

NC schools facing teacher recruitment and retention challenge

Fewer college students want to become teachers

Largest group of teachers have 1.5 years of experience

Educators say more needs to be done to help new teachers

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RALEIGH

Higher education and K-12 educators said Wednesday that more needs to be done to recruit and retain North Carolina teachers at a time when fewer students want to enter the profession and those who are in the classroom are less experienced.

Enrollment at the 15 UNC schools of education has dropped 30 percent since 2010, according to Alisa Chapman, UNC system vice president for academic and university programs. The UNC system provides 37 percent of the state's teachers, so any decline in the education programs makes it more difficult for districts to recruit teachers.

Chapman also said 25 percent of the state's 100,000 public school teachers are in their first five years on the job. The most common group of teachers is those with about 1.5 years of experience.

"We have a greening workforce," Chapman told attendees at a panel discussion at the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at N.C. State University. "We do need to put in place the right structures and support systems to help support the beginning teachers that we have."

What North Carolina is seeing is a national problem, with states that pay teachers more also seeing drops in teaching candidates, according to Terry Stoops, director of education studies for the John Locke Foundation. Stoops, who attended the panel discussion, said it's also not a surprise to see the impact of so many veteran teachers retiring.

Over the past two years, the legislature raised pay for beginning teachers to \$35,000 to make the starting salary more competitive with surrounding states. Key lawmakers say a teacher pay raise is likely this year but have dismissed as unrealistic state schools Superintendent June Atkinson's call for a 10 percent pay raise.

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“If you consider the number of kids that are no longer choosing to teach in schools of education, the pay rate in North Carolina that’s not attractive to neighboring states, we’re really facing some tough statistics in front of us,” said Wake County Superintendent Jim Merrill.

The panel took place against the backdrop of other education changes made in the past few years by the General Assembly.

Wetonah Parker, director of teacher education at Meredith College, criticized the elimination of state funding of the Teaching Fellows Program, a scholarship and enrichment program for prospective teachers.

Parker also faulted the state for placing letter grades for schools based largely on their passing rates. High-poverty schools make up many of the schools with the lowest grades.

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“It’s difficult for a school system to recruit teachers into schools if they’re listed as D or F,” Parker said. “I didn’t want a D or F on my report card. Why would I run to a school that’s been rated D or F?”

The forum was organized by the Cooperating Raleigh Colleges, the Wake County school system and Wake County SmartStart. One of the goals was to share information on what strategies are being used that could help improve the state’s teaching workforce.

Chapman said the UNC schools are more aggressively recruiting teaching candidates. She also said that the New Teacher Support Program that the UNC system is involved with is showing promising results.

Merrill mentioned how Wake is mentoring beginning teachers and recruiting high school seniors to become future teachers. He also pointed to efforts to change how teachers are paid so they don’t have to leave the classroom to earn more.

Despite the challenges, Merrill said he’s optimistic about the future of the teaching profession.

“If young folks today are still choosing to teach, they see what the brouhaha is about and they’re still saying, ‘I want to teach,’” Merrill said. “They’ve self selected through some tough stuff and if they’re still interested, then they’ve got some grit.”

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