NEPC Review: Missouri's 21st Century Public School Personnel Boom (Show-Me Institute, August 2026)



Reviewed by:

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November 2026

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Suggested Citation: Redding, C. (2026). *NEPC Review: Missouri's 21st century public school personnel boom*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date], from https://nepc.colorado.edu/review/personnel

Funding: This review was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

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Summary

Since the year 2000, Missouri public school districts and charter schools have added teachers and administrators at rates that outpaced student enrollment. This growth coincided with a decline in average inflation-adjusted teacher salaries. A new Show-Me Institute report contends that this "Personnel Boom" occurred as a result of shifting perceptions about the needs of students and the expansion of regulatory responsibilities. The report also suggests that teacher salaries could be over $10,000 higher if staffing levels had remained at year-2000 levels. While the report is grounded in strong descriptive evidence of staffing and salary trends, it offers less convincing evidence of why staffing increased. The indicators used in the report to assess student need provide only a partial picture of the challenges schools face. Additionally, changes in federal educational policy and service delivery, including expanded inclusion efforts and intervention models such as multi-tiered systems of supports may, for example, have increased demand for additional instructional personnel even in the absence of large changes in underlying student need. Overall, while the report points out budgetary tradeoffs of different instructional and administrative staffing levels, it is a less useful guide for determining the appropriate number of teachers and administrators Missouri school districts should employ or their appropriate allocation.

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I. Introduction

In most school district budgets, personnel is the largest line item. Recently, some have scrutinized whether districts spend too much on administrators and too little on classroom teachers. Nationally, between the 2016-2017 and 2022-2023 school years, the number of district administrators grew by 26% and district administrative support staff grew by 28.4%. Over the same period, the number of classroom teachers only increased by 1.8%.[1] Though the debate about the appropriate balance of staff has existed in school finance literature for decades, increased federal Covid relief funding appears to have boosted the number of administrators in many Missouri districts and reignited debates on the matter.[2]

Interconnected with this question of optimal staffing has been a shift in how schools address students' barriers to learning. If you walked into a typical elementary school at the turn of the 21st century, you'd likely find a principal, assistant principal, counselor, and classroom teachers. Because of an expanding responsibility for supporting students' academic, behavioral, and socioemotional development, schools have increasingly been staffed by a greater variety of instructional and support roles. Today, you may find that the same school also has an instructional coach, a reading interventionist, a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) coordinator, a family engagement specialist, paraprofessionals, and a psychologist, while sharing a behavior specialist, speech pathologist, and social worker with other schools in the district.

Within this context, *Missouri's 21st Century Public School Personnel Boom*, written by Avery Frank and Cory Koedel and published by the Show-Me Institute,[3] argues that the growth in administrators and support staff since 2000 may explain lagging

teacher salaries. Instead of funding a growth in personnel, additional funding could have been applied to increase teacher pay.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report presents several bulleted "Key Takeaways."[4] These include:

1. Between 2000 and 2025 in Missouri, teaching and administrative staff outpaced growth in student enrollment. FTE teacher and administrators increased 13% and 35%, respectively, while enrollment declined by 4%.
2. This trend occurred in 85% of state districts, and rural, urban, and suburban makeup.
3. In real terms, teacher and administrator salaried have declined.
4. Had staffing levels been maintained and the savings been reallocated, the average teacher salary would be $10,000 higher today.

The report hypothesizes that the "Personnel Boom" was caused by shifting *perceptions* of student needs and the expansion of regulatory responsibilities associated with reporting and compliance requirements.[5]

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report makes its findings regarding increased staffing and enrollment and existing salaries through computations with relevant state data. After documenting declines in teachers' and administrators' real wages, it then argues that teacher salaries could have been much higher (an average increase of $10,000 per teacher today) if the number of teachers and administrators were maintained at 2000 levels. This conclusion assumes that money "saved" by maintaining 2000 personnel levels would have been directed to teacher salary by policymakers. It also suggests that additional staffing was unnecessary. Based on this opinion, it recommends that a partial "unwinding" of the Boom to "free up" resources to increase teacher salaries is appropriate.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report largely fails to use unbiased, expert-driven research (e.g., peer review studies) and instead draws on a mix of secondary data sources (e.g., Federal Reserve

data, CDC reports), popular books, media coverage, and think-tank issue briefs. In addition, it omits relevant studies that could have provided a counterpoint to some of its claims.

Significantly, its claim that student needs have not changed is thin and lacking support in literature. Using minimal sourcing, the report contends that there is less evidence that student needs have changed over time and in such a way that might warrant increased personnel. In other words, while poverty and poor economic standing may require increased school supports for students, that has not happened in the time examined.

But this ignores compelling research that suggests that student need as function of economic inequality has only increased in the last decades, especially following the pandemic. As a general matter, recent studies have documented widening disparities between upper- and lower-income families and the worsening impact of economic inequality on educational opportunity.[6]

More specifically to Missouri, while poverty rates are similar in 2025 to where they were at the turn of the century, this interpretation risks glossing over increasing childhood poverty during the Great Recession.[7] In addition, the report does not discuss trends in free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) status, which increased in Missouri from 34.6% in 2000 to 49.3% in 2025.[8] Although FRPL status is not synonymous with student need,[9] this pattern suggests that schools may have been serving a larger share of economically disadvantaged students over time.

Similarly, its argument that student mental health needs are moving in a "*favorable*" direction[10] sits apart from what existing research has found. Rather, evidence strongly suggests that mental health continues to present complicated challenges to student learning in schools.[11] Youth suicide rates are up since the pandemic, for example.[12] Notably, in 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General declared a public health advisory warning of a youth mental health crisis.[13]

Additionally, even if mental health and disability identification rates remained stable or declined over time in Missouri, changes in how schools serve students may have increased demands on schools even in the absence of large changes in underlying student need. For example, continued efforts to increase inclusion for students with disabilities[14] may require more instructional staff even if identification rates remained constant. Again, this is but one example of relevant research that would suggest an increase in demand of specialized personnel as the complexity of student needs has increased.

Finally, it fails to point to research that might support its major claim that had staffing levels remained flat and more funding flowed to districts, policymakers *would have* directed those funds to teacher pay. How stakeholders and policymakers de-

termine allocation and redistribution of resources is a complicated endeavor with competing forces.[15]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is a straightforward descriptive, longitudinal analysis from 2000 to 2025 using comprehensive state data that documents changes in enrollment, teacher FTE, and administrator FTE, and inflation-adjusted salary trends for teachers and administrators. It includes a clear, concise description of data cleaning methods, all of which appear appropriate.[16] Its examination of districts throughout the state where teacher or administrator staffing increased faster than enrollment, with supporting data available through an online dashboard, provides a useful descriptive portrait of long-term staffing and salary trends in Missouri public schools.

The final portion of the report estimates how high teacher salaries could be if the state prioritized raising teacher salaries as opposed to expanding the number of teachers and administrators using a "Counterfactual Teacher Salary Calculation." To illustrate, imagine a district with 200 teacher FTEs in 2000 and 220 teacher FTEs in 2025, and a consistent inflation-adjusted average teacher salary of $75,000. If this hypothetical district had not experienced this "boom" of 20 teacher FTEs, it would have generated $1.5 million dollars in savings that could have been shared across the 200 teachers currently working in the district. This would have equated to a salary of $82,500, or $7,500 more in real dollars compared to what teachers currently earn.

While there is some value in the report data (especially as it continues to call attention to low teacher wages), it amounts to an accounting exercise designed to quantify the budgetary tradeoffs, or opportunity costs, associated with staffing growth. It should not be interpreted as a "counterfactual" in the sense commonly used in rigorous education policy analysis. The "all else equal" assumption required for such an interpretation is unlikely to hold in this setting.

First, the calculation assumes that all savings from reduced staffing would go towards higher teacher salaries. In practice, districts facing lower staffing levels would likely respond in a variety of ways, which may include raising teacher salaries but could also include shifting spending to technology, instructional materials, or teacher professional development and reducing expenditures altogether. In addition, some positions may be supported through funding streams that are restricted to specific purposes, limiting the extent to which shifting salary in this way would even be feasible. But the methods do not account for these possibilities.

Second, it does not account for compositional changes in the teacher workforce that may occur in response to the report's tacit policy recommendation to cap the num-

ber of teachers or administrators. Average inflation-adjusted salaries may decline because districts fail to increase salaries enough to keep pace with inflation, but they may also decline because experienced teachers retire and are replaced by novice teachers who are paid much less. Without examining changes in teacher experience, it is difficult to determine the extent to which declining average salaries reflect compositional changes or reducing FTE to raise to raise teacher salaries. As another example, increased teacher salaries could increase teacher retention, resulting in a more experienced workforce and higher average salaries. But, here again, the methods do not provide for this realistic assessment.

In sum, this report provides helpful, basic descriptive information about trends in enrollment, staffing, and pay. It documents a concern that is impacting the educator labor market: low wages. But it lacks methodological rigor typically seen in studies meant to inform policy recommendations.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's finding that staffing grew and wages stagnated is supported, but its conclusions around that finding are flawed. In the main, because enrollment has declined but staffing has increased, it concludes that fewer resources should be spent on hiring additional instructional and administrative staff and those funds should be redirected to raise teacher pay.

This assumes that resources devoted to additional personnel would have been better spent elsewhere, particularly on teacher compensation. But nowhere does the report look at the value of those benefits associated with adding new teaching and administrative positions during this period. In other words, additional supports may be providing additional educational gains—and knowing that information would be essential *before* drawing a claim of unnecessary overstaffing. Indeed, evidence is emerging that additional federal money had a positive impact on student achievement.[17]

The example of MTSS (Multi-Tiered Support Systems) is illustrative here. To enact MTSS, many districts have added different staff positions, including interventionists, reading specialists, behavior specialists, MTSS coordinators, instructional coaches, and counselors, among other roles. Importantly, these shifts are supported by broader policy shifts over the study period, including evolving guidelines around how IDEA and Title I funding can be used to support instructional and support personnel. Research on MTSS is not strong enough to definitively justify whether the benefits that arise from these various positions justify the costs. Lacking this, district leaders must make difficult decisions about how best to allocate resources to address students' academic, behavioral, and socioemotional barriers to learning. Re-

gardless, simply implying that the growth of staff has been unnecessary overlooks the extent to which schools have invested in preventive targeted supports to address varied student needs.

Class sizes are another helpful example. If smaller class sizes are a goal of districts in the state—a preference often expressed by parents and teachers alike—the report demonstrates demonstrable gains on this front. Student-teacher ratios dropped from 14.1:1 in 2000 to 12:1 in 2025. Still, some district leaders may want to sacrifice larger classes for efforts to better compensate and support a smaller number of teachers. This is a local decision that would involve leadership and explication about why larger classes may be preferred (e.g., lack of strong achievement effects of small class sizes; more students being assigned to stronger teachers). Again, such a decision would need to weigh local preferences alongside budgetary realties about how best to leverage teacher and administrator FTEs to support student learning.

Additionally, the report lacks grounding in existing research. This is particularly obvious relative to its claims that additional support was unnecessary because economic conditions and student mental health needs are improving. Research suggests that economic inequality and student mental health issues continue to worsen and impact student educational opportunity, requiring more support, not less.

In summary, the finding that maintaining 2000 staffing levels could have been a tool to increase teacher salaries is best understood as a value judgment rather than an empirical conclusion. The report quantifies the costs and opportunity costs associated with a growing number of staff positions but it is not designed to assess the tradeoffs of other ways funding could have been used (e.g., increasing intervention services).[18] Consequently, while the report provides strong evidence that staffing levels increased, it provides less evidence that those staffing decisions were ill-advised or that there are in fact too many teachers and administrators working in Missouri public schools.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report's analyses provide a descriptive picture of trends in teacher and administrator staffing and salary levels in Missouri. And it makes a valid point that educators continue to be underpaid. But, outside of that, it is less useful as a guide for determining whether Missouri schools currently employ too many teachers and administrators. It implies that staffing levels—particularly administrator staffing levels—have grown beyond levels needed to adequately support students in the state. The evidence presented does not support this conclusion.

Notes and References

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5 It should be noted that the report qualifies this conclusion, noting that "Ultimately, our analysis does not speak directly to the reasons for the Personnel Boom." Frank, A. & Koedel, C. (2026, August). *Missouri's 21st century public school personnel boom*. Show-Me Institute. Retrieved September 3, 2026, from https://showmeinstitute.org/publication/education/missouris-21st-century-public-school-personnel-boom/

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16 Data cleaning included identifying and checking linearly interpolating missing values, implausible values, and data errors. When examining study data longitudinally, the authors find that many implausible values in 2003, which are interpolated using 2002 and 2004 data. The authors also examine instances in which districts have a deviation from their year-over-year running average. For districts in the 0.5^{th} percentile of this distribution across different sized districts, linear interpolation is again used to smooth longitudinal trends. The authors report manually examining each imputed value and overriding this procedure when appropriate. In addition, data are appropriately weighted using district counts to ensure that larger districts contribute proportionally more than smaller districts.

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18 The report alludes to this point near the end: "The potential to raise teacher salaries is just one way to quantify the opportunity cost of the Personnel Boom. It is a salient example given the strong support for higher teacher pay among Missouri voters, but the savings could be distributed in any number of ways. Whether it would be feasible to truly unwind the Personnel Boom is uncertain. If not, at a minimum these calculations can serve as a reminder of the cost of allowing the Personnel Boom's relentless expansion to continue." Frank, A. & Koedel, C. (2026, August). *Missouri's 21st century public school personnel boom*. Show-Me Institute. Retrieved September 3, 2026, from https://showmeinstitute.org/publication/education/missouris-21st-century-public-school-personnel-boom/