

School Bells Expose Teacher Shortage

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This week Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about the lack of K-12 Teachers in Wisconsin.

PLUM CITY, WI - “Please sound the alarm,” Superintendent Mary Baier wrote to me. “We are not able to find people to fill positions in Wisconsin.” She needed a special education teacher and only one applicant had applied to her rural Plum City district.

When the school bells ring across Wisconsin, parents expect classrooms to be filled with qualified teachers. But a dramatic decline in education majors at university-based programs and an exodus of both newly minted and experienced teachers have left Wisconsin parents asking, “Who will teach our children?”

The “impending crisis” is here.

Schools are scrambling to find qualified teachers. For example, less than a month before school started, News 8 WKBT reported the La Crosse district needed to fill 23 positions.

Districts have done more with less for years. Existing teachers covered more classes and received cross training. Districts asked current teachers to go back to school and obtain certification in different subjects. Local schools already share many teachers, guidance counselors and other staff. Teachers move between schools, between districts and even across state lines during the course of their workweek.

Some districts use special “waivers,” or permission to bend the rules on teacher certification, allowing a district to place an unqualified teacher in a position as long as that teacher seeks proper certification.

But the teacher shortage is growing and it affects urban, suburban and rural schools.

Christine Hedstrom works in Human Resources for the Waukesha School District. She told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, “You could technically start a school year without an administrator in place, but you need to have a teacher in the classroom.”

But rural schools are particularly hard hit.

Rural schools often have fewer options and already greatly diminished choices for students. They’ve already combined, shared, downsized and cross-trained. Having a teacher in the classroom may not even be possible in some local rural classrooms.

A rural western Wisconsin district board member told me, “We are starting the school year with two positions unfilled”- one of the positions was a Spanish language teacher. “I guess we’ll have to use some type of video/distance learning option,” the board member told me. “But that’s not a good way for students to learn a language.” Spanish is the only foreign language available to students in this rural district.

When I asked folks why we had a teacher shortage, I heard several comments over and over. “Fewer students going into teaching.” “New graduates not staying in Wisconsin.” “More teachers retiring or leaving the profession.” “Teaching is no longer a valued profession.”

The Wisconsin Budget Project reported over the last eight years the number of teachers in Wisconsin public schools fell by nearly 3,000 even as school enrollment increased.

They also reported on a troubling decline in experienced teachers. “In the 2013-14 school year,

teaching staff of 39% of school districts had an average of 15 or more years of experience. That share has fallen dramatically since the 2004-05 school year, when 58% of school districts has a teaching staff with an average of 15 or more years or more of experience.”

Not surprisingly, fewer students are entering the education profession. Statistics from the United States Department of Education show a dramatic drop in the number of university students learning to be teachers in Wisconsin. In 2011, 12,624 education majors were enrolled in all types of university-based programs. By 2014, this number had dropped by almost a quarter to 9,563 education majors.

Of course, in 2011, we saw the passage of anti-public employee legislation in Act 10 and the largest cut to public education in Wisconsin’s history. It’s not hard to imagine why a college student might decide to change majors following the words and actions of many elected leaders.

The future troubles many education professionals with whom I spoke. Just who will teach the children born in 2020?

“As we move forward, my largest concern is the quality of teachers. We have become a state that doesn’t value quality education. Why would anyone go into teaching?” Superintendent Baier asked.

I remind my colleagues who voted for Act 10 and the budgets that created this problem just what my mother told me eons ago as I answered that first school bell.

Actions have consequences.

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