

Survey: Teacher shortage worsening for most Illinois districts

77 percent of superintendents report having trouble filling open positions

By **PETER HANCOCK**
Capitol News Illinois

SPRINGFIELD – A recent survey of Illinois school districts shows most are continuing to have trouble filling open teaching positions with qualified teachers and even more are having difficulty hiring substitute teachers.

It’s a problem that has existed in the state for many years and one that experts attribute to a variety of factors, such as low pay and the difficulty in attracting new teachers to work in certain parts of the state.

The survey has been conducted each of the past four years by the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools. Regional superintendents are in charge of supervising schools in the state’s 38 educational regions and operating regional offices of education. They also act as a kind of conduit of information and support between the Illinois State Board of Education and the state’s 853 local school districts.

“You know, it’s not like we just stubbed our toe, this is a crisis,” IARSS President Mark Klaisner said in an interview. “It’s getting worse each year. And when we asked them to look forward, they said, you know, in the next five years, we don’t see this changing.”

The latest survey was conducted in early October and included responses from 591 of the state’s 853 districts. Of those responding, 77 percent said they have a teacher shortage problem while 93 percent said they have a problem hiring substitute teachers, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Individual districts have responded to the shortage in a variety of ways, such as canceling the offering of some classes or switching them to online formats as well as filling critical positions with teachers who are not fully qualified to teach in a particular grade level or subject area.

In fact, the districts that responded to the survey reported a combined total of 938 open teaching positions – 17 percent of the 5,414 positions that districts were looking to fill – were either unfilled or filled by someone who was not certified in that grade level or subject area. That percentage, however, is actually down from previous surveys.

The largest number of those was in special education at all grade levels, where 195 positions were either vacant or filled by an unqualified teacher. In terms of percentages, though, computer science teachers were also hard to come

by. Forty-one percent of the open computer science positions were either vacant or filled by an unqualified teacher.

Districts also reported having trouble filling elementary education, math, physical education and science positions.

The survey also found that 257 classes offered in the participating districts had been canceled and 195 had been moved online because school administrators could not find educators to teach them.

Education researchers in Illinois say the reasons for the teacher shortage are numerous and complex, but it boils down to the fact that there are more veteran teachers around the state retiring or leaving the profession than there are new teachers coming out of university schools of education.

James Anderson, dean of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign’s College of Education, said in an interview that for a variety of reasons, including the cost of a college education and the salaries teachers earn after graduating, teaching has become a less attractive career than many other professions.

“You graduate from high school, you come to college to become a teacher, you borrow a significant amount of money along the way, then you go into the profession with a very low salary,” he said. “And then you try to pay off your student debt and perform your job as a teacher. And that’s a very difficult invitation to accept.”

The minimum wage for a teacher in Illinois is \$34,576 for the 2021-2022 school year and is scheduled to increase under state law to \$40,000 by the 2023-2024 school year.

Local superintendents also reported having difficulty recruiting teachers to work in remote rural areas.

As schools throughout the state were forced to shift to online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, two-thirds of the districts responding to the survey said it has reduced their need for substitute teachers. Meanwhile, most districts responding to the survey, 51 percent, said the pandemic has not resulted in higher turnover rates while nearly as many, 49 percent, said it does not appear to have had an impact on teacher burnout.

Some districts, however, said the pandemic has made finding substitutes more difficult amid a return to the classroom.

In addition, early in the pandemic, Gov. JB Pritzker issued an executive order waiving certain licensing requirements for teachers, making it easier for new teachers and paraprofessionals to enter the profession, although some of those waivers have since expired.

However, two independent education consultants who wrote an analysis

of the survey data, Bradford White and Thomas Withee, said the pandemic could have an impact on the supply of teachers in future years because it has depressed enrollment in higher education, exacerbating the downward trend in the number of students graduating from teacher preparation programs.

They also said it is still unclear how the pandemic might affect attrition rates going forward.


But Jim Wolfinger, dean of Illinois State University’s College of Education, the state’s largest teacher preparation program, said in an interview that he is more hopeful that as the pandemic eases, interest in the


teaching profession will rebound.

In the report, the regional superintendents offer a number of recommendations to ease the teacher shortage, such as continuing to extend some of the waivers Pritzker initiated to make it easier for new teachers to become licensed. One of those is the requirement that prospective teachers pass a test called the Teacher Performance Assessment, or edTPA, which Illinois lawmakers have considered in recent years but have not yet acted upon.

The regional superintendents also recommend establishing a state-sponsored loan forgiveness program for teachers that go to work in districts with the greatest shortages or in hard-to-fill subject areas.

Orthopedics and Sports Medicine






James Sola, MD

Orthopedic Surgeon

SBL Fayette County Hospital Orthopedic Surgeon James Sola, MD, provides orthopedic care for people in Vandalia and the surrounding communities.

Welcoming New Patients



Sarah Bush Lincoln

Fayette County Hospital

GREENVILLE
Greenville Family Practice
308 W. College Ave.

VANDALIA
The Wellness Complex
825 New York Dr., #2

618-283-5531



Southern Illinois Builders Association

1468 N. Green Mount Road, O’Fallon, IL 62269
(618) 624-9055; ceo@siba-agc.org
Donna Richter, Chief Executive Officer



SIBA and SICAP working together to improve the Southern Illinois Construction Industry!

Representing a strong unionized construction industry with the following attributes:

- Pride in craftsmanship
- Quality of project constructed equates with value;
- Experienced, qualified contractors;
- Skilled workforce, well-trained through a comprehensive apprenticeship program;
- Promotes safety and accident prevention in the industry;
- Supports educational seminars and training programs for all industry personnel;
- Supports economic development programs for the benefit of the construction industry;
- And much more!