

Expand

http://cumberlink.com/news/local/closer_look/closer-look-teacher-shortage-looms-on-horizon/article_f2ebf75f-bfb6-5b8a-a704-0bd51316b895.html

FEATURED

TOP STORY

Closer Look: Teacher shortage looms on horizon

Joseph Cress The Sentinel Jun 4, 2016



Jason Malmont, The Sentinel

Hampden Elementary School teacher Audrey Montemayor talks to students on Thursday afternoon during class.

Uncertainty combined with a heavy workload and negative public perception has contributed to the prospect of a looming teacher shortage in public education across Pennsylvania.

Statistics show the number of in-state teacher certifications issued by the state Department of Education was down by 62 percent from 16,361 in 2012-2013 to 6,215 in 2014-2015 — a drop of more than 10,000 certificates in three years.

Pennsylvania is in line with a nationwide trend that has seen the number of college students enrolled in education majors decrease by 55 percent since the fall of 1996, said Nicole Reigelman, press secretary for PDE.

She added that under former Gov. Tom Corbett, state funding of public education was cut forcing school districts across Pennsylvania to eliminate programs, layoff teachers and reduce staff by not filling vacancies.

The result has been larger class sizes, fewer support personnel and additional duties placed on the remaining teachers making a challenging profession even more challenging, Reigelman said. "These dynamics have likely contributed to fewer people seeking teacher certification and enrolling in teacher programs."

Traditionally, school districts have seen the most chronic shortages in science and high-level math teachers. College students in these fields tend to be drawn more to the private sector where salaries, benefits and work conditions are viewed as more favorable.

"I don't think we are doing a good enough job as educators recruiting good math and science students back into our schools," said John Friend, superintendent of the Carlisle Area School District. "They see opportunities in other areas. We currently have a physics opening. I think we only have two to three candidates that have applied."

The trend at work across the country and Pennsylvania has made the job of finding a qualified science or math teacher even more daunting. Only 23 in-state teacher certifications were issued in physics across Pennsylvania in 2014-2015 compared to 53 certifications in 2012-2013.

Over that same period, the number of certifications issued for mathematics went from 558 to 204. For biology, it went from 221 to 106, chemistry from 85 to 22 and earth/space science from 55 to 12.

While just a few years ago the most chronic shortages were in science and math teachers, the prospect now exists for shortages across the board in most content areas and grade levels, said Al Moyer, superintendent of South Middleton School District. "I think the workload, the public perception and the uncertainty all combined have created a negative feeling about going into the field right now,"

Both superintendents have careers spanning about 35 years in public education including 25 years as administrators. They have both seen the job market flux, but agree conditions are taking a turn for the worse.

"Do I see a crisis on the horizon? Absolutely," Friend said. "The candidate pool is down 60 percent. We have not seen the number of shortages that we have seen today."

"There have been ups and downs, but I do believe the past couple years have been the most challenging ever," Moyer said. "This has been the most serious in any time in my career."

Teacher shortages exist in other states and can be significant depending on the locale and type of certification, said Wythe Keever, spokesman for the Pennsylvania State Education Association. He noted there are some rural areas of the South where school districts have problems drawing teachers for the core subject areas.

Political attacks on teacher compensation, benefits and seniority, along with deep cuts by Corbett and the demand for a pay freeze, sent a message to college students that future jobs may be jeopardy and that public education is not a stable profession to enter, Keever said.

“The root cause of the problem, in our view, is inadequate funding, attacks on the teaching profession and poor working conditions,” he added. The PSEA represents 120,000 active classroom teachers employed by 483 of the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania.

Demographics also play a factor in the availability of certified teacher candidates for public education jobs. Current shortages in Pennsylvania are more related to pockets of geography along with supply and demand in certain subject areas, said Christine Royce, a professor and chair of the teacher education department at Shippensburg University.

For example, urban school districts tend to have greater fiscal challenges that result in lower teacher salaries and greater turnover as educators move on to better paying jobs, Royce said. She added while Pennsylvania produces an abundance of teachers certified in early childhood and elementary education, there is greater demand for special education teachers as more students are being identified as having a need.

Yet another factor is a decrease in the number of college students due to a decline in the birth rate, Royce said. Fewer babies were born between 1995 and 1998 resulting in a decline in enrollment from 2013 to 2016. There are fewer college students to major in education.

A growing demand for teachers prompted Wilson College to add special education to its Teacher Intern Program designed to help individuals with bachelor degrees earn their level one teacher certification, Program Director Beth Byers said. Most TIP students graduate from college in a major other than education only to be called into teaching through this nontraditional path to certification.



"It's a career change for some...For others it's fulfilling a lifelong passion," said Byers, adding how many TIP students were diverted away from an education major in college by career advice and vocational test results that suggested to them a different path to pursue. "But the yearning to teach did not go away," she said.

By adding special education certification to this program, Wilson saw a reversal in a trend where enrollment peaked at 182 TIP students in 2004 before slipping to just 68 students in 2013 to rebounding to the current 86 students.

Recently the TIP program has seen an increase in the number of engineers seeking to leave that profession to apply their real world experience towards teaching math in a public school, Byers said. She attributes this trend to tight industry deadlines and professional burnout citing the case of a female engineer who wanted a more mom friendly job.

There has also been an increase in the number of private school teachers seeking public school certifications in order to make them more marketable, Byers said.

Email Joseph Cress at jcress@cumberlink.com