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Fewer choosing teaching jobs

By Kavan Peterson, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Classroom enrollment is up in most parts of the country and so is the demand for public school teachers. But many states report that fewer people are choosing to become teachers -- a trend that could lead to a national teacher shortage crisis, especially if baby boomers, who make up the largest age group in the profession, begin retiring en masse.

Increases in college tuition and new pressures to up student test scores have made low-paying teaching jobs less appealing, education advocates say. And because today's college graduates and new teachers typically change careers every five to seven years, turnover for teachers is at a record high.

An estimated half of all teachers leave the field within five years. The turnover costs states an estimated \$2.2 billion a year, according to one [estimate](#), and leaves shortages in critical subject areas.

The shortfall is hitting schools hardest in the core subjects of math and science and in traditionally hard-to-staff areas such as special education and language training for non-English speakers, according to the American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE), which has tracked teacher supply and demand trends for nearly 30 years.

President Bush spotlighted the problem in his State of the Union address in January by proposing \$380 million to recruit more math and science teachers to boost America's international competitiveness. Many governors are pushing initiatives of their own, such as Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's recent proposal to offer \$15,000 bonuses to attract new math and science teachers.

State institutions of higher education have not been graduating enough teachers in math, chemistry and physics for more than a dozen years, said AAEE executive director B.J. Bryant. But in 2005, school administrators surveyed by AAEE in nearly every region in the United States reported not having enough teachers to fill positions in more than 30 subject areas, nearly half the 64 fields covered by the survey. Besides shortfalls in the sciences, nearly every state reported significant shortages in qualified special education teachers, who specialize in teaching students with mental and physical disabilities.

The shortage is expected to get more severe because nearly one-third of all U.S. teachers are ages 55 and older, Bryant said.

"Whenever that group of 55-year-plus begins to feel secure enough to retire, we'll see a demand in almost every field of teaching that will be impossible to meet," she said.

Sun Belt states such as California, Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina and Texas are feeling the worst crunch, Bryant said.

North Carolina, for example, has to look outside the state to fill more than half its 10,000 teaching openings every year, according to the state Department of Public Instruction. By fall 2006, Florida will need to fill 30,000 teaching positions, almost double the amount in previous years because of a spike in retirement and the demands of a 2002 constitutional amendment to reduce classroom sizes. California was able to fill fewer than half of the 2,100 openings for high school math teachers in 2004, according to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

Also hard-hit are states such as Iowa and West Virginia, where teacher salaries have lagged far behind neighboring states.

West Virginia state Sen. John Unger (D) introduced legislation this year to create a Teacher Critical Shortage Area Fund of \$3.5 million for hard-to-fill positions. The money would be targeted at making teacher salaries more competitive in school districts that border Maryland and Virginia. Teachers can make about \$12,000 more in Maryland and \$6,000 more in Virginia than in West Virginia, where teachers make an average of \$38,496 in 2005, according to the American Federation of Teachers' [annual salary survey](#).

Berkeley County, W.V., for example, sandwiched between Maryland's panhandle and Virginia's Washington, D.C., suburbs, has 268 teacher vacancies this year in a school district with fewer than 1,000 teachers. The district has money to hire teachers, but they're losing qualified candidates to schools across the border, Unger said.

"They literally have buses that come into our communities to pick up teachers in the morning and take them to schools across the border in Maryland," Unger said.

Iowa is struggling to fill positions in math and science in schools across the state, and about 2,000 of its 13,000 high school teachers are eligible to retire, according to the Iowa State Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union.

Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack (D) currently is negotiating with the state Legislature on a sweeping education package that proposes \$30 million annually for five years to raise state teacher salaries above the national average of \$46,000.

Since 2001, Iowa has dropped from 36th in the nation for teacher pay to 41st at \$39,284. That's compared to \$53,820 in sixth-ranking Illinois, \$45,010 in 19th-ranking Minnesota and \$41,681 in 27th-ranking Wisconsin.

"Other states are just leapfrogging ahead of us raising teacher salaries while we haven't even been maintaining the status quo," said Linda Nelson, president of the Iowa State Education Association.

According to the Iowa Department of Education, the state has seen a 21 percent drop in student teachers from its three largest public universities in the past two years and a 23 percent drop in new teacher licenses since 2000.

Besides low pay, new teachers also are intimidated by the state's teaching license requirements, which are among the most rigorous in the nation, Nelson said. New teachers must complete two years of probation and mentoring before getting a license, during which time they can be terminated without notice.

Kimberly Stolba, a 21-year-old education student at the University of Iowa, said she's always wanted to be an elementary school teacher but already has decided against teaching in Iowa. The pay is too low and the requirements for getting a teaching license, such as compiling a massive portfolio of classroom activities, are too much work for too little reward, she said.

Instead, she plans to look for a job in Illinois, where elementary school teachers make \$12,500 more on average than in Iowa.

"I'm looking in the Chicago suburbs because it's a much higher pay base, much better benefits and they pay for advanced education like a master's degree, which I'd never get in Iowa," Stolba said.

Intense accountability measures under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) also have increased the pressure on teachers, who often get blamed if their schools are failing to meet NCLB targets, said Barry Wilson, president of the Iowa Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and an education professor at University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls.

NCLB is intended to close achievement gaps between students of different incomes and races and requires states to show gains in student test scores in reading and math every year until 100 percent of students score proficient by 2014. Schools that fall short of annual goals face sanctions.

"It's really unfair to our young teachers and discouraging them from entering the profession, particularly in the most challenging teaching environments where they're most needed," Wilson said.

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Contact Kavan Peterson at kpeterson@stateline.org.

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