

# COVID-19's spring 2020 school closures: The effect on teacher candidates

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Dunleavy mandated that Alaska's K12 schools closed to in-person instruction; later, these school closures were extended until the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. Across the state, educators worked not only to ensure they met their responsibilities for instruction, but also other key school functions including parent resources, meal services, and social-emotional learning. Concurrently, senior college students in teacher licensure programs at the University of Alaska (UA) were in classrooms fulfilling their clinical experience (student teaching) requirements. During the school closures, students were still "placed" in schools, but the nature of their internship experience changed fundamentally as classes were moved to distance delivery.

On March 20, Alaska's Education Commissioner Michael Johnson announced that the state of Alaska would grant emergency certification to teachers who were unable to complete the required number of clinical placement hours due to COVID-19 school closures. Many of these new graduates will qualify for licensure, but how will the pandemic affect them as they become teachers?

In this paper, we explore how teacher candidates perceive their readiness for teaching in the fall, and their career intentions. By comparing survey responses collected from spring 2020 graduates against graduates of spring 2019 (the students who had a "typical" student teaching experience), we find that the 2020 graduating class feels ready for the classroom. However, these new teachers – and those hired from teacher education programs (TEPs) outside of Alaska – will need supports as they transition to teaching.

## What is Alaska's teacher landscape?

Students need good teachers to learn and achieve (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005), and Alaska has a difficult time staffing its public schools. Until 2019, about 200 new teachers graduated from Alaska colleges every year. The University of Alaska Anchorage's (UAA) initial teacher licensure program that annually graduated more than 90 teachers was closed in 2019; while students in Anchorage could enroll at UAF or UAS, the UA 2020 graduating class of new teachers was about 25% smaller than 2019. To meet its staffing needs, Alaska public schools hire the majority of new teachers from the "lower 48," which has also been experiencing a teacher shortage (Gunn, 2018; Picchi, 2018); even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Alaska struggled to compete for teachers in a national market.

## Why is student teaching so important?

To qualify for initial licensure to teach in Alaska, educators must hold a bachelor's degree, complete an accredited teacher preparation program including a supervised student teaching (clinical) experience, pass an approved basic competency exam, and pass a content area exam.<sup>1</sup> Clinical practice is central to high-quality teacher preparation and to making sure that teachers are "learner ready" (American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, 2018). Clinical placements are not just places for teacher candidates to demonstrate competencies, but also a key learning period as they join theory and practice and develop a classroom praxis (Talbert-Johnson, 2006; Zeicher, 2010). This critical experience was interrupted by the COVID-19 school closures in the spring of 2020.

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<sup>1</sup>Information on teacher certification in Alaska can be found on the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) website: <https://education.alaska.gov/teachercertification>

## Data sources & methods

Since 2017, Alaska's schools of education have used the Network for Excellence in Teaching (NExT) suite of survey instruments to support assessment of its Teacher Education Programs (TEPs). Every year, surveys are administered to incoming teacher candidates, graduating teachers, first-year teachers, and principals who hire UA-prepared teachers. Because we have a few years of data collected under "typical" conditions, comparing these data against the data collected from the 2020 cohort helps us to understand the effect of the COVID-19 school closures. In this analysis, we compare the *preparedness* scores for 83 teachers who graduated from TEPs at UAF and UAS<sup>2</sup> in 2019 to 70 teachers<sup>3</sup> who graduated in 2020; these numbers represent response rates of 65% and 46%, respectively.<sup>4</sup> We tested the sample for selection bias and found it to be robust for analysis.<sup>5</sup>

## The length and nature of the disruption varied.

Though extended clinical experiences are generally recommended (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2014), the length varies significantly between programs, with some institutions across the US requiring as little as 10 weeks (Greenberg, Pomerantz, & Walsh, 2011). Most UAF and UAS teacher candidates complete two semesters of student teaching as part of their graduation requirements.<sup>6</sup> Thus at UA institutions, most teacher candidates had completed about 75% of their in-person clinical experience before the COVID-19 school closures. Most students and faculty at UA institutions reported that districts worked to accommodate UA student teachers during the closures. However, their clinical experiences during the closures varied considerably, and depended on the cooperating teacher,<sup>7</sup> the technology used to deliver remote learning, and content area. Secondary teacher candidates were more likely than elementary teacher candidates to report that they were able to participate in instructional activities. Table 1 aggregates responses for all student teachers and indicates how they engaged with schools and classrooms during the closures. Most (88%) were able to participate directly in the delivery of instruction by helping the cooperating teacher to prepare lessons, communicating with parents, delivering lessons, giving feedback on student assignments, or working with students in small groups. However, 12% indicated that they were "not able to participate very much," citing challenges on the part of the mentor teacher to engage them in teaching or to assign them work, feeling distanced from the school, and because they were unable to contact students or parents.

Table 1 How student teachers engaged with schools and classrooms during the COVID-19 school closures	
	% agree
I helped my mentor teacher to prepare and deliver lessons.	61%
I engaged in parent communication.	52%
I prepared and delivered lessons.	49%
I graded assignments or gave feedback to students.	46%
I provided one-on-one or small group support to students.	43%
I was not able to participate very much.	12%
I supported other school programs (e.g., meal distribution, recreation/sports, school clubs).	10%
<i>Most student teachers were able to participate directly in instructional activities during the COVID-19 closures, but 12% said they were not able to participate very much.</i>	

<sup>2</sup>Though UAA had 68 graduates in the spring of 2019, they were excluded from this analysis as the program did not have any 2020 graduates.

<sup>3</sup>We excluded 8 teachers who graduated in fall 2019; though they are generally considered a part of the 2020 graduating class, these students did not experience disruptions due to COVID-19 school closures.

<sup>4</sup>The surveys are generally administered to teacher candidates in person during their class meeting times. We suspect that the lower 2020 response rate can be attributed to the university closures and the lack of face-to-face contact with faculty, who help to encourage survey participation.

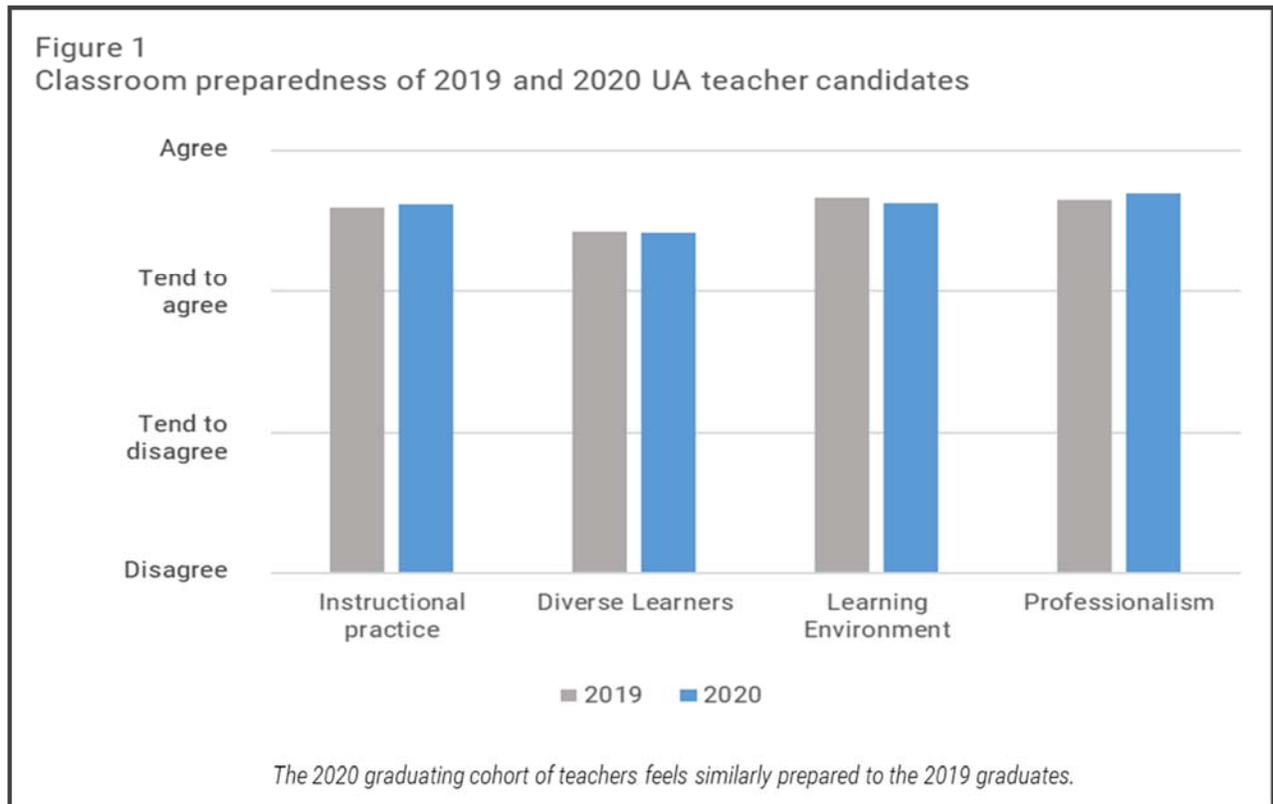
<sup>5</sup>To detect sample selection bias, we used participation status as the dependent variable, and then used a bivariate statistical method to compare participants and non-participants. A chi-square test was used to examine whether there was a systematic difference in the demographics of participants in 2019 and in 2020; the result indicated no sampling bias in gender or racial categories.

<sup>6</sup>Some of the lower-enrollment programs, such as special education, require a semester of clinical placement.

<sup>7</sup>Student teachers are typically supervised by university faculty but work closely with a cooperating or mentor teacher throughout their placement.

## The 2020 cohort feels equally prepared for teaching as the 2019 cohort.

Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 school closures, the average responses of the 2020 cohort were nearly identical to those of the year prior. Figure 1 depicts average responses in the areas of instructional practice (teaching skills), meeting the needs of diverse learners, creating effective learning environments, and professionalism. An independent samples t-test, which is used in analysis to mathematically determine the differences between two groups, confirmed that there was no significant difference between the two groups on these measures.



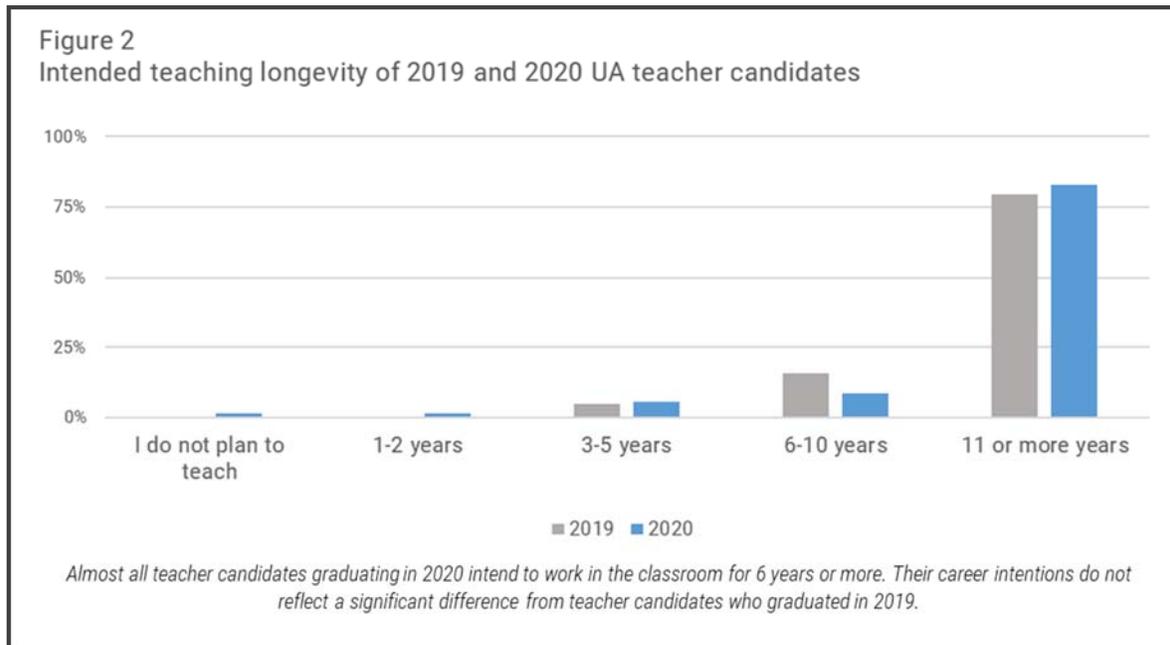
## The 2020 cohort intends to stay in the profession for a long while.

Because teacher shortages and retention are perennial problems for Alaska (Vazquez Cano & Amor, 2019), we were concerned the COVID-19 disruptions may dissuade some teachers from going into the classroom. When asked directly whether or not the pandemic would affect their plans to work as educators, the vast majority (84%) of 2020 graduates indicated it did not change their career intentions, and some even said it strengthened their resolve. However, 13% said that it may affect their career plans due to uncertainty of job openings and school operation, and hesitations about online teaching.

At the time the surveys were administered, the 2020 graduates also indicated that they planned to work as teachers for about the same amount of time as the 2019 graduates. Figure 2 compares the two cohorts; 96% of the 2019 graduates and 92% of the 2020 graduates intend to work as teachers for 6 years or more.

*"Though the online delivery platform makes personal contact difficult and limited, I still found joy in connecting with students over academics, problem-solving with other professionals, and exploring new ways to deliver information. I expect this will not be the last time we have to deliver via technology, and I think the challenge makes me a better practitioner."*

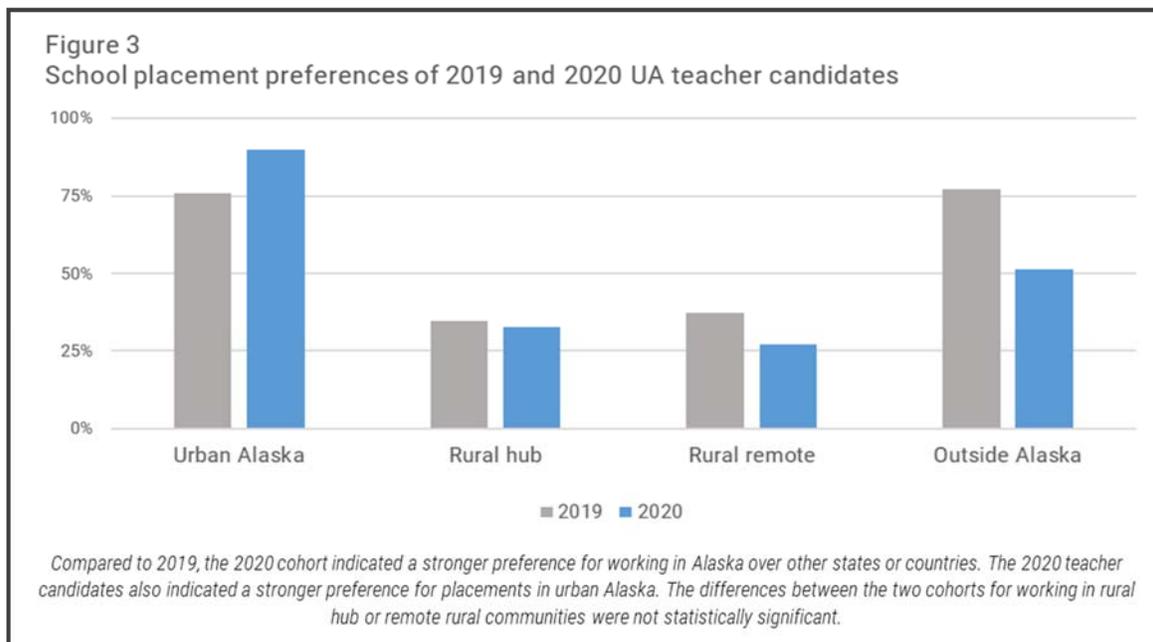
– 2020 graduating secondary teacher candidate



## The 2020 cohort of teacher candidates prefers to teach in Alaska and are more likely to prefer urban placements.

We were also concerned that the COVID-19 school closures may affect *where* teachers in the 2020 cohort were willing to teach – especially because recruitment challenges vary by geographic location, and lack of access to healthcare has been previously identified as a challenge in recruiting rural teachers in Alaska (DeFeo & Tran, 2019; DeFeo, Hirshberg, & Hill, 2018).

Figure 3 depicts each cohorts' willingness to teach in different community types. While the 2020 cohort is much more likely to seek a teaching placement in Alaska than outside of the state or country,<sup>8</sup> they are more likely to prefer working in urban Alaska,<sup>9</sup> and this preference was stronger among graduates from UAS than those from UAF. The difference between the two cohorts' preference for rural hub and remote rural communities was not statistically significant.



<sup>8</sup>We applied a chi-square test, which is used to evaluate whether two categorical variables are related. Results for teacher preference for Alaska versus out-of-state placement:  $\chi^2(1, n = 153) = 7.10, p = .008$ .

<sup>9</sup>Results of chi-square for teacher preference for urban versus rural Alaska:  $\chi^2(1, n = 153) = 4.27, p = .039$ .

## 2020 teacher candidates were disappointed at missed learning opportunities and experiences.

When we asked teacher candidates to reflect on how COVID-19 affected their student teaching experience, **sadness** was the strongest theme in their open-ended responses.

Many teacher candidates had been excited to deliver lessons they had worked diligently to prepare, and to observe their colleagues' teaching. They were disappointed that they were not able to engage in activities that they had looked forward to. Much of this sadness was also attributed to abrupt changes or severing of relationships with students, families, and mentor teachers. Teacher candidates felt that they missed the opportunity to say goodbye and to "tie off" relationships properly.

## New teachers in fall 2020 will still need some specific supports.

Though the 2020 cohort of teacher candidates feels ready for the fall semester, they noted lost opportunities on key training and professional development opportunities, including practice in classroom management, student assessment, parent-teacher conferences, standardized test administration, student engagement, and delivery of specific content. They were also concerned about limited opportunities to reflect with mentor teachers. Several 2020 graduating teachers indicated they would need support in navigating licensing and job application processes. Additionally, the 2020 teacher candidates expressed uncertainty and desire for guidance in addressing health and safety concerns related to the ongoing pandemic – both in making sure that teachers and students are *physically* safe from infection, and in supporting students *socially and emotionally*. The teacher candidates also emphasized a need for professional development and support around distance delivery methods if they will be expected to teach in this medium in the fall.

*"I felt crushed that I missed the last week of full-time student teaching because I had planned many great activities and strategies to utilize during that last week. I also feel disappointed that I got to miss end-of-the-year activities, such as field trips, talent shows, and an in-person graduation ceremony."*

– 2020 graduating elementary teacher candidate

*"[Not] finishing the year with my students is a big loss for me. We formed relationships and routines of trust in building their educational momentum that I fear will now be lost. I worked with a wide variety of learners and saw first-hand their accomplishments and now I never see some of them even through online meetings."*

– 2020 graduating elementary teacher candidate

## What can Alaska do?

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system are mostly unknown, however preliminary reports suggest that it is likely to reduce the number of teachers in the workforce. Throughout the US, many teachers who are older or in high-risk groups are expected to take early retirements or leave the profession (Perry, 2020). In Alaska, high-need schools were unable to recruit at job fairs that are typically held in the spring, and some newly hired teachers have pulled out of contracts (Aina, 2020). Amidst uncertainty, policy and practice actions should consider the context of Alaska's ongoing teacher shortage and turnover challenges.

**Alaska's rural districts will need support in recruiting and hiring teachers.** In general, a high proportion of UA graduates tend to work in urban Alaska and rural districts rely disproportionately on out-of-state hires. The 2020 cohort's stronger preference for urban placements suggests that rural districts may have even more difficulty recruiting Alaska-prepared teachers for the fall of 2020. Coupled with recruiting challenges exacerbated by the pandemic (Aina, 2020), this urban preference suggests that rural districts will need additional support to meet their hiring needs.

**All teachers will need support in the fall 2020, and especially first-year teachers.** By most accounts, teaching in the fall of 2020 will not be "business as usual" and teachers will have new responsibilities and use new technologies in their craft. At the national level, unions are working to negotiate these new expectations (Sawchuk, 2020). Teachers across Alaska will need support, professional development, and resources. First-year teachers will need additional support in learning skills that were not a part of their TEP, but also in developing some of the skills that they missed in their clinical experience, like classroom management, assessment, and parent and student engagement. In-house mentoring programs and the *Alaska Statewide Mentoring Program* are likely to be critical resources to support first-year teachers and encourage their retention.

**UA graduates report they are ready for fall, but this readiness may not extend to Alaska's new teacher hires from out-of-state.** A limitation of our analysis is that it only considers the experiences of UA teacher candidates. Alaska relies heavily on out-of-state hires, so principals and superintendents should be mindful that first-year teachers will have experienced different levels and types of disruptions from the spring 2020 school closures.

Though self-assessment needs to be taken with a grain of salt,<sup>10</sup> the self-efficacy we detected in the 2020 cohort's responses is associated with teacher retention and positive student learning outcomes (Kayapinar, 2016), and thus our data are encouraging. As the state and nation plan for various and contingent re-opening scenarios including the need for social distancing, supporting schools and teachers will be critical to providing a high-quality education for Alaska youth.

<sup>10</sup>See Haverback & Parault (2008) who note that preservice teachers frequently over-estimate their skills and abilities before they have exposure to the realities of working as educators.

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