

# Recruiting teachers in Michigan: Vacancies lead to wining and dining, incentives

[Lori Higgins](#), **Detroit Free Press** Published 5:27 p.m. ET Nov. 3, 2017 | Updated 8:46 p.m. ET Nov. 3, 2017

One day last spring, Grand Rapids Public Schools sent a bus to Wayne State University in Detroit to pick up a dozen or so wannabe teachers and brought them back to Michigan's second-largest city for a day of wining and dining — and recruiting.

These education majors were treated to lunch at Vander Mill Cider, dinner at Brewery Vivant, a visit to the Urban Institute for Contemporary Art, a visit to the Gerald R. Ford Academic Center and a panel discussion featuring new and veteran district teachers.

The goal: Connect with these future teachers early, while they're still in college, and hope that when they graduate they'll consider Grand Rapids schools as a destination for their first jobs.

It's an example of the aggressiveness with which some districts are tackling what many say is a growing problem: a shrinking pool of certified teachers in crucial areas such as special education, English as a second language, math and science. Career-technical programs are also struggling to find instructors. Just as difficult is finding substitute teachers.

"Teachers are not used to being wined and dined," said Nick Swartz, the talent acquisition manager for the Grand Rapids district, which relied on donations and sponsors to pay for the recruitment tour in April. "Recruiting teachers is becoming a competitive market. We're going to keep doing things like this."

The scramble to fill vacancies is happening as the number of people earning teaching certificates has taken a sharp dive, and as the number of people enrolling in teacher preparation programs has also declined dramatically.

The Detroit Public Schools Community District's efforts to fill vacant teaching positions gets the big headlines, and for good reason. This summer, the district had more than 400 vacant positions — a number that has been whittled down to 150. DPSCD, unlike most districts, is struggling across the board — needing teachers in a wide variety of subjects.

Across Michigan, district leaders are having to get more aggressive in recruiting teachers. Some are seeing fewer applicants for teaching jobs. And it's becoming increasingly common for teaching positions to go unfilled deep into the beginning of the school year. The Grand Rapids district had about 30 vacancies left to fill last week.

At an Oct. 17 legislative hearing, Curt Babcock, superintendent of North Muskegon Public Schools, said that for the first time in his eight years there, the district "scrambled and just filled our last position a month and a half into the school year."

"It was because we had to go back to the drawing board to find the right person," Babcock said.

Meanwhile, competition among districts is becoming fierce, as higher pay and attractive incentives lure teachers away. And schools more often find it difficult to retain teachers as they compete with the private sector.

"I had a (math) teacher quit two weeks ago and he's going into engineering. He's been with us two years," said Janet McLeod, human resources director for the Waterford School District.

At a September statewide conference of school administrators, Chris Wigent, the executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators, asked how many of the 300 in attendance had a vacancy they were having trouble filling.

"About half the room raised their hand," Wigent said.

## Pay matters in recruiting, retention

Some say districts must try new approaches to dealing with shortages. Ben DeGrow, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, told lawmakers at a Senate Education Committee hearing this week that districts need to offer higher salaries to teachers in those hard-to-fill areas.

"The predominant single salary schedule that bases salary exclusively on seniority and advanced academic degrees is inflexible, ineffective and unsustainable," DeGrow said. "Michigan school districts need to start to use the laws of supply and demand to their advantage, not just settle to be victims of them."

Some districts are somewhat inching in that direction by offering incentives to teachers in those hard-to-fill subjects.

For instance, if you're certified to teach in autism spectrum disorder classrooms, you can get a bonus in Dearborn Public Schools. The district started offering the bonuses this school year to current and new teachers who must commit to at least five years, said Maysam Alie-Bazzi, executive director of staff and student services. The bonuses range from \$1,000 in the first year to \$2,500 in year seven.

Meanwhile, DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti has said the district is negotiating with the Detroit Federation of Teachers to provide financial incentives to lure teachers in crucial subjects.

Other steps districts are taking:

- Some districts — from Detroit to Grand Rapids to Dearborn — are increasing starting salaries for new teachers, hoping that will draw candidates. The recently negotiated contract in Detroit bumps the starting salary for a teacher with a bachelor's degree from \$35,683 to \$38,500. In Dearborn, a new salary schedule will boost salary for a beginning teacher with a bachelor's degree from \$33,672 to \$36,468. Districts are increasingly developing partnerships with local colleges and universities to build pipelines of teacher candidates. Grand Rapids, for instance, has partnerships with Grand Valley State University and Aquinas College that either brings student teachers with ESL certification to their district, or allow existing teachers in the district to receive such certification. "We have a really diverse population in our district, a lot of immigrants, a lot of refugees," Swartz said. "We're really doing our best to make sure our students get the services they deserve from their school district."
- Districts are also relying heavily on long-term substitute teachers to fill in gaps, and using administrators to cover classes left open. At Ottawa Hills High in Grand Rapids, for instance, Principal Kaushik Sarkar has been teaching one math class this school year — an arrangement that ends next week because the district was finally able to hire a permanent teacher.

- Substitute teacher shortages have prompted lawmakers to loosen rules, giving districts more flexibility to hire retired teachers as subs on a limited basis, without risking the pensions of those subs. A current bill would extend that flexibility beyond its expiration in July. Another bill would allow someone with a high school diploma to substitute teach in a subject area in which they can show expertise. Right now, a sub has to have 90 hours of college credit.

## Fewer students, fewer teachers

The Michigan Department of Education in September released two white papers — one on [trends in teacher certification](#) in the state and the other on [teacher turnover](#).

From 1996 to 2016, the number of initial teacher certificates issued in Michigan dropped from 6,077 to 3,696.

"It peaked in 2004," with 9,664 certificates, Abbie Groff-Blaszak, director of the MDE's office of educator talent, told lawmakers Tuesday. "It has been steadily and sometimes sharply declining since then."

Meanwhile, there has been a 40% decline in enrollment in teacher preparation programs as well as a 25% decline in the number of people completing prep programs in the last five years, she said.

A common question people have is whether the declines are simply a market correction, given Michigan's total K-12 student population is on the decline, she said. But the data show that while the initial certificates have declined 62% since its 20-year peak in 2004, K-12 enrollment has declined 14% since its peak in 2003.

Michigan used to be an over-producer of prospective teachers. In 2007, the Free Press reported that teacher preparation programs were producing so many teachers that students graduating were often having to leave Michigan to find jobs. And that's why the State Board of Education placed a moratorium on the approval of new teacher prep programs.

DeGrow and Jason Mellema, superintendent of the Ionia Intermediate School District, both noted that MDE data show the state has 105,000 people with teaching certificates who aren't currently in the classroom.

But it's unclear whether that 105,000 is a pool districts can draw from. Groff-Blaszak said that number includes school administrators who've kept their teaching certification, private school teachers, people no longer living in Michigan and people who've left teaching for private sector jobs.

## Negative opinion of educators

So why are the teacher numbers down? One thing people agree on is that there's a negative perception of education, and specifically the teaching job.

Public school advocates have often pointed blame at lawmakers, citing efforts to remove tenure protections, make it easier to fire poor-performing teachers, eliminate teacher pensions, and weaken bargaining rights.

But at Tuesday's hearing, Sen. Marty Knollenberg questioned, "Who's responsible for this negative perception?"

"It certainly isn't coming from lawmakers," said Knollenberg, saying lawmakers aren't telling teachers they're terrible and overpaid. "Lawmakers don't say that."

There was a consensus at the hearing: The media is to blame because of negative stories about education.

"What we need to do is get the media to write more stories about the virtue of public education," said Sen. Phil Pavlov, the chair of the committee.

"We've all got to own this problem," Wigent said Wednesday. Lawmakers have to look at the impact of what they've done in efforts to reform public education, and the education community, which he said "has been very reactionary to policy changes," also has to own its role.

The public in general also has played a role, Wigent said. While they've been supportive of public education at the local level, they've been less so at the state level, Wigent said. "I think that has filtered down into the teaching ranks."

Wigent said he hopes the legislative discussion at the meeting this week isn't a one-time thing. He said an alliance — made up of the executive directors of education groups across the state — has created a work group to analyze the problem and come up with short- and long-term solutions.

"Unfortunately, we feel it's going to get worse as time goes on," Wigent said.

Some districts are building pipelines from within. Grand Rapids is looking at creating middle and high school teacher preparation clubs for students interested in teaching. That district and others — including Detroit — are also considering creating academies that give high school students a deep introduction into the teaching profession.

Such a program exists in Chippewa Valley Schools, where high school students at Dakota and Chippewa Valley high schools can take a year-long Teacher Cadet class. It's part of the district's career technical education programs.

The class covers everything from classroom management to curriculum planning. They also work on developing lesson plans, and under the supervision of a cooperating teacher, they teach lessons, said Claire Brisson, the director of career and technical education in the district. The class at Dakota has averaged 23 students a year in the last five years, while the Chippewa Valley class has averaged 19 to 20 students. Both can hold 33 students.

"We have never filled the class to capacity," she said.

Alie-Bazzi and McLeod said that in addition to the issue of shortages, districts will also have to address retention issues.

"In the past, teachers would be hired and they would be married to their districts," Alie-Bazzi said. Now, though, "it's become increasingly difficult to retain them because they have more options and there are vacancies everywhere."

Meanwhile, districts like Grand Rapids will continue looking for innovative ways to recruit. Swartz said he'll keep in touch with the Wayne State students who were brought to Grand Rapids in April. He said districts can no longer expect teacher candidates to come to them.

"We have to do things differently," Swartz said. "We have to give people a reason to come here."

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