

Entering the Teacher Pipeline During COVID-19

Evidence from the First Cohort of Emergency License Holders in Massachusetts

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In the spring of 2020, as the nation’s schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the typical pathways into teaching were also unprecedentedly disrupted. Teacher candidates completing their student teaching could no longer attend their practicum sites, while individuals preparing to take required licensure tests found test centers shuttered. Entry into the profession essentially ceased.

To ensure those working to become educators could still enter the workforce and to prevent a pandemic-induced teacher shortage, Massachusetts authorized an emergency teaching license in June 2020. This emergency license allowed districts to employ individuals who had not yet completed the standard licensure requirements. Under the emergency license, individuals could functionally begin teaching with just a bachelor’s degree; the requirements to complete teacher preparation or certification exams remained but were delayed until later in the typical timeline of training and employment.

Given this significant shift in policy, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) committed to studying the emergency license’s impact and contracted researchers at Boston University’s Wheelock Educational Policy Center to investigate this change. This report summarizes key learnings from the first cohort of individuals to apply for and/or be employed under the emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021 (referred to as Cohort 1 for the rest of this report). Findings are based on analyses of DESE administrative data on these individuals and survey results from over 1,300 emergency license holders (ELHs).¹

The implementation and study of the emergency license in Massachusetts offers an important opportunity to understand the influence of licensure requirements on the composition and quality of the teacher workforce. While Massachusetts has previously studied various aspects of their licensure policies,² it is rare in any state to be able to observe what happens in the absence of most of these licensure requirements, particularly at the scale anticipated here. Future work will explore the longer-term impacts of this policy intervention on the teacher workforce, including an analysis of effectiveness outcomes associated with ELHs.

To lay an initial foundation about the use of the emergency license, this brief outlines:

- Who applied for the emergency license?
- Who was employed on an emergency license?
- Who on an emergency license was retained the following year?

KEY FINDINGS

- The emergency license appears to have served as **a stop-gap in a pandemic-induced teacher shortage**.
- The emergency license appears to be **diversifying the teaching workforce at greater rates** than traditional licenses.
- Emergency-licensed teachers are **staying in the workforce at rates similar to other newly licensed teachers** and most hope to remain in the profession.

Work conducted on behalf of:



*Authors’ names are listed in alphabetical order.

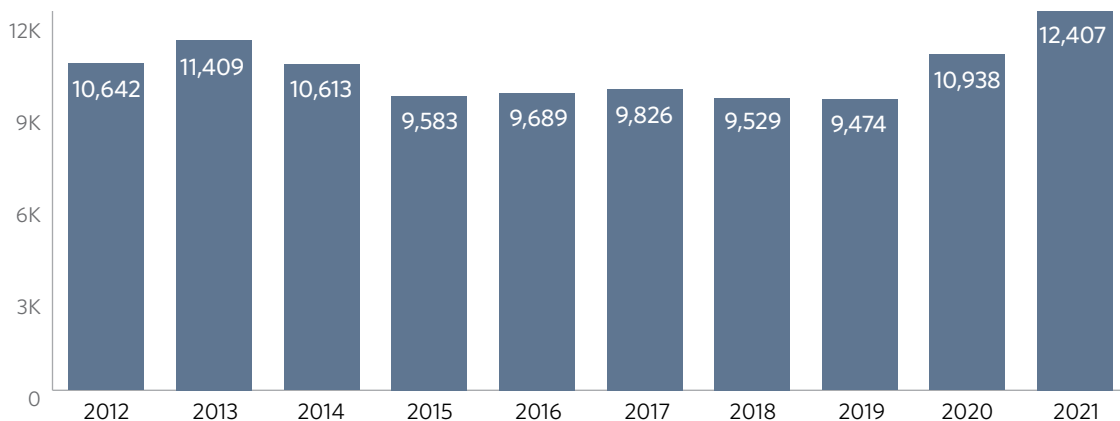
Who Applied for the Emergency License?

KEY FINDINGS

- The emergency license helped to generate more applications for licensure than in any of the prior 10 years.
- In the first year (June 2020–May 2021), about 5,800 individuals obtained an emergency license.
- Many of the emergency licenses issued were in traditional shortage areas (e.g., special education, STEM).
- ELHs are more racially/ethnically diverse than other new license holders.

Between June 2020 and May 2021, roughly 5,800 individuals applied for and obtained an emergency license. Together with those that obtained an initial or provisional license (i.e., the two traditional entry licenses), the state saw an overall increase in the number of newly licensed teachers. Figure 1 shows that in 2021 there were roughly 12,400 individuals obtaining an initial, provisional, or emergency license, marking a high for at least the last 10 years.³

Figure 1: Number of Individuals Receiving Any Initial, Provisional, or Emergency License(s) by Year.



SURVEY INSIGHTS

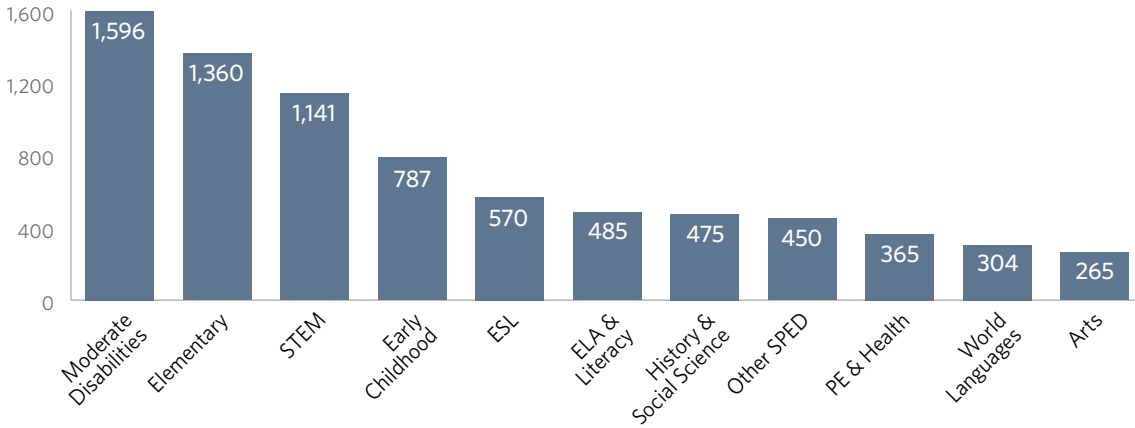
When Cohort 1 ELHs were surveyed about their reasons for obtaining an emergency license, their responses (n=1,345) indicated that COVID conditions had prevented many of them from completing licensure requirements, including the MTEs (35%) and educator preparation coursework (13%).⁵

Other frequently selected responses indicated that many ELHs pursued the emergency license because they couldn't complete the MTEs in time (22%) or didn't pass the subject-matter MTEs (20%) for reasons unrelated to COVID. Additional reasons cited were financial (19%), because they wanted to try teaching (18%), or because they moved from out of state (13%).

Figure 2 illustrates the variety of subject areas for which individuals obtained emergency licenses, with the greatest number of licenses granted for moderate disabilities, elementary, and STEM subjects. Almost a quarter (24%) of ELHs obtained more than one license. Importantly, not all of these individuals were employed on their emergency licenses, so these numbers do not directly

correspond to the number of new teachers in each subject area. Nevertheless, this finding emphasizes that the policy added licensed educators to the teaching pool across subject areas, particularly in traditionally hard-to-staff subjects such as special education and STEM.

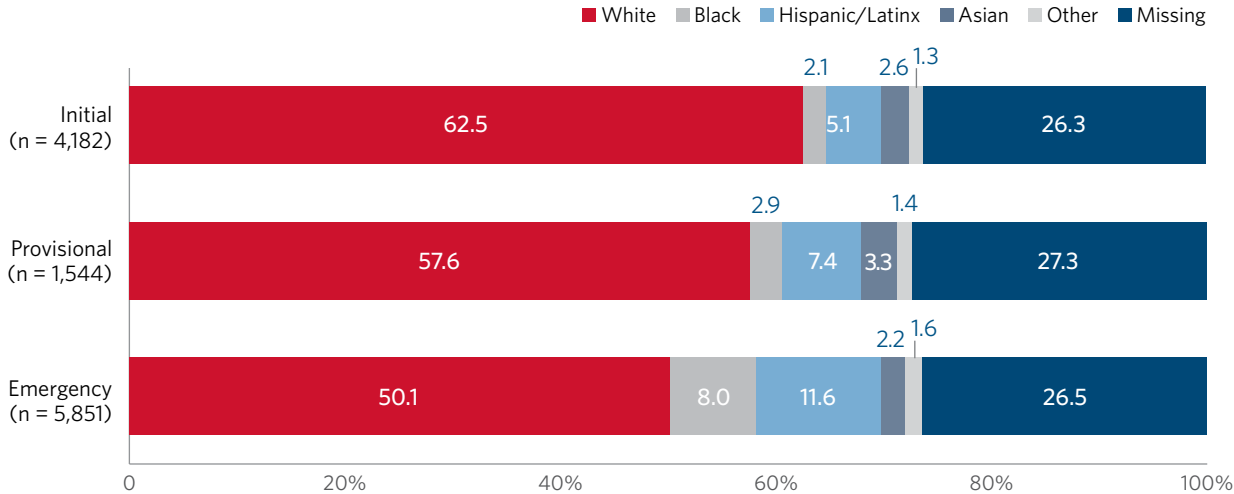
Figure 2: Number of Emergency Licenses Issued by Subject Area



Note: Includes emergency licenses issued between June 2020 and May 2021. “Other SPED” includes licenses covering Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Speech and Language, and Severe Disability.

In addition to expanding the pool of licensed teachers, the emergency license has also contributed to increased racial/ethnic diversity within that pool. Figure 3 shows that about 23% of all ELHs in this first cohort identify as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, or Other. This is compared to smaller percentages of applicants of color for initial (11%) or provisional (15%) licensure.

Figure 3: Race/Ethnicity Among Initial, Provisional, and Emergency License Holders

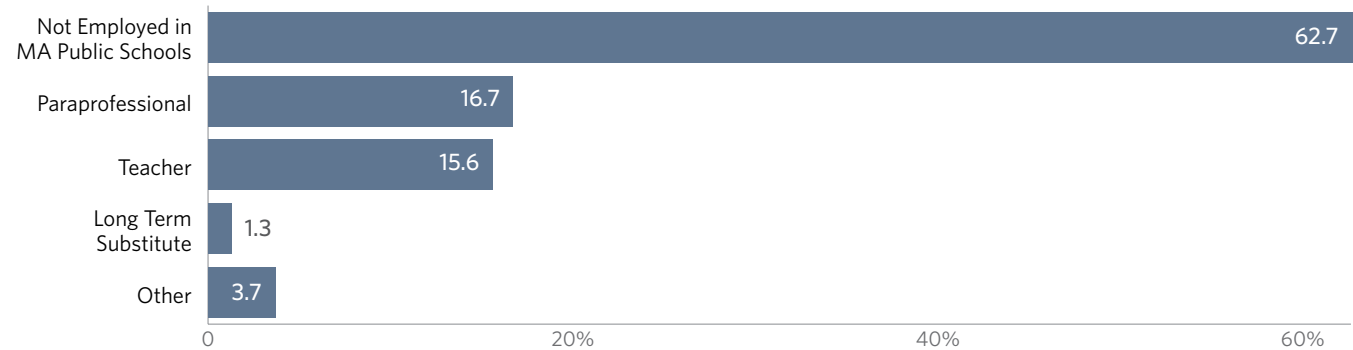


Note: Includes individuals who received an initial, provisional, or emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021.

Particularly for this first cohort of ELHs, it is important to understand their prior engagement in the teacher pipeline and the extent to which the emergency license either ensured they could continue on the path into the profession or opened new doors. Figure 4 shows that the majority (about 63%) of Cohort 1 ELHs were not previously employed in a Massachusetts public school; however, about a third of those individuals (or 18% of the cohort) were already in the process of becoming licensed teachers, having attended an educator preparation program in the state and/or taken at least one of the required licensure exams within the last three years.⁴ The remaining 37% were previously employed in a Massachusetts public school in some capacity. Roughly 17% were employed as paraprofessionals, about 16% as teachers serving under waived requirements, 1.3% as long-term substitutes, and 3.7% as other

school staff. Together, these findings demonstrate that the emergency license not only made licensure accessible for aspiring teachers and existing school staff despite the disruptions of the pandemic, but also widened the teaching pool to others who were not already in the system—an added and somewhat unexpected policy outcome for the state.

Figure 4: Prior Employment of ELHs



Note: Includes 5,852 individuals who received an emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021.

SURVEY INSIGHTS

Evidence from the survey of Cohort 1 ELHs suggests that a majority were already on a path into the profession. Roughly **70% of respondents stated that they were planning to obtain a new teacher license** before the emergency license was offered in Spring 2020.

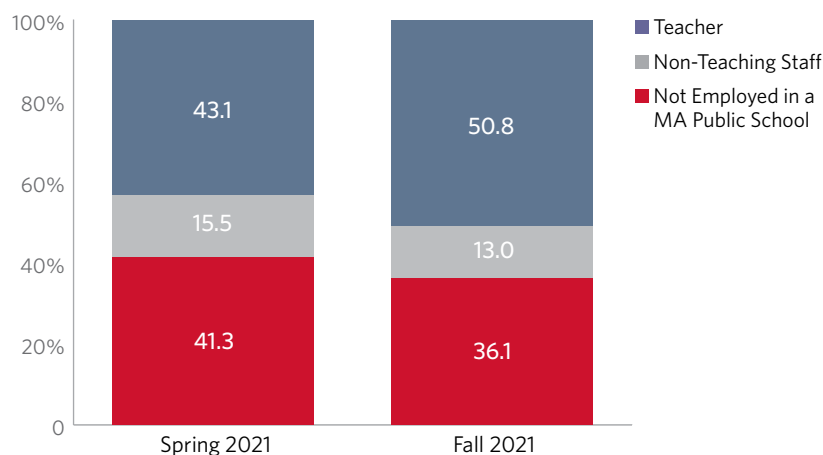
Who was Employed on an Emergency License?

KEY FINDINGS

- Despite high hopes of employment, just half (51%) of ELHs were employed in a Massachusetts public school by the fall of 2021.
- Schools and districts employed ELHs at lower rates than initial licensees.
- ELHs of color were more likely to become teachers than White ELHs.
- While ELHs were employed throughout the Commonwealth, they tended to be more concentrated in charter and urban contexts.

While the creation of the emergency license appears to have provided an ample supply of teachers, the actual hiring of ELHs was more varied. Figure 5 shows the employment status of ELHs at the end of the 2020-2021 school year and the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. By spring 2021, 43% of ELHs were employed as teachers; that number increased to about half (51%) by fall 2021. This employment rate is similar to that of individuals who received a provisional license during the same period: 52% of them were employed as teachers in fall 2021. However, both emergency and provisionally licensed teachers were less likely to find teaching positions compared to those who received initial licenses during the same period: about 62% of them were employed by fall 2021.⁶

Figure 5: Employment Status of ELHs



Note: Includes individuals who received an emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021.

SURVEY INSIGHTS

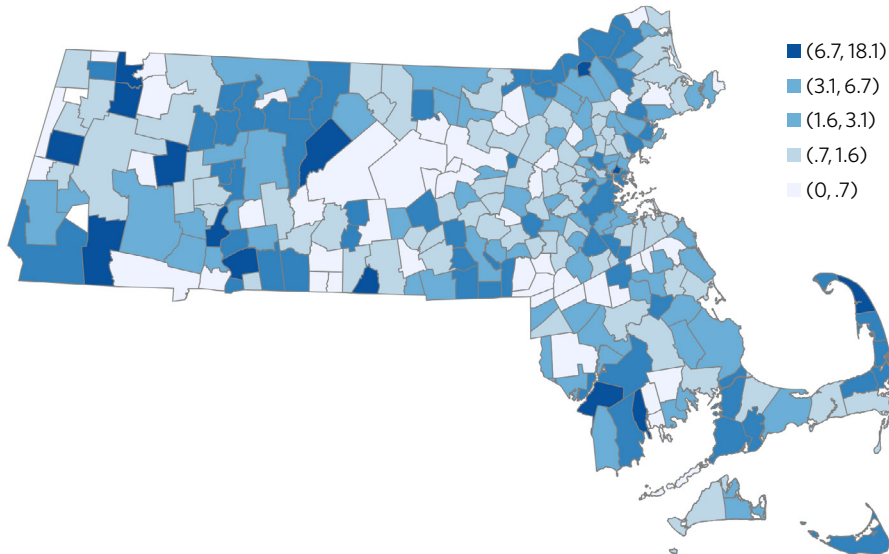
Survey data from a subset of ELHs (n=1,341) indicates that there were individuals (about 71% of respondents) with an emergency license who were not hired during the period of study, but applied for positions and were still looking for a role during the 2022-2023 school year. In open responses, several ELHs expressed the perception that schools seemed to view emergency-licensed applicants as less favorable than other applicants with more traditional preparation, licensure, or experience.

In the words of one ELH: “The emergency licensing didn’t seem to hold much weight within the district.”

Future research under this project will seek to better understand this perception.

Based on the distribution of ELHs across the state, it does appear that there are some district-specific considerations relative to hiring individuals with this license. Figure 6 shows the percentage of individuals employed under an emergency license relative to all educators within the district.

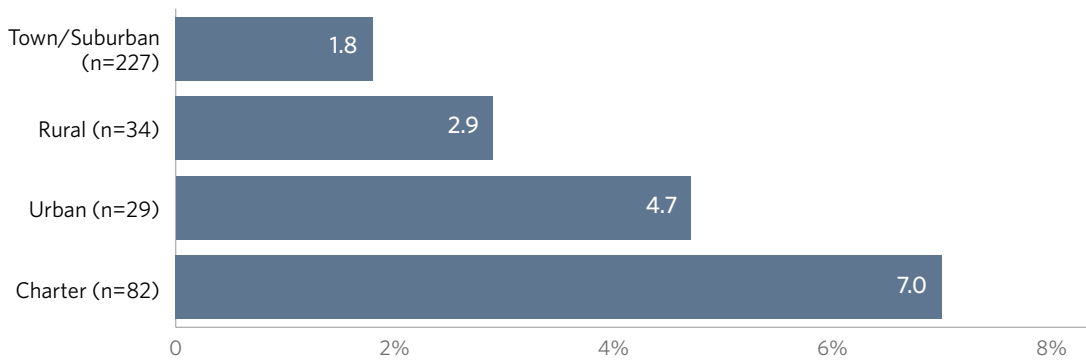
Figure 6: Percentage of Teachers Who Are Cohort 1 ELHs in Spring 2021, by School District



Note: All data are from MA DESE. Categories roughly correspond to quartiles of ELH employment, with the top quartile divided into two groups (75th-90th percentile and 90th-100th percentile).

Within this distribution, Figure 7 shows that charter schools were more likely to hire ELHs than traditional public school districts, and that overall, urban districts hired a higher percentage of ELHs than schools in rural and suburban areas. In fact, there was a great amount of variation in ELH employment rates across districts, suggesting that geography and other school and district characteristics played a role in determining whether ELHs were able to secure teaching positions.

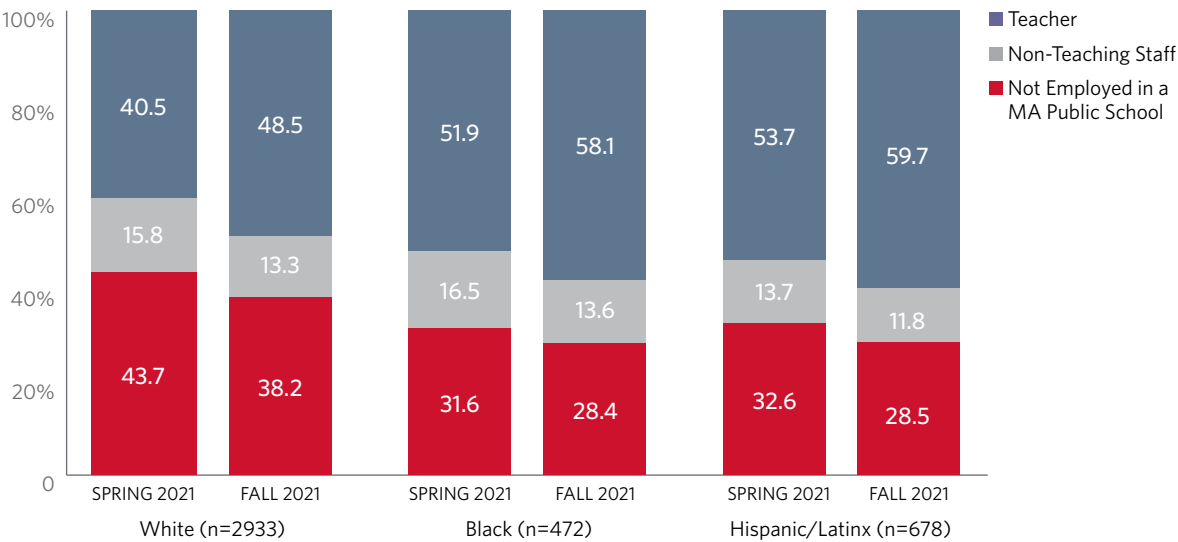
Figure 7: Percent of Teachers Who Are Cohort 1 ELHs, by District Geography and Charter Status



The reason behind this district distribution is not known; however, it may be that some of these districts/schools see the emergency license as a mechanism for supporting their broader efforts to diversify the workforce.⁷ The next two figures show that ELHs of

color were more likely than their White counterparts to be hired and that the emergency license represents greater racial and ethnic diversity in the workforce than either the provisional or initial license. Figure 8 shows that by fall 2021, close to 60% of Black and Hispanic/Latinx ELHs held teaching positions, compared to less than 50% of White ELHs.

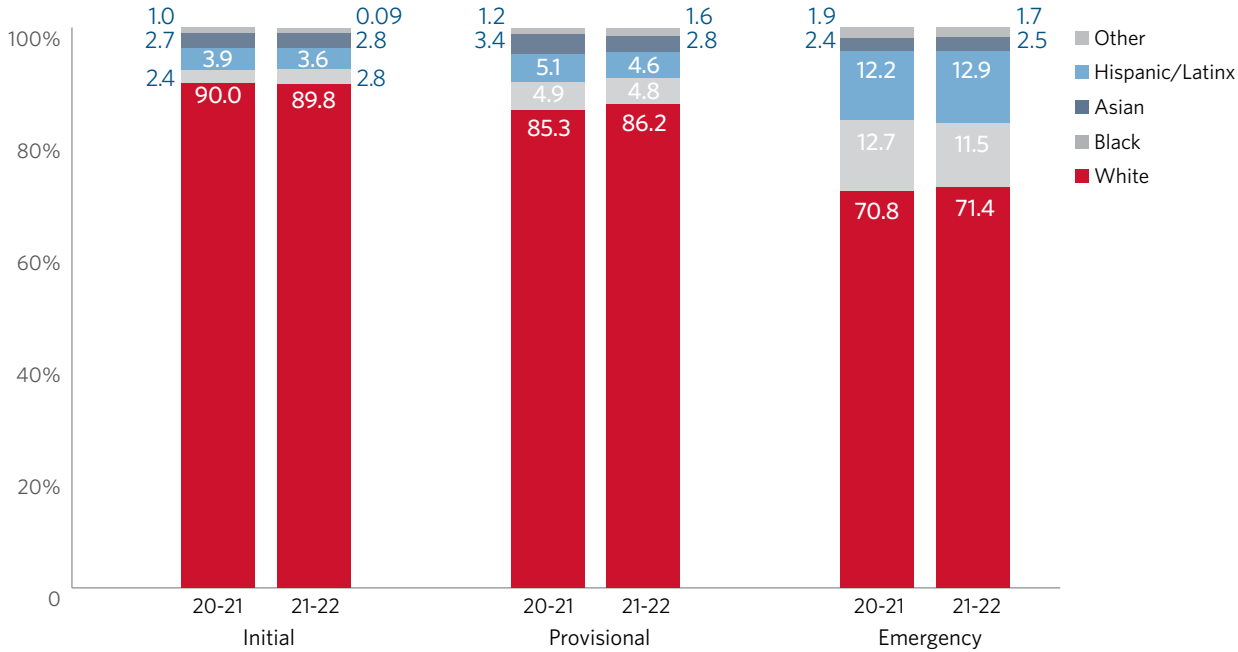
Figure 8: Employment Status of ELHs by Race/Ethnicity



Note: Includes individuals who received an emergency license between June 2020 and May 2021.

Figure 9 further emphasizes the greater racial diversity within the emergency licensure pathway, showing that newly hired teachers with emergency licenses were more likely to be teachers of color than new hires with initial and provisional licenses.

Figure 9: Race/Ethnicity of Newly Hired Teachers by License Type



Note: The “Other” category includes American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial teachers. Number of observations by year and license type: Initial: (20-21) 3,027; (21-22) 2,393. Provisional: (20-21) 933; (21-22) 820. Emergency: (20-21) 1,156; (21-22) 1,667.

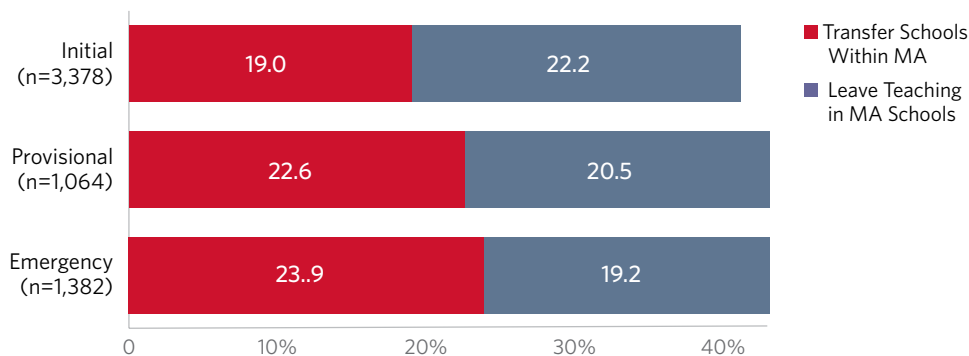
Who Remained Teaching the Following Year?

KEY FINDINGS

- Emergency-licensed teachers have similar retention rates to other new teachers.
- Most ELHs intend to pursue permanent licensure.

In considering the retention of ELHs, it is important to do so relative to our broader understanding of attrition amidst the pandemic. Other work by Bacher-Hicks & Chi examined shifts within the Massachusetts teacher workforce during this same time period and found, overall, that individuals employed under an emergency license have relatively similar turnover rates compared with other newly hired teachers.

Figure 10: Turnover of Newly Hired Teachers by License Type⁸



Notes: All data are from MA DESE. Turnover is measured between the spring semester and fall semester of each calendar year (e.g., turnover in 2021 is measured as the turnover from spring 2021 to fall 2021).

Additionally, while it is still too early to measure the long-term retention rates of emergency-licensed teachers, survey results indicate that the vast majority of them (86%) plan to continue teaching in Massachusetts, with 80% stating that they plan to pursue provisional or initial licensure (which would be required after the emergency license expires).

In the words of one ELH:

“It was helpful because I was able to get a job in 2020 in the district I am still working in now. I was able to build experience while still learning and applying for my initial license.”

Future Work

As described above, this research provides a first look at the impact of the emergency license policy in Massachusetts. The initial findings suggest that the emergency license was likely an important policy intervention in the context of the pandemic – ensuring continual access to the profession for the pipeline of individuals interested in becoming teachers. In addition to stemming an anticipated teacher shortage, the emergency license also appears to have had some additional benefits aligned with state and district priorities; namely, the increased racial/ethnic diversity of the workforce.

Through additional extensions of the emergency license, we will be able to understand even more about its use and impact on the composition of the workforce in the years ahead. Future work will include updating the analyses shared within this report to include additional cohorts of ELHs as well as effectiveness outcomes, such as educator evaluation and student growth.

A key priority for both DESE and this research team moving into the second year of this work is to understand more about the hiring of ELHs and the supports in place to facilitate their conversion to a permanent license. Together with the outcomes analysis, insights in these areas will help to paint a more comprehensive picture of how changes to licensure policies could influence teachers’ career trajectories and impact on student learning.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The option to obtain an emergency license was originally slated to expire in December 2021. Due to the pandemic's ongoing effects on the workforce, Massachusetts has now extended this deadline twice, most recently until June 2024. Emergency licenses will stop being issued 180 days after the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency in Massachusetts. Future reports will continue to update the analyses included in this initial report for additional cohorts of emergency license holders. See www.doe.mass.edu/licensure/emergency/ for the most updated information about ongoing extensions and requirements pertaining to the emergency license.
- 2 See for example James Cowan, Dan Goldhaber, Zeyu Jin, Roddy Theobald (2020). Teacher Licensure Tests: Barrier or Predictive Tool?. CALDER Working Paper No. 245-1020
- 3 These counts are for individuals that were issued licenses, not those that were ultimately employed. Additionally, these totals do not include those that may have been teaching in a district or public charter school under waivers. However, such educators comprise a relatively small proportion of the new entrant pool each year, therefore the conclusion drawn from Figure 1 remains valid: the availability of the emergency license appears to have stemmed a pandemic-induced shortage.
- 4 Among those not employed in DESE schools, it is possible that more than 18% intended to enter the workforce. For example, many new entrants who begin teaching in an alternative preparation or residency-based program (e.g., Teach for America) take the licensure tests and apply for licensure in the late spring/early summer. While those individuals may technically have been "in the pipeline," they are not included in the 18% as of March 2020 because they had not yet completed at least one of the required licensure exams.
- 5 Survey respondents could select multiple reasons for obtaining an emergency license.
- 6 Provisionally licensed educators meet all the requirements of those with an emergency license but have also taken and passed all required certification exams. To obtain an initial license, individuals must have completed an approved teacher preparation program in addition to required licensure exams.
- 7 Future work will seek to understand more about district and school-based hiring decisions and support of ELHs. That research may reveal many different reasons for employing ELHs, including staff shortages, varied approaches to establishing a candidate pipeline, and number of hard-to-staff vacancies.
- 8 Source: Bacher-Hicks, A., Chi, O. L., & Orellana, A. (2023). Two Years Later: How COVID-19 Has Shaped the Teacher Workforce. *Educational Researcher*, 0(0). doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231153659

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