

# Crisis hits Oklahoma classrooms with teacher shortage, quality concerns

Oklahoma schools, including TPS, must scramble to replace teachers lost to better salaries in neighboring states and to a rash of early retirements

By ANDREA EGER and NOUR HABIB World Staff Writers | 81 comments

Oklahoma's deepening teacher shortage has education officials trading in their "Help Wanted" signs for ones with a more urgent message: "Help Needed NOW."

As schools ring in the start of a new academic year, administrators are desperately trying to fill teacher vacancies amid a scarcity of applicants.

Evidence of that growing desperation abounds through the number of emergency certification requests at the Oklahoma State Department of Education and through vacancies still advertised by districts.

Since July, the state has received 526 requests for emergency teaching certificates — already exceeding the 506 it received in all of 2014-15. Those certificates allow those who haven't completed basic higher education and training requirements to enter the classroom right away.

"The teacher shortage is at a point of crisis," said state Superintendent Joy Hofmeister. "Emergency certifications continue to skyrocket, and class sizes continue to increase. Until we can attract and retain teachers in our state, education will suffer."

Tulsa Public Schools, which had 568 teachers — or 20 percent — of its certified teaching positions exit over the past 14 months, has resorted to the measure at a record high rate. District officials say they have submitted 59 emergency certificate requests. Records from the state show 40 of those among the total of 526 already processed.

Not so long ago, emergency certificate requests were so rare — 32 were received from public schools statewide in 2011-12 — that each applicant and his or her superintendent were summoned before the state Board of Education to make their case.

Some were denied.

Today, low teacher morale in Oklahoma and better salary and benefits in surrounding states are making it harder for districts to compete for recent college graduates and retain experienced teachers. The state also averaged 3,000 annual teacher retirements in each of the past five years.

The teacher shortage is spinning off a complex web of devastating consequences in course offerings for students and working conditions for the educators left behind.

Tulsa's new superintendent, Deborah Gist, said she didn't fully appreciate all of the implications when she left her position as Rhode Island education commissioner to come here in July.

“Not only do we need a teacher in every classroom, we also need experienced and stable teams of teachers in our schools,” Gist said. “TPS has consistently had around 50 teacher vacancies at the start of school and even through our school year for many years now. So to start the year with a full complement of teachers is an enormous challenge. We have worked tirelessly and creatively to ensure every student in our district has a teacher on the first day of school and throughout the year.”

Three days before the start of school, the TPS website still lists more than 150 teaching positions for applications because hiring needs persist all year. Another 100 support jobs, such as janitors and classroom aides, were also posted.

## **Frustration leads to retirement**

According to the Oklahoma Teachers’ Retirement System, nearly 15,000 teachers retired over the past five years, including 1,100 early retirees. Public schools reported 1,000 unfilled teacher vacancies in August 2014, and over the course of the academic year, another 3,090 teachers retired.

Of last year’s retirees, 238 left early, including Lynetta Tart, who had taught for 39 years at TPS before retiring in June, shortly before her 61st birthday.

“I decided to retire because I was tired of going to meetings,” she said.

To Tart — who most recently taught family and consumer science at Hale Junior High — those meetings represented increasing government mandates and a dwindling amount of time to prepare lessons and teach.

A host of other things made her life as a teacher more difficult, including bigger class sizes, rates of teacher turnover and student discipline problems, plus she feared repercussions for speaking out about those problems.

Tart said she and her colleagues would sometimes stay at school as late as 9 p.m., grading papers and finishing lesson plans. She would also take work home, some nights working past midnight.

Still, Tart doesn’t like the label often used to brand reasons for teachers leaving the profession early: “teacher burnout.”

She said she just couldn’t shake the feeling that “the more work I do, the more work I’m required to do. And I don’t mind working, but I just feel like there’s some things that should be administrative, and there’s some things that should be (done by) teachers.”

In early July, one of Gist’s first actions as Tulsa superintendent was to send a letter asking more than 900 teachers who had left in recent years to consider returning. A spokesman said that although the effort produced about 35 “leads,” none resulted in new employment contracts.

## Influx of novice teachers

Jenks Public Schools was set to start the new school year fully staffed, but two teachers dropped out last week. Officials in the highly sought-after district say their applicant pool is much smaller and also of lower quality.

“It is getting harder and harder to fill positions, especially in special education, math and foreign language,” spokeswoman Bonnie Rogers said. “And we have had three to four applicants for positions that would have had 10 to 15 in the past.”

Another indicator of the lower-quality applicant pool is that Jenks is releasing more teachers after their first or second year, she said.

“Teachers who are new to the district are on temporary contracts, meaning they end in each of the first two years. After that, they go on permanent contracts, but more and more, we’re seeing that we’ve needed to open those positions up to other candidates rather than hire back those temporary contract teachers,” Rogers said.

The staggering number of people entering the classroom for the first time with emergency certificates calls into question not only their instructional effectiveness, but also districts’ ability to support these novices.

Many of Oklahoma’s emergency certificate requests aren’t for usual hard-to-fill science, foreign language and special-education jobs.

Those going into elementary and early childhood classrooms account for 49 percent of the 526 requests for 2015-16.

Talia Shaull, executive director of human capital at TPS, said the state’s two large, urban school districts held out as long as possible before resorting to so many emergency certifications. In the 2013-14 school year, Tulsa had 12 requests and Oklahoma City had eight.

“Even with the decline in the candidates available to urban districts in Oklahoma, Tulsa and Oklahoma City tended to limit emergency certification requests through the 2013-14 school year,” Shaull said. “Emergency certifications were mainly requested for specialized positions, such as those within language-immersion school settings. Starting in 2014 and continuing on in 2015, the number of emergency certification requests has increased exponentially due to the teacher shortage. This trend is likely to continue into the coming years.”

Last year, TPS requested 27 and Oklahoma City requested 165. So far for 2015-16, Tulsa already has 59 requests compared to Oklahoma City’s 143.

Among Tulsa's emergency certification candidates is Nadia Najera, who is set to teach social studies and science at Zarrow International School. She has a bachelor's degree in international studies from George Washington University and previously worked 14 years in mortgage finance.

She was living in Texas when she decided to change careers and completed that state's required coursework and exams for an alternative teaching certificate. But she didn't get to fulfill the requirement of working in a classroom for a full year before her family relocated to Tulsa in fall 2013.

"Because I had passed those exams in Texas, I was told I could teach at the junior high or high school level here, but my passion for language and cultures and immersion has been ongoing all of my life," Najera said. "My only option to teach at the elementary school level was either go back and get an education bachelor's degree, or I could work for a whole school year as an assistant and then apply for alternative certification."

In January 2014, Najera took a job as an assistant in a classroom at Zarrow. She has passed one of Oklahoma's three required exams for alternative certification, but she needed the emergency certificate because she hasn't completed the final two exams.

"It's just such an honor to work with these kids. That's why I really wanted to be at one of the language-immersion programs," Najera said. "I followed my partner to Tulsa, but compared to Texas and what I could have made had I stayed in Texas, it's quite a shock. I would have probably started at \$10,000 to \$15,000 more in Texas.

"One of the other big differences I've noticed is a lot of the teachers in Oklahoma who are young tend to have second jobs just be able to make ends meet or to live well. That also affects the quality of teaching — if they could put that energy into their classrooms, imagine how much better their instruction could be."

## **Teachers recruited away**

School officials just over the state lines routinely recruit Oklahoma teachers to relocate or simply commute.

Craig Correll, superintendent at Coffeyville Public Schools in Kansas, said, "We do have several teachers that live in Oklahoma and teach here. We also have several applicants when we have open positions."

Ken Ramey, of the Siloam Springs School District, said his district and Rogers and Bentonville easily recruit Oklahoma teachers because Arkansas offers better salary, benefits and retirement. His district has had teachers from Tulsa, Claremore, Inola, Grove, Jay, Vinita and Tahlequah.

"We have had wonderful teachers coming to us with experience along with strong content knowledge," Ramey said. "Our children benefit from well-prepared teachers, and Oklahoma has sent us some really well-trained, experienced teachers who have contributed strongly to our school system."

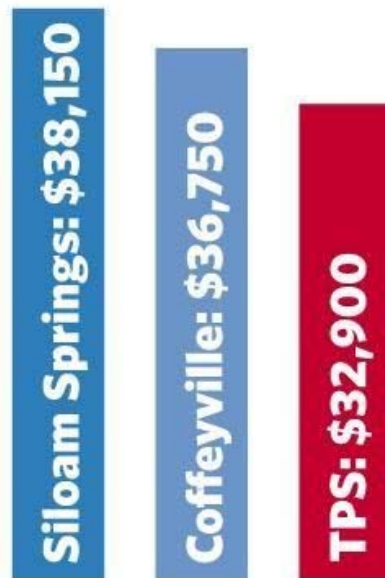
Dan Siemens left Owasso Public Schools in 2000 to become principal at Southside Elementary School in Siloam Springs. He routinely hires Oklahoma teachers.

"I hired two just this year from small districts just over the border — Westville and Oaks Mission," Siemens said. "The pay is definitely better."

## MONEY MATTERS

Salary comparison for TPS teachers against those with similar experience in two districts just across Oklahoma's state lines — Coffeyville, Kansas, and Siloam Springs, Arkansas.

### STARTING SALARY



### SALARY WITH 5 YEARS EXPERIENCE



Compared to TPS' starting salary of \$32,900, Coffeyville starts teachers at \$36,750 and Siloam Springs at \$39,500. When teachers reach their fifth year at TPS, they earn \$34,500. For that same experience level in Coffeyville and Siloam Springs, educators make \$38,150 and \$41,348, respectively.

The Oklahoma State School Boards Association is conducting a statewide survey to determine an exact count of teaching vacancies, with the results due out in late August. The survey also asks how many positions have been eliminated because qualified candidates couldn't be hired.

Last year, 856 public school classes were canceled because not even substitute teachers were available, according to a spring survey conducted by accreditation officials at the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

OSSBA Executive Director Shawn Hime said immediate legislative action is needed on a commitment to improve teacher pay over the coming years.

"There is real momentum to try to have a long-term solution for teacher compensation so we can compete with Siloam Springs, Arkansas, and Wichita, Kansas, and Denton, Texas, that we hear about all the time," Hime said. "Even if there isn't more money right away because of the state budget situation, if they would put a long-term solution in place, that sends the message that teachers really are respected and that

there is hope for the future. That could go a long way to recruiting or retaining teachers that are on the bubble about going to another state or another profession.”

## Frustrations outweigh rewards

It’s too late for Hannah Stephenson, who taught at Union Public Schools for five years before moving back to Oregon this summer.

“I got into teaching because I love kids, and I thought it would be a perfect opportunity to impact their lives,” Stephenson said, “and I just find that over the years, the frustrations of teaching have ended up outweighing all of the rewards.”

Stephenson taught fourth and first grades at McAuliffe and Boevers elementaries and grew frustrated over ballooning class sizes.

“That may not seem to make a big difference to anyone else, but there is a big difference between 22 kids and 29 kids,” she said. “It’s hard for them to learn when they’re packed in there so tightly. And we end up doing a lot of just classroom management and trying to kind of keep your kids out of each other’s face, and resolve conflicts. ... It feels like teaching doesn’t get to happen as much as you would like it to.”

Stephenson saw some colleagues wanting to leave the profession after only two years. In addition to low pay, they were upset with a lack of resources for special-education students, plus state testing and school grade cards.

She wants to explore other careers in Oregon but admits she still contemplates a return to the classroom.

“I would love to be in a classroom,” she said, “but I need for it to be in a way that I know I’m able to teach my kids in the most effective way possible, and I don’t feel like I can do that here.”

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## Teacher vacancies by district

| School       | Total teacher vacancies | Certification areas                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | School start date |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Tulsa        | 4                       | 1 band teacher at Webster High, 1 kindergarten teacher at Hawthorne Elementary, 1 science teacher at East Central Junior High, ½ (part-time) counselor at Early Childhood Development Center-Porter and ½ (part-time) special education teacher at Burroughs Elementary | Aug. 20           |
| Bixby        | 6                       | 2 kindergarten, 1 elementary, 2 intermediate, 1 middle school                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Aug. 20           |
| Broken Arrow | 14                      | 1 pre-k, 1 fifth grade, 1 secondary math, 1 secondary science, 10 special education (3 pre-k, 3 elementary, 4 secondary)                                                                                                                                                | Aug. 20           |
| Jenks        | 2                       | 1 psychologist, 1 secondary science                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Aug. 19           |
| Owasso       | 0                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Aug. 13           |
| Sand Springs | 1                       | school nurse                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Aug. 20           |

## By the numbers

**526:** Requests for emergency teaching certificates made to the state. **49 percent** are for early childhood and elementary education teachers.

**59:** Requests for emergency teaching certificates by TPS made to the state Department of Education this year. TPS made 27 all of last year.

**158:** Number of teaching positions advertised on the TPS website as of Friday. Last year, the district opened with 70 teaching positions unfilled.

**856:** Number of public school classes in Oklahoma that were canceled last year because not even substitute teachers were available.

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