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ANOTHER VIEW: THE WINCHESTER SUN Teacher shortage may not be ‘crisis’ but is concern

By The Winchester Sun 20 hrs ago

Are Kentucky schools in crisis mode because of teacher shortages?

While some districts argue numbers reported about shortages are inflated, there is no doubt there is a shift in interest in the teaching career, and schools are feeling the impact.

While recent data show openings for teaching positions have increased over the last several decades, the number of people pursuing careers in teaching has declined, signaling the problem is only going to get worse – especially as the state’s more skilled and experienced teachers retire to protect their pensions or leave the profession for other careers.

The state’s teacher shortage was the topic of discussion Wednesday for the Interim Joint Committee on Education, as officials talked of their concerns.

A July article from Kentucky Teacher, a publication of the Kentucky Department of Education, said “critical shortage areas have been identified in a number of subjects and disciplines in all areas of the state.”

Kentucky Teacher reported that since Jan. 1, almost 5,000 open positions have been listed on the Kentucky Educator Placement Service website.

“However, there has been evidence of teacher shortages in Kentucky for several years,” the article said. “There were 6,247 open educator positions listed on KEPS in the 2014-15 school year; that number increased to 8,855 for the 2016-17 school year.”

While many of these positions were filled before the start of the 2019-20 school year, many were not, according to testimony heard by the Joint Committee on Education.

Jim Flynn of the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents said 95 percent of superintendents believe the teacher shortage is a “significant problem.”

KDE Commissioner Wayne Lewis agreed. He said this summer the shortage has reached crisis level as he unveiled his Go Teach KY initiative, which offers various pathways for teachers to become certified in Kentucky while also aiming to recruit more people to seek teaching degrees.

While the number of openings is increasing, interest in teaching is waning, the KDE said.

According to the KDE article, “the number of college students pursuing education degrees declined by more than 13 percent over a five-year period from 2013-14 to 2017-18, according to a report issued by the Council on Postsecondary Education.”

Flynn said that in 2011, there were about 13,000 people enrolled in education programs. In 2017, that number had dropped to 5,000.

The problem with a teacher shortage is it directly and negatively impacts Kentucky students. Without enough teachers, programs will be cut. That means a step back in terms of offering a high-quality education for Kentucky students. Without enough teachers, elective courses that have been integrated into our schools may be cut. We’ll likely start seeing an education lacking in arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and other courses because shortages will mean teachers will have to focus solely on the core curriculum areas.

Students will suffer because of an inability to recruit and retain highly-skilled teachers. Without the most skilled science teachers, our future doctors will suffer. Without the most skilled math teachers, our future engineers will suffer. Without the most skilled English teachers, our future writers will suffer.

A brighter future banks on our young people, and our young peoples' future relies on them getting the best education possible.

With declining interest in teaching, our future could begin to look bleak.

Without a doubt, the recent atmosphere and rhetoric about teachers and education in Kentucky, and particularly how legislators opt to address pension concerns, will play a role in whether people pursue teaching degrees in the future.

Legislatures should spend time in the coming session addressing ways to recruit and retain teachers.

Maybe that means a beefed-up and attractive benefits package, even if it means moving away from the current pension model.



Much like the state has found ways to encourage more interest in STEM careers through vocational studies, career pathways, apprenticeships and other methods, there are ways to let students begin exploring teaching careers early in their education. Maybe there's a

career pathway model for teaching that could be added in our high schools that would put older students in classrooms as aids or assistants and expose them to the rewards of working with students.

To retain teachers, the state needs to look at how to fund competitive salaries and protect and fund existing teachers' retirements. Additionally, the state needs to explore avenues to increase funding for schools, which would allow teachers to do their jobs better.

A Kentucky Center for Economic Policy report issued Thursday said Kentucky students returned to school this year amid historically deep funding cuts.

Ashley Spalding reported for the KCEP that the state's portion of SEEK per-pupil funding has decreased drastically: "The state portion actually decreased each year of the current budget and has declined by \$122 between 2008 and 2020, while the local portion grew \$300." That means local districts are having to spend more and more on students, which means they can afford to spend less and less on recruiting and retaining good teachers.

One key to improving interest in teaching careers will be reshaping the narrative about education in Kentucky. We can't have a system that appears not to value educators and expect to attract highly-skilled, passionate teachers.

We can't have a system that may or may not be able to fund their retirement and expect teachers to sign up, let alone stick around.

We can't have our state officials talking in degrading ways about our teachers and expect them not to react negatively, or expect someone to want to enter into a hostile career environment straight out of college.

We value Kentucky's teachers, and we understand that as time goes on, the profession is becoming increasingly difficult. There is more and more pressure put on teachers, with less and less funding.

It's no easy task to educate the next generation of leaders and citizens, but it's one that someone must take on. We need to explore ways to make choosing that task easy for future educators.

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