

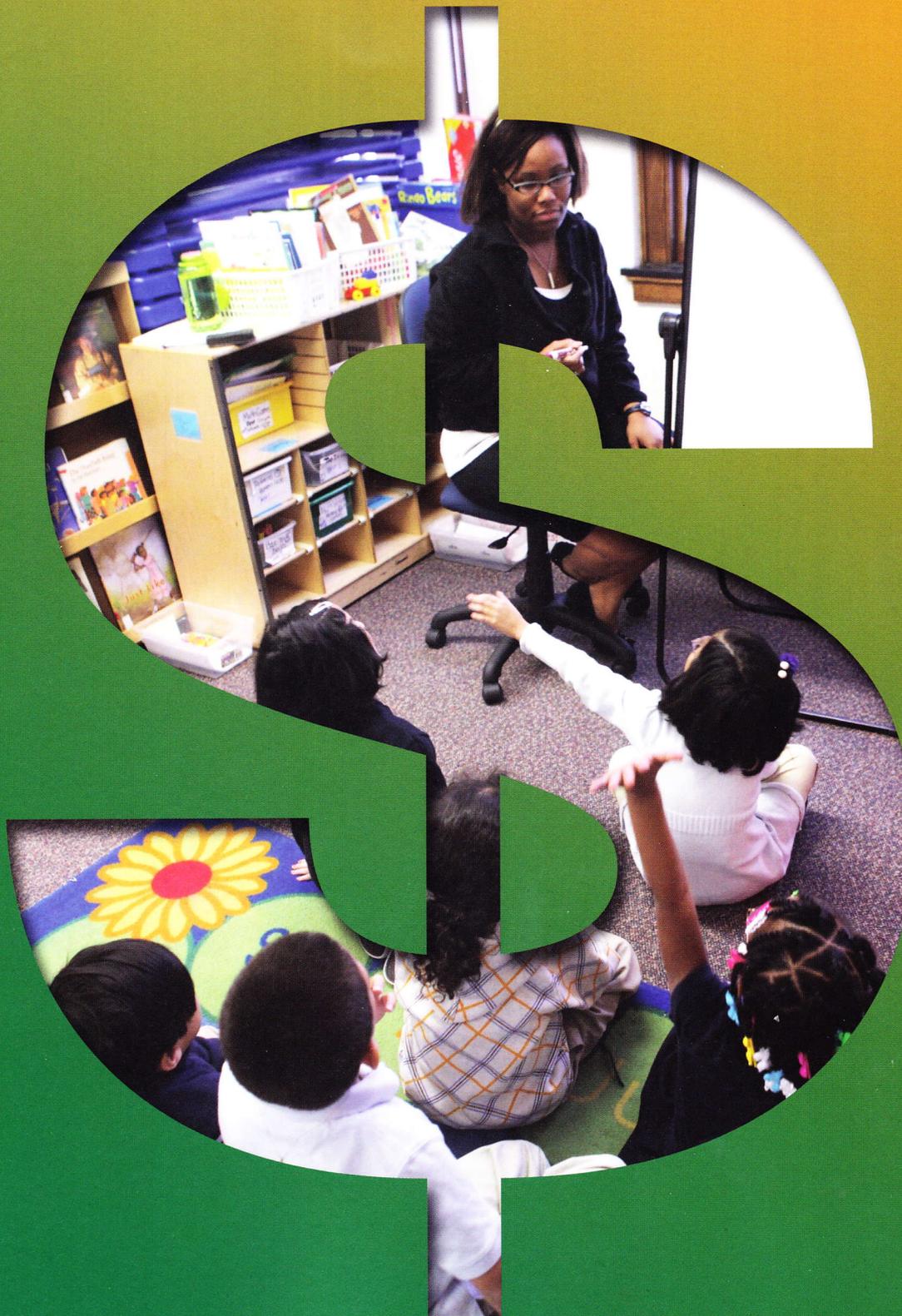
inquiry

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The Business Behind the Blackboard

TODAY'S EDUCATION LABOR MARKETS

By Marya Smith

What spans every region of the United States, employs more people than the combined populations of Iowa and Wyoming, and is the subject of multifaceted research and analysis? The answer is teacher and principal labor markets, comprising more than 3.5 million elementary and secondary school educators and administrators.

The search for data and insights into these two labor markets is wide-ranging, with SESP scholars contributing to the field over many years. These scholars continue today with exciting ongoing research that benefits educators, administrators, policy makers and students alike.

TEACHER LABOR MARKETS

The teacher labor market is a complex and rewarding arena for study, with teachers representing the supply side and schools representing the demand side, according to SESP assistant professor Michelle Reininger.

“Not everything is quantifiable, and so it would be difficult to simply say, here are the 12 ingredients teachers and schools need for success,” Reininger says. However, state-level data now exist that have allowed researchers to observe aggregate patterns in teacher labor markets. “For example, we’ve learned that in addition to higher pay, teachers prefer such things as higher-achieving schools, schools close to where they grew up and schools with better facilities,” she says.

Whatever their preferences, teachers and schools alike must deal with constraints particular to education, including collective bargaining agreements, Reininger notes. “For instance, schools aren’t always at liberty to hire the candidates they want until they’ve met contract provisions such as seniority transfers,” says Reininger. “And the dismissal of an ineffective teacher is often very difficult due to the protections offered by teacher tenure, which is granted anywhere from two to five years after employment. This is not how most other labor markets work.”

Policy directives are also integral to the study of the teacher labor market. “In recent years, there has been increasing state and federal involvement in education, with a lot of focus on major national policies like No Child Left Behind,” says Reininger. “Since education labor markets are localized by nature in most of the nation, I’m interested in how states interpret federal mandates and how that translates to an individual school.”





For example, stricter requirements of No Child Left Behind and state certification have decreased the pool of candidates available in certain subject areas, resulting in teacher shortages in math, science and foreign languages. "Some schools, particularly in rural areas, don't always have someone certified in a subject like chemistry, for example, and so they're offering courses via video conferencing," Reininger says.

CURRENT STUDY ON STUDENT TEACHING

Reininger's research to date has focused primarily on teacher preparation: how people get into the teacher labor market; how desirable candidates can be attracted to the field; and how teachers can be best prepared for the job. She also examines teacher retention and development.

In a current research project, funded by a Joyce Foundation grant, Reininger is examining student teaching. She is tracking more than 1,500 student teachers from approximately 50 different preparatory schools who are doing their "on-the-job" classroom training in the Chicago Public Schools system. Her study, now in its second year, includes surveys of student teachers before and after their school placements.

"I'm looking at the variation in experiences to figure out what components correlate with a productive student teaching experience," Reininger explains. Her findings are expected to shed light on several concerns of the teacher labor market, including how student teaching influences whether an individual becomes a classroom teacher and how to retain good candidates for the teaching profession.

PRINCIPAL LABOR MARKETS

Traditionally, research has focused on the teacher labor market, but the school principal labor market is drawing increasing attention. "The teacher labor market is greatly influenced by the principal labor market," Reininger says. "For example, good leadership has been shown to be a strong determinant in whether teachers leave or stay in a particular school, so understanding what goes into hiring good principals could have a big impact on teacher retention."

A new research study, under the direction of Reininger and SESP professor James Spillane, will track all newly hired principals in the Chicago Public Schools for three years, beginning this fall. Funded by the Spencer Foundation, the project will look at a host of issues, including how schools recruit principals, what they look for in hiring, who is attracted to the field and what the career path is for this leadership position.

"We'll track the individual principals to get a sense of how they experience the job and how they're socialized into the occupation, the school system and the particular school organization," says Spillane, the Olin Professor in Learning and Organizational Change. "Retaining people is a big issue, and those first few years are more than likely critical to the formation of the person's identity as a school principal. We'll be looking at how new principals' identities and practice evolve over their early years on the job."

The study will also be casting a wider net, according to Spillane, looking at other school leaders such as assistant principals and curriculum coordinators and how these other leaders think about pursuing the principal position. "There are typically multiple leadership positions in schools, but very little work has

Alumni Martin Zacharia (BA06) and Chris Grattoni (MS07), both teachers at Fremd High School in Palatine, Illinois, grew up near the school. They illustrate assistant professor Michelle Reininger's research finding that teachers are more likely to work close to where they grew up than other workers are.

PHOTOS BY
ANDREW CAMPBELL

been done on these other tiers,” he says. “We hope to take a broader perspective examining how these other leadership positions may or may not serve as pathways into the principal’s office.”

CLOSE-UP ON TEACHER HIRING

What qualities do principals look for when they’re hiring teachers? SESP alumna Mimi Engel (PhD09) decided to find out, as part of her dissertation on principal hiring practices. Drawing from the Chicago Public Schools system, she interviewed 30 principals in depth and also analyzed a broader survey of 268 principals in higher- and lower-achieving schools.

“Principals told me they look for teachers who care about kids, who are willing to give extra time and who have great classroom management skills,” says Engel, assistant professor of education at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. “What was interesting is that they only briefly mentioned teaching skills and content knowledge,” she continues. “I have anecdotal evidence that these two qualities are taken for granted, with some principals saying: ‘you have the degree, so you can teach.’ But in other cases, principals said: ‘if you can’t manage your classroom, it doesn’t matter what content you know.’”

Engel also found that principals in lower-achieving schools were three times more focused on classroom management skills than principals in higher-achieving schools. “I’d love to replicate this study in a different district,” she adds. Engel’s work is representative of the ongoing search for deeper understandings of the workings of teacher and principal labor markets.

LABOR MARKETS IN A POOR ECONOMY

In an economy that posted total job losses last year at the highest level since 1945, every industry feels the impact. One significant difference between the teacher labor market and other labor markets is the time required for teacher training and certification.

“As a result of this credentialing piece, the teacher labor market isn’t as responsive in the short run to economic fluctuations,” Reiningger says. However, she notes that this is changing because of alternative routes like Teach For America and SESP’s NU-TEACH, which provide a quicker way into the classroom than traditional paths.

Although education and health care are often cited as recession-proof, that’s not entirely true, according to Reiningger. “Many states are facing huge deficits, and education is one area where they’re trying to cut back,” she notes. “Beginning teachers are the first to be laid off because of seniority provisions in collective bargaining agreements. This raises concerns about how to continue to attract people to the profession if they feel they’re going to be cut no matter how well they do.”

However, most professions face similar concerns, and young people are having a hard time getting jobs anywhere, Reiningger asserts. “If you asked me whether I’d rather take a job in the construction industry or in education right now, I’d pick education,” she says. “It’s doing a lot better than most other fields, even though it’s facing its own issues. At the end of the day, people still need to be educated.” Reiningger adds, “Education is not going to go away.”



During a recession, education labor markets are less responsive to economic fluctuations than other types of labor markets, according to Reiningger.