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In the face of a statewide teacher shortage he described as an escalating “crisis,” Kentucky’s education commissioner issued a plea Wednesday urging the state’s residents to consider teaching as a first, second or even third career.
“You can positively impact the lives of children and families now and for generations to come. You can inspire Kentucky’s next generation of scientists, health care professionals, educators, attorneys and more,” Wayne Lewis said during a meeting of the state’s Board of Education.

“What’s missing in Kentucky’s schools? You. Take the next step toward teaching. Kentucky students need you.”

According to the Kentucky Department of Education, thousands of teaching positions remain open across the state. Since Jan. 1, almost 5,000 vacancies have been listed on the Kentucky Educator Placement Service maintained by the department.

Describing the issue Wednesday, Lewis framed it within a national shortage.

“From 2008 to 2017, the U.S. saw a 27 percent decrease in completion of education preparation programs; in Kentucky that decrease was 36 percent,” Lewis said, according to a KDE news release. “This trend is creating a crisis. As schools begin a new year, districts are still clamoring to fill positions.”

This week, Kentucky’s Department of Education unveiled Go Teach Kentucky, its attempt to solve the problem. The campaign’s website at goteachky.com focuses on recruiting high school and college students and professionals looking to switch careers.

The initiative starts as early as high school, with the Educators Rising program and Teaching and Learning Career pathway. Undecided college students, professionals with college degrees and trade workers are also a focus, according to the news release.

As part of the Go Teach Kentucky campaign, the department is also taking applications for the Kentucky Academy for Equity in Teaching, a renewable loan forgiveness program designed to help the pool of classroom teachers become as diverse as the students they teach. Eligibility requirements and applications are available at goteachky.com.

For Gary Houchens, a Western Kentucky University professor and Kentucky Board of Education member, stepping up recruitment efforts will play an important role.
“It’s really important because we know that the No. 1 factor in student success ... is the quality of the teacher in the classroom,” Houchens said.

However, he also stressed retaining the state’s current teachers, who he said have been gradually pushed out in part by the growing list of demands placed on the profession. Teachers are increasingly expected to “triage” every social problem students bring to school with them, he said.

“Teaching has never been harder than it is right now,” he said.

Low teacher pay isn’t helping either, Houchens said, adding that higher wage fields can draw potential teachers away and a lack of funding for school resources can frustrate current teachers wanting to do the best job they can.

“We have to focus on recruitment, but we also have to engage lawmakers in encouraging them to provide the resources that are necessary,” for better teacher pay and more resources for schools, Houchens said.

Currently, Houchens said, the state only funds 58 percent of school districts’ transportation costs, and funding streams for teacher training, textbooks and new teacher mentorship were eliminated during the last state budget cycle. Houchens said restoring money to those programs would allow school districts the flexibility to give their teachers raises.
“When you do things like that, then you free up more resources within a district,” he said.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.
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