

Teacher shortage in Mississippi

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MERIDIAN, Miss. (WTOK) - There's a teacher shortage in Mississippi, and the problem is bigger than many people might realize. According the Mississippi Department of Education from 2007 to 2017 there was a 92% decrease in the number of people who applied for a teacher's license in the state. During that time that number dropped from 7,620 applicants to 603. Today we are talking with some local officials in search for the answer to the problem.

"Colleges and universities are not turning out as many of those graduates," says Kimberly Kendrick. She is the Human Resource Director for the Meridian Public School District. "Across the board, they're not turning out as many graduates period, but even less in special education. So, that's where it's hit us the hardest."

Special education, and upper level math and science are often the hardest teacher positions to fill for the district.

Dr. Jeffrey Leffler is an Assistant Professor for Elementary Education at MSU Meridian. He is also the Director of Graduate Studies for the school's Division of Education. He says MPSD is not the only district dealing with this problem. In fact, he says rigid requirements for teachers are major factors.

"In many times we have created a situation where people that may have been high quality don't get in based on what may be an arbitrary requirement," says Dr. Leffler.

He says becoming a teacher in Mississippi is not easy and here's why. If you don't make at least a 21 on the ACT, you have to take the Praxis Core test. It focuses on three subject areas which are: reading, writing and math. This is a test that can be required for people to get into any teacher certification program at a four-year institution in the state. Critics say the big problem is with the math portion, which focuses heavily on geometry and higher levels of that subject. This has left some to ask if everyone who applies for a teacher's license in Mississippi should have to meet the same requirements?

"I don't know that having a 21 ACT or being highly proficient in advanced Geometry are necessarily the qualifications that are needed to be a good special education teacher," says Leffler, "or for that matter, a kindergarten teacher or 10th grade Social Studies teacher."

To address the shortage and attract quality teachers, both the Meridian Public School District and MSU Meridian have put in place special programs. In fact, MPSD is teaming up with William Carey University and the Phil Hardin Foundation to offer free alternate route classes for professionals who have qualified and agree to work for at least three years within the district.

"This eliminates some barriers for some because it eliminates some of the financial responsibility," says Kendrick.

If things go as planned, the roughly 30 students in MPSD's program will start their weekly night classes later this month. They're scheduled to finish in late May, and some could start teaching in the classroom by this fall.