Returning Teachers: An Underutilized Solution to the SBAE Teacher Shortage in the North Central Region?

Introduction

The persistent shortage of qualified school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers demands innovative strategies to expand and sustain the teaching workforce. One such strategy is to leverage the potential of *returning teachers*—those who step away from teaching and later re-enter the profession. While limited research exists specifically on SBAE, broader education studies indicate that returning teachers represent a substantial share of the overall teacher labor market, accounting for 25% to 40% of new hires in public schools (Broughman & Rollefson, 2000; Cook & Boe, 2007). These individuals bring valuable prior experience and may be more instructionally effective than novice teachers (Beaudin, 1995).

Gendered patterns also emerge in teacher attrition and reentry. DeAngelis (2013) and Spiess (2016) found that women are more likely to leave teaching for family or caregiving responsibilities but are also more likely to return. Caregiving responsibilities—including both childcare and elder care—pose significant financial burdens that contribute to women leaving the teaching profession. On average, U.S. families spend over $11,500 annually on childcare, with costs higher in urban areas and limited availability in rural regions (Child Care Aware of America, 2023; HRSA, 2023). At the same time, caregivers for adults—most often women—spend over $7,200 per year out-of-pocket and frequently reduce work hours or exit the workforce entirely (AARP, 2021; Urban Institute, 2023). For educators earning modest salaries, these expenses can be unsustainable. Many teachers cite caregiving as a factor in the decision to leave the profession, particularly when childcare costs rival their take-home pay or elder care becomes unaffordable (Garcia & Weiss, 2022; BLS, 2023). These caregiving demands—amplified by a limited support infrastructure—have led to measurable attrition among women teachers, highlighting the need for policy interventions such as childcare subsidies, paid leave, and flexible work options to support retention and gender equity in education (Urban Institute, 2023; Brookings Institution, 2023). In SBAE, the proportion of teachers leaving due to caregiving has more than doubled in the past decade, increasing from 3% to 7%, concurrent with a notable rise in the proportion of female SBAE teachers, from 41% to 56% (Lawver et al., 2024). These trends highlight a critical connection between gender, career interruptions, and reentry.

While caregiving demands contribute to teacher attrition, particularly among women, they do not necessarily imply a permanent departure from the profession. General education research consistently shows that many teachers return to the classroom after a career interruption, most often within the first few years of leaving. Murnane et al. (1991) found that approximately one-fourth of teachers in Michigan and North Carolina who left the teaching profession eventually returned, with return rates varying by age, gender, subject, and licensure. Similarly, historical data from Massachusetts and California show that 20% and 6% of teachers, respectively, re-enter the profession each year (Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1987; Boe & Gilford, 1992). These findings suggest that career breaks—especially for caregiving—may be a temporary phase in a cyclical teaching career, rather than permanent loss.

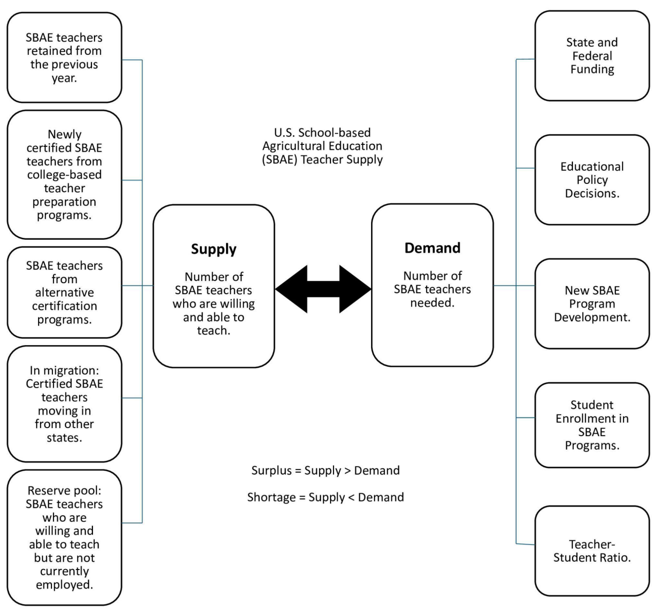
Reentry offers a meaningful opportunity to expand the teacher workforce, with returning teachers representing a renewable and underutilized pool of talent that has the potential to alleviate shortages. With this in mind, Moyer (2022) emphasizes the importance of retaining connections with teachers who exit the profession. In the context of SBAE and other high-need areas, this population may be essential to long-term workforce sustainability.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the National Supply and Demand (NSD) study (Lawver et al., 2024) identifies factors contributing to the supply and demand of SBAE teachers (see Figure 1). The supply side of the model accounts for teachers retained, program completers, alternatively certified teachers, migrating teachers, and the reserve pool. This research examines returning SBAE teachers as an additional source of teacher supply, a resource that has likely been previously considered within the reserve pool.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the AAAE National Supply and Demand Study



Methods

This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of teachers returning to the school-based agricultural education profession as a potential source of supply to meet the annual demand of school-based agricultural educators. The questions that guided the study include:

RQ1: What is the allocation of new hires in the North Central AAAE region identified as returning teachers?
RQ2: What is the role of returning teachers in relation to the net shortfall metric as identified by the National Supply and Demand Study (Smith et al., 2025)?
RQ3: How does the North Central AAAE region compare to the national data findings?

This study built upon the established protocols of the National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand research. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at The Pennsylvania State University (IRB #4564) for research involving human subjects.

Data were specifically collected from state-level leaders identified as contacts regarding teacher demand in agricultural education. The National Supply and Demand (NSD) study utilizes a census survey of these state staff and faculty from agricultural education teacher preparation programs. The frame is reviewed annually and vetted by Agricultural Education Related Organization (AERO) leaders to ensure accuracy.

The instruments used for both supply and demand components have been refined continuously since 2014 through researcher review and application. Items were added or revised based on relevant literature and feedback from a panel of expert agricultural teacher educators, who evaluated the instruments for face, content, and construct validity. Reliability was assessed annually and found to be acceptable for a descriptive study.

Data collection was conducted using Qualtrics, guided by Dillman's (2014) principles for Internet and mixed-methods surveys. After distributing individualized survey links and email reminders, follow-up phone calls were made to non-respondents. The data presented in this report were collected in 2024. Notably, the 2024 demand survey included a new item to capture the number of teachers returning to the classroom after one or more years away from teaching.

For 2024, the demand frame included 23 contacts representing 23 of the 24 states in the North Central Region (see Figure 2). The response rate for this region was 91.3%. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Access and Excel to generate descriptive statistics. Operational definitions for key terms used in this study are provided in Table 1. A primary limitation is that the data reflect self-reported information from each state contact and are taken at face value.

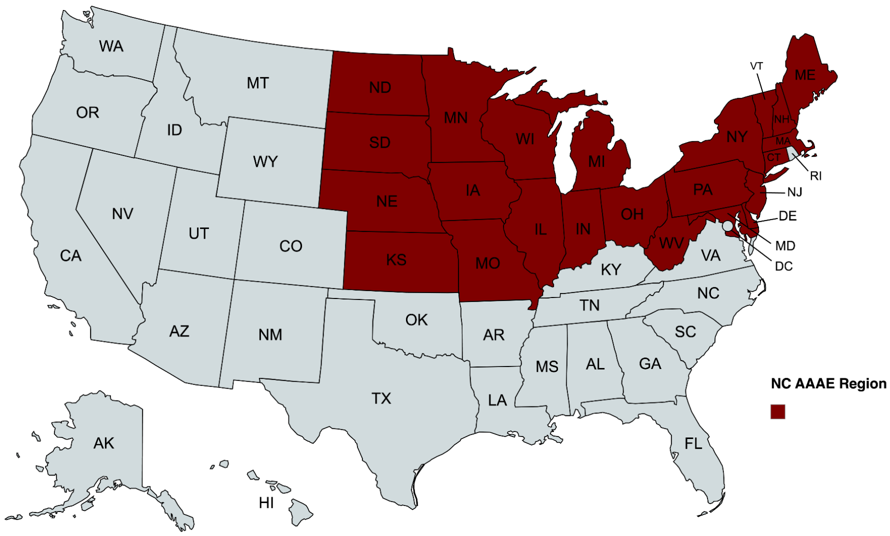
Table 1

Operational Definitions of Terms Utilized in the Current Study

Shortfall	Demand Metric (Teachers Leaving + new positions - lost positions) - Program Completers taking jobs in SBAE
Shortfall Ratio	Shortfall Ratio is the ratio of net shortfall to total teachers
Total Hires	Total positions in school-based agricultural education hired in the past year in a state
Net Hire	Total hires, not including existing school-based agricultural educators who moved between schools

Figure 2

States Represented in the North Central Region of AAAE



Results

RQ1: What is the allocation of new hires in the North Central AAAE region identified as returning teachers?

Across the North Central AAAE region, a total of 40 individuals returned to school-based agricultural education teaching positions in 2024-25 academic year, following at least one year out of the classroom. Returning teachers comprised approximately 7% of net new hires in 2024 (Table 2).

RQ2: What is the role of returning teachers in relation to the net shortfall metric as identified by the National Supply and Demand Study (Smith et al., 2025)?

As shown in Table 2, program completers (PCs) fill more than five times as many positions as returning teachers. Returning teachers represent less than 1% of the total SBAE teacher workforce in the North Central AAAE region. Three states reported more than 20% of net hires were returning teachers, however ten states reported zero returning teachers. Of the 10, it is unknown if this data was not available or if there were truly no returning teachers.

RQ3: How does the North Central AAAE region compare to the national data findings?

Although small differences were noted between the North Central region and national data (Table 3), returning teachers comprised less than 1% of all SBAE teachers at both the regional and national level. Within the 21 reporting states of the North Central AAAE region, there are 5373 (of the 12033 reported nationally) school-based agricultural educators, with the minimum number in a single state being 21 school-based agricultural educators and the maximum number in a single state being 672, with an average of 255 school-based agricultural educators per state.

Table 2

Comparison of Returning Teachers, Net Hires, and Shortfall

	Total	Minimum State	Maximum State	Mean
Net New Hires	580	5	117	27
Returning Teachers Hired	40	0	14	2
Program Completers Hired	233	0	39	10
Returning Percent of Net New Hires	-	0%	25.0%	6.9%
Returning Percent of All Teachers	-	0%	2.4%	0.7%
Net Hires Percent of All Teachers	-	3.1%	71.4%	10.8%
Net Shortfall	386	3	62	23

Note: Net Shortfall is a metric that measures the ability to meet demand with program completers (Lawver et al., 2024).

Table 3

A Comparison of the North Central AAAE Region to National Metrics

Region	Returning /Net Hires	Net Hires /Teachers	Returning /Teachers	PC/Net Hires	Shortfall Ratio	Attrition
North Central	7%	13%	1%	38%	8%	8.1%
Total	8%	13%	1%	41%	7%	7.0%

Note: Shortfall Ratio is the ratio of net shortfall to total teachers. Nationally, 36 states reported data needed for net shortfall calculation. 42 states provided data required to calculate attrition.

Conclusions/Implications

Returning teachers make up a small proportion of net hires in SBAE. While national studies found that approximately half of teachers who leave the profession return within five years (Moyer, 2022), this trend is less pronounced in SBAE. Several factors likely contribute to this discrepancy. SBAE programs are often in rural communities, which may limit availability for geographically bound individuals. Additionally, districts often employ one SBAE teacher – unlike core subjects– which further reduces reentry opportunities. Gender also plays a role. Grissom and Reininger (2012) found female teachers more likely to return within a few years of leaving the profession than male counterparts. This is particularly relevant in SBAE, where the teaching population is increasingly female (Lawver, et al, 2024). As such, supporting and retaining women–especially through career transitions–may be critical.

Despite small numbers, returning teachers remain a valuable source of experienced hires in SBAE. In some states, they made up more than 20% of net new hires, underscoring the potential for targeted recruitment. We recommend ongoing inclusion of returning teacher data in the NSD study to monitor trends and the collection of additional demographic and career data (e.g., years of prior service, length of service break) to better understand who returns and under what conditions. Initiatives to maintain licensure status among departing teachers and efforts to promote re-entry within five years may be also beneficial for SBAE program continuity and workforce sustainability.

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