

# Returning Teachers: An Underutilized Solution to the SBAE Teacher Shortage?

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## Abstract

*The persistent shortage of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers necessitates innovative approaches to expanding and sustaining the teaching workforce. One underexamined strategy is reengaging returning teachers, defined as licensed SBAE educators who leave the profession and later reenter. This study examined the role of returning teachers as a source of SBAE teacher supply using data from the National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand (NSD) Project. Returning teachers were first identified as a distinct hiring category in the NSD dataset in 2024. Descriptive analyses were conducted using national and state-level data from 2024 and 2025 to examine trends in gender composition, attrition, hiring sources, regional variation, and the relationship between returning teachers and shortage and shortfall metrics. Results indicate that returning teachers comprised approximately 7% of net hires in 2024 and increased to 8% in 2025, although substantial variation existed across states and regions. While returning teachers represented a relatively small share of hires nationally, they accounted for more than 20% of net hires in several states. Findings also highlight continued reliance on unlicensed or non-traditionally certified teachers, suggesting unmet demand for qualified SBAE educators. Given the increasing proportion of women in the SBAE workforce and evidence that women are more likely to return after career interruptions, returning teachers may represent a growing and underutilized pool of experienced educators. Implications include the need for improved tracking of returning teachers, policies that support licensure maintenance and reentry, and flexible employment arrangements to strengthen long-term workforce sustainability in SBAE.*

## Introduction

The persistent shortage of qualified school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers requires innovative and sustainable strategies to expand and stabilize the teaching workforce. One underutilized strategy is to reengage returning teachers, defined here as licensed SBAE educators who leave active classroom teaching and subsequently reenter the profession after at least one academic year of absence. Although research specifically examining returning teachers within SBAE is limited, studies in the broader education workforce suggest that returning teachers constitute a substantial portion of the labor market, accounting for approximately 25% to 40% of new hires in public schools (Broughman & Rollefson, 2000; Cook & Boe, 2007). Importantly, these individuals bring prior instructional experience and institutional knowledge and may demonstrate higher instructional effectiveness than novice teachers (Beaudin, 1995).

## Career Interruptions and Temporary Attrition

Caregiving demands, defined as responsibilities for children, aging family members, or other dependents, are well-documented contributors to teacher attrition, particularly among women. However, these demands do not necessarily result in permanent departure from the profession (Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2014). General education research

consistently demonstrates that many teachers who exit the classroom later return, with reentry most likely to occur within the first five years following departure (Moyer, 2022). Murnane et al. (1991) found that approximately one-quarter of teachers who left teaching in Michigan and North Carolina eventually returned, with return rates varying by age, gender, subject area, and licensure status. Similarly, historical analyses of the teacher labor markets in Massachusetts and California indicate that approximately 20% and 6% of teachers, respectively, reentered the profession annually (Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1987; Gilford & Boe, 1992). Collectively, these findings suggest that career interruptions, particularly those related to caregiving, are frequently a temporary phase within a cyclical teaching career rather than a permanent form of attrition.

### **Costs of Attrition and the Value of Reentry**

Teacher attrition imposes high economic and instructional costs on schools. These include expenses associated with recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and induction, as well as the loss of accumulated professional expertise (Callahan, 2016). When vacancies are filled by inexperienced or unlicensed teachers, additional costs may arise, including reduced instructional effectiveness (Watlington et al., 2010). Prior research indicates that experienced teachers are associated with higher levels of student achievement (Hughes, 2012). From a workforce perspective, reentry offers a meaningful opportunity to mitigate these costs by restoring experienced educators to the classroom without incurring the full costs of developing new teachers. Reengaging returning teachers may therefore represent a renewable and underleveraged source of instructional capacity. Moyer (2022) emphasizes the importance of maintaining connections with educators who leave teaching, noting that sustained engagement increases the likelihood of return. In SBAE and other high-need fields, this population may be critical to long-term workforce sustainability.

### **Gender, Attrition, and Reentry in SBAE**

Recent demographic shifts underscore the relevance of returning teachers within SBAE. The proportion of female SBAE teachers increased from 42% in 2016 to approximately 60% in 2025, reflecting a substantial gender shift within the profession (Smith et al., 2025). This distribution increasingly mirrors the national secondary teacher workforce, which is approximately 36% male and 64% female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Prior research suggests that attrition and reentry patterns may differ by gender. Spiess (2016) found that female SBAE teachers with 7–9 years of experience were more likely to leave the profession than their male counterparts. At the same time, DeAngelis (2013) reported that women are more likely than men to leave teaching for family or caregiving reasons but are also more likely to return.

### **Teacher Attrition and Caregiving Pressures**

Teacher attrition is the largest driver of demand for new teachers, though reasons for leaving vary widely and include retirement, compensation, administrative support, workplace conditions, student-related factors, and collegial relationships (Sutcher et al., 2019). Family dynamics play a particularly salient role for female teachers. Stinebrickner (2002) found that caregiving responsibilities are a common factor influencing women's decisions to leave the workforce. Both childcare and elder care impose substantial financial burdens that can make continued employment untenable, particularly for educators earning modest salaries. On average,

U.S. families spend more than \$11,500 annually on childcare, with higher costs and limited availability in urban and rural areas alike (Child Care Aware of America, 2023; Health Resources and Services Administration, 2023). Adult caregivers, most often women, incur more than \$7,200 in out-of-pocket expenses per year and frequently reduce work hours or exit the labor force entirely (AARP, 2021; Urban Institute, 2023). For teachers, these costs may rival or exceed take-home pay, contributing to decisions to leave the profession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Garcia & Weiss, 2022). In SBAE specifically, the proportion of teachers leaving due to caregiving has more than doubled over the past decade, increasing from 3% to 7%, concurrent with the rising proportion of female teachers (Smith et al., 2025). These trends highlight a critical intersection among gender, caregiving-related career interruptions, and the potential for reentry.

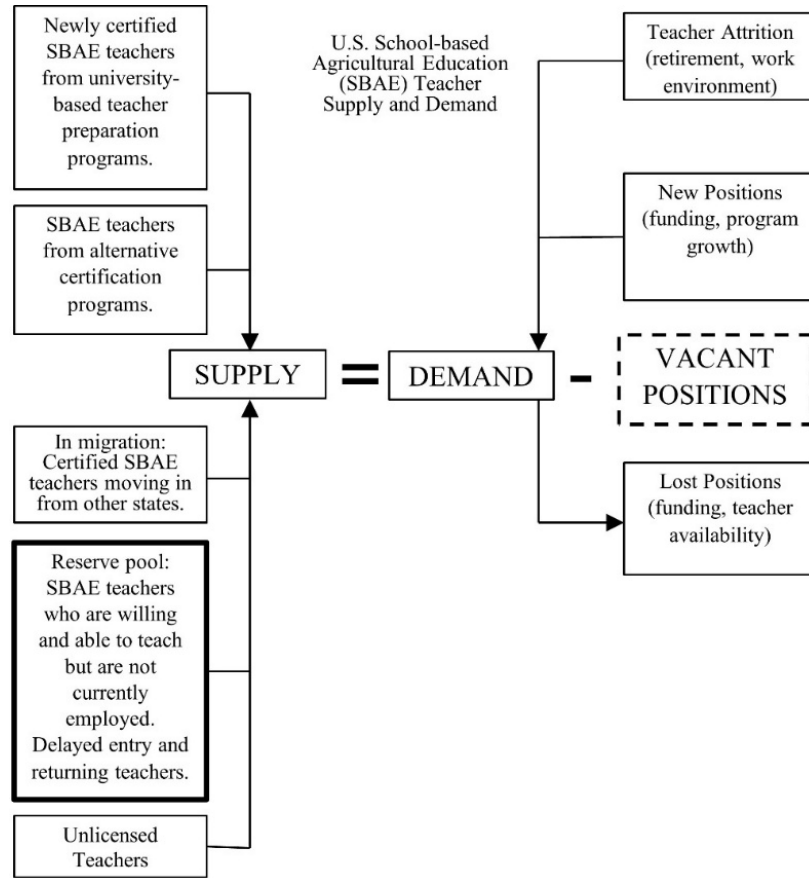
### **Returning Teachers and Hiring Dynamics**

Research on teacher reentry further supports the importance of this population. Elsayed and Roch (2023) used a discrete-time hazard model and found that female teachers are more likely than male teachers to return to the profession. Grissom and Reininger (2012) similarly reported that women are more likely to reenter teaching and that child-rearing plays a central role in gendered return patterns. More recent work by Moyer (2022) suggests that while women's post-childbirth labor force participation has increased over time, reentry itself may no longer be strongly associated with gender. Importantly, Beaudin (1993) observed that return probabilities vary by subject area, with science and mathematics teachers less likely to return than teachers in other disciplines, suggesting that reentry dynamics may differ within SBAE. Hiring practices further strengthen the case for returning teachers. School districts typically prioritize traditionally certified teachers, followed by alternatively certified teachers, and then unlicensed individuals (Diamond et al., 2020; Gantner, 2006). Given this hierarchy, returning teachers with prior licensure and experience may be particularly attractive candidates, potentially reducing reliance on unlicensed hires. As such, returning teachers represent a strategically valuable workforce segment that may help address SBAE shortages while preserving instructional quality.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the National Supply and Demand (NSD) study (Lawver et al., 2024) depicts the factors influencing the supply and demand of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers (Figure 1). The supply side includes retained teachers, program completers, alternatively certified teachers, migrating teachers, and a reserve pool of certified individuals not currently teaching, with vacant positions representing unmet demand or teacher shortages as defined in prior AAAE studies (e.g., Kantrovich, 2010). This study extends the framework by examining returning SBAE teachers as a distinct source of supply, recognizing their potential to address persistent workforce shortages.

**Figure 1**  
*AAAE Teacher Supply and Demand Conceptual Framework*



### Objectives

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 for school-based agricultural educators. The questions that guided the study include:

- RQ1: What are the recent trends in teacher gender in SBAE?
- RQ2: What are the recent trends in SBAE attrition rates?
- RQ3: What is the portion of new hires identified as returning teachers?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between returning teachers and other hiring sources?
- RQ5: How does the percentage of returning teachers vary by AAAE region?
- RQ6: What is the role of returning teachers in relation to the shortage and shortfall metrics?

## Methods

This study utilized data from the National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand (NSD) Project, a long-standing, annually administered data collection effort facilitated by the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) that traces its origins to the 1960s (Craig, 1981; Camp, 1998; Foster et al., 2025). The NSD project collects statewide demand data from designated state agricultural education leaders and includes information on teacher workforce dynamics, including sources of new hires. Beginning in 2024, the instrument was expanded to explicitly identify returning teachers, defined as licensed SBAE teachers who reentered the profession after a period of absence. Data specific to returning teachers were extracted from the demand-side hiring source variables and analyzed using Microsoft Access and Microsoft Excel. Methodological approaches to studying teacher supply and demand vary across states (Lindsay et al., 2009), a consideration when interpreting cross-state comparisons. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were calculated to characterize the prevalence of returning teachers within the SBAE hiring landscape. Operational definitions for key terms are provided in Table 1 to support consistency and transparency in interpretation. Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. First, consistent with prior NSD research, data are self-reported by designated state agricultural education contacts and are accepted at face value; the reliability and completeness of findings are therefore contingent on the accuracy and consistency of state-level reporting practices, which may vary. Second, states may differ in how they identify and classify returning teachers, potentially affecting cross-state comparability. Third, the absence of data on returning teachers prior to 2024 precludes longitudinal trend analysis, limiting conclusions to descriptive patterns observed across two data collection cycles. While established data quality protocols are employed within the NSD project, findings should be interpreted as descriptive estimates of national and state-level trends rather than definitive counts.

**Table 1**  
*AAAE Supply & Demand Project Operational Definitions*

Term	Description
Returning Teachers	Teachers hired with previous teaching experience who did not teach in the previous year.
Shortfall	Demand Metric (Teachers Leaving + new positions - lost positions) – Traditionally credentialed teachers hired (includes returning teachers). This is a measure of the lack of traditionally prepared teachers to fill positions.
Shortage	Reported vacant or unfilled positions
Total Hires	Total positions in school-based agricultural education hired in the past year in a state. Includes teachers moving between schools.
Net Hires	Total hires, not including existing school-based agricultural educators who moved between schools. Essentially, the “new” hires are within the state.

## Results

Findings are presented for each of the six research questions using descriptive statistics derived from the National Supply and Demand dataset.

### **RQ1: What are the recent trends in teacher gender in SBAE?**

For all public-school secondary teachers, the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reports that in 2020–2021, 64% were female, a figure not significantly different from the 2011–2012 study. The national trend in the number of female SBAE teachers continues to increase, reaching 58% in 2025 (Table 2). In 2015, only 42% of teachers were reported as female (Smith et al., 2025). However, there are noticeable differences between states and regions. If female teachers are more likely to return (Grissom & Reininger, 2012), then in some states with a lower average percentage of female teachers, like Alabama (19%), Oklahoma (28%), Arkansas (34%), Mississippi (35%), and Louisiana (43%), the reserve pool of these teachers may be smaller. In states with a higher number of female teachers, such as Maryland (69%), Michigan (70%), New Hampshire (71%), and Florida (71%), the reserve pool may be larger.

**Table 2**

*SBAE Female Teachers Shown as a Percent of Female, Male, and Non-binary Teachers*

<b>Region</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>Average</b>
North Central	58%	59%	60%	61%	62%	60%
Southern	44%	49%	46%	50%	50%	48%
Western	54%	54%	55%	58%	60%	56%
National Average	<b>53%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>57%</b>	59%	56%

*Note:* Percentage calculation omits teachers reported as other or unknown. Not all states reported every year.

### **RQ2: What are the recent trends in SBAE attrition rates?**

National teacher attrition in public schools has been 8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The five-year national SBAE average (of reporting states) is in line with the overall national average (Table 3). The distribution of reasons for leaving is changing, with a decline in retirements and an increase in caregiving and in leaving to teach other subjects (Smith et al., 2025). The average attrition rates for the years 2021-2025 varied from 2% (Alabama, Ohio, and New York) to 13% (Arizona, Wyoming, and North Dakota).

**Table 3***Attrition Rates by AAAE Region and State*

<b>Region/State</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>Average</b>
<b>North Central</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>
Connecticut	3%	7%	6%	1%	5%	4%
Delaware	7%	11%				9%
Illinois	8%	10%	8%	8%	6%	8%
Indiana	9%	11%	13%	13%	12%	12%
Iowa	14%	15%	7%	11%	8%	11%
Kansas	7%	12%	8%	10%	8%	9%
Maryland	8%	9%	10%	9%	7%	8%
Michigan	4%	9%	4%	6%	8%	6%
Minnesota	3%	10%	11%	9%	13%	9%
Missouri	9%	12%	10%	11%	11%	11%
Nebraska	11%	14%	6%	10%	8%	9%
New Hampshire			8%	11%	9%	9%
New Jersey	8%	10%	13%	3%	11%	9%
New York	2%	4%	2%	3%	2%	2%
North Dakota	10%	11%	19%	14%	11%	13%
Ohio	4%	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%
Pennsylvania	4%	11%	6%	5%	3%	6%
South Dakota	3%			10%	4%	6%
West Virginia			5%	10%	9%	8%
Wisconsin	10%	7%	8%	8%		9%
<b>Southern</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>9%</b>
Alabama			2%			2%
Arkansas		2%	8%	8%	4%	6%
Florida	6%	6%			1%	4%
Georgia	7%	13%	8%	8%	7%	9%
Kentucky	6%	10%	9%	11%	9%	9%
Louisiana		3%	2%	6%	7%	4%
Mississippi	13%	12%		1%	2%	7%
North Carolina	8%	14%	12%	12%	8%	11%
Oklahoma	11%	7%	13%	10%	8%	10%
South Carolina	6%	4%	4%	2%	1%	3%
Tennessee	5%	5%	5%		3%	5%
Texas					1%	1%
Virgin Islands	60%	60%				60%
Virginia	3%	3%	5%	3%		4%
<b>Western</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>
Alaska			20%	7%	4%	10%
Arizona	11%		13%	14%	13%	13%
California	4%	8%	10%	9%	7%	8%
Colorado	1%	2%	12%	8%	10%	7%
Idaho			4%	3%	2%	3%
Montana	3%	6%	11%	11%	5%	7%
Nevada	15%	15%	2%	0%	14%	9%
New Mexico	7%	6%	3%	2%	3%	4%
Oregon	6%	8%	6%	6%	7%	7%
Utah	6%	3%	5%	15%	7%	7%
Washington	2%	3%	4%	4%	1%	3%
Wyoming	12%	8%			19%	13%
<b>Average</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>

*Note.* Attrition is calculated as the number of leavers relative to the number of teachers in the prior year. To calculate, a state must report valid data in both years.

**RQ3: What is the portion of new hires identified as returning teachers?**

A total of 111 individuals returned to school-based agricultural education teaching positions in 2024-25 and 88 in the 25-26 academic year, following at least one year out of the classroom (Table 4). Returning teachers comprised approximately 8% of net hires in 2024 and 10% in 2025.

**Table 4**  
*Returning Agriculture Teachers by State and AAAE Region*

Region/State	2024		2025		Total Net Hires	Total Returning
	Net Hires	Returning	Net Hires	Returning		
<b>North Central</b>	<b>584</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>552</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>1136</b>	<b>90</b>
Connecticut	4	1	3	3	7	4
Delaware	8	0	9		17	0
Illinois	51	0	57	6	108	6
Indiana	48	6	47	2	95	8
Iowa	34	4	35	5	69	9
Kansas	46	3	39	4	85	7
Maine	15	0	15		30	0
Maryland	8	2	6	1	14	3
Michigan	13	0	21	3	34	3
Minnesota	25	1	37	5	62	6
Missouri	77	14	70	11	147	25
Nebraska	47	4	31	5	78	9
New Hampshire	2	0	2	0	4	0
New Jersey	4	0	6	0	10	0
New York	43	1	40	0	83	1
North Dakota	17	0	14	3	31	3
Ohio	43	0	49		92	0
Pennsylvania	23	0	9	0	32	0
Rhode Island	4		6		10	
South Dakota	26	0	9	2	35	2
West Virginia	5	1	5	0	10	1
Wisconsin	41	3	42		83	3
<b>Southern</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>484</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>1023</b>	<b>58</b>
Alabama	7		6		13	
Arkansas	48	10	32	1	80	11
Florida	9	0			9	0
Georgia	36	3	45	0	81	3
Kentucky	35	1	24	0	59	1
Louisiana	31	3	29	3	60	6
Mississippi	18	1	10	1	28	2
North Carolina	75	6	65	8	140	14
Oklahoma	56	7	54	7	110	14
South Carolina	5	0	5		10	0
Tennessee			9		9	

Texas	190		180	5	370	5
Virgin Islands	1				1	
Virginia	28	2	25		53	2
<b>Western</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>51</b>
Alaska	14	0	21	0	35	0
Arizona	20	4	21	3	41	7
California	117	19	67	2	184	21
Colorado	25	3	23	1	48	4
Hawaii	26		29		55	
Idaho	16	2	16	0	32	2
Montana	28	3	17	1	45	4
Nevada	8	2	9	0	17	2
New Mexico	5	0	11	1	16	1
Oregon	24	3	22	5	46	8
Utah	21	0	18		39	0
Washington	39	0	20	0	59	0
Wyoming	8	2	11	0	19	2

*Note.* Net hires are interpolated, returning teachers cannot be interpolated since there are not enough data points.

#### **RQ4: What is the relationship between returning teachers and other hiring sources?**

In 2024, traditionally certified (TC) teachers accounted for 37% of new hires, a slight increase to 38% in 2025. Alternatively certified (AC) teachers represented 29% of new hires in 2024 and 24% in 2025. Teachers who were unlicensed or held other certifications comprised 26% of hires in 2024, increasing to 30% in 2025. The proportion of hires lacking agricultural education certification indicates that demand for SBAE teachers remains unmet. Notably, unlicensed or other-certification teachers filled nearly three times as many positions as returning teachers. In 2024, six states reported that returning teachers accounted for more than 20% of net hires, while 17 states reported no returning teachers. In 2025, four states reported that returning teachers accounted for more than 20% of net hires, whereas 12 states reported no returning teachers. For states reporting zero returning teachers, it is unclear whether these values reflect an absence of returning teachers or limitations in data availability.

**Table 5**

*Distribution of Hiring Sources of SBAE Teachers*

Region/State	2024				2025			
	Returning	TC	AC	Other	Returning	TC	AC	Other
<b>North Central</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>33%</b>
Connecticut	25%	25%	50%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
Delaware	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%	44%	-11%	67%
Illinois	0%	49%	51%	0%	11%	40%	49%	0%
Indiana	13%	19%	21%	48%	4%	30%	40%	26%
Iowa	12%	74%	15%	0%	14%	60%	26%	0%
Kansas	7%	41%	13%	39%	10%	31%	5%	54%
Maine	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Maryland	25%	13%	63%	0%	17%	0%	50%	33%

Michigan	0%	38%	62%	0%	14%	38%	0%	48%
Minnesota	4%	48%	0%	48%	14%	57%	0%	30%
Missouri	18%	32%	18%	31%	16%	46%	24%	14%
Nebraska	9%	40%	38%	13%	16%	61%	19%	3%
New Hampshire	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	50%	0%	50%
New Jersey	0%	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%	17%	83%
New York	2%	12%	16%	70%	0%	5%	40%	55%
North Dakota	0%	35%	35%	29%	21%	14%	7%	57%
Ohio	0%	91%	9%	0%	0%	84%	16%	0%
Pennsylvania	0%	43%	26%	30%	0%	67%	22%	11%
Rhode Island	0%	0%	60%	40%	0%	0%	67%	33%
South Dakota	0%	19%	81%	0%	22%	33%	0%	44%
West Virginia	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%	40%	60%	0%
Wisconsin	7%	24%	46%	22%	0%	43%	40%	17%
<b>Southern</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>12%</b>
Alabama	0%	57%	43%	0%	0%	57%	43%	0%
Arkansas	21%	79%	0%	0%	3%	97%	0%	0%
Florida	0%	100%	0%	0%				
Georgia	8%	72%	19%	0%	0%	62%	38%	0%
Kentucky	3%	80%	17%	0%	0%	79%	21%	0%
Louisiana	10%	16%	68%	6%	10%	7%	83%	0%
Mississippi	6%	11%	83%	0%	10%	10%	80%	0%
North Carolina	8%	24%	5%	63%	12%	20%	0%	68%
Oklahoma	13%	41%	18%	29%	13%	56%	20%	11%
South Carolina	0%	40%	60%	0%	0%	40%	60%	0%
Tennessee					0%	100%	0%	0%
Texas	0%	64%	36%	0%	3%	69%	28%	0%
Virgin Islands	0%	0%	0%	100%				
Virginia	7%	21%	0%	71%	0%	28%	4%	68%
<b>Western</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>42%</b>
Alaska	0%	0%	43%	57%	0%	0%	5%	95%
Arizona	20%	35%	30%	15%	14%	24%	29%	33%
California	16%	52%	16%	15%	3%	88%	9%	0%
Colorado	12%	28%	40%	20%	4%	30%	30%	35%
Hawaii	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Idaho	13%	38%	44%	6%	0%	56%	31%	13%
Montana	11%	46%	43%	0%	6%	12%	82%	0%
Nevada	25%	63%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
New Mexico	0%	80%	20%	0%	9%	27%	0%	64%
Oregon	13%	21%	58%	8%	23%	32%	41%	5%
Utah	0%	19%	0%	81%	0%	33%	6%	61%
Washington	0%	33%	3%	64%	0%	65%	0%	35%
Wyoming	25%	50%	13%	13%	0%	36%	64%	0%
<b>Average</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>30%</b>

*Note:* Missing data was not reported or invalid. TC=Traditional certification (not including returning teachers), AC=Alternative certification.

**RQ5: How does the percentage of returning teachers vary by AAAE region?**

Substantial year-to-year variation was observed across regions (Table 5). On average, the proportion of returning teacher hires was higher in the North Central Region (9%) than in the Southern (5%) and Western (8%) Regions. Although this pattern is generally consistent with regional differences in the proportion of female teachers, no significant correlation was detected, indicating that additional factors likely contribute to the observed regional variation.

**RQ6: What is the role of returning teachers in relation to the shortage and shortfall metrics?**

Between 2024 and 2025, overall demand, teacher shortages (as measured by vacant positions), and the shortfall all decreased, while the total number of SBAE teachers increased (Table 6). Returning teachers accounted for 7% of hires in 2024, rising to 8% in 2025. Given that only two years of returning teacher data are available, no inferences can be made regarding the relationship between teacher shortages or shortfalls and the hiring of returning teachers. Prior to 2024, returning teachers were not reported as a distinct category in the dataset and were likely included within traditionally certified hires. It is important to distinguish between two dimensions of the SBAE teacher shortage: the degree to which SBAE mirrors national teacher attrition trends, and the degree to which demand for new SBAE positions outpaces the available supply of qualified educators. The data presented here suggest both dynamics are at play. SBAE attrition rates broadly align with national averages; however, the persistent shortfall—even in years when vacancies decline—reflects a structural gap in which the production of traditionally credentialed SBAE educators is insufficient to meet expanding program demand.

**Table 6.**

*Agricultural Teacher Demand, Shortage, and Shortfall by AAAE Region*

<b>Region/State</b>	<b>Teachers</b>		<b>Demand</b>		<b>Shortage</b>		<b>Shortfall</b>	
Year	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025
North Central	5329	5320	550	449	69	53	327	221
Southern	7111	7215	604	543	51	41	321	272
Western	2800	2807	267	238	33	26	138	123
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>15240</b>	<b>15342</b>	<b>1421</b>	<b>1230</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>786</b>	<b>616</b>

*Note.* This table uses interpolated data and does not represent the raw reported data. Missing values are imputed from previously reported data.

**Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications**

Returning teachers currently represent a relatively small proportion of net hires in school-based agricultural education (SBAE). This finding contrasts with national research on the education workforce, indicating that approximately half of teachers who leave the profession return within five years (Moyer, 2022). The comparatively lower reentry rate observed in SBAE suggests that discipline-specific structural and contextual factors may constrain returning teachers' opportunities. SBAE programs are frequently located in rural or geographically isolated communities, which may limit reentry for individuals whose mobility is restricted by family or caregiving responsibilities. In addition, many school districts employ only a single SBAE teacher, unlike core subject areas where multiple positions may exist within a school or district, further reducing opportunities for reentry following a career interruption. Research in the broader teaching workforce has similarly identified institutional and perceptual barriers to reentry,

including concerns about workload, limited flexible employment options, and a perceived lack of organizational support for returning educators (Buchanan, 2012), all of which may be amplified in the demanding SBAE professional context.

Gender dynamics may further shape patterns of attrition and reentry in SBAE. Prior research has shown that female teachers are more likely than male teachers to return to the profession after leaving, particularly within a few years of exit (Grissom & Reininger, 2012). This finding is especially relevant given the continued feminization of the SBAE teaching workforce, which increased from 42% women in 2016 to approximately 60% in 2025 (Smith et al., 2025). As the demographic composition of SBAE shifts, the profession may increasingly experience caregiving-related career interruptions. Consequently, policies and practices that support women through career transitions, including exit and reentry, may be essential for maintaining workforce stability and instructional capacity.

Despite their relatively small numbers nationally, returning teachers represent a valuable and experienced source of SBAE hires. In several states, returning teachers accounted for more than 20% of net hires, demonstrating that reentry can meaningfully contribute to workforce supply under the right conditions. These findings suggest that returning teachers are not merely a marginal phenomenon but a potentially strategic recruitment pathway, particularly in states facing persistent shortages.

To better understand and leverage this workforce segment, continued inclusion of returning teacher data within the National Supply and Demand (NSD) study is recommended. Longitudinal tracking of returning teachers will enable researchers and stakeholders to monitor trends over time and assess the relationships among reentry, shortages, and workforce stability. Additionally, collecting supplemental demographic and career history data outside the NSD framework, such as years of prior teaching experience, length of career interruption, licensure status, and reasons for exit, would provide critical insight into who returns to SBAE and under what conditions.

From a practice and policy perspective, efforts to maintain licensure among teachers who exit the classroom and to actively promote reentry within the first five years following departure may support SBAE program continuity and reduce reliance on unlicensed hires. Flexible employment arrangements may also offer promising pathways for reengaging experienced teachers. For example, hiring teachers with caregiving responsibilities on a part-time basis could provide districts with instructional capacity while allowing teachers to balance professional and family demands. Such arrangements may also support program expansion without the financial commitment of a full-time hire.

Prior research suggests that strategies including part-time appointments, job sharing, and adaptable timetables that prioritize work-life balance can enhance teacher retention (Stoddart, 2024). Although these approaches are typically discussed in the context of retaining current teachers, they may also be effective in attracting returning teachers. The SBAE three-circle instructional model is widely recognized as demanding substantial time commitments beyond the classroom. Qualitative accounts from SBAE teachers frequently describe the cumulative burden of instructional, programmatic, and extracurricular responsibilities (Haddad et al., 2024), as well as the tension between professional success and personal well-being (Traini et al., 2019).

Addressing these challenges through structural supports and flexible work designs may not only reduce attrition but also lower barriers to reentry for experienced educators.

The field stands to benefit from more intentional and creative approaches to identifying and reengaging returning teachers, rather than continuing to rely predominantly on strategies that have not resolved the persistent shortfall. State agricultural education programs and teacher educator associations could develop formal reentry registries, voluntary systems that allow former licensed SBAE educators to signal their continued interest in returning to the classroom. University teacher preparation programs could partner with state agricultural education directors to offer condensed re-credentialing or licensure renewal pathways tailored specifically to lapsed SBAE educators, reducing the structural barriers that currently discourage reentry. Peer mentorship programs pairing returning teachers with experienced colleagues could facilitate reintegration by addressing the professional and contextual changes that occur during a career interruption. At the national level, NAAE and affiliated organizations could leverage existing alumni and membership networks to proactively identify and cultivate relationships with former teachers, transforming passive attrition into a structured, recoverable reserve of talent. These approaches require coordination across institutional levels but represent a more active and targeted investment in workforce sustainability than conventional recruitment and preparation strategies alone can provide.

Collectively, these findings highlight returning teachers as an underexamined yet potentially impactful component of the SBAE teacher workforce. By alleviating factors that contribute to teacher exit and intentionally supporting reentry pathways, the profession may be able to retain experienced educators, strengthen program continuity, and enhance long-term workforce sustainability.

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