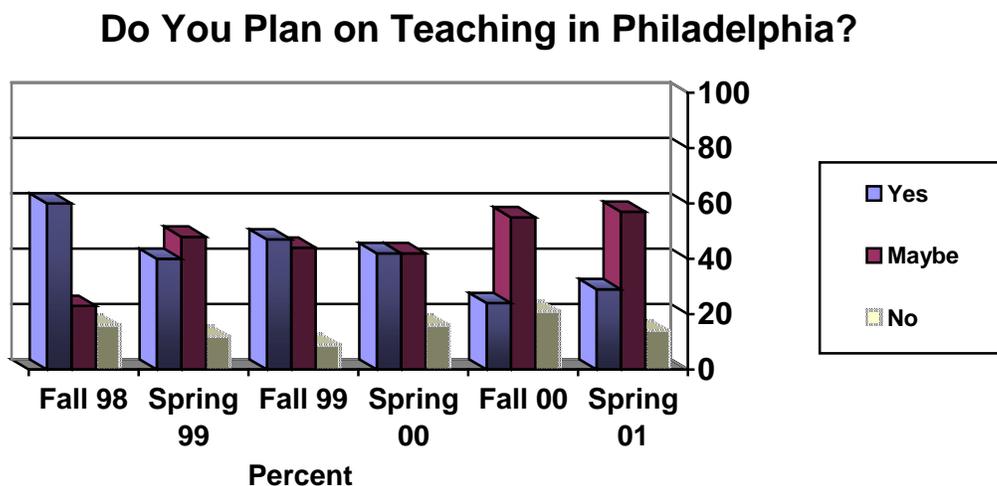
Place of Residence

A majority of the 2000-2001 student teachers, about two thirds both semesters (and previous semesters), said they lived in the city. Another quarter lived in the Pennsylvania suburbs, with lesser numbers residing in the New Jersey suburbs and elsewhere. Thirty-four percent of the Fall 2000 cohort and 43 percent of the Spring 2001 cohort had attended Philadelphia schools as a child. A smaller percentage (27-30 percent) graduated from Philadelphia public schools, figures within the range from previous semesters of 25-34 percent.

Employment Plans

Those who did their student teaching during the 2000-2001 school year were much less likely than those in the previous two years to say they planned on teaching in the School District of Philadelphia. (Figure 1) Only 24 to 29 percent said they planned on doing so; another 55-57 percent said “maybe”; and 14-21 percent said they did not plan on working in the District. In the three previous semesters, around 40 percent of the student teachers indicated they planned to teach in the city, and 60 percent had so indicated in the Fall of 1998. The low Fall 2000 semester percentage was somewhat understandable given the contentiousness of collective bargaining over a new teachers union agreement. The spring numbers rebounded only a bit, however, suggesting that student teachers’ ambivalence came from a broader set of causes.

Figure 1



As before, a large majority of student teachers--67 percent in the fall and 70 percent in the spring--said they had been contacted by the Office of Human Resources about applying for

² Respondents could pick more than one grade category so the percentages add up to more than 100.

employment in the District. Fifty-one percent of the spring cohort had actually filed an application with the District.

Once again, student teachers who resided in the city were two or three times more likely than those living outside of the city to say they planned to teach in Philadelphia--30 percent of the residents compared to 13 percent of the non-residents in the fall and 35 percent compared to 18 percent in the spring. Surprisingly, unlike previous years, those who had attended or graduated from Philadelphia public schools themselves were not significantly more likely to say they planned to teach in the District.

Students in the Spring 2001 cohort were asked if they had applied to charter schools in search of employment. About 27 percent checked off that they had done so, indicating that a significant number were considering this new avenue to public school teaching.

Student teachers were significantly more likely to say they planned to teach in Philadelphia if they agreed that 1) the school faculty [where they were placed as student teachers] displayed positive attitudes about teaching in Philadelphia; 2) faculty from their college or university encouraged them to teach in the system; and 3) the principal made an effort to acknowledge the student teacher's presence in the school.³ As was the case every semester, students from the Fall of 2000 gave their cooperating teachers high marks for being a good role model, but gave comparatively low marks to principals when it came to acknowledging their presence. Further, about half of the student teachers indicated that the teachers in their school had negative attitudes about teaching in Philadelphia, a percentage that has increased since 1998. (Table 1)

Factors Attracting Student Teachers to Employment in Philadelphia

Student teachers responding to the survey were asked to check off the three main reasons (from a list of nine factors) that were attracting them to teaching jobs in the District. As in previous years, the 2000-2001 cohort singled out the following factors:

- More than three fifths (61 percent in the fall and 65 percent in the spring) pointed to “loving the kids.” This reason was the most frequently-chosen item in all six semesters the survey has been given.
- “Availability of jobs,” consistently the second leading factor, was chosen by 45 percent in the fall and 36 percent in the spring.
- “Commitment to urban education,” chosen by 36 percent in the fall and 26 percent in the spring, edged out “Philadelphia is my home town” for third place, a factor chosen by 26 percent fall semester and 24 percent spring semester. Of concern, however, is the fact that the percentage choosing “commitment” has fallen steadily since the fall of 1998 when nearly twice as many student teachers nominated that factor.

³ The correlation coefficients were .23, .17, and .21, all significant at the .05 level or less. These questions were not asked of the Spring 2001 cohort.

Table 1
Mean Scores of Responses to Statements about Student Teaching Experience*
 (Scale of 1-4; 1=strongly disagree 4=strongly agree)

Statement	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
	Fall 1998	Spring 1999	Fall 1999	Spring 2000	Fall 2000
My cooperating teacher was a good role model	3.50	3.42	3.47	3.40	3.43
The classroom provided an effective learning environment for students.	3.42	3.29	3.43	3.35	3.34
The school provided an effective learning environment for students.	3.36	3.19	3.28	3.27	3.26
I was welcomed into the school community by other teachers.	3.20	3.43	3.45	3.29	3.29
Faculty from my college encouraged me to teach in Philadelphia.	(na)	2.88	3.03	2.85	2.92
The principal made an effort to acknowledge my presence.	3.05	2.72	2.77	2.62	2.78
The school faculty displayed positive attitudes about teaching in Phila.	2.79	2.70	2.76	2.54	2.53

*These items were not included in the Spring 2001 survey.

- About 20 percent of the students both semesters cited the encouragement of their cooperating teacher as a reason for thinking about teaching in the city. Of note is the fact that 23 percent in the spring claimed the \$4500 hiring bonus was an important attraction for them, up from 17-18 percent in previous semesters. Fourteen percent chose the “enhanced compensation system” that would enable them to move faster up the salary scale. Once again, few chose the “encouragement of the principal” as a factor in their thinking (7-9 percent).

Factors Discouraging Student Teachers from Seeking Jobs in the City

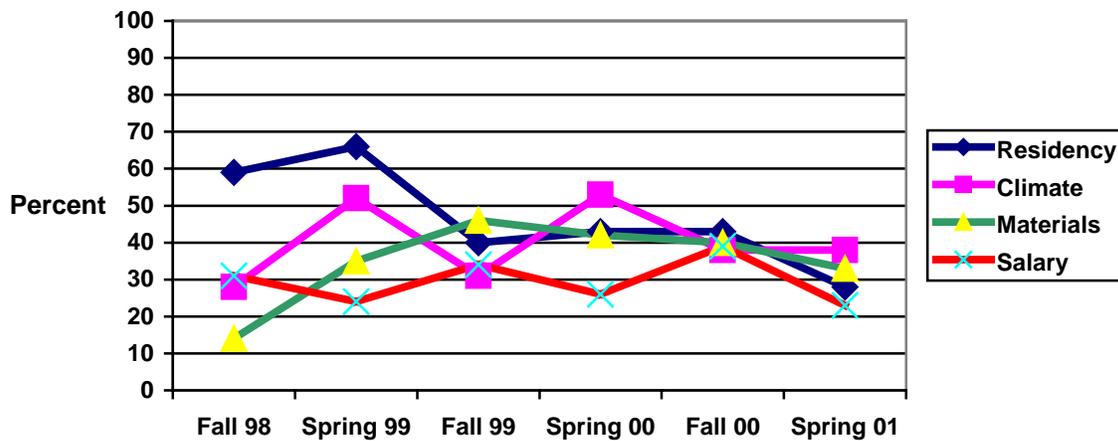
Each semester, respondents have been asked to identify the factors that made them unsure about seeking a job in the District or that have led them to spurn a job search there altogether. Four

factors, out of a possible 15 in a closed-choice list, stand out semester after semester: (Figure 2)

- the District’s residency requirement;
- school climate and student behavior;
- the availability of materials and supplies;
- the starting salary.

Figure 2

Factors Discouraging Student Teachers from Working in Philadelphia



The percentage citing the residency requirement as a barrier during 2000-2001 dropped significantly, from 43 percent in the fall to 28 percent in the spring. (Table 2) It is likely that this change occurred because the student teachers filled out their surveys shortly before the requirement was abolished by the state legislature in June 2001, and they were doubtless aware from media coverage that the requirement stood a strong chance of being eliminated.

In a separate forced-choice question on the residency requirement, only 30 percent of them said the residency requirement was not a problem for them. Seven percent said it would keep them from applying for a job, 14 percent said it would cause them to leave the District when the requirement kicked in after three years of employment, and 50 percent indicated that the requirement might become a problem for them sometime in the future (e.g. when they got married and/or had children).

“Teacher morale” was selected as a concern by 27 percent of the Fall 2000 respondents at a time when the teachers union and District were at loggerheads on a new collective bargaining contract but that percentage fell to 13 percent in the spring of 2001. Concerns about personal safety (chosen by 27-28 percent of the respondents both semesters) and poor school facilities (checked by 23 percent in the fall and 19 percent in the spring) were significant as well.

Table 2
Barriers to Employment in the School District of Philadelphia

	Fall 2000	Spring 2001
Percent Choosing Each Barrier		
Residency requirement	43%	28%
Availability of materials and supplies	40	33
Starting salary	39	23
School climate/student behavior	38	38
Teacher morale	27	13
Personal safety	27	28
School facilities	23	19
City wage tax	18	14
Support of administration	17	16
Other (moving away, etc.)	15	7
Need for tuition reimbursement	11	11
Cost of living in Philadelphia	7	4
Car insurance rates	5	2
Lack of information on job openings	5	(na)
Threat of state takeover	(na)	3

What Does Three Years of Research on this Issue Tell Us?

The results from six surveys over a three-year period of student teachers, the prime source for new recruits into Philadelphia’s teaching force, reveal that these students have become more ambivalent about employment in the city’s public school system. During 2000-2001, the percentage asserting that they definitely planned to teach in the School District of Philadelphia dropped significantly and the percentage of “undecideds” rose correspondingly. Similarly, most indices of satisfaction with the student teaching experience dropped as well.

Respondents’ concerns about the District’s residency requirement, the chief barrier to employment when the surveys began in the fall of 1998, dropped over the three-year period as the District loosened the requirement (allowing teachers up to three years to move into the city) and then prepared to abandon it altogether. Although state legislative action finally led to the demise of the requirement, a substantial number of other disincentives to employment remain, notably insufficient materials and supplies, poor school climate and student discipline problems, and low starting salaries. Other hindrances such as poor school facilities and personal safety concerns were checked off by many respondents as well, demonstrating why the city has difficulty competing with the suburbs for teachers. Perhaps it is the multiplicity of deterrents that explains why the percentage of students citing “commitment to urban education” as a reason for teaching in Philadelphia has steadily dropped over the three-year period of the study.

Survey findings also point to an additional problem: student teachers tend to cluster in the lower grades and to prefer elementary teaching. Too few are being trained for middle and high school positions. This finding dovetails with statewide data that point to an oversupply in elementary education graduates from the state's colleges and universities.

On a more positive front, substantial numbers of student teachers aim for jobs in the District's schools, partly out of attraction to the children and a commitment to urban teaching, and partly out of a pragmatic assessment that Philadelphia is "where the jobs are." Some choose Philadelphia because they grew up here and it seems like a logical next step. Student teachers are more likely to look for a job in the city when they are encouraged to do so by their cooperating teachers and other teachers in the school, their college and university faculty, and their principals.

If teacher supply and teacher quality are to be addressed in any serious way at the state and local levels, new policies must be implemented to reduce the number and severity of the disincentives to employment in Philadelphia that are highlighted in this study. Beyond that, school faculty and administrators should make an explicit effort to reach out to student teachers and encourage them to consider teaching in the city.