

Unlocking the Potential of Military Spouse Teachers

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The United States is currently grappling with a teacher shortage. According to research published by the Annenberg Institute, there are more than 36,000 vacant teacher positions nationwide.¹ Southern states like Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi have particularly large vacancies that are estimated to be larger than 3,000 teachers. Also, American teachers are burned out. Studies show that teachers reported a higher level of job-related stress or anxiety symptoms than those in other professions during the COVID-19 pandemic and even in the post-pandemic period.^{2,3}

However, occupational licensing regulations limit the entry of new teachers and lower the retention of existing teachers who move across states. To teach in public schools, prospective workers should obtain a teacher license, also known as teacher certification, typically requiring a four-year college degree, a completion of a teaching preparation program, and licensing exams.⁴ Moreover, existing teachers who move across states must obtain a new license to teach in a new state. Given the lack of a standard procedure for transferring teacher licenses, the interstate licensing barriers prevent or delay existing teachers with out-of-state licenses from working in school.⁵

If we examine the profession of military spouses and focus our attention solely on licensed occupations, we see that most military spouses work as teachers or nurses. Table 1 provides more details on military spouse

¹ Nguyen, Tuan D., Chanh B. Lam, and Paul Bruno. (2022). Is there a national teacher shortage? A systematic examination of reports of teacher shortages in the United States. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-631). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/76eq-hj32>

² Kush, Joseph M., Elena Badillo-Goicoechea, Rashelle J. Musci, and Elizabeth A. Stuart. "Teachers' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic." *Educational Researcher* 51, no. 9 (2022): 593-597.

³ Teachers Are Still Stressed and Underpaid Post-COVID (<https://www.rand.org/pubs/articles/2024/teachers-are-still-stressed-and-underpaid-post-covid.html>)

⁴ Law, Marc T., Mindy Marks, and Tomer Stern. "Teacher Testing Standards and the New Teacher Pipeline." *Available at SSRN 4644356* (2023).

⁵ 50-State Comparison: Teacher License Reciprocity (<https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-teacher-license-reciprocity/>)

occupation. Teachers are 36.4% of military spouses if we focus on the 22 universally licensed occupations and 5.9% of all occupations held by military spouses, according to the American Community Survey.⁶

To best utilize the potential of military spouses, policy makers can ensure that regulation is not limiting the ability of licensed workers to continue working. We analyze policy attempts to ease the frictions military spouses encounter when transitioning to a new military base. When comparing the compact and recognition model, we believe that the recognition model is preferable. Twelve states exclude teachers from the reform and this policy should be reconsidered in those states.⁷ Further, for recognition to be most effective, it is important that the reform is not limited to teachers who have completed “substantially similar” requirements to obtain a license. Before concluding the piece, we also provide stories on eight military spouse teachers facing difficulty in transferring a license across states in reality.

Teacher Compact

As of Spring 2023, the Teacher Compact is active. The Teacher Compact, with a full name of Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact and henceforth referred to as the Teacher Compact, creates a new Interstate Commission that facilitates the movement of licensed teachers from state to state. If a licensed teacher is moving from a compact member state to another compact member state, their license will transfer. Figure 1 illustrates the current landscape of the Teacher Compact. At the time of this writing, 12 states have enacted the Teacher Compact.⁸

Teachers that have a fully authorized or unencumbered license are eligible to utilize the Teacher Compact. Considering frequent relocation of military families, the Teacher Compact contains special provisions for military spouses that allows the group to utilize the Teacher Compact with provisional or temporary licenses.

A clear downside of the Teacher Compact is that it applies only to moves within compact member states. As an example, if a teacher moves from Pennsylvania, a compact member state, to Florida, another compact member state, the license will transfer. If a teacher moves from outside of the compact (e.g., Montana) to Florida, or vice versa, the compact does not help the teacher transfer her license. Similarly, the Teacher

⁶ The 22 universally licensed occupations are occupations that are licensed in all U.S. states and identifiable in the Census survey. The list is obtained from Johnson, J. E., & Kleiner, M. M. (2020). Is occupational licensing a barrier to interstate migration?. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 12(3), 347-373.

⁷ 50-State Comparison: Teacher License Reciprocity (<https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-teacher-license-reciprocity/>)

⁸ National Center for Interstate Compacts (<https://teachercompact.org/compact-map/>)

Compact does not benefit teachers moving between states outside of the compact (e.g., Montana and California).

In general, the Teacher Compact requires each individual state to pass the model legislation to become effective for teachers in all 50 states. This process will likely take some time, and the legislation may not be passed in all 50 states. This reliance on multilateral compliance limits the immediate effectiveness of the reform to improve the portability of teacher license across states.

Recognition

As an alternative to compacts, military spouses may take advantage of recognition. With the exception of Connecticut and the District of Columbia, 49 states have passed some form of recognition of occupational licenses for military spouses.⁹ The military spouse license recognition is a policy specially designed for military spouses who move across states much more frequently than other people because of the periodical relocation of their spouse in the U.S. Armed Forces.¹⁰ With the policy, military spouses can transfer a license more easily and quickly, sometimes with a provisional license and a lower licensing fee, than other workers.

The recognition policy is not confined to one occupation but extends to all or most licensed occupations.¹¹ Military spouse teachers are eligible for the recognition in more than two thirds of states.¹² Unlike the Teacher Compact, the recognition applies to any moves to the state regardless of whether a person came from a jurisdiction with the same policy. No multilateral negotiation is required for the recognition, which may be a reason for why the policy has been quickly adopted by almost all states since 2011.

A limitation of recognition is that the policy often does not apply to teachers. As of June 2020, twelve states and the District of Columbia does not offer the recognition for military spouse teachers.¹³ For the same reason, teacher licenses are issued more slowly than other licenses that are eligible for the recognition in

⁹ Greenberg, D. (2021). *Military Spouse License Recognition: A Guide to State Legislation (2021.1.11)*. Retrieved from Veterans' Employment and Training Service, U.S. Department of Labor: <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/VETS/files/Military-Spouse-License-Recognition-A-Guide-to-State-Legislation.pdf>

¹⁰ 2021 Active-Duty Spouse Survey (<https://www.militaryonesource.mil/data-research-and-statistics/survey-findings/spouses-survey/>)

¹¹ The military spouse license recognition policy typically covers a broader range of occupations than universal license recognition for all people. For more details on universal license recognition, see Bae, K., & Deyo, D. (2024). 2024 Update to the Survey of Universal Licensing Reforms in the United States. *Policy Brief, The Knee Center for the Study of Occupational Regulation*. <https://csorwvu.com/policy-brief-survey-of-universal-licensing-reforms-in-the-united-states-2024/>

¹² 50-State Comparison: Teacher License Reciprocity (<https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-teacher-license-reciprocity/>)

¹³ 50-State Comparison: Teacher License Reciprocity (<https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-teacher-license-reciprocity/>)

almost all states.¹⁴ Moreover, some states allow the recognition only if an original license was issued in a state with “substantially similar” licensing requirements to the state. Given large variations in tiers and requirements of teacher licensure, this additional requirement may potentially make many military spouse teachers ineligible for the recognition.¹⁵

Voices of Military Spouse Teachers

Despite the Teacher Compact and recognition, military spouse teachers still struggle to transfer their license after moving across military bases in different states. Interviews with eight military spouse teachers (including former teachers left the profession by the time of interview) provide vivid description on multiple layers of barriers to transferring a license across states.¹⁶

Military spouses face challenges due to the lack of uniform standards, making it difficult to transfer licenses, as discussed earlier. For instance, some states require additional tests or coursework for license validation, even when a candidate has years of experience and qualifications. Also, they struggle to find proper information on relicensing procedures varying across states. Resources meant to assist, like Military OneSource, are often difficult to navigate. Some spouses reported gaps in the information provided, which added to the overall complexity of getting licensed in new states.

Moreover, each state requires different forms, documentation, and sometimes even custom formats that prior districts may not accommodate. This can lead to extensive back-and-forth communication, delays, and frustration, especially when states lack streamlined or electronic submission options. Some educators encountered barriers with state education boards’ systems, such as poorly functioning online forms and inadequate IT support. Obtaining a new license in certain states can take several months, impacting job prospects and income. This lag can be especially problematic when licensing must be completed before applying for teaching positions.

Military spouses often bear repeated financial costs for applications, transcripts, and additional certification requirements. While some organizations like Military OneSource offer financial support, they may not fully cover all the costs, and navigating their resources can be challenging.

¹⁴ Brawley, Kristin K., Brett N. Weldon, Jillian R. Rodgers, Jessie H. Rudi, and Daniel F. Perkins, 2021. Military Spouse Licensure Portability (August 15, 2021), Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State (<https://militaryfamilies.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/mslp-report-15aug2021.pdf>)

¹⁵ Teacher Certification Requirements by State (<https://teach.com/careers/become-a-teacher/teaching-credential/state-requirements/>)

¹⁶ The interviews were conducted in person or via social media messaging between an interviewer located at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls, Montana and military spouses in several U.S. states from September 26th to November 5th, 2024.

Furthermore, military spouses report instances where employers are reluctant to hire them, assuming they will need to relocate soon. This leads some educators to leave teaching entirely or to seek remote roles to avoid the frequent relicensing cycle. Some teachers struggled with tracking or updating ongoing professional development or continuing education requirements, which vary widely by state. In certain states, there are additional hurdles after licensure, such as city-level administrative approvals. Others faced administrative issues, like states not providing physical licenses, complicating the documentation for their future job applications.

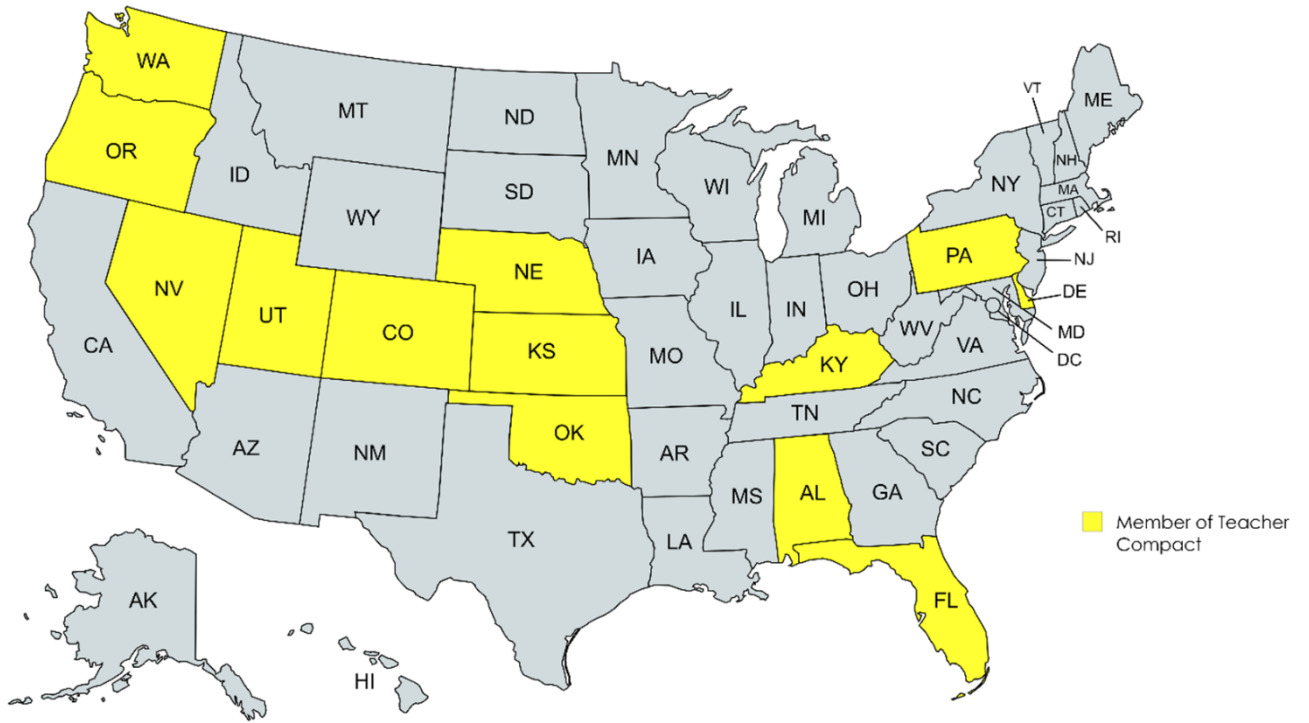
Lastly, military spouses may lose retirement contributions and benefits when moving, particularly if benefits do not transfer with them across states. This lack of portability is often a key factor in decisions to leave the teaching profession.

Conclusion

Given teacher shortages and burnouts extending to the post-COVID era, it is essential for policymakers to use all possible means to increase the number of qualified teachers. Unlocking the potential of military spouse teachers with out-of-state licenses is a cost-efficient way to alleviate the teacher shortage with little concern on teaching quality because they are experienced teachers with teaching skills transferrable across states. The Teacher Compact and military spouse license recognition are two major policies to help military spouse teachers transfer a license without a costly relicensing procedure. Despite the policies and subsequent increase in occupational license portability, military spouse teachers still report difficulties in obtaining a license and continuing a teaching career in a new state.

To further improve military spouse teacher license portability, we suggest that all states allow military spouse teachers to apply for recognition without mandating “substantially similar” licensing requirements between states. This model is preferable to the slower and likely less effective teacher compact. Also, it is crucial to fill the informational gap among military spouses in the availability of relicensing procedures and to reduce the psychic costs for relicensure by making the application system user-friendly. Lastly, policymakers may consider mitigating other barriers to employment or career development in the teaching profession among military spouses such as the limited portability of pension plans across states.

Figure 1: US Teacher Compact States in January 2025



Created with mapchart.net

References: National Center for Interstate Compacts (<https://teachercompact.org/compact-map/>)

Table 1. Military Spouses in Licensed Occupations

Rank	Occupation	Share among 22 universally licensed occupations	Share among all occupations
1	Teacher	36.4%	5.9%
2	Nurse	30.6%	5.0%
3	Cosmetologist and barber	6.0%	1.0%
4	Social worker	4.8%	0.8%
5	Real estate broker and sales agent	4.0%	0.7%
6	Physical therapist and occupational therapist	3.1%	0.5%
7	Lawyer	2.8%	0.5%
8	Insurance sales agent	2.2%	0.4%
9	Physician	2.1%	0.3%
10	Dental hygienist	1.6%	0.3%
11	Emergency medical technician and paramedic	1.3%	0.2%
12	Pharmacist	1.1%	0.2%
13	Physician assistant	1.0%	0.2%
14	Electrician	0.9%	0.2%
15	Psychologist	0.9%	0.1%
16	Veterinarian	0.5%	0.1%
17	Dentist	0.3%	0.1%
18	Real estate appraiser and assessor	0.2%	0.0%
19	Chiropractor	0.1%	0.0%
20	Optometrist	0.1%	0.0%
21	Pest control worker	0.1%	0.0%
22	Podiatrist	0.0%	0.0%
	Total	100%	16.2%

*Notes: The sample is military spouses at age 18 to 64, who are not on active-duty military service, and whose occupation data is available in the American Community Survey 2005-2022. The 22 universally licensed occupations are occupations that are licensed in all U.S. states and identifiable in the Census survey.*¹⁷

¹⁷ Johnson, J. E., & Kleiner, M. M. (2020). Is occupational licensing a barrier to interstate migration?. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 12(3), 347-373.