

## **Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Shortage Inaccuracies: Collaborating to Set the Record Straight**

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*Although the shortage of family and consumer sciences (FCS) teachers has been documented in the literature for over ten years (Werhan & Way 2006; Werhan 2013), government data documenting areas of teacher shortage do not always include the need for FCS educators. The omission of such data may impact awareness of the shortage, recruitment efforts, and financial aid opportunities for college students. This paper seeks to explain how this incongruity may occur and provides suggestions for individuals to press for authentic data.*

In a world of technology, it may be assumed that data related to the number of family and consumer sciences (FCS) teachers employed by schools, the number of FCS teaching positions that are open, and the number of students who are enrolled in FCS classes would be readily available at the federal or state levels, but they are not. Werhan (2013) contacted each state in the United States when she conducted a national survey of secondary FCS programs between 2012 and 2013, in part to determine the “number of FCS teachers employed and needed” and “ascertain the changes in teacher and student numbers since the last data collection” in the decade prior to the study (p. 42). Werhan found that some states do not collect this data, or the process of obtaining it was cost-prohibitive. Using the best data available, Werhan (2013) confirmed what the profession suspected, states were struggling to fill FCS teacher vacancies, and the shortage of FCS teachers was expected to grow. But, when reviewing documents which use the United States Department of Education (USDOE), Office of Post-Secondary Education as a source of shortage data, FCS is not regularly identified as a shortage area and this conflicts with the Werhan data.

The USDOE publishes a list of teacher shortage areas developed from a reporting document turned in annually by each state’s Chief State School Officer (USDOE, 2016). This annual list has been considered infallible and is used extensively for workforce education documents and as the basis for state and federal loans and scholarships for teacher education students. Those scholarships include:

Targeted teacher deferment for borrowers under the Family Federal Education Loan (FFEL) and Federal Supplemental Loans for Students (SLS) programs (34 CFR 682.210(q));

Full-time teaching in fields of expertise, cancellation of up to 100 percent of their debt under the Federal Perkins Loan Program (34 CFR 674.53(c)); and

Teaching obligation fulfillment for recipients under the Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant Program (34 CFR 686).

In the USDOE (2016) document, only 12 states specifically list FCS as a teacher shortage area; however, in the Werhan (2013) data, 20 states reported a current, active FCS teacher shortage. Given the many inconsistencies between data recently published by the USDOE (2016) related to FCS educator shortages and Werhan's (2013) research, the question of why the need for FCS educators has not been communicated effectively to the USDOE remains.

To answer this question, we contacted the Office of Post-Secondary Education (OPSE) at the USDOE to identify: 1) who completes the report, 2) what data are included, and 3) what steps can be taken to insure the report is completed accurately. Information from this government office indicated that the "Chief State School Officer" would have that responsibility. This prompted an inquiry at the state level that could be replicated by others within their own state and perhaps correct an on-going issue of inaccurate data.

### **Identification of the Issues**

Responding to the information provided by the OPSE, we tried to identify who specifically completed the report in their home state of Kansas, a state that does not list a shortage of FCS teachers for the 2016-2017 academic school year (USDOE, 2016). Within Kansas, it was ascertained that the Commissioner of Education has this responsibility. Data for USDOE's list were gathered from a superintendent's report submitted to the Kansas State Department of Education. Teacher application data were also used to determine shortage areas. The Commissioner did not conduct a survey to gather the data on teacher shortages. Instead, the listing submitted to the USDOE (2016) document related to teacher shortages was prepared by extrapolating data from unrelated reports.

### **Response to the Issues**

A 23-question perception survey was developed to determine, among other inquiries, if Kansas superintendents thought there was a shortage of FCS teachers and if they were aware of the report from which shortage data was collected by their state. This survey was emailed to a list of 286 Kansas superintendents provided by the Kansas Department of Education. The response rate from Kansas superintendents was 29%, with 34% of superintendents reporting great difficulty in finding FCS teachers and 24% having some difficulty. Despite this difficulty in finding FCS teachers, Kansas did not list FCS as a shortage area on the USDOE report during the last three years.

The survey was edited for clarity and emailed nationally to 11,618 superintendents of public, non-charter districts throughout the United States. Contact information for this national group was collected from a variety of sources including contacts with state departments of education, posted information from online state superintendent databases and in over half of the individual districts, conducting a search of school district web sites. These methods were required because some states would not provide contact information for personnel. Contact information was collected over a six-week period. Less than 1% of the contact information was determined to be unusable.

The national response rate was poor at 12%, with 55% of reporting superintendents reporting great difficulty and 35% some difficulty in finding FCS teachers. Fifty-six percent indicated that they did not provide shortage data to their respective state, despite assurances from the federal level that the data was collected by the Chief State School Officer from the local

school administrators. The national report from the OPSE shows all U.S. states submitted data on their shortage areas. This raises the concern of the source of the data and who actually contributes to the report as a significant number of those listed as being the provider of data are unaware of its collection.

During the time period the survey was being sent out to Kansas superintendents, inquiry was being made at the state level regarding the report which was sent to the OPSE and how the shortage data was collected. A few issues were identified that impacted a report being sent to the federal level that did not indicate FCS was a teacher shortage area:

First, it was determined that several different offices completed portions of the report. It appeared to be an administrative duty without much awareness of the impact of the report. Additionally, the timing of when the superintendents were provided information from which the assumed level of open positions was drawn and what constituted “unfilled” was problematic. (Examples: superintendents were not clear on if an unfilled position meant one that was total unfilled, unfilled because of failure to search, or unfilled because the person currently employed did not have the required license, etc.) Finally, it was determined that a flawed procedure of comparing the number of teacher job openings to the number of applications being submitted was being used to determine “shortage”. This procedure did not account for duplication of applications by teachers. Fifteen people may be looking for a FCS secondary position but those fifteen filled out a total of thirty applications. This was seen by the state department as being thirty people looking for a job, not just thirty applications. Once these inconsistencies were pointed out to those managing the reports, alternations were made in the survey which should have resulted in accurate data for all teacher shortage areas being send to the federal level, at least from Kansas. However, the survey was altered again to address a different target which resulted in inaccurate data being collected once again. It is critical that those charged with data collection follow-through to collect meaningful data for accurate reports to be developed.

### **Replication in Other States**

At the 2015 American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences *Say Yes to FCS* Summit, researchers encouraged all states to look at the teacher shortage data for their individual state and see if it was accurate. Knowing that a survey sent out from regional researchers may have a higher rate of return than a national survey, the original survey sent out to Kansas superintendents as well as materials supporting the survey, were offered to representatives from the states attending. Three volunteers from Wyoming, Minnesota, and Wisconsin sent out the survey to superintendents in their states to determine if they understood that FCS was a shortage area and if they were aware of how shortage data are collected. This provided those volunteers the needed information to contact their state’s Departments of Education to see if the method of reporting shortage data was accurate.

Initial response rates for states when the survey was sent from the authors based in Kansas for the three states was 9%. When the respondents were asked by someone within their state to respond the rate jumped to a range of 47% to 53%. While the survey results of the superintendents’ understanding did not change, the confidence in the data was far greater.

### **Recommendations for Continued Action**

Those who would like to ensure state and national data are accurate can facilitate this by first checking the states OPSE’s list of teacher shortage areas (USDOE, 2016). Is FCS listed specifically for state in the United States in question? Or, does the report just list Career-

Technical Education (CTE) without specific content areas? Each CTE area needs to be listed separately for accurate communication between those that use this document as a reference tool.

How does a specific state collect data about teacher shortage? To get an answer to this question may take several phone calls or email messages, but these conversations are important ones. Do superintendents list a position when filled by a substitute teacher or an emergency hire as “filled” or is it listed as “unfilled?” Clarification of terms is essential to identify if programs are being taught by highly qualified teachers or just someone to fill-in until a teacher can be found. Collaboration between FCS teacher educators and state supervisors with their colleagues in other content areas may be beneficial to raise greater awareness of the issue.

If and when the federal document lists a state having an FCS shortage area, then the next steps are to ensure that all teacher preparation programs in the state are aware of this designation. Does the teacher education website include FCS as a shortage area? It may only take a phone call to make that change. The financial aid office at the university also needs to be aware that FCS is a shortage area in order to process the federal funding opportunities for the students. This is a critical step. Also even if it is not listed as a teacher shortage area within your state, if the financial aid office lists FCS Education as eligible if the student is moving to a teaching job in a state where there is a shortage then they still qualify for additional assistance. Additionally, the Commission on Higher Education (CHE) in a state needs to list FCS as a shortage area. Some universities go by the CHE (or other politically appointed groups) stated shortage areas for financial aid.

Working with state-wide government agencies, universities, and interested individuals is essential to make sure FCS Education gets the publicity and benefits that a “teacher shortage area” receives. It is the experience of the writers that most people want the shortage data to be accurate and are willing to investigate and make changes that insure that there are no inaccuracies. Someone just needs to call it to the attention of those who can make the changes and apparently people are beginning to do so. Since 2015, nine more states have specifically listed FCS as a shortage area. We must continue to be diligent to make sure the shortage data are reported accurately.

### **References**

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