

Teachers lured from struggling states

By Nathaniel Weixel, Special to Stateline.org

Debbie Johnson got her teaching degree from Michigan State University, but recruiters convinced the 23-year-old to start her career in Georgia, where the weather is warm, the cost of living is lower and the schools offer more resources, like projectors and interactive wireless pads.

“I like technology,” Johnson said. “There are a lot of (classroom) resources here I hadn’t seen in Michigan. There’s an amazing opportunity.”

Michigan is one of 31 states facing a multi-million budget gap this year, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That makes Michigan’s teachers prime poaching targets of out-of-state recruiters from states like Texas, Georgia, Nevada and Wyoming where school-age populations are growing.

Even if teachers aren’t yet being laid off, a tough economic climate is often enough to drive them away, said Kelly Herndon, director of recruitment and retention for Gwinnett County, Ga.

“I watch the markets,” Herndon said. “I’ll admit, if the economy is in bad shape, or the state legislature isn’t managing funds, I focus on those states.”

In some states, teachers are being let go because of shrinking budgets and shrinking school populations, including Michigan, Florida and California, which is facing a projected \$15.2 billion deficit in 2009.

But one state’s misfortune is an opportunity for others, like Nevada, which is also struggling with its budget, but relies heavily on recruiting out-of-state teachers to fill its classrooms. Last year for instance, only 676 new teachers came from Nevada schools, out of 2,750 hires, according to the Nevada Department of Education.

Most of the new recruits went to work in Clark County — the largest school district in the state and fifth largest in the nation — where growth in new teacher positions has far outpaced the number of locally educated teachers.

Emily Aguero, Clark County’s executive director of recruiting said she sends teams throughout the country, but concentrates more on states with financial troubles. “We target states where their economy is slowing down,” Aguero said. “We sell how wonderful it is to teach in Nevada.”

Another factor many recruiters consider in scouting for new hires is the quality of a state’s teacher education programs. In a state with a strong reputation, like California, out-of-state recruiters might spend more money on advertising or making multiple recruiting trips.

Aguero said she’s never experienced backlash from a state for luring its teachers away. Some states might put Nevada’s booth in an unfavorable position at job fairs, but she said it’s always been in a spirit of friendly competition.

“A lot of areas where there’s a slow economy, they’d appreciate that we can give jobs to

teachers,” Aguero said.

But that’s not the case for one California teachers’ representative. Dennis Smith, secretary treasurer of the California Federation of Teachers, said he thinks that when states like Nevada poach California’s teachers, they’re taking advantage of the state’s political problems.

“They’re trying to capitalize on California’s woes,” Smith said. “It’s harmful to California’s future and economy.” The blame for California’s teacher exodus lies with the Legislature and its inability to pass a budget that would close the state’s deficit, Smith said. The lawmakers’ months-long impasse there has resulted in the longest overdue state budget in history.

As an educator, though, Smith said he knows there’s not much he can do about it.

“We’re doing what we can politically to educate the legislators of the problem,” he said. “California’s got itself backed into a corner. When schools are caught in the middle of a political football game, it’s the students who are losing.”

While the faltering economy in some states has refocused some efforts, out-of-state teacher recruitment has a long history.

Richard Kouri, public affairs director for the Texas State Teachers Association, said his state has been heavily recruiting for the past decade and will most likely continue for the next, mainly because of a rapidly growing student population.

On the east coast, Georgia is another state that relies heavily on out-of-state teachers. Rick Eiserman, director of policy and communication at the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, said about a quarter of the 15,000 new teacher hires come from other states.

Like Texas, Georgia’s student population is growing, and Eiserman said the state needed to make their openings desirable to attract good candidates. One way was to raise teacher salaries, and Georgia’s teachers now are some of the highest paid in the Southeast, Eiserman said.

Bobby Stevens, a consultant with the Metropolitan Regional Education Service Agency in Georgia, said new college graduates are easiest to recruit because they are more willing to move. MRESA, a state-funded consortium of 30 school districts that targets college seniors, has a limited budget, Stevens said, so the group tries to maximize its efforts.

“We target large state job fairs,” Stevens said. “You want quantity before quality. If we drum up 100 candidates, it’s up to the districts to sort them out. It’s about where we can generate the most candidates for the districts to consider.”

In tough economic times, Stevens said, recruiters look for former teachers who have been laid off from more lucrative jobs to return to a teaching career.

“We run counter to the economy,” Stevens said. “When it’s bad, recruitment is good.”

School Funding

Hearing Starts in Ongoing School Funding Dispute

HELENA – Education groups asked a judge Monday to rule that the state has failed to address his 4-year-old ruling that declared the state's school funding system unconstitutional.

The old court battle over school funding was renewed in Helena District Court, where arguments over the issue are expected to last most of the week.

Earlier this year, Judge Jeffrey Sherlock said he was unsure if the state had fixed the school funding formula that school districts argue is inadequate. The judge ordered both sides back into court for the compliance proceeding, and said he was worried that most school funding is still funneled through the old formula that he found problematic.

The Montana Quality Education Coalition and others want Sherlock to find the state has not done enough to meet his 2004 ruling.

"Since that decision, some good things have happened and some not so good things. That's why we are here," education association attorney Jim Molloy said.

The state, however, argued it has increased school funding 25 percent over the past four years through a series of regular and special legislative sessions, interim committees and executive requests.

Before renewing the lawsuit, the MQEC wanted negotiations with the state over a settlement offer that calls for an extra \$260 million per year in school funding.

But both Attorney General Mike McGrath and Gov. Brian Schweitzer proclaimed that the lawsuit is no longer relevant following changes made in recent years to funding levels.

The governor said the new hearing is a waste of money.

"This is an example of taxpayers suing taxpayers and taxpayers paying for lawyers on both sides," Schweitzer said Monday in a statement. "This is money that could be going towards other things like teacher salaries or technology in the classroom."

By Matt Gouras, Associated Press, 09-23-08

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Gazette Opinion: A new look at Montana school facilities

Montana public school facilities should be on the agenda when the Legislature convenes in January. A starting point for discussion, "K-12 Public School Facility Condition Assessment," was published earlier this month by the state Department of Administration.

Lawmakers and Gov. Brian Schweitzer ordered that study back in December 2005 when a special session convened to deal with school funding issues. The 59-page executive summary released this month gives a lot of information about Montana schools as a group. The study's district-specific data on crowding, energy efficiency and building conditions isn't yet available, but is expected to be forthcoming in August.

The state study specifically looked at schools' energy usage and identified potential for substantial consumption savings. According to information in the study, Montana schools' costs for gas (for heat), electricity and other fuels rose from \$18.5 million in 2000 to \$27.3 million in 2006 and then declined slightly in 2007 to \$27.18 million.

"A modest 10 percent reduction in consumption across the board would result in over \$2.7 million available on an annual basis for other school system needs," the report notes. The report estimates that 68 percent of Montana school facilities were built before 1970. Yet it found that most buildings were in good condition. Out of 2,195 buildings assessed, 56 were determined to be in poor condition and 202 in fair condition.

Local school staff and trustees have done a good job maintaining buildings, said Linda McCulloch, state superintendent of public instruction, noting that most deficiencies are wear out. McCulloch said the 2009 Legislature will have at least \$52.3 million to address building maintenance from investment legislation that she and former Secretary of State Bob Brown championed several years ago to lessen cuts to education in a biennium when the state budget was short of money.

How far would \$52.3 million go around the state?

Billings Public Schools alone has estimated its deferred maintenance backlog at \$85 million. More than 10 percent of all K-12 students statewide are educated in Billings.

The traditional means in Montana for improving school buildings is locally voted bond issues or voted building reserve levies. For some schools, that local financing became more difficult after a greater share of school operating costs were shifted to local property taxpayers during the 1990s. The cost shift hasn't been reversed by more recent boosts in state education support.

The state study didn't put dollar amounts on costs of upgrading buildings. Local school leaders will need to communicate that information with their communities and their legislators. Safe, functional school facilities are an integral factor in providing high-quality education to Montana children, a factor recognized by law enacted in 2005. The 2009 Legislature should take steps to carry out that law. Lawmakers should ensure that K-12 school buildings are both conducive to learning and efficiently operated.