Shortage of Teachers Stretches Nationwide

By Sara Randazzo

In Maine, state employees are pitching summer-camp counselors on the benefits of being a teacher. In Texas, school districts are buying billboards in other states to lure educators across the border. In Florida, military veterans without teaching experience or bachelor's degrees will soon be allowed to lead classrooms. In New Jersey, dozens of districts will pipe virtual teachers into classrooms.

Nationwide, school districts are dealing with what many administrators are calling the toughest teacher recruiting season they have ever experienced. Schools are racing to fill classroom openings with qualified educators as the school year begins, with many holding out hope that they won't have to resort to long-term substitutes, cutting classes or increasing class sizes.

"We're going through one of the worst shortages we've ever seen," said Charity Comella, the human-resources director at a school district outside Princeton, N.J. "It's like dog-eat-dog, all of the school districts are getting very competitive with each other."

State education departments and legislatures are working to bolster the teacher

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pipeline, spending hundreds of millions of dollars to create teacher residency programs, boost salaries and cover the costs of a credential for those working in the highest-need schools. Many states are also loosening requirements to become a teacher, calling them needlessly onerous.

Tens of thousands of teacher vacancies exist across the country, according to state education departments. Indiana schools are seeking more than 1,700 classroom positions. Delaware has 500 openings.

Some states have increased salaries; New Mexico teachers now start at between $50,000 and $70,000, an increase of as much as 25%. Teachers earn an average of $65,300 nationally, with average starting salaries of $41,770, according to the National Education Association.

Many administrators said the pandemic strained what has for years been a tight teacher labor market. The number of students completing teacher preparation programs fell 30% between 2010-11 and 2019-20, according to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Some teachers have retired early or left the profession because of pandemic-induced burnout, and others are feeling pressured by public scrutiny of school curricula and laws in several states dictating what can be taught in classrooms.

"In the beginning of the pandemic teachers were heroes, now they're being portrayed negatively," said Laura Jeanne Penrod, a high-school teacher in Las Vegas. "I think people are tired of not being treated as professionals."

In New Jersey's Freehold Regional High School District, an annual job fair that attracted almost 500 candidates in 2018 drew 126 this year, for the same number of about 50 openings. The district, which pays higher salaries than others, filled the vacancies.

But over the summer, teachers have unexpectedly retired, leaving director of personnel Jennifer Sharp needing to poach from neighboring districts or ask teachers to give up prep periods.

In Alabama, two years of policy changes have improved the teacher shortage, though it is still in "crisis proportions" in special education and rural counties, said Eric Mackey, the state's superintendent of education.

Anyone can now teach in Alabama with a license from another state, and 3,000 people reclaimed lapsed certificates through a clemency program. Dr. Mackey said the changes are about making reasonable accommodations to find teachers, not lowering the standards.

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Tens of thousands of U.S. teacher vacancies exist. Districts have raised pay, hired virtual teachers or waived rules to fill some jobs.

"We've done all these things to hold the gap," said Dr. Mackey, "but long term the only real fix is to convince more 18-year-olds that teaching is a good career."

Researchers at Rand Corp. recently concluded that an increase in desired staffing levels has strained the teaching market more than a mass exodus from the profession. More than three-quarters of district leaders Rand surveyed said they had expanded substitute or regular teaching ranks since before the pandemic.

Dozens of districts will be turning to a contingency plan made more palatable since the pandemic: having a virtual teacher.

Proximity Learning, an Austin-based company that streams certified teachers into physical classrooms, has seen demand double since last year to 158 districts, said founder and Chief Executive Evan Erdberg. The company has a stable of 1,500 teachers.

"Five years ago we were a Band-Aid," Mr. Erdberg said. "Now we're the long-term strategy."

Florida is completing a rule to give qualifying military veterans—with no bachelor's degrees but some college credit—temporary five-year teaching licenses. Arizona is letting college students begin teaching in the classroom.

Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association, said that while he appreciates more pathways into the profession, the veterans program "will not solve the greatest challenge facing our schools unless we address the issues driving educators away—low pay and a lack of professional respect."

Kimberly Willis took over as human-resources director of a five-school charter district in Arkansas in July and has hustled to fill 16 vacancies, about 10% of her staff.

Three classrooms still needed teachers by the start of school, which began Monday.

She will resort to recruiting college students earning teaching certificates and is already looking ahead at how to keep her staff in place.

"We have to be mindful of how to make the field of education interesting enough that teachers are thriving by December," she said, "and not saying: I can't wait until the year is over."