

In an already struggling district, Detroit schools deal with extreme teacher shortage

[Lori Higgins](#) , Detroit Free Press 11:24 p.m. ET May 20, 2017



On any given day in the Detroit Public Schools Community District, about 100 classes are operating without a permanent teacher — the result of a dire teacher vacancy problem that is taxing schools, teachers, students and principals.

As of April 27, the district had 263 teacher vacancies. Of that number, 161 were being filled by long-term substitute teachers, including several dozen that are part of a program that puts them on a quicker track toward full certification.

Schools are employing a variety of methods to cope day-to-day. Some teachers are taking on bigger loads. Some are giving up their

preparation time. Some principals are covering classes. And in some cases, instructional specialists and curriculum leaders are filling in.

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"There's constantly someone covering or someone being pulled from a different role," said James Baker, deputy superintendent for human resources.

It's not an ideal situation, especially in a district that is struggling to improve academic achievement. It's why the district is trying to be more aggressive with its recruiting efforts, and it's why a great deal of emphasis is being placed on a recruitment fair taking place Tuesday.

"What is being missed is just a person on a daily basis that is going through the curriculum and giving those students exactly what every student should expect," Baker said of those classes without a permanent teacher.

At that recruitment fair at King High School, 3200 E. Lafayette, the district will be making conditional offers to qualified people.

Ivy Bailey, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, said last month that the situation is leading to burnout.

"People don't understand the physical and the mental and the emotional impact this has had," Bailey said. "Some days, some teachers don't get a prep. You need a break. It's affecting people's health. It's affecting morale."

The bigger effect, said King High math teacher David Menczer, is how it's impacting the way students perform on high-stakes standardized exams. He says too many students are going too long without a permanent math or science teacher.

"By the time they're taking an SAT, those effects show up on their test scores," Menczer said. "And everyone is judging the school."

District pushes recruiting

What DPSCD is experiencing is an impact of what's happening nationally: Fewer people are going into the teaching profession, leaving the pool of potential candidates far smaller than it was in previous years.

Interim Superintendent Alycia Meriweather told board of education members May 9 that local universities are producing 38% fewer teacher candidates.

"When I go to career days and talk to children about how many of you want to be a teacher, very few of them raise their hand," Meriweather said. "We've got to change that. It's the most amazing job you could ever have. But we've got to make it more appealing in the entire country and we definitely have to make it more appealing here in Detroit."

She told the board the district is working on a deal with teacher candidates who've completed their student teaching in the district. They may not receive their teacher certification until the summer, but they do meet all the requirements to be a substitute teacher.

"We can transition them right into positions in buildings where they've worked for the last six months or a year," Meriweather said.

The district is taking other steps, too. Baker said officials have been to more than 20 recruiting fairs this school year and plan to attend more before the end of June.

"Of those events, we've been able to have face to face contacts with well over 400 candidates," he said.

He said the district needs to more than double the number of recruitment fairs it can attend next year, but that may require a reorganization of the department and the need for more recruiting staff. Board members have pushed the district to recruit at historically black colleges and universities.

During that May 9 meeting, Sonya Mays, the board's treasurer, said a previous emergency manager for the district made changes in the human resources department "which left us without having a dedicated recruiting team."

"In this era of needing to be much more aggressive about recruiting and retaining teachers, it does make sense to revisit a possible restructuring of the department to include that function once again."

The board's finance committee, which Mays chairs, has decided to have that request be taken up by Nikolai Vitti, the district's newly hired superintendent who begins in the job Tuesday. Vitti has identified the vacancies as a key issue the district will need to resolve.

Baker said the district also is reaching out to the five or six charter schools that are closing in the city, encouraging employees to apply for teaching jobs in the district.

The district is working more closely with universities "to get as many of them to send their student teachers our way," he said. They've also eased district requirements for subbing. It used to require a bachelor's degree. Now, the requirement is the same as what's required statewide — 90 hours of college credit.

DPSCD is specifically targeting retired teachers, though those educators are limited in how much they can earn in retirement if they don't want to risk their pensions. The Michigan Legislature has eased that in specific subject areas that are particularly difficult to find teachers for in the state.

And social media is taking on more prominence. For instance, the district is spending under \$500 to get information out about the Tuesday job fair to about 100,000 people between the ages of 22 and 55.

"We're really hoping social media gives us the opportunity just to get the message out about the opportunities here in Detroit," Baker said.

Retention also an issue

Donya Odom, principal at Communication and Media Arts High School, began the school year without a teacher to teach French classes.

"When you have parents coming to open houses to meet teachers, and you have to tell a parent that the position will be filled, that makes parents very uneasy," Odom said.

So uneasy, in fact, that she and others worry that the vacancies can lead parents to leave the district for other schools.

Odom, who said she has covered classes herself to deal with vacancies, was eventually able to find a teacher about a week into the school year. But that teacher isn't coming back for the 2017-18 school year, citing salary as an issue.

A beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree in the Detroit district would earn about \$35,680, while someone with five years of experience would earn about \$42,000.

Cassandra Washington, the executive director of the division of talent and human resources, said one thing that helps is that the district provides signing and retention bonuses for teachers in crucial subject areas, which covers a number of disciplines, including math, foreign languages and special education.

Washington said those incentives include a \$500 signing bonus and a \$1,000 retention bonus for teachers who stay until the end of the school year.

The district is heavily relying on long-term subs like Faith Washington, who teaches science classes at Cooke S.T.E.M. Academy, a school with a relatively new focus on science, technology, engineering and math.

Principal Damon Sewell said he has a strategy with young subs like Washington. Instead of throwing her into a full classroom five days a week, he starts them out small — working with small groups of students then working up to a larger number of students. All the while, he said, he's ensuring they're getting the coaching and training they need to be successful.

"We're trying to figure out — how do we hold on to a person like this," Sewell said of Washington. "I'm hoping to keep her on staff."

Washington, 22, who has a degree in computer science, has been subbing in the district since December. She's in charge of doing hands-on science experiments with groups of students to go along with their science instruction.

Teaching isn't what Washington had planned for a career, but she's starting to have second thoughts.

"If I were to get an offer in computer science, I might have to turn it down because I love the kids so much," she said.

The heavy reliance on long-term subs, though, can have disadvantages. They're filling a key role, but while they're doing that, there are fewer subs to go around to cover if teachers are out because of illness or other reasons.

"In a perfect world ... you want your pool to be circulated where they're fresh and re-invigorated. Sometimes that's not the case when you're constantly going to that pool to do the day-to-day" substituting.

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Detroit teacher recruitment fair

On Tuesday, DPSCD is holding a recruitment fair from 4-8 p.m. at King High School, 3200 E. Lafayette. Representatives from schools in the district will be on hand to interview applicants, and the district will be making conditional offers on the spot.

Areas of crucial need, the district says: Math, English/language arts, vocational, homeroom, world languages, science/integrated science, special education, early childhood, music and social studies.

For more information, go to www.detroitk12.org/employment

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