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AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER PLACEMENT AND RETENTION
IN THE MISSISSIPPI EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING PROGRAM

By
Abby Elizabeth Johnston

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
April 2021

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ABSTRACT

The Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP) was created in 2013 by a privately-funded grant from the Hearin Foundation of Jackson, Mississippi. In exchange for a full cost-of-attendance scholarship, undergraduate participants in the program at both the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University commit to teaching at a public school in Mississippi for five years after graduation. The purpose of this study is to analyze the teacher placement and retention rates of METP in order to draw conclusions on its effectiveness at retaining high-performing high school students to become teachers in the state of Mississippi.

This study was conducted by analyzing the 64 responses to a mixed-methods survey, which was sent to the 118 graduated participants in METP at both universities in order to generate statistics regarding teacher retention rates and the school placement of members of the first four METP cohorts. This study found that 30 survey participants teach in an A-rated school district, while only 1 teaches in a D-rated school district and 1 in an F-rated school district. Furthermore, this study concluded that 21 survey participants are undecided on their career path after completing their five-year teaching commitment to METP. From these results, this study made several programmatic policy recommendations, including the institution of a post-grad support program, cohort reunions, more exposure to high-needs classrooms during undergraduate student teaching, and avenues for future research.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

According data published in *Mississippi Today*, Mississippi is facing a compounding teacher shortage crisis, which continues to worsen each year it goes unaddressed by the state legislature (Betz, 2021). The Mississippi Department of Education considers any school district with 10-15% of its teachers not fully-licensed to teach as facing a shortage (Betz, 2021).¹ By this standard, fifty-four of Mississippi’s 151 school districts are experiencing a teacher shortage. According to this same MDE data, 3% of all teachers in Mississippi in the 2017-2018 school year and 1.5% of teachers in the 2020-2021 school year were not properly certified to teach (Betz, 2021).

While these numbers may seem small, they represent only an average of all school districts across the state. In some districts and counties—specifically those with higher populations of minorities and those with lower teacher salaries—uncertified teacher percentages are much higher. For example, “in North Panola School District, where 97 percent of the students are African-American, 9 percent of the teachers lacked proper certification in the 2017-18 school year. Meanwhile, in neighboring South Panola School District, where 55 percent of students are African-American, only two percent of the teachers weren’t certified” (Betz, 2021).

While no data since 2015 exists on which school districts specifically are experiencing a teacher shortage, the Office of Technology and Strategic Services (OTSS) in the Mississippi Department of Education conducted a study in 2015 as part of a larger MDE study entitled “Mississippi State Plan to Ensure Equitable Access to Excellent Educators” in which OTSS published the names of 48 school districts in Mississippi that

¹ If a district has more than 60 teaching positions, the standard is 10%; if it has fewer, the standard is 15% (Betz, 2021).

experienced a geographic teacher shortage during the 2014-2015 school year. This same study identified the following subjects as critical subject shortage areas: Biology, Chemistry, French, German, Mathematics, Physics, Spanish, and Special Education (MDE, 2015).

Most recently, a 2019 report published in *The Clarion Ledger* found that “nearly one of every three school districts in Mississippi is designated as a critical teacher shortage area.” More specifically, the Mississippi Department of Education “licensed 3,447 teachers in 2013; but in 2018, the agency licensed 1,624,” which is “a steep nosedive” from previous licensing numbers (Harris, 2019). *The Clarion Ledger* report also looked into why this is the case, citing first and foremost the fact that schools of education at Mississippi’s public institutions have seen a steady decline in enrollment since 2014. Strikingly, the report found that “the number of education candidates enrolling and graduating from teacher preparation programs at the state’s universities has dropped by 40 percent” (Harris, 2019).

Further exacerbating the teacher shortage is the fact that Mississippi’s teachers are not paid sufficiently. According to 2018 data from the National Education Association, Mississippi pays its teachers the lowest amount in the nation. The average starting salary for a public school teacher in Mississippi is between \$34,000 and \$39,000, and the overall state average pay is \$44,926. The average national teacher salary is much higher at \$60,477 in 2017-2018 (NEA, 2019). Making this phenomenon even more critical for Mississippi is the fact that neighboring states often provide higher wages and attract Mississippi’s educators. These educators in Mississippi know that if they can drive a little

further and cross state lines into Alabama, Louisiana, or Tennessee, they are likely to earn a better salary (Harris, 2019).

Unfortunately, Mississippi's critical teacher shortage and low teacher salary woes are not a new phenomenon. They have plagued the state's public education system since before 1998, the year in which Mississippi's state legislature decided to act on this issue and passed the Critical Teacher Shortage Act of 1998, which sought to "establish the Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program for the purpose of awarding full scholarships to full-time and part-time college students agreeing to teach in a geographical critical teacher shortage area of the state" (HB 609, 1998).

Similar to the Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program, the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP) was established in 2013 as a way to attract high-performing rising college students to teach in Mississippi public schools for at least five years. The stated goal of the program is "to attract top-performing high school seniors who want to become secondary English, mathematics and science – as well as elementary and special education – teachers in Mississippi." The program was created as a joint effort between the Schools of Education at both the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University with support from grant writers at the CREATE Foundation, which is Northeast Mississippi's "premier philanthropic resource regarding comprehensive charitable planning for individuals, nonprofits, communities, and businesses" and a "powerful catalyst for building charitable resources for our region" (Create Foundation Home, 2021). The program is funded by the Robert M. Hearin Support Foundation of Jackson, which donated \$12.95 million in 2012, and another \$28 million in 2017.

From 2013 to the present, the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program has accepted 362 students. The program provides full financial support to students, including a full cost of attendance scholarship, a technology stipend, professional development opportunities via cross-campus learning, a study abroad opportunity, and admission to the annual National Teaching Conference in return for a non-negotiable commitment (with an option to defer to attend a graduate program) to teaching at a public school in the state of Mississippi for five years.

The creators of the program believed that by providing a full cost of attendance scholarship, more college students would be attracted to enroll in the School of Education at either the University of Mississippi or at Mississippi State University, thus boosting enrollment in these institutions. Additionally, the program's scholarship is intended to help off-set the state's abysmally low teacher salaries. Combined with the program's five-year Mississippi public school teaching commitment, the program helps keep teachers working in the state, as opposed to moving elsewhere. Finally, by supporting extra-curricular learning opportunities like a study abroad trip and admission into teacher conventions, the program works to increase the quality of education that prospective teachers receive so that they themselves can be highly-qualified educators.

The purpose of this study is to analyze teacher placement and retention in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program based on University of Mississippi data, Mississippi State University data, and participant feedback. This thesis consists of a literature review, which surveys existing literature on the following topics: the importance of highly-qualified teachers, alternate route programs and their effects, teacher recruitment and retention in challenged districts, methods for increasing teacher

recruitment and retention, and programs similar to METP. Following the literature review, this study features a methodology and results section, which explains the study's survey design and subsequent findings. The study then presents a discussion of the results and recommended policy changes.

This research is significant because much at stake and much has been invested into this program. METP is a unique collaboration between the state's two major public universities, has 362 total participants, has produced 118 B.A. Ed. graduates so far, and has been funded to the tune of over \$40 million. This analysis will help guide the program as it moves into the future and also will serve as a guide to policymakers and educational organizations alike as they attempt to solve important issues in public education such as a shortage of high-quality teachers in Mississippi's public schools.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review surveys existing research pertinent to the purpose of this thesis, which is to analyze the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program's (METP) teacher placement and retention rates. This literature review is divided into five sections and discusses a variety of sources on the following topics: the importance of highly-qualified teachers, the effectiveness of alternate route programs, teacher retention and attrition in challenged districts, mechanisms for increasing teacher retention rates, and incentive-based programs similar to METP. The studies examined here include publications in education research journals, government publications and reports, as well as publications from education-focused think tanks.

The Importance of Highly-Qualified Teachers

In November of 1996, a watershed study was published at the University of Tennessee entitled "Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement." Most notably, the authors of this study found that "students with highly effective teachers for three years in a row scored 50 percentage points higher on a test of math skills than those whose teachers were ineffective" and concluded that "the single most dominant factor affecting student academic gain is teacher effectiveness" (No Child Left Behind, 2006). This conclusion influenced President George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Initiative, and continues to shape how we view the importance teacher quality nearly 25 years later.

Americans have always recognized the value of teachers, but after this study, policymakers and educators alike began to understand just how crucial a quality teacher is to student achievement. As part of his 2002 "No Child Left Behind" Initiative,

President Bush mandated that every teacher in every classroom in America be “highly qualified” by the year 2006. Under this new national requirement, every teacher was required to have a bachelor’s degree, had to meet certification standards as set by the states, and had to be competent in his or her subject area (Sanders and Rivers, 1996). Clearly, the Bush administration believed improvements in student achievement can be made when high-quality teachers are at the head of classrooms. Research has overwhelmingly supported this notion: higher-quality public school teachers equate to higher-quality public education systems (see, for example, Clotfelter et al., 2007 and Rockoff, 2004).

However, there is debate over what it really means to be a “highly-qualified teacher.” Many believe President Bush’s requirements are not strong enough and do not account for other important factors that contribute to teacher quality, including a teacher’s undergraduate education, post-graduate education, pre-service experience, test scores, number of years’ experience in the classroom, and professional development opportunities (Clotfelter et al., 2007). Each of these factors impacts not only the quality of a particular teacher but also the quality of an education that he or she is able to provide to students.

In their 2007 study entitled “Teacher Credentials and Student Achievement: Longitudinal Analysis with Student Fixed Effects,” Charles Clotfelter, Helen Ladd, and Jacob Vigdor analyzed which teacher characteristics and credentials had the most significant impact on student achievement as measured by state test scores for students in grades 3, 4, and 5 in North Carolina between 1994 and 2004. The study utilized records maintained by the North Carolina Education Research Data Center at Duke University,

which included nearly 1.8 million student observations. The teacher credentials the authors measured were years of experience, graduate degrees, teacher licensure, National Board certification, teacher test scores, and quality of undergraduate institution. Overall, this study concluded that “teacher’s experience, test scores, and regular licensure all have positive effects on student achievement, with larger effects for math than reading” (Clotfelter et al., 2007).

The authors first looked at teacher experience, as measured by the number of years a teacher had drawn a paycheck from the state for teaching. The study concluded that teachers who had been teaching for a longer period of time were more effective at increasing student test scores, especially in math. Similar but not as robust gains were made in the analysis of reading test scores. Interestingly, the greatest gains occurred after teachers had several years of classroom experience.

In his 2004 study “The Impact of Individual Teachers on Student Achievement” published in *The American Economic Review*, Jonah Rockoff found similar results regarding teacher experience. Rockoff used “a random-effects meta-analysis approach to measure the variance of teacher fixed effects” and to “measure the relationship between student achievement and teaching experience” (Rockoff, 2004). Rockoff studied two school districts within the same county in New Jersey. He collected data from test scores spanning 1989 to 2000, which included about 10,000 students and 300 teachers. This allowed Rockoff to study the teachers’ impact over many years and with many students as well as study student achievement across different teachers. The empirical results of his study concluded that “a one-standard-deviation increase in teacher quality raises test scores by approximately 0.1 standard deviations in reading and math on nationally

standardized distributions of achievement” (Rockoff, 2004). In addition to teacher quality, this study found that teacher experience has the greatest impact on student achievement. Rockoff concluded that “reading test scores differ by approximately 0.17 standard deviations on average between beginning teachers and teachers with ten or more years of experience” (Rockoff, 2004).

In addition to teacher experience, graduate degrees are often used as a yardstick for measuring teacher quality. In their study “Teacher Credentials and Student Achievement: Longitudinal Analysis with Student Fixed Effects,” Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor also analyzed the effect teachers with graduate degrees have on student achievement. The authors performed a regression analysis in which they disaggregated graduate degrees by type. Overall, the study concluded that “having a graduate degree exerts no statistically significant effect on student achievement and in some cases the coefficient is negative” (Clotfelter et al., 2007).

These authors also studied the effect teacher licensure has on student achievement, which they conclude matters a great deal more than graduate degrees. North Carolina offers three options for obtaining a teaching license. Teachers can obtain it “regularly” by taking and passing an exam. They can also obtain a license “laterally” by earning a bachelor’s degree and at least a 2.5 GPA in coursework pertaining to the subject they desire to teach. Finally, teachers can obtain a temporary or emergency license. The authors analyzed the effects of each of these licensure options. They concluded teachers with the temporary/emergency license had negative effects on student achievement by upwards of 0.059 standard deviations on test scores. The study also concluded that

teachers with lateral licenses had reduced coursework and preparation and thus often “exhibited smaller initial gains than other teachers” (Clotfelter et al., 2007).

Additionally, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor studied the impact of a teacher’s undergraduate experience on student achievement. The authors used a ranking system from the Barron’s College Admissions Selector to rank institutions and compare these rankings to teacher test scores and student achievement. Interestingly, the study concluded that “coming from an elite and very competitive institution does not make a teacher any more effective on average relative to teachers from other institutions” (Clotfelter et al., 2007).

Perhaps most significantly, Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor studied the effect teacher test scores on the North Carolina Elementary Education or Early Childhood Education test had on student achievement. These tests assessed pre-service teachers on their knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The authors normalized and averaged all the test scores taken by all elementary teachers in North Carolina between 1994 and 2004. This analysis concluded that “higher average test scores are associated with higher math and reading achievement, with far greater effects for math than for reading” (Clotfelter et al., 2007). The test score improvements associated with higher-scoring teachers are major: teachers who “scored two or more standard deviations above average boosted student achievement gains by 0.068 standard deviations” while teachers who “scored two or more standard deviations below the average reduced achievement gains by 0.062 standard deviations” (Clotfelter et al., 2007). Clearly, a teacher’s ability to score well on these pre-service exams had a significant impact on his or her ability to help students achieve in the classroom.

Professional development and teacher training programs have also been linked to increased teacher quality and increased student achievement. The goal of professional development programs in the field of education is to increase student achievement by promoting teacher excellence and leadership. One of the most well-known professional development and teaching training programs in the United States is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This program seeks to “develop, retain and recognize accomplished teachers and to generate ongoing improvement in schools nationwide” and to be eligible, teachers must meet qualifications such as having at least a bachelor’s degree, three years of teaching experience, and a valid teaching license. Certification generally takes 3 years to complete and is granted after teachers are assessed via content-specific online exercises, classroom portfolios, sample instructional videos, and involvement outside of the classroom (Belson, 2015).

In their 2015 study entitled “The Impact of National Board for the Professional Teaching Standards Certification on Student Achievement” published in the *Education Policy Analysis Archives* at Arizona State University, Sarah Belson and Thomas Husted found that “the percentage of National Board-certified teachers in a state is positively related to scores on state-level NAEP Reading and Math assessments” (Belson, 2015). Using “the standard educational production function model,” the authors analyzed the relationship between “inputs” such as student, school, and teacher characteristics and the “output” of student achievement as measured by average NAEP assessment scores in 8th grade math and reading between the years 2008 and 2011 in school districts across the country. In addition to improving individual students’ test scores, the authors concluded that having National Board-certified teachers in classrooms has “spillover effects” that

further increase educational quality in schools. These teachers are more likely to be leaders in the workplace, serve as mentors to colleagues, and promote a positive learning environment in the school.

Based on these studies, it is clear that teacher quality—whether that is measured by undergraduate education, post-graduate education, pre-service experience, teacher test scores, number of years’ experience in the classroom, or professional development opportunities—has a significant impact on student achievement in the classroom and on standardized testing. The credentials that are most likely to affect student achievement are teacher test scores, classroom experience, and professional development opportunities.

Alternate Route Programs and Their Effects

Clearly, filling classrooms with high-quality teachers is an important step to ensure that our public schools are providing students with access to a high-quality education. However, to do this, we must first encourage and recruit high-performing students to enter the field of education and become teachers. College students who are interested in becoming teachers usually enter the field in one of two ways. The first is the traditional route, which typically includes a 2 or 4-year preparation program at a college or university as well as pre-service training and student teaching (Humphrey et al., 2008). The second route to certification is known as the “alternative route,” and in Mississippi it allows those who did not participate in a teacher education program to become teachers so long as they have a bachelor’s degree, earned a 21 or higher ACT score, and have passed a subject area-specific exam called the Praxis II (MDE, 2020).

Alternative routes to certification have become more and more common, as teacher shortages are increasing in number and severity across the nation (Partelow,

2020). As alternate route options have gained traction, so too have many different programs that encourage and aid in alternate route certification. These programs are commonly sponsored by interested parties such as universities, school districts, and nonprofits. Each individual program usually has its own requirements in regard to pre-service training and term commitment that are attached to certification.

Perhaps the most well-known nonprofit alternate route certification program is Teach For America (TFA). According to its mission statement, TFA is “a diverse network of leaders who confront educational inequity by teaching for at least two years and then working with unwavering commitment from every sector of society to create a nation free from this injustice” (TFA, 2020). Participants are usually high-performing recent college graduates, and upon committing to the program, they undergo a 6-week training period and are then placed in one of 50 communities across the nation in dire need of teachers. Corps members are only required to teach for two years in their assigned school, and post-participation, participants can do whatever they please, whether they remain in their assigned school, transfer schools, or leave the teaching profession altogether (TFA, 2020). The idea behind this nonprofit organization is to put high-achieving college graduates in classrooms in hopes of encouraging them to become teachers or gain the experiences necessary to make other societal changes.

Similar to Teach For America but located specifically in Mississippi, the Mississippi Teacher Corps seeks to “recruit, train, and support empathetic participants to become committed, talented, and passionate educators who have a desire to partner with and serve communities as teachers in critical-needs public schools” (About MTC, 2017). The program is similar to TFA in that it recruits high-performing college graduates to

become teachers by offering them alternate route certification as well as well as “training, support, and a full scholarship for a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) from the University of Mississippi” in exchange for a commitment to teach in a high-poverty public school in Mississippi for two years. The program is fully-funded by the state legislature, and it selects no more than 30 participants each year.

While these programs are successful at attracting and incentivizing high-performing college graduates to become alternatively-certified public-school teachers, the programs face serious retention and attrition rate problems, exacerbated by the relatively short time commitment of both programs (Heineke et al., 2013). These programs oftentimes leave gaping holes in classrooms, schools, and school districts because many teachers do not choose to remain in the classroom beyond their commitment—a trend that is especially true for Teach For America corps members as evidenced by recent regional studies (Heineke et al., 2013).

A 2008 study conducted by the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research studied teacher attrition rates among TFA participants in New York City. This study concluded that in this region, “TFA teachers left after the 2nd year of teaching at triple the rate of traditional teachers and double the rate of alternatively certified teachers; after 4 years, 15% of TFA teachers remained in the district” (Boyd et al., 2008). A study conducted in the Houston region and published in the *Education Policy Analysis Archives* in 2005 yielded similar results. This study found that “85% of TFA teachers departed after 3 years” (Darlington-Hammond et al., 2005). Most strikingly, a 2010 study entitled “Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence” published by the

National Education Policy Center found that overall, “more than 50% of TFA teachers leave after two years, and more than 80% leave after three years” (Heilig and Jez, 2010).

Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Challenged Districts

Clearly, Teach For America and other alternative route programs are successfully recruiting high-achieving college students to the field of education. However, with such bleak retention rates, it is evident that more needs to be done to encourage teachers to remain in the workforce once their commitment has been fulfilled. Interestingly, this issue is not one faced solely by TFA and other alternative route programs. Challenged districts like the ones targeted by TFA have difficulty retaining teachers of any type, regardless of any financial obligation or academic incentive.

A 2019 report published by the Economic Policy Institute investigated the challenges all schools, but specifically high-needs schools, have in hiring and retaining teachers. Overall, the study discovered that the teaching profession has one of the highest attrition rates in the country, since nearly “30% college graduates who became teachers were not in the profession five years later.” This report also found that “the aggregate turnover and attrition rate is 15.3 in high-poverty schools—that’s 3.4 percentage points higher than the aggregate turnover and attrition rate in low-poverty schools (11.9 percent), creating more potential vacancies in high-poverty schools than in better-off schools” (Garcia and Weiss, 2019). Further, high-poverty schools and school districts struggle to fill these positions, as “well over a third (36.8 percent) of high-poverty schools with vacancies reported that it was ‘very difficult’ to fill at least one of their vacancies...” (Garcia and Weiss, 2019). As a result, high-needs schools are more likely to hire new teachers, inexperienced teachers, and alternatively-certified teachers (Garcia and

Weiss, 2019). This trend leads to greater inequality in schools, especially in terms of teacher quality.

A 2011 report by Stanford University professor Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond examined the rate of inequality in America's schools. The study gathered data on teacher qualifications, salaries, and student achievement in school districts across New York and California and concluded that in both states, "districts serving the highest proportions of minority students have about twice as many non-credentialed and inexperienced teachers as do those serving the fewest. They have higher turnover, as suggested by the percentage of teachers newly hired in a given year, and their teachers have lower levels of education" (Darling-Hammond, 2011).

The Mississippi Department of Education launched the "Grow Your Own Teacher" Task Force in 2016 to study and combat the issue of teacher shortage and attrition in Mississippi, especially in high-needs districts. The study affirmed that "teacher shortage typically adversely affects schools and districts with traditionally underserved populations, such as those with high poverty rates and high minority populations, to a greater degree than other schools and districts" (MDE, 2018). As of July 2018, every Mississippi Congressional district was facing a teacher shortage, and the state had a total 1,063 open positions. However, the most severe shortage by far was located Mississippi's 2nd Congressional District, which comprises the Mississippi Delta region. In this district, 479 teaching positions were left vacant for the 2018-2019 school year.

Additionally, a 2017 study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute yielded similar results. This study determined that school districts located in southern states face

the highest turnover rates in the country by far at 16.7% annually. School districts located in southern metropolitan cities face an even higher rate of teacher turnover at 17.3%. Additionally, the Learning Policy Institute found that Title I schools across the country face higher rates of teacher turnover at 16%. This is 5% higher than teacher turnover rates at non-Title I schools. With this data in mind, it comes as no shock that Mississippi—a rural southern state with more than 900 Title I schools— has the 8th highest turnover rate in the country at just below 20% (LPI, 2017).

Increasing Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Clearly, action must be taken in order to ameliorate the shortage of high-quality teachers in Mississippi public schools and to encourage teachers to remain in challenged school districts. The good news is, feasible solutions exist that can aid in accomplishing both of these goals.

This was the purpose of the Mississippi Department of Education’s 2016 “Grow Your Own Teacher” Task Force. The task force sought to compile data on recruitment and retention of Mississippi’s public-school teachers. The report made several feasible suggestions. First, the report suggested using state funding to fund existing recruitment programs that have not been fully-funded in at least a decade. These programs offer financial assistance and support resources for new teachers and include programs such as the Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program, the William F. Winter Teacher Scholar Loan Program, the Beginning Teacher/Mentoring Program, the Mississippi Teacher Recruitment and Retention Grant Program, and the Mississippi Employer-Assisted Housing Teacher Program. Additionally, the task force suggested using federal funds “to develop and implement initiatives to assist with recruiting, hiring, and retaining effective

teachers, particularly in low-income schools with high percentages of students who do not meet the challenging state academic standards” (Mississippi Grow-Your-Own Teacher Task Force Report, 2016).

The Grow Your Own Teacher Task Force also suggested rethinking Teacher Academy programs in Mississippi so that high school students who are interested in becoming educators are identified, given the instruction and support they need, and can be encouraged to attend universities with schools of education. The task force also suggested collaborating with teaching professionals as well as the MDE licensure department to provide Teacher Academy students with a preemptive license to teach. The report’s final proposal was to identify paraprofessionals and classified workers in schools who might be interested in becoming full-time teachers, encourage them to pursue licensure, and assist them with tuition where necessary (Mississippi Grow-Your-Own Teacher Task Force Report, 2016).

Similar to the Grow Your Own Teacher Task Force, authors Amy Heineke, Bonnie Mazza, and Ariel Tichnor-Wagner studied ways in which teacher recruitment and retention rates can be improved, especially for professionals who participate in alternate route programs. The authors conducted a mixed-methods analysis on teacher retention and attrition for Teach For America corps members, and their findings were published in 2013 in *Urban Education*. After collecting data on what corps members plan to do post-participation in TFA, the authors made several recommendations as to how to improve teacher retention in programs such as TFA. The first recommendation was to extend the teaching commitment beyond two years. Specifically, the authors called for a three-year commitment with a one-year teaching residency because they believed this would

increase the likelihood that corps members “rise to organizational expectations,” remain teachers in their assigned area, and gain the experience and development necessary to become high-quality teachers.

Additionally, this study proposed that TFA select more applicants who were education majors as opposed to applicants who have other career aspirations. This way, the program is selecting corps members who are already committed to a lifetime of education as opposed to a short service. Finally, this study recommended that TFA partner more closely with universities and schools of education so that corps members can be better-prepared for the workforce and can also have veteran educators as mentors. This would add another layer of support to corps members as they face many challenges in their first year of teaching (Heineke et al., 2013). However, it should be noted that the goal of TFA is not to create career teachers; however, that is the goal of programs like METP.

Clearly, there are steps Mississippi can take in order to recruit more teachers and improve teacher retention rates. There are also important steps that alternate route programs like TFA can take to ensure their participants are committed to the field of education for the long-term. The suggestions in this literature are echoed in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program opportunities as well as in its commitment requirements.

Programs Similar to METP

In addition to the field of education, other professional fields across the United States are experiencing shortages and decline in retention, specifically the medical field in rural areas of the country. According to data published in the *American Medical*

Association Journal of Ethics in 2011, “65 percent of primary care health professional shortage areas [are] rural” and “77 percent of rural counties in the U.S. are designated as primary care health professional shortage areas (HPSAs)” (Mareck, 2011). Many challenges faced by the medical community in terms of attracting and retaining rural physicians are similar to the problems faced by the field of education in terms of attracting teachers to work and remain in high-need regions or states like Mississippi.

In an effort to combat problems with attracting and retaining physicians to practice in rural areas, the federal government has instituted three main programs: Area Health Education Centers (AHECs), Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), and the National Health Service Corps (NHSC). While AHECs and FQHCs have both seen much success in attracting and retaining rural physicians, the National Health Service Corps is most similar in nature to programs in the field of education such as Teach For America, Mississippi Teacher Corps, and the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program. The NHSC program was enacted by Congress in 1970 as part of the Emergency Health Personnel Act of 1970, and is currently overseen by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), within the Department of Health and Human Services (Heisler, 2018).

According to a 2018 publication from the Congressional Research Service, the National Health Service Corps “provides scholarships and loan repayments to health care providers in exchange for a period of service in a health professional shortage area (HPSA)” (Heisler, 2018). The scholarship component includes medical school tuition, a stipend for other reasonable education expenses, and a monthly living stipend,” and is granted to “individuals enrolled full-time in specified education programs at a fully

accredited U.S. school” including “medical schools (allopathic and osteopathic), physician assistant programs, dental schools, and advance practice nursing schools” (Heisler, 2018). According to the NHSC website, medical students who chose to participate in the National Health Service Corps “commit to a minimum two years of full-time service” at an NHSC-approved site “in exchange for a full year of scholarship support” (NHSC, 2020).

In fiscal year 2017, the NHSC program received \$415 million in federal funding (75% of which was mandatory funding), and the program provided 5,801 total scholarship awards (Heisler, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ website, “there are now more than 13,000 medical, dental and behavioral health care clinicians providing quality care to more than 13.7 million Americans in rural, urban and tribal communities. There are also almost 1,480 students and medical residents preparing to serve in the Corps” and “more than 60% of NHSC participants work in federally funded community health centers, which provide a lifeline to quality health care in high-need communities throughout the nation” (HHS, 2019).

Many studies have been conducted on the impact of the National Health Service Corps since its creation. According to an article published in 1997 in the National Library of Medicine, which studied the effects of the NHSC from 1975 to 1983, “twenty percent of the physicians assigned to rural areas were still located in the county of their initial assignment, and an additional 20 percent were in some other rural location in 1991” (Cullen, 1997).

In 2007, the Mississippi State Legislature enacted a program similar to NHSC but based solely in Mississippi, known as the Mississippi Rural Physicians Scholarship

Program (MRPSP, 2020). This program provides scholarships to medical students who intend to practice Family Medicine, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Pediatrics, Medical Pediatrics or General Internal Medicine in a designated small-town community in Mississippi for at least four years. In 2008, the program provided ten \$30,000 per year scholarships for medical students to attend the University of Mississippi Medical Center School of Medicine. The program was able to double that to 20 scholarships in the 2010-11 school year. The most recent data from the Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians shows that in the fall of 2019, “the program had a total of 41 physicians practicing in rural Mississippi who have completed the program, 61 residents, 64 medical students who are scholars, and 47 undergraduate participants” (MAFP, 2019).

Clearly, tuition scholarships and other stipends that help offset barriers to entry into the medical field and location in rural areas can positively impact medical students’ decision to practice and remain in areas of high need, such rural small towns in Mississippi. Additionally, “grow your own” programs such as MRPSP have immense economic impact in rural areas. According to 2019 data from the Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians, “the addition of one physician to a community contributes an average of \$2 million in additional economic output and an average of 21 jobs,” and the MRPSP program has already accounted for an economic impact of nearly \$50 million in Mississippi (MAFP, 2019).

In conclusion, the existing studies surveyed in the above literature review provide background information on the importance of highly-qualified teachers, the effectiveness of alternate route programs, teacher retention and attrition in challenged districts, mechanisms for increasing teacher retention rates, and incentive-based programs similar

to METP. The findings of these surveys can be analyzed in order to better understand the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program for its advantages, its necessity, and its similarities and differences to alternate route programs and other incentive-based teacher recruitment programs. The information from this literature review will be referenced in the results and conclusion chapters of this thesis.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The following chapter outlines the survey design and analysis process utilized in this study. It also details the subsequent findings from the survey, including quantitative results and a qualitative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of METP.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to analyze teacher placement and retention in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP) based on University of Mississippi data, Mississippi State University data, and participant feedback. The research conducted in this study aims to answer the question “Is the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program fulfilling its mission with respect to teacher placement and retention?” I sought to answer this question by conducting a mixed-methods study that collected data from 64 graduated participants in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program at both the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University in order to generate statistics regarding teacher retention rates and the school placement of members from the first four METP cohorts, which equates to 118 participants.

I first created a 25-question survey using the survey software platform Qualtrics, and then applied for approval with the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A for the survey questionnaire and results). The IRB approved my application and survey questions on September 21, 2020. I then emailed an introductory letter and survey link to the Directors of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Programs at both the University of Mississippi and at Mississippi State University, who disseminated the link to all graduated METP participants (cohorts 1, 2, 3, and 4) on October 5, 2020.

The first set of questions gathered personal information regarding the survey participants, including race, gender, and alma mater. The second set of questions gathered information on whether and where participants have taught in Mississippi, how long they have taught, and what grade they teach. The third set of questions gathered information regarding participants who are not currently teaching in a Mississippi public school, specifically in terms of their graduate school enrollment or current career path if not working in public education. The fourth set of questions asked participants about their career plans once they have fulfilled their 5-year METP commitment, specifically asking if they plan to remain in the classroom and if they plan to remain in Mississippi. The final set of questions asked for open-ended participant feedback on their overall opinion of METP, specifically in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, and any suggestions for improvements. The survey was closed on January 14, 2021, and received a total of 64 responses, yielding a response rate of 54%.

As noted in the introduction to this study, the METP program was created in 2013 and therefore only 4 cohorts (118 students) have graduated from the program to date. This research is only generalizable to the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program, and is broadly reflective of the program population as a whole. The data presented here can be used to draw conclusions regarding the intentions and plans of program graduates. More research and surveys will be needed as more students graduate from the program and fulfill their five-year teaching commitment. The data regarding METP participant placement and retention is presented below.

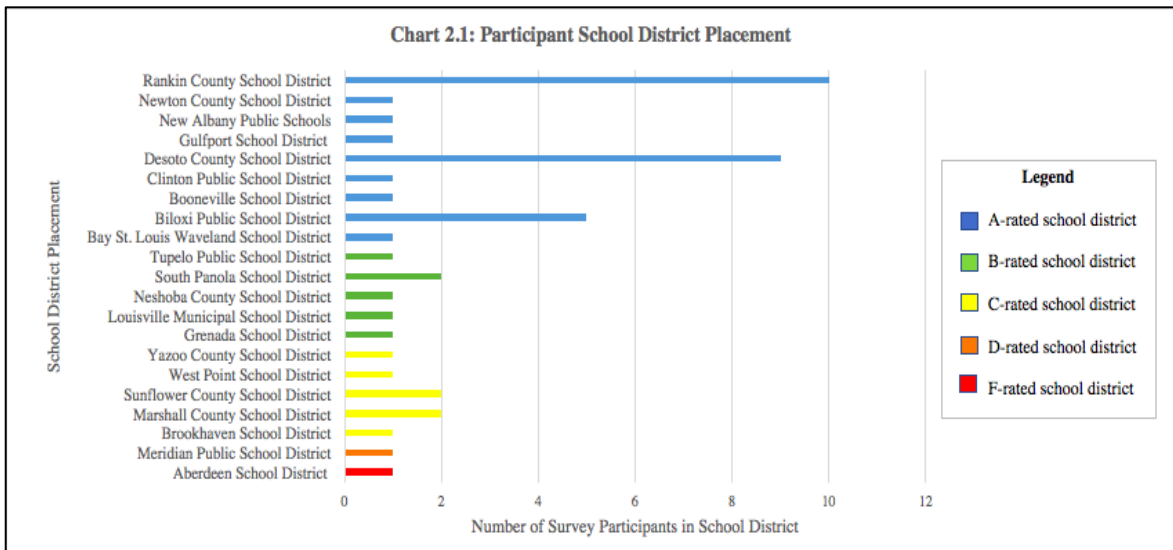
Demographics of Survey Participants

Of the sixty-four METP graduates who completed this survey, fifty-three identified as female, eight identified as male, and three identified as other. Sixty identified as white/Caucasian, one identified as Black, one identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and two identified as multiracial/biracial. Forty-five survey respondents attended the University of Mississippi, while nineteen attended Mississippi State University. Twenty-five respondents graduated from METP in 2020, thirteen graduated in 2019, twelve in 2018, and thirteen in 2017.

Participants Who are Currently Teaching

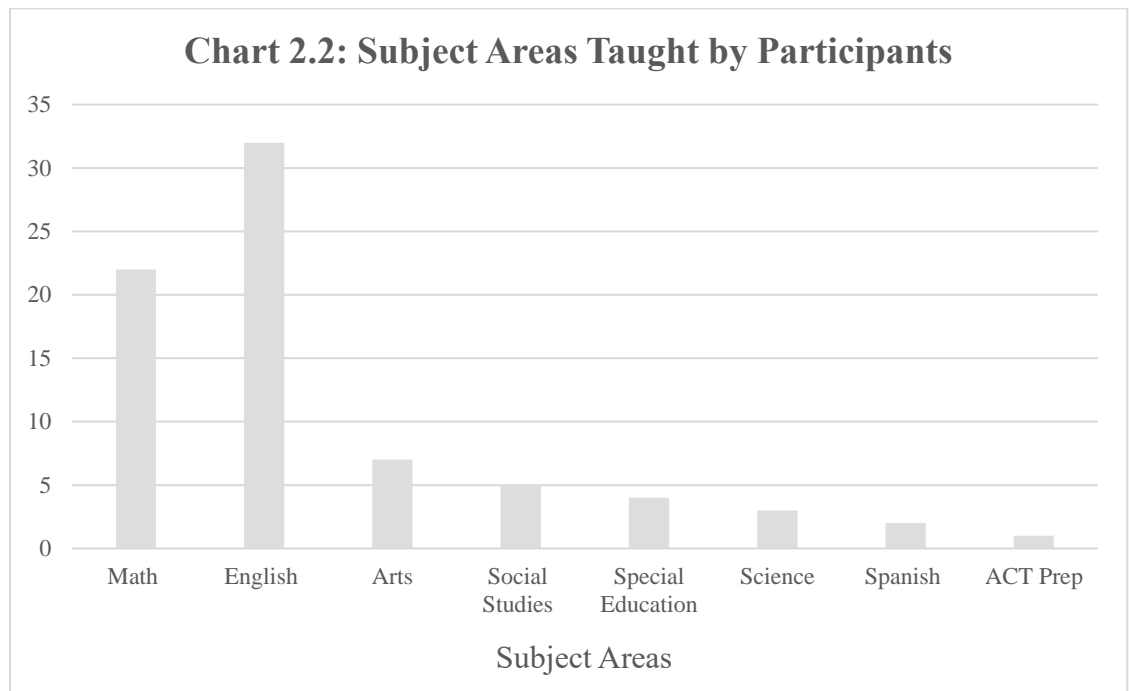
Fifty-eight survey responses came from graduates who have or are currently teaching in a public school in Mississippi. Of those fifty-eight responses, twenty-six respondents are first-year teachers, eight are second-year teachers, twelve are third-year teachers, and ten are fourth-year teachers. Twenty-six participants are high school teachers, eighteen are middle school teachers, and eight are elementary teachers.

Chart 2.1 depicts the survey’s findings regarding the school districts in which respondents currently teach, including how many respondents teach in each district and



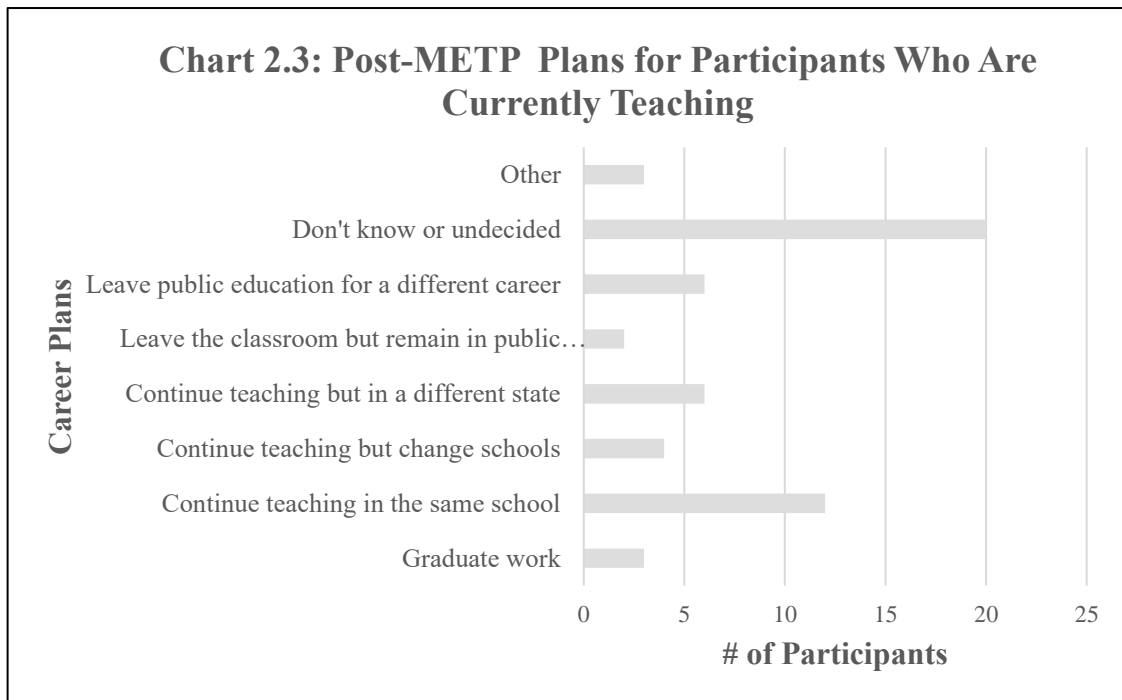
the 2019 state accountability grade for each school district. As shown in the chart, thirty survey respondents teach in A-rated school districts, and six teach in B-rated school districts, seven teach in C-rated districts, one teaches in a D-rated district, and one teaches in an F-rated district.

Chart 2.2 depicts the subject areas that survey respondents currently teach or have previously taught. Thirty-two respondents have taught English, and twenty-two have taught mathematics. Other subject areas taught by respondents include social studies (five), science (three), special education (four), the arts (seven), Spanish (two), and ACT Prep (one). Thirty of these respondents advise, coach, or lead extra-curricular activities.



Upon fulfillment of their five-year teaching commitment, three survey respondents intend to complete graduate work, twelve intend to continue teaching in their current school, and four intend to continue teaching but in a different school in Mississippi. Six plan to continue teaching but in another state: one person intends to relocate to Nevada, two to North Carolina, two to Tennessee, and one to Texas. One

person intends to leave the classroom but remain in public education, six plan to leave public education for a different career, and twenty are undecided. Two respondents are considering teaching at the junior college level, and one participant intends to teach in a different country. Chart 2.3 depicts these results.

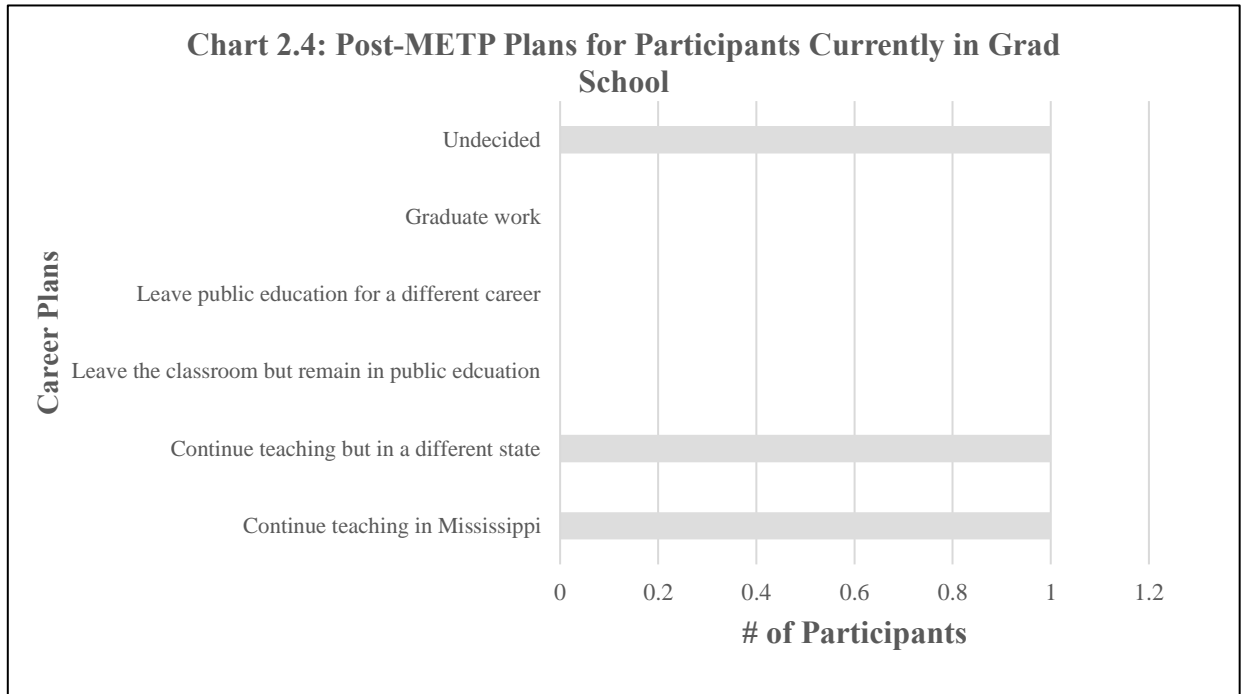


Participants Who Are Not Currently Teaching

Five survey respondents are currently or have previously been enrolled in a graduate program. Two participants are enrolled in Masters of Education (M. Ed.) programs, and one is enrolled in a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program. Of the participants enrolled in a Masters program, two intend to enter the classroom in one year, and one intends to enter the classroom in two years. Upon fulfillment of the five-year commitment, one respondent currently enrolled in a graduate program intends to stay and teach in Mississippi, one intends to continue teaching but in a different state, and one

respondent is undecided. One survey participant de-committed from METP all together.

Chart 2.4 depicts these results.



Strengths of METP

The final portion of the survey asked participants to provide their personal perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of METP. Several themes and commonalities arose from these responses.

First, many responses referenced the financial benefits of METP when discussing the program’s strengths. Financial benefits of the program include a full-tuition scholarship and a technology stipend. In this regard, one survey respondent wrote, “[METP] provides a debt free chance for college. As a future educator, not having student loans is really appealing and important. I might not have chosen education for fear of financial difficulty without METP.” Another wrote, “Our state needs teachers now more

than ever. I think the monetary appeal of the METP Program is a strength in getting quality teachers into classrooms.” Another stated, “The financial benefits/aid of the program is hard for other programs to compete with.” Additionally, the financial benefits were cited in eight other responses as a strength of the program as a whole.

Second, many responses cited the opportunities for professional development, like early access and exposure to classroom environments, study abroad trips, tickets to national teaching conferences, and volunteer teaching experiences as major strengths of METP. In explaining this, one respondent wrote, “Beginning freshman year, we had the opportunity to experience classroom environments, begin discussing teaching philosophies, and learn about educational policies that impact Mississippi. Through different seminars and the trips, METP greatly emphasized continuous learning and development as teachers. That work ethic is something that has positively impacted my teaching experience. I am incredibly thankful for various professional development experiences offered to us through the program.”

Other responses echoed this idea with statements such as, “The professional development opportunities the program offers during all four years of college was great. Even freshmen year we were exposed to real professionals and others that work in the public education” and “METP does an excellent job recruiting, giving us opportunities to volunteer, and exposes us to different school systems (nationally and globally).” Finally, one respondent wrote, “METP does a good job of recruiting students and helping students through the teacher education program. The extra summer seminars and ability to visit other school districts across the state was beneficial, as well as being more connected to

professors and staff within the college.” Additionally, the opportunities for professional development and extra-curricular activities were mentioned by five other respondents.

Third, the prestige, quality, and competitiveness of the program were listed as major strengths of METP. In referencing the prestige of the program, one respondent stated that the program “puts driven, passionate, and intelligent people into classrooms allowing students to learn from some really bright minds who know their content but also have the drive to succeed in teaching.” Another respondent stated that the program cultivates “well-prepared and intelligent scholars that bring new ideas and resources to the schools.” Another wrote, “METP is such a great program that shows that teaching is a profession that should require highly qualified individuals.” Other respondent referenced the quality of the program in stating, “METP does a great job at preparing fellows for the different types of public schools they may encounter” and “Teachers should have a deep understanding of the subject areas they are teaching, so getting teachers who perform well in their college classes are set up for success in the workplace.” Seven other responses mentioned the high caliber of program participants and the overall quality of the teacher preparation of the program as major strengths.

Finally, many survey respondents cited the connections made within and through the METP program, including the connection to other teachers, university faculty and staff, and members of other METP cohorts as major strengths of the program. One survey respondent wrote, “I have great comfort knowing that I'm not the only one who is trying to bring a high-quality education to Mississippi's students: I made wonderful friends through METP and wouldn't trade that for anything. I believe that we are each other's biggest role models in this field. Another strength would be that we were exposed to

many a wide variety of education experiences that helped all of us develop our own philosophies of teaching.” Another respondent stated, “One strength is networking; for example, I already knew people working in my district because of METP. Also, I felt prepared to be a teacher because of the experiences I had through METP.”

Several respondents referenced the idea that METP allowed program participants to make the connections necessary to easily find a job in the workforce. One stated, “METP made it very easy to find a job working at a public school in Mississippi. Every district is familiar with the program and is very impressed by past METP graduates.” Another said, “METP was amazing in sending different schools that were looking for teachers as well as giving great recommendations to those principals.” Another said, “Also, the automatic connection to the School of Education is a huge plus since we got emailed about all sorts of events and volunteer opportunities from the coordinator, Blake.” METP’s sense of community and subsequent connections were mentioned four other times in the question responses.

Weaknesses of METP

In discussing the weaknesses of METP, several respondents referenced a lack of preparation for the realities of teaching. One respondent wrote, “I experienced a lack of resources in emotional and mental preparation for the career. We didn’t discuss how lonely, exhausting, and confusing the first years of teaching can be. We discussed the small and big impacts that we can make as teachers, but we never discussed that our mental and emotional well-being is so incredibly important.” Other respondents echoed this sentiment by stating, “METP does not teach enough education policy and almost sugar coats the profession,” and “My only wish was having more training on how to

juggle the clerical work, manual labor, organizing, and classroom management outside of teaching the kids” as well as, “A lot of what we learned was just surface level or too focused on standards. The reality of teaching is that content is not everything. When students are homeless, hungry, and abused, learning doesn’t happen. I didn’t feel prepared for many of the realities I’ve seen in my high risk public school.” One respondent cited a lack of preparedness as a weakness, but also stated that perhaps it is just a function of the profession: “Nothing can really prepare you for being a teacher. Not sure if that counts as a weakness of METP or just a hazard of the profession.” A lack of preparedness was mentioned six other times in discussion of METP’s weaknesses.

Second, many respondents referenced a lack of post-graduation support from program faculty and staff. One respondent stated, “There wasn’t much help our first year of teaching, which I think is when most teachers question their calling. So, if the goal is to retain quality teachers, then they should try some post-graduation help too.” Other respondents referenced this idea, writing, “The biggest weakness is by far the following up with alumni after they complete the program and are teaching in Mississippi. Faculty should observe alumni at least once each year during their first 3 years teaching and provide stronger mentorship” and “the program has not supported its graduates in the transition from Guyton Hall to MS’s public schools.” Another respondent referenced this weakness in stating, “Lack of support after graduation. That wasn’t promised, but it would be really nice. Teaching is so difficult and it may be better for us if we have support in place.” A lack of support post-graduation was cited five other times in participant feedback as a major weakness of the program.

Additionally, several survey respondents referenced the financial and five-year teaching commitment of METP as a major weakness of the program. One respondent stated, “Some people have mixed emotions about choosing to live in Mississippi for 9 years (4 years of college and 5-year teaching requirement) and making that decision when they are 18.” Other respondent echoed this idea in stating, “Having 18 year olds sign off on committing essentially 9 years of their life to certain geographic area. Even if I did intend to stay in MS either way, it can be stressful knowing I don’t have much choice” and “METP is a trap. More than once students have left or been kicked out and are saddled with astronomical debt.”

Interestingly, many respondents cited a lack of cohort community and an inability to network and make connections as a weakness of the program. One respondent wrote, “The culture may have changed, but there lacked a sense of community when I graduated. I was close with specific members but never felt like a member of a larger network. There was never a point where I felt like my fellow scholars had my back about issues in education that were important to me.” Other respondents reported a similar sentiment in stating, “There isn’t enough collaboration between the two schools” and “We were not able to network as much as anticipated.” Another said, “The program needs more exposure, discussion, and marketing not only to potential candidates for the program, but also to principals and school districts across the state. It should be known as an elite teacher education program and principals should understand that they have a quality candidate when they interview a fellow of METP. This has not been the case for me at two different schools now.”

Finally, several respondents offered critiques of the Schools of Education associated with the program and their subsequent classroom environments and experiences. One respondent stated, “The METP seminars we had once a week were usually too short to discuss anything at a real capacity. They never seemed to really flow into each other; they were more random bits of education just talked about. Also, I’m not fully convinced observing during our freshman and sophomore years did much for us. I’d be very interested in seeing the effects of requiring volunteer work in education instead, like tutoring for Team 36.” Another respondent wrote, “I think that the classes that we had to take our freshman and sophomore year were not focused around growing us to be culturally relevant educators.”

Finally, one respondent stated, “because METP is not a degree-granting program like the MS Teacher Corps, METP must operate within the existing infrastructure of UM’s Department of Teacher Education (DoTE). Thus, the DoTE’s flaws hinder the original goal of METP which was to be the ”honors college of teacher education.” As a whole, the DoTE lacks rigor in its coursework and instructional delivery; my education courses couldn’t hold a candle to my rigorous courses in the College of Liberal Arts. Moreover, with regards to secondary English education, my coursework lacked practical, specific instruction in domain-specific pedagogical content knowledge (ex. how to teach a full-length work of literature, how to lead a discussion, how to provide feedback on student writing).”

Overall, the findings of this survey were manifold. Fifty-eight of the sixty-four survey respondents have or are currently teaching in a public school in Mississippi. In terms of METP’s retention, this study found that after their five-year commitment, three

survey respondents intend to complete graduate work, twelve intend to continue teaching in their current school, four intend to continue teaching but in a different school in Mississippi, six plan to continue teaching but in another state, one person intends to leave the classroom but remain in public education, six plan to leave public education for a different career, and twenty are undecided. Two respondents are considering teaching at the junior college level, and one participant intends to teach in a different country. In terms of the school placement of METP graduates, this survey found that the majority of respondents (thirty) teach in an A-rated school district, while only one respondent teaches in a D-rated district and one teaches in an F-rated district.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following chapter discusses the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the survey as well as limitations to the study. This chapter also recommends several programmatic policy changes.

Discussion of Results

Through this thesis, I sought to analyze the placement and retention of current teachers who participated in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program as undergraduates. As mentioned in the introduction, the stated goal of the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program is “to attract top-performing high school seniors who want to become secondary English, mathematics and science – as well as elementary and special education – teachers in Mississippi.” It should be noted that nowhere in the METP mission statement does it mention placing teachers in high-needs school districts in Mississippi as a goal. The only goal of the program is to encourage high-performing high school students to study education in college, become teachers, and remain in a Mississippi public school for five years. In light of this and the fact that the program at both schools continually attracts a cohort of about thirty students each year, currently has 362 participants, and only one survey respondent indicated that she has decommitted from METP altogether, I would conclude that METP is achieving its goal.

However, it is interesting to note that based on the findings of my survey, very few survey respondents are teaching in high-needs school districts. Thirty—which is nearly half of all respondents—teach in A-rated school districts, including ten in Rankin County School District (a suburb of Jackson), nine in Desoto County School District (a suburb of Memphis), and five in Biloxi School District. All three of these school districts

are located in suburban areas of the state, and all three districts are able to significantly supplement their teachers' salaries. Furthermore, only one participant currently teaches in a D-rated district (Meridian School District), and only one participant currently teaches in an F-rated district (Aberdeen School District).

Additionally, the majority of survey respondents teach in school districts that are not designated in the Mississippi Department of Education's 2015 study as a school district experiencing a critical teacher shortage. Only eight survey respondents (12.5% of all respondents) currently teach in a school district that the Mississippi Department of Education deems as a geographic teacher shortage area. One survey respondent teaches in Clinton Public School District, one teaches in Meridian Public School District, one teaches in New Albany Public School District, one teaches in Newton County School District, one teaches in Quitman County School District, two teach in Sunflower County School District, and one teaches in Yazoo County School District.

Furthermore, of the fifty-eight survey respondents who are currently teaching, twenty-eight (48.3%) teach a subject that the Mississippi Department of Education deems as a critical subject shortage area. MDE considers Biology, Chemistry, French, German, Mathematics, Physics, Spanish, and Special Education as subject areas facing a critical teacher shortage (MDE, 2015). Twenty-two respondents teach mathematics, four respondents are special education teachers, and two teach Spanish courses.

The fact that the majority of survey respondents do not teach in a high-needs area or in school districts experiencing critical teacher shortages could be the result of a number of factors. First, as noted several times in the open-ended survey responses, METP students are often placed in "better" schools for their practicum observations and

student teaching experiences. While this may seem like a benefit to students at the time, this decreases METP participants' exposure to high-needs schools, which in turn decreases the likelihood that these participants will feel comfortable or prepared to teach in a high-needs district.

Additionally, this phenomenon could also result from the fact that high-needs school districts are often unable to supplement their teachers' salaries and thus are unable to compete with school districts like Desoto County and Rankin County, which have the means to pay their teachers more than other districts. Finally, this phenomenon could be the simple result of geography. Many of Mississippi's high-needs school districts are located in rural areas, which are not as desirable to live in, especially for young adults right out of college. Metropolitan or suburban areas in Mississippi are often more attractive to young adults at the beginning of their careers and commonly have more options for affordable housing (Betz and Wright, 2021).

It is also interesting to note that 35% of survey respondents (twenty-one METP graduates) are undecided on their career plans after they fulfill their five-year teaching commitment to METP. While it is a sign of the program's overall success that only one survey participant has decommitted from the program altogether, the program is not showing as much success in keeping these teachers committed to staying in Mississippi classrooms after their five-year commitment ends. While I understand that creating life-long educators is not an explicit goal of METP, it would be an incredible benefit if these currently undecided teachers could be encouraged to continue teaching, and especially encouraged to do so in Mississippi.

Generalizability of Results

The results of this survey are broadly generalizable to the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program population as a whole and can be used to formulate generalizations about the intentions and plans of program graduates. The research sample used in this thesis reflects the population as a whole in terms of gender. There are fifty-eight male (16%) and 304 female (83.97%) participants in METP together at both the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University. Of the METP graduates who completed the survey, 12.5% were male and 82.81% were female.

The research sample studied in this thesis does not exactly match the demographics of the whole program in terms of race and ethnicity, but it comes close and thus provides an accurate subset on race and ethnicity. Based on a sampling of race demographics from one cohort at the University of Mississippi, METP is majority Caucasian (86.2% in the sample group) with several non-white participants (13.8% in the sample group). Of the METP graduates who responded to the survey, 93.75% identified as white or Caucasian, and 6.25% identified as non-white.

The majority of survey respondents (70.31%) graduated from the University of Mississippi, while 29.69% of survey respondents graduated from the University of Mississippi. Further research is needed from METP graduates at Mississippi State University in order to make generalizations about this group of program participants' placement and retention rates.

Programmatic Policy Recommendations

In response to these findings, I would like to make several programmatic policy recommendations. First, as mentioned in the discussion section of this chapter, there are

twenty-one survey participants who are undecided on the next step in their careers. While this might at first seem like a misstep or failure of the program, I think this phenomenon represents an opportunity that METP directors, faculty, and staff can seize upon by encouraging these teachers to remain in Mississippi and remain in the field of public education.

In order to do so, METP program leadership should work to create a support program for participants once they have entered the classroom. Many of the results from the open-ended portion of the survey indicate that program participants who are currently teaching would greatly appreciate this. Many survey respondents expressed feelings of unpreparedness and loneliness. Many current teachers lamented a lack of support from university faculty and staff—the very people who had been these teachers’ biggest support systems, cheerleaders, and advocates during their undergraduate studies. As noted in the survey, being a first-year teacher can be extremely challenging, and being without one’s usual support system only adds to this challenge.

To combat this, current program directors, faculty, and staff should implement monthly check-ins on METP graduates. These check-ins could take the form of in-person visits and observations or virtual meetings. Either way, the implementation of a support program on the part of METP faculty and staff would not only allow current teachers to feel supported and receive feedback or help where needed, but this would also encourage the program leadership to continually evaluate the success of the program and its participants. This, in turn, would enable the program to continually improve.

Furthermore, the program should create a more cohesive post-graduate community by working to connect its members from across the cohorts after graduation.

Many survey respondents noted that the cohort-style of METP was very beneficial and provided a sense of community and even family for participants while in undergrad. Many respondents noted that this made studying easier and enriched program activities such as student teaching. However, many also noted that the program lacks this sense of community after graduation. Many participants lose contact with one another and expressed a feeling of isolation once they begin their careers. To combat this, the program should also institute yearly cohort reunions with graduates from both campuses. Not only would this allow participants to reunite with one another, but it would also create a sense of cohesion among all of the cohorts and would invite collaboration and cooperation between teachers across grade levels, subject areas, and across the state of Mississippi.

Additionally, the program should address the fact that the majority of METP graduates are not teaching in high-needs areas or school districts experiencing critical teacher shortages. While I understand this is not a stated goal of the program, it should be on the program directors' radar screens. Participants should at least be exposed more often to high-needs students, classrooms, and school districts, whether that be during their practicum or student teaching or by participating in service projects or tutoring opportunities in these areas. Administrators of METP should contact the principals and district administrators in high-needs and critical shortage school districts so as to better connect METP students with job opportunities in these areas. Many high-needs school districts are located far away from Oxford or Starkville, which results in participants being unaware of these schools and school principals being unaware of METP and the quality of its participants.

Furthermore, the METP program leadership should conduct a similar study to this one each year in order to gather statistics and information about if program participants are teaching, where they are teaching, and if they intend to continue teaching after their five-year commitment. Because METP is still a relatively young program and no program graduates have completed their five-year commitment yet, the data from this survey is purely speculative and based on what program graduates intend to do once they graduate. METP program leaders should continue to conduct this type of survey so that conclusions about what program graduates actually end up doing after their commitment can be made.

Another limitation to this study is that it did not collect test score data on students taught by METP graduates. Further research should be conducted in order to examine testing data of classrooms with METP graduates at the helm in order to determine if high-quality high school students who enroll in teacher education programs at either the University of Mississippi or Mississippi State University are actually more effective teachers. Much research included in the literature review of this survey suggests that METP graduates will be more effective teachers and that their students will have higher test scores, but this data does not currently exist specifically for METP program graduates. A final limitation to this study is the fact that data was only collected via an online survey. With more time, focus groups could be formed and interviews conducted in order to gather more qualitative data and more personalized feedback from program participants on their career paths as well as the program's strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, the findings from this survey show that overall, participants are pleased with METP and their undergraduate experience. Many participants noted that the program's scholarship package was extremely attractive to them as high school students.

The program also comes with a plethora of benefits such as a study abroad opportunity, a technology stipend, admission to national teaching conferences, and other professional development opportunities that are hard to turn down. Additionally, METP has been successful in not only recruiting high-performing high school students to study education but also in retaining them in Mississippi for at least five years, as evidenced by the 118 program graduates as well as the seventeen survey respondents who indicated that they intend to stay in Mississippi beyond their five-year commitment.

Based on these findings, I would recommend that the Robert M. Hearin Foundation continue to fund the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program, and where possible, work to attract more high school students and expand the cohort size to more than thirty students. As mentioned in several open-ended survey responses, the program is still fairly young, and there are many school districts and high schools across the state, southeast, and country that are unfamiliar with the program and its benefits. With more of a programmatic emphasis on recruitment, the program could see major growth. With an expanded cohort population, the program could see an increased positive impact in Mississippi's public schools and on its public education system at large.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to analyze the retention rates and school district placement of participants in the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program. Based on the existing studies surveyed in the literature review of this study, METP is likely to have a significant impact on Mississippi's public education system as a whole. METP has several of the components listed in the literature review of this study— including a full-tuition undergraduate education, the opportunity for post-graduate education, a quality pre-service experience, and a plethora of professional development opportunities—which suggests that the program will prepare its teachers to be highly-qualified and see gains in student learning.

Additionally, this study concluded that the program is accomplishing its goal of attracting “top-performing high school seniors who want to become secondary English, mathematics and science – as well as elementary and special education – teachers in Mississippi,” as evidenced by the 118 program graduates and the 362 participants at both the University of Mississippi and Mississippi State University. This study also concluded that the program is successfully placing its participants in public schools in Mississippi, as evidenced by the sixty-three survey respondents (98.4%) who intend to fulfill their five-year commitment to the program and to Mississippi's public education system.

Based on this data and the qualitative results of the survey, I recommended that METP create more of a post-grad community and support system for graduates once they enter the workforce, and I also recommended that the Hearin Foundation continue to fund METP and even look into expanding the program.

However, it is important to note that while the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program is accomplishing its stated goal and is successfully placing teachers in public schools for five years, the program alone will not and cannot solve Mississippi's teacher shortage crisis. This study found that very few program participants are teaching in critical shortage areas. Only eight survey respondents (12.5% of those currently teaching) teach in a school district that the Mississippi Department of Education deems as a geographic teacher shortage area. Furthermore, METP participants are not teaching in high-needs schools. Thirty-six survey respondents (62% of those currently teaching) teach in an A or B-rated school district, while only two respondents (3.4% of those currently teaching) teach in a D or F-rated school district. As a result, METP is making headway in attracting students to become public school teachers, but unfortunately, vast teacher shortages still exist in more than fifty school districts across the state of Mississippi.

Additional research should be conducted in order to determine how teacher incentive programs can be structured so that high-achieving high school and college students can not only be recruited to the field of education but also encouraged to teach in more challenged school districts, like those designated by MDE as experiencing a critical teacher shortage or those that are rated as a C or below school.

Further research should also be conducted to address other limitations of the study, including the fact that all data gathered in this thesis is based solely on intention. The first cohort of METP graduates graduated in 2017, so their five-year commitment has not yet been completed. Further research should also be conducted in order to determine

the career choices that these and future METP graduates actually end up making after fulfilling their five-year teaching commitment.

Also, further research should be conducted to examine testing data of classrooms with METP graduates at the helm in order to determine if high-quality high school students who enroll in teacher education programs at either the University of Mississippi or Mississippi State University are actually more effective teachers. Much research included in the literature review of this survey suggests that METP graduates will be more effective teachers and that their students will have higher test scores, but no data currently exists that is based solely on the testing data of students taught by METP graduates. A final limitation to this study is the fact that data was only collected via an online survey. With more time, focus groups could be formed and interviews conducted in order to gather more qualitative data and more personalized feedback from program participants on their career paths as well as the program's strengths and weaknesses.

Overall, this study found that the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program is accomplishing its goal of encouraging and recruiting high-performing high school students to serve as public school teachers in the state of Mississippi for at least five years. Many of its current graduates intend to remain in the field of public education after their five-year commitment, and in a state that for so long has struggled to retain its best and brightest and also suffered from a worsening critical teacher shortage for over twenty years, this is good news. With a few programmatic policy improvements outlined above as well as further research once current graduates fulfill their five-year commitment, the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program can positively impact Mississippi's public education system for years to come.

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APPENDIX A

The following questionnaire was sent to all current graduates of METP. The questions asked survey respondents about their demographics, current occupation, graduate program enrollment, future career goals, and subjective strengths and weaknesses of METP. The results of each question are also included. Questions and answer choices with no responses have been deleted.

Survey Questionnaire and Results

Q1 - Which of the following best describes you?

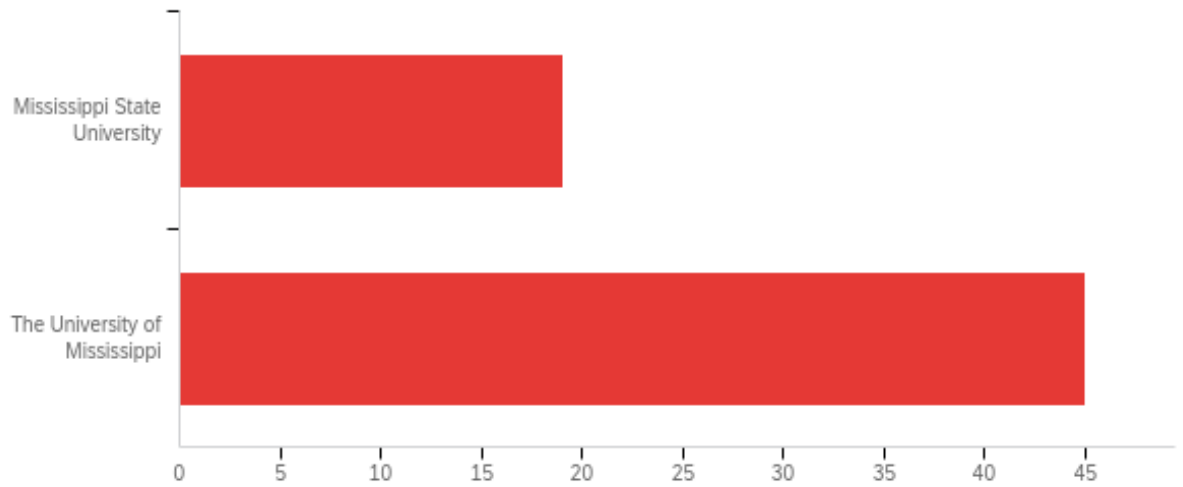
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Male	12.50%	8
2	Female	82.81%	53
3	Other	4.69%	3
	Total	100%	64

Q2 - Which of the following best describes you?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Asian or Pacific Islander	1.56%	1
2	Black or African American	1.56%	1
3	Hispanic or Latino	0.00%	0
4	Native American or Alaskan Native	0.00%	0
5	White or Caucasian	93.75%	60
6	Multiracial or Biracial	3.13%	2

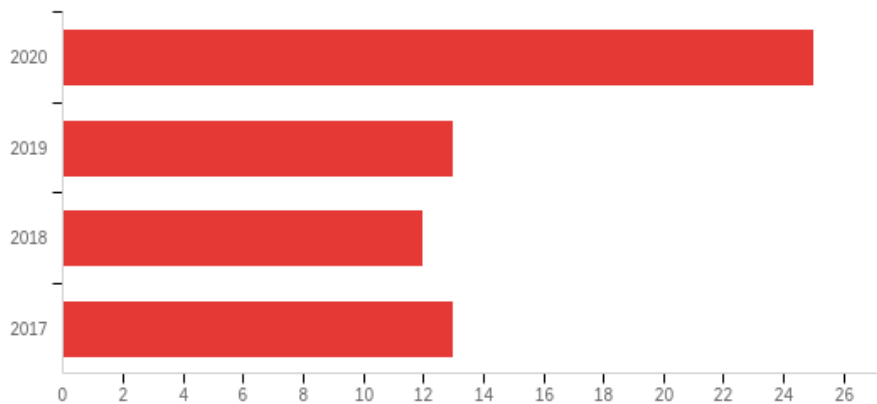
7	A race/ethnicity not listed here	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	64

Q3 - Which school did you graduate from?



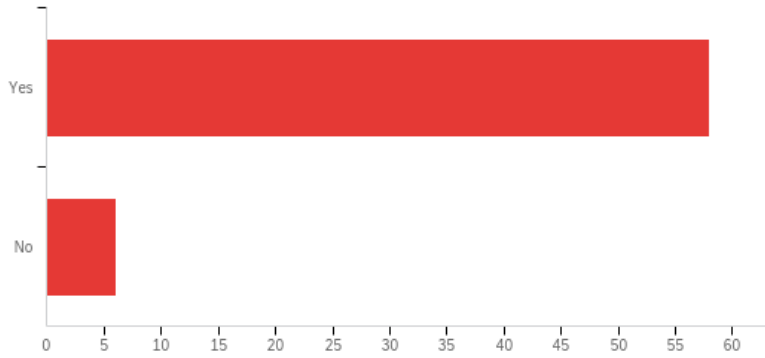
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Mississippi State University	29.69%	19
2	The University of Mississippi	70.31%	45
	Total	100%	64

Q4 - What year did you graduate?



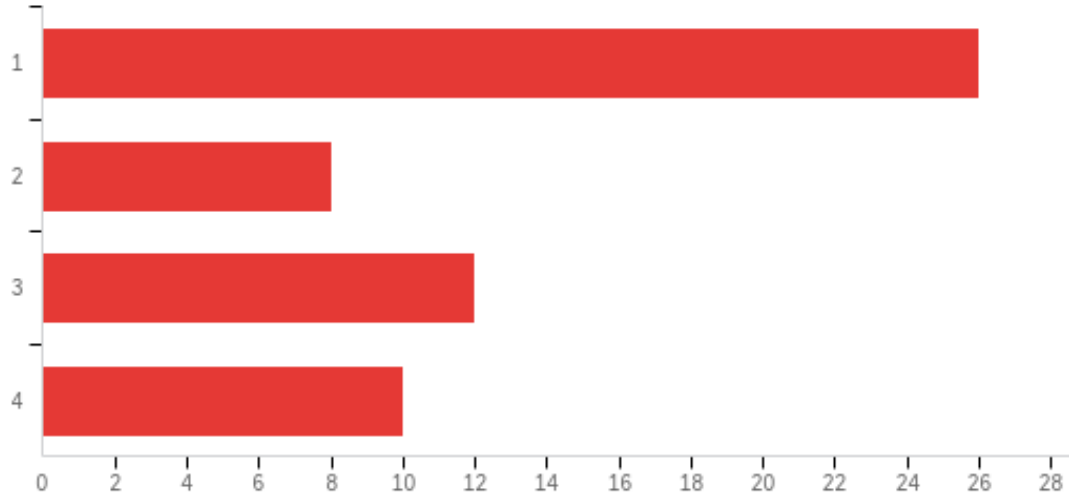
#	Answer	%	Count
1	2020	39.68%	25
2	2019	20.63%	13
3	2018	19.05%	12
4	2017	20.63%	13
	Total	100%	63

Q5 - Are you currently or have you taught in a Mississippi public school?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	90.63%	58
2	No	9.38%	6
	Total	100%	64

Q6 - How many years have you been teaching?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	1	46.43%	26
2	2	14.29%	8
3	3	21.43%	12
4	4	17.86%	10
	Total	100%	56

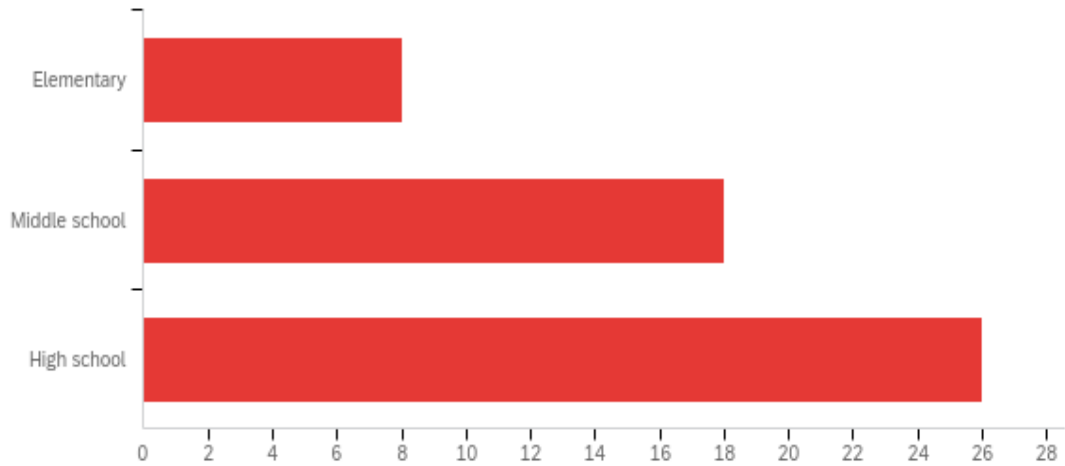
Q7 - What school district(s) do you currently teach or have you ever taught in?

#	Answer	%
1	ABERDEEN SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
7	BAY ST LOUIS WAVELAND SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
10	BILOXI PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	7.69%
11	BOONEVILLE SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
12	BROOKHAVEN SCHOOL DIST	1.54%

13	CLINTON PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
22	DESOTO CO SCHOOL DIST	13.85%
23	GRENADA SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
24	GULFPORT SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
26	HARRISON CO SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
27	HAZLEHURST CITY SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
28	ITAWAMBA CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
29	LAFAYETTE CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
30	LAMAR COUNTY SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
31	LEAKE CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
32	LOUISVILLE MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
33	MARSHALL CO SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
34	MERIDIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
35	NESHOBA COUNTY SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
36	NEW ALBANY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	1.54%
37	NEWTON COUNTY SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
38	OCEAN SPRINGS SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
39	OXFORD SCHOOL DISTRICT	3.08%
40	PASS CHRISTIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
41	PETAL SCHOOL DIST	4.62%
42	POPLARVILLE SEPARATE SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
43	QUITMAN CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%

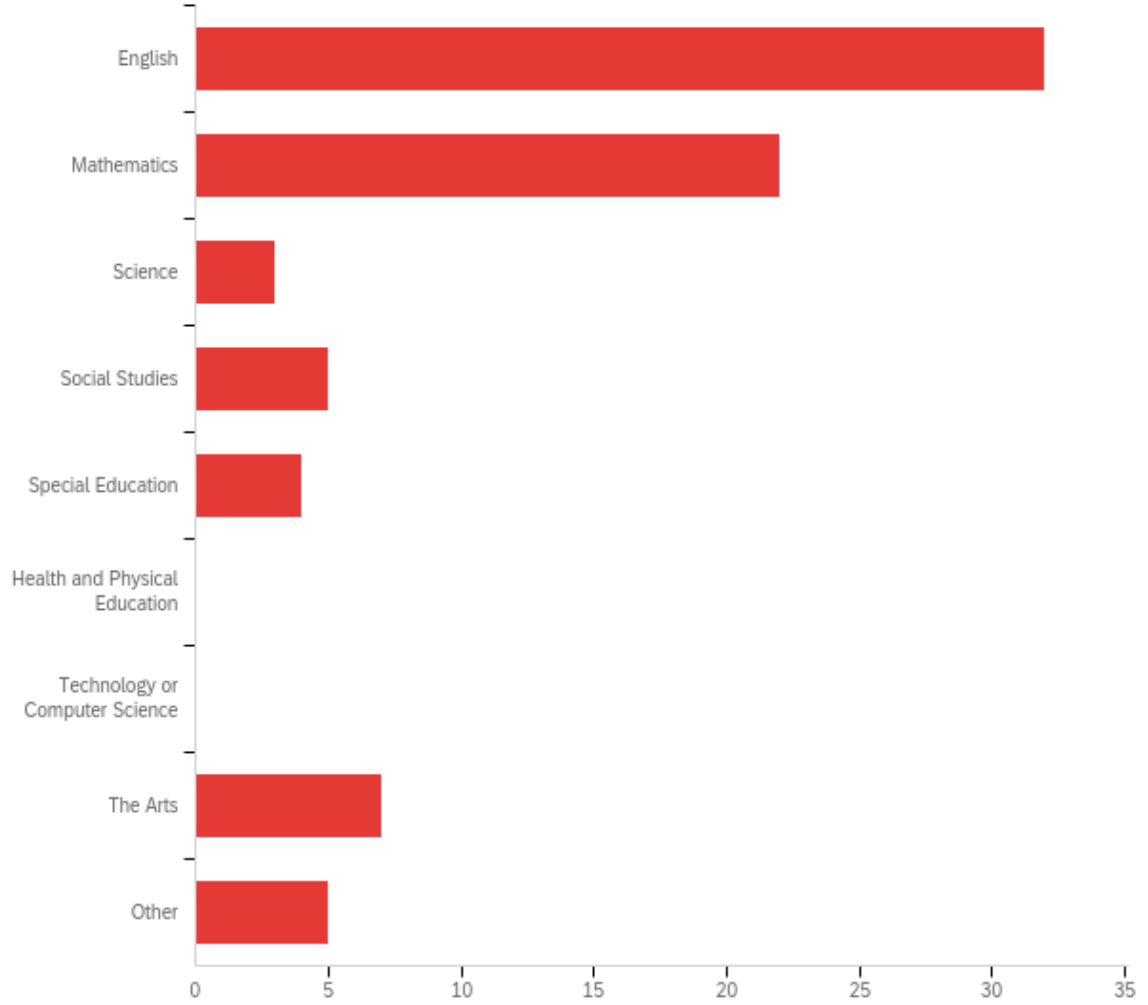
44	RANKIN CO SCHOOL DIST	15.38%
45	SIMPSON CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
46	SOUTH PANOLA SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
47	SUNFLOWER CO SCHOOL DIST	3.08%
48	TUPELO PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
49	WEST POINT SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
50	YAZOO CO SCHOOL DIST	1.54%
51	Total	100%

Q30 - What grade level do you teach?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Elementary	15.38%	8
2	Middle school	34.62%	18
3	High school	50.00%	26

Q9 - What subject(s) do you teach or have you ever taught?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	English	41.03%	32
2	Mathematics	28.21%	22
3	Science	3.85%	3
4	Social Studies	6.41%	5

5	Special Education	5.13%	4
6	Health and Physical Education	0.00%	0
7	Technology or Computer Science	0.00%	0
8	The Arts	8.97%	7
9	Other	6.41%	5
	Total	100%	78

Other - Text

Foreign Language

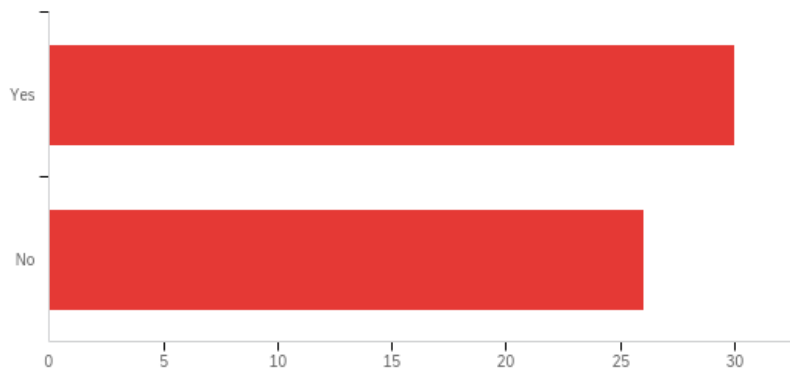
Geometry and Foundations of Algebra

Spanish

ACT Prep

Spanish

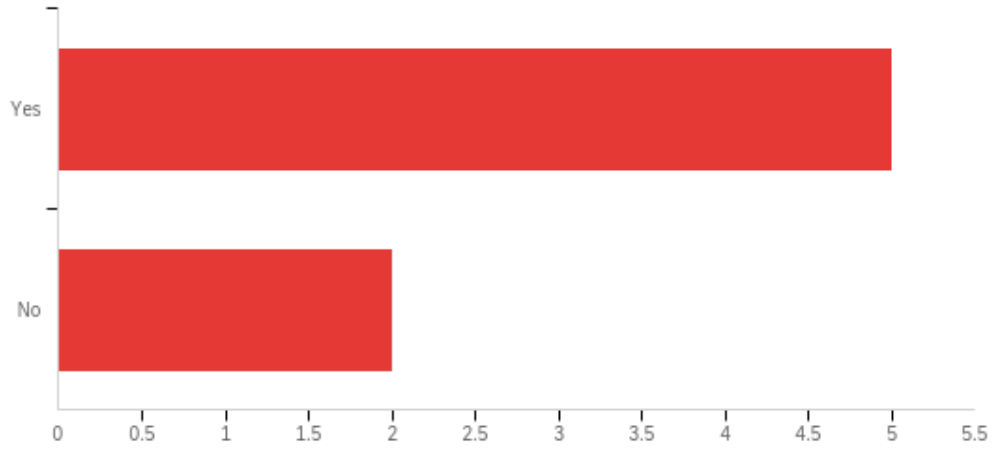
Q10 - Do you advise, coach, or lead any school activities?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	53.57%	30

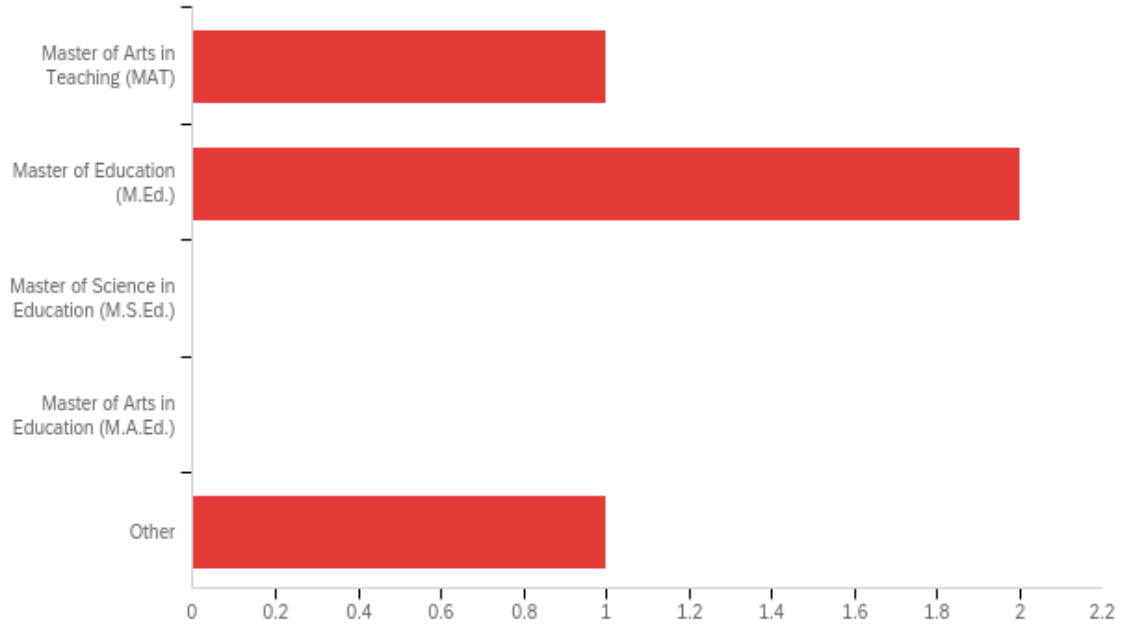
2	No	46.43%	26
	Total	100%	56

Q11 - Are you or have you been enrolled in a graduate program?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	71.43%	5
2	No	28.57%	2
	Total	100%	7

Q12 - What graduate degree are you working on?

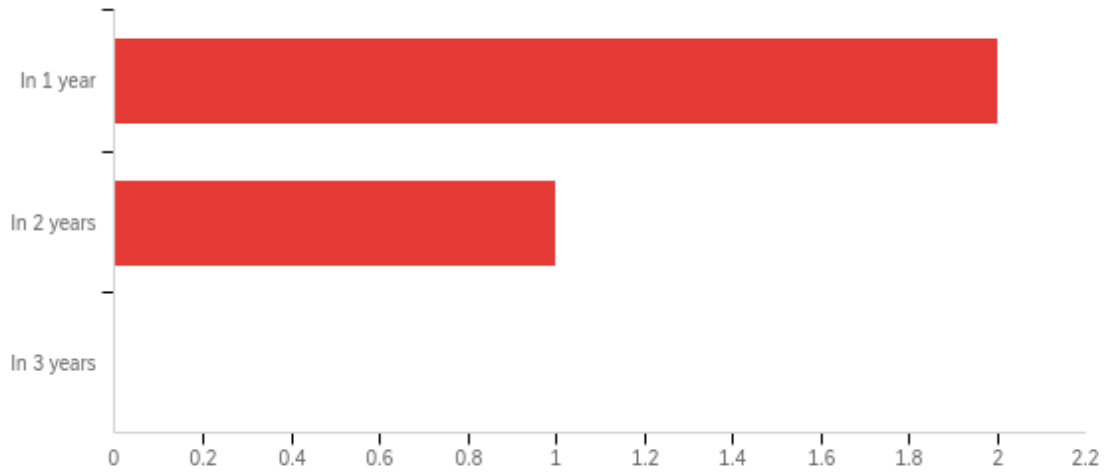


#	Answer	%	Count
1	Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)	25.00%	1
2	Master of Education (M.Ed.)	50.00%	2
3	Master of Science in Education (M.S.Ed.)	0.00%	0
4	Master of Arts in Education (M.A.Ed.)	0.00%	0
5	Other	25.00%	1
	Total	100%	4

Other - Text

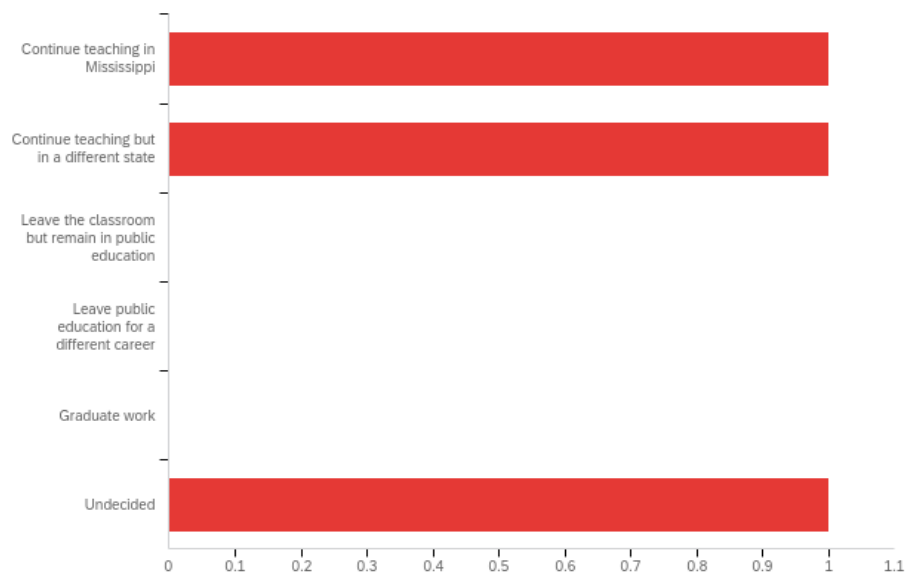
Ed.S.

Q13 - When do you plan to enter the classroom?



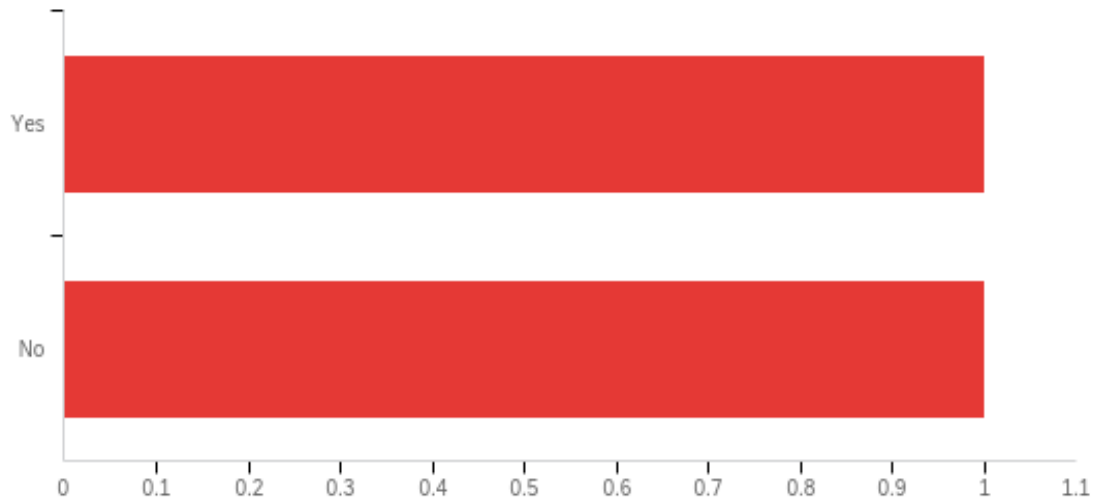
#	Answer	%	Count
1	In 1 year	66.67%	2
2	In 2 years	33.33%	1
3	In 3 years	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	3

Q31 - What are your plans for after your five year METP commitment?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Continue teaching in Mississippi	33.33%	1
2	Continue teaching but in a different state	33.33%	1
3	Leave the classroom but remain in public education	0.00%	0
4	Leave public education for a different career	0.00%	0
5	Graduate work	0.00%	0
6	Undecided	33.33%	1
	Total	100%	3

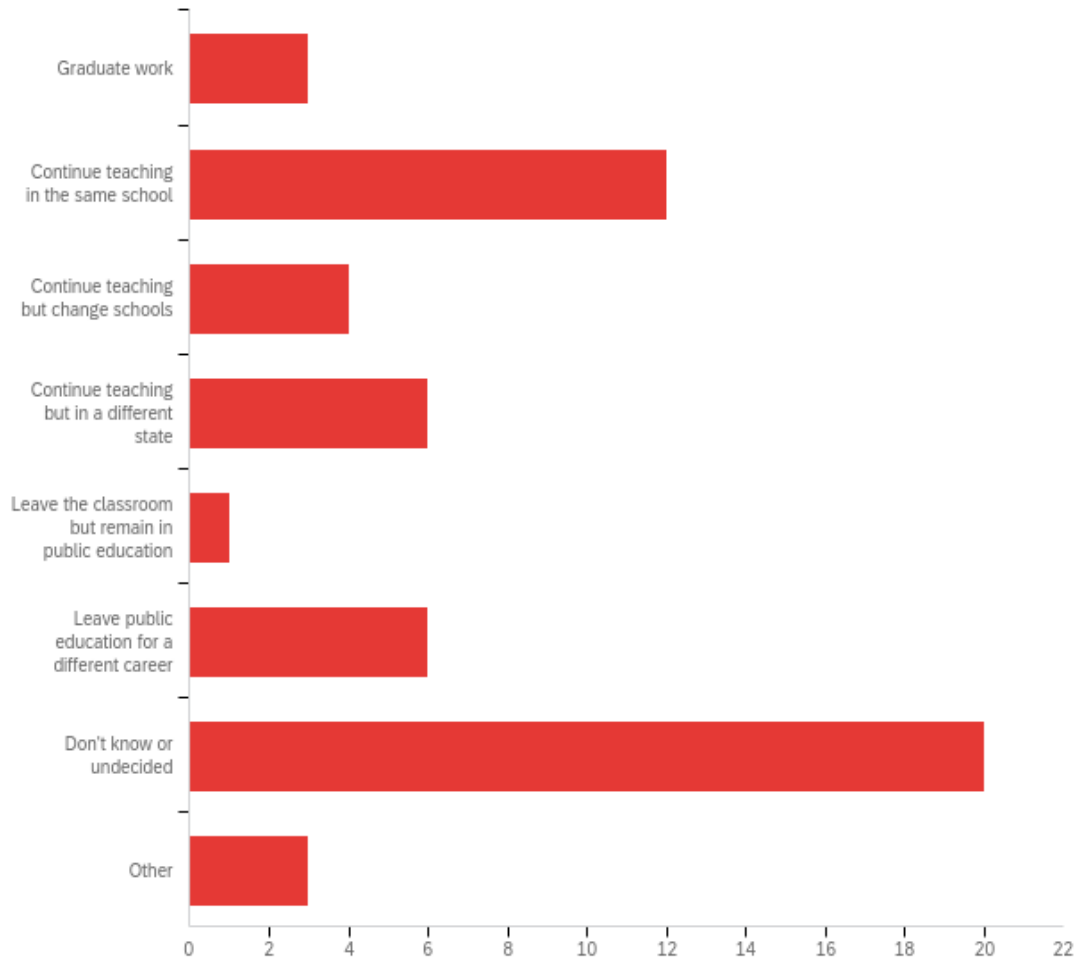
Q14 - Did you de-commit from METP altogether?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	50.00%	1
2	No	50.00%	1
	Total	100%	2

Q15 - Please explain your current and future plans.

Q16 - What are your plans for after your five-year teaching commitment?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Graduate work	5.45%	3
2	Continue teaching in the same school	21.82%	12
3	Continue teaching but change schools	7.27%	4
4	Continue teaching but in a different state	10.91%	6
5	Leave the classroom but remain in public education	1.82%	1
6	Leave public education for a different career	10.91%	6

7	Don't know or undecided	36.36%	20
8	Other	5.45%	3
	Total	100%	55

Other - Text

Continue teaching but maybe at the Community College Level. I am finishing my masters in Community College education English in April of 2021!

Not 100% sure yet, but will probably keep teaching on the high school level. I may try to move up to the junior college level. We'll see.

Continue to teach in a different country

Q18 - If you plan on leaving the field of public education entirely, can you explain why?

Concerned about the direction of the profession.

The financial insecurity associated with the low teaching salary is a large deterrent for me and I have other career options and interests I would like to explore.

The public school system in Mississippi (and in most of the country) is riddled with systemic issues that many have taken as a matter of course. That doesn't mean I don't support public schools, I do. However, they currently exist exclusively as conservative, reactionary institutions. Academic cultures are built around exclusion, treating this practice as if it is a measure of prestige an institution holds rather than a failure to render public services to all citizens. In an attempt to work towards remedying the damage this has done, I plan to attend law school and hopefully defend the civil and human rights of those who are most at risk.

Q19 - What state will you be relocating to?

Q17 - Please explain your decision to relocate to another state.

Q23 - What do you see as the strengths of METP in getting high performing college graduates into public school classrooms?

Q24 - What do you see as the weaknesses of METP?

Q25 - What suggestions do you have for making METP better?