http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/school-bus-kids-s5.jpg 

Sen. Vinehout writes about the staff shortage facing many Wisconsin school districts and Superintendent Evers' Work Group on the teacher shortage.

ALMA, WI - "Who will be my teacher?" my son asked me years ago. For a brief point in time, the teacher was the most important person in his young life.

As children head back to school and parents scramble with new schedules, schools are facing their own scheduling headaches. This year a teacher shortage hit many local schools. Around the state, school districts have hundreds of vacancies.

Recently, I presented an overview of state education budget issues in Viroqua. At least a dozen local superintendents, school board members, principals and teachers were in the audience. Following my presentation, the conversation turned to the teacher shortage.

Educators described an environment in which teachers in certain high demand subject areas move from one school district to another based on the best offer.

Two superintendents from neighboring school districts laughed when they realized they spent the summer bidding against each other to snag the same teacher. "Now we have teachers who come back [to our school] and say, 'I'm getting a $6,000 increase in an offer from another school.'"

A staff member paid a $12,000 raise creates problems in districts where teachers went seven years with little raise in pay. John, a local teacher, told the group, "The impact on morale is just horrendous."

Many superintendents, including State Superintendent Tony Evers, saw this crisis coming. Mr. Evers took a number of steps, including the creation of a Working Group on School Staffing Issues.

“Act 10 created a ‘free agency’ environment where competition for high demand and talented teachers is fierce, and financial and geographic differences put many districts at a competitive disadvantage,” stated the group’s final report submitted this summer.

I recently spoke with former Durand Superintendent Jerry Walters who now administers CESA 11, a regional cooperative sharing educational services. He explained post-retirement benefits tended to “give teachers a sense of loyalty”. After Act 10, and the loss of benefits, teachers are like sports player – open to the highest bidder. Few districts can compete in this new world.

School districts have state-imposed revenue caps limiting what they can spend. People are the heart of the school and make up nearly 80% of a district’s budget. Some districts are very short on funds. They gave few raises for many years.

“But some have money to do this,” Mr. Walters told me. “Some Minnesota schools [for example] offer a $10,000 signing bonus… For districts left behind this creates attraction and retention issues…Ultimately it’s the smaller, poorer school district at the bottom of the food chain.”

Rural schools are at a particular disadvantage. Many rural school districts pay ten percent of their budget in transportation costs and have a low revenue cap, which means they don’t have the money to make special offers.

A teacher who worked in Milwaukee, Oconomowoc, Tomah and Westby said, “As long as there is a Middleton, we will lose teachers in Westby.”

To compound problems, fewer students are going into teacher education programs. An April 2016 Journal Sentinel story reported some teacher education programs have 20% to 40% fewer students than a few years ago.

At the Viroqua event, a local elected official, Karen Dahl told the group, “Young people don’t want to go into education because [some in] Wisconsin denigrate the profession and the value of education.”

State Superintendent Evers’ working group offered some solutions to the teacher shortage: cultivate “grow your own” teachers especially in rural areas; make it easier to hire in an emergency; add flexibility so teachers can take on new roles; strengthen ties between K-12 and university teacher education and change recent laws that limit retired teachers from part-time work.

But the simplest part of the solution starts with each of us. I spoke with a math teacher who closed her Facebook page because of negative comments about her profession made by “friends.” She said, “I was in the grocery store and a neighbor came up and said that he didn’t want to pay my salary because I ‘wasn’t worth a dime.’”

Words hurt. And you can help.

Providing every child a great education means getting great people to enter and stay in teaching. We must appreciate the work educators do every day. Our children need an answer to the question, “Who will be my teacher?”