

Education: The State We're In

Nearly 25% of classes are led by out-of-field teachers

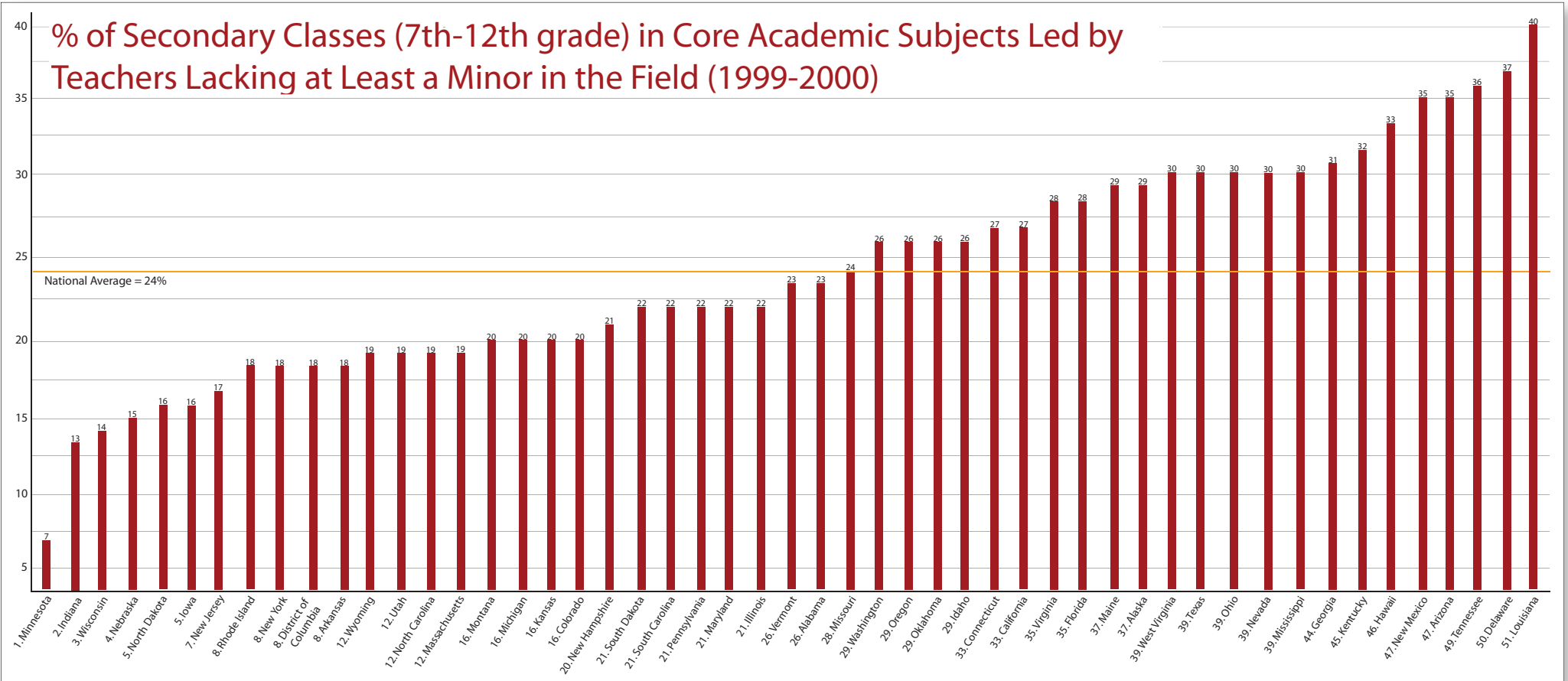
Teachers are the single most important element in the education of children. Dedicated, caring teachers who have deep knowledge of what they teach can help their students master challenging material and instill in them a lifelong love of learning. The difference such teachers can make in their students' lives is well documented. One study conducted in Tennessee found that students placed with effective teachers three years in a row performed 50 points better on a 100-point scale than their counterparts placed with three ineffective teachers.¹ In a similar vein, a study done in Texas found that a high-quality teacher can “substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of low socio-economic background.”² Every child deserves to have such

individuals both in their classroom and in their life.

While many classrooms are led by high-quality teachers, a startlingly high number are not. One major challenge to ensuring that every child is taught by an able and well-prepared instructor is the practice of out-of-field teaching, in which instructors are assigned to teach subjects that they have not minored or majored in during college. Because teachers cannot teach what they do not know, this practice has real consequences for students. Out-of-field teaching occurs in 24% of all middle- and high-school core academic classes, and it is especially prevalent in low-income, rural and/or minority neighborhoods.

In 22 states and the District of Columbia, more than one-fourth of core academic subjects in middle- and high-schools – language arts, social studies, math and science – are taught by out-of-field teachers. Delaware and Louisiana are the worst offenders, with 37% and 40% of their core subjects taught by out-of-field teachers, respectively. Minnesota and Indiana represent the opposite end of the spectrum, with the lowest rates of out-of field teaching among all states.

Even more alarming than the high overall rate of out-of-field teaching is that 19 states have a ten or more percentage-point difference between out-of-field teaching rates in all schools and in high-poverty schools. At overwhelmingly



unsatisfactory rates, Kentucky, Louisiana and Utah have 50% or more of their secondary classes in high-poverty schools taught by out-of-field teachers. In these states, it would appear that the achievement gap is also a teacher gap.

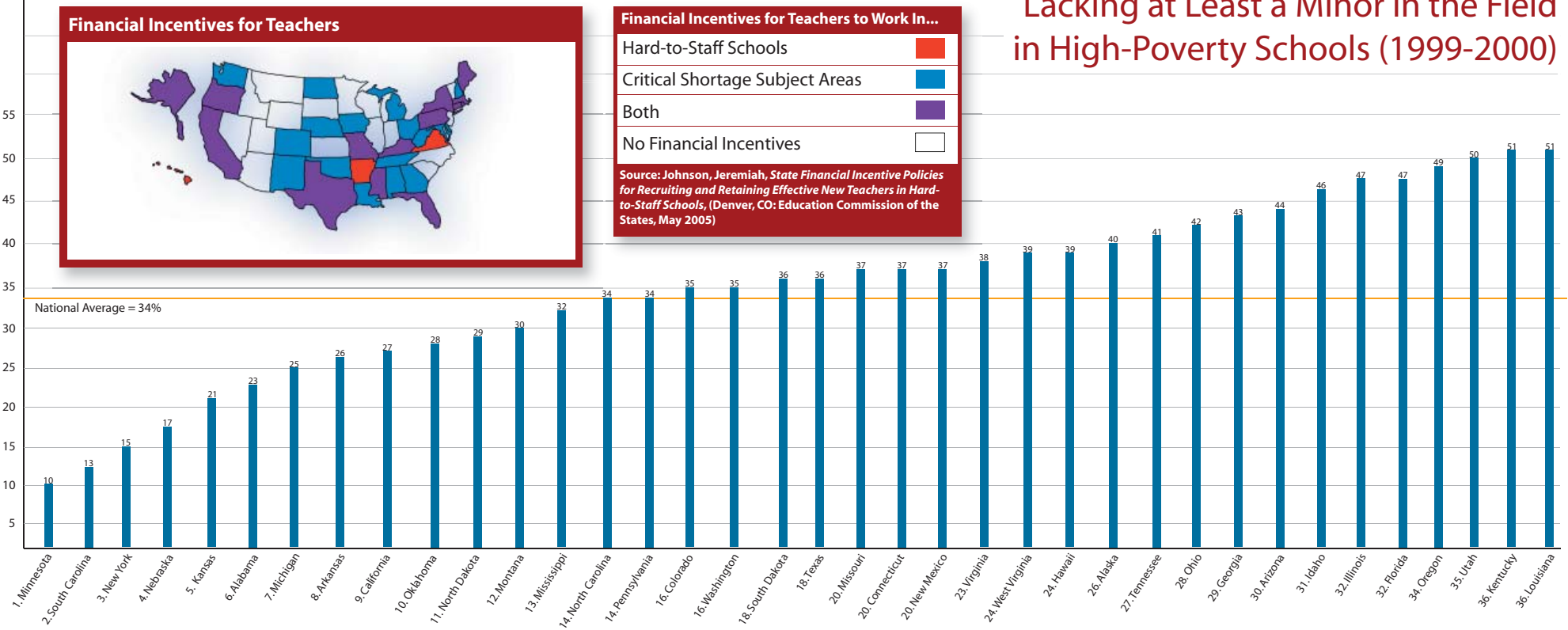
Out-of-field teaching occurs in part because administrators have a hard time finding enough instructors – and especially well-qualified ones – willing to teach in certain subject areas, such as math and science, and in the high-poverty, high-minority schools where teaching is most challenging.

Several policy initiatives have been put in place to recruit and retain effective new teachers. Approximately 17 states offer financial incentives to teachers in hard-to-staff schools, and 31 use such tools to attract teachers in critical shortage subject areas. These policies, especially those that provide financial assistance to teachers, can have considerable affect on the teaching profession and the quality of public education in the United States. This cannot be more clearly supported than by the fact that most teachers leaving the profession note that a better salary, in addition to better working conditions, might have encouraged them to remain in the classroom.³

Renewing Our Schools, Securing Our Future: A National Task Force on Public Education addresses this issue, as well as other challenges to ensuring that every classroom is led by a high-quality teacher, by recommending upgraded professional development, restructured compensation and career advancement systems, a more equitable distribution of high-quality teachers and more rigorous teacher preparation programs.

- Denise St. Just

% of Secondary Classes (7th-12th grade) in Core Academic Subjects Led by Teachers Lacking at Least a Minor in the Field in High-Poverty Schools (1999-2000)



Source: Jerald, Craig D. and Richard M. Ingersoll, *All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching*, (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, August 2002)

Samples taken in Delaware, Nevada, Maine, Vermont, Maryland, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Wyoming, the District of Columbia, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Indiana were too small to make a reliable estimate. High-poverty schools are defined as having 50% or more students qualifying for the federal free/reduced-price lunch program.

¹ Sanders, William L. and June T. Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects of Teachers on Future Student Academic Achievement*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center, 1996).

² Carey, Kevin, *The Real Value of Teachers: Using New Information About Teacher Effectiveness to Close the Achievement Gap*, (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2004).

³ Ingersoll, Richard M., *Why Do High-Poverty Schools Have Difficulty Staffing Their Classrooms With Qualified Teachers?* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2004).