



School districts of all sizes experiencing teacher shortages

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Theo Allen leads his Ag Science students at Delavan High School through a hands-on exercise as they discuss the science of nutrition for raising livestock and then put it into practice as they feed their flock of six-week-old Buff Orpington chickens they are raising in a greenhouse just outside of the main school building. Allen shows students Kennedy Lashbrook, far left, and Kylee Davis a chicken up close.

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By Pam Adams
Journal Star reporter Follow

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Theo Allen is one of an increasingly rare breed.

Allen teaches agricultural classes at Delavan High School. He is in one of the areas where a growing teacher shortage exists, including special education, science, math, and language arts, according to a recent statewide survey.

The problem isn't confined to small, more rural public school districts.

In the area's largest school district, Gail Johnson is going into her second semester as a substitute teacher at Von Steuben Middle School as Peoria School District 150 struggles to fill 32 vacancies, five more than the same time last year.

"It started out short-term, for one week," said Johnson, a certified substitute teacher who works with fifth-grade special education students in Von Steuben's inclusion classes.

While 60 percent of school districts that responded to the survey say it's tough to fill teaching positions, the problem is particularly acute in the central region of the state where 75 percent of the responding districts reported difficulty filling jobs — and 89 percent said they noticed fewer qualified candidates applying for jobs.

Of the state's 857 districts, 538, or about 63 percent, completed the survey, which was conducted by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS). In the central region, 170 of 245 districts, or 69 percent, responded.

Central Illinois had the highest percentage of negative responses in all areas of the survey when results were broken out by region. Twenty-two percent said they had canceled classes or programs because of the shortage, compared to 16 percent overall.

Educators, by and large, aren't surprised by the results.

"We want the best and the brightest in our schools, but the best and brightest may not be going into education," said Gail Owen, regional superintendent of schools for three counties, including Tazewell.

Owen monitors a statewide job bank for school districts advertising open positions.

"This year, for the first time in my memory, there were openings in a lot of districts that don't generally have problems filling positions," she said. "It surprised me because some of them were looking to fill positions like third-grade teachers."

Dean Cantu, chairman of Bradley University's teacher education department, said public and private colleges throughout the state saw the shortage coming.

"What we've experienced over the course of, certainly, the last five years, are lower numbers of students going into teacher preparation programs. Illinois is not the exception," Cantu said.

Bradley and other schools are starting to see a rebound, he added. "But there's a lot of ground to make up."

Declining enrollment in teacher-education programs is one of several factors educators say contribute to teacher shortages. They also say the shortage is a backlash to earlier reform efforts to raise teaching standards.

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Page 2 of 2 - Tougher entrance exams to get into teacher preparation programs, more requirements to get licensing and certifications, especially for teachers moving from other states, play a role.

Superintendents say some potential candidates decide not to teach after considering Illinois' pension system and changes in the retirement age.

"On top of everything else, the Illinois State Board of Education is backed up in even reviewing candidates for teaching certifications," said Andrew Brooks, superintendent of Delavan Community Unit School District 703.

Superintendents such as Brooks and Kyle Freeman of Washington Community High School District 308 say they're still seeing qualified candidates, but fewer of them.

"It's just that you're shocked when you were used to getting eight to 10 applications a day and they start to trickle in at one or two a day," Brooks said.

The regional superintendents want to jump-start a statewide conversation about solutions. In the meantime, schools districts are looking at ways to attract and retain teachers — and substitute teachers.

District 150 board members recently approved an agreement with Western Illinois University that would streamline the process leading to teacher certification for special education.

The district is also getting more aggressive about recruiting teachers, from sending teams to college and career fairs to running public service announcements at Bradley basketball games.

Knowing that it may be a while before all of its vacancies are filled, District 150 has started offering more training and professional development for long-term substitutes like Johnson, who had worked as a teachers aide and other positions for 25 years before retiring last year.

"I don't mind," Johnson said. "I love it."

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