

For every two teachers who quit, Idaho finds one

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho used to have a teacher shortage.

Now it has a teacher famine.

That's how Madison School District Assistant Superintendent Randy Lords described it recently to Idaho Education News' Devin Bodkin.

What's the difference?

With a shortage, a district might have trouble finding people in hard-to-fill slots such as higher-level math or special education.

In a famine, you suddenly have problems locating someone to teach American history and PE.

When there's a shortage, a school might have a shallow pool of applicants.

With a famine, there are no applicants at all.

With a famine, you're stuck putting more teachers on overtime - which means students may have a more frazzled instructor in the fifth and sixth periods.

With a famine, you crowd more kids around the smaller number of teachers.

With a famine, you hire teachers who may have an academic and professional expertise - but will learn on the job how to communicate with children.

With a famine, special ed teachers are so bogged down with caseloads, testing and paperwork that they begin to doubt their effectiveness.

And a teacher famine is where Idaho finds itself. As Bodkin noted, Idaho now ranks just above West Virginia for having a shortage of qualified teachers.

More than five years ago, Idaho could draw upon 1 1/2 newly certified teachers for every one that left the classroom. Now the state is losing teachers twice as fast as it is replacing them:

- During the 2009-10 school year, 1,380 teachers left while 2,001 new teachers were certified.
- By the 2011-12 school year, 2,401 teachers quit while only 1,883 replacements had been certified.
- In 2013-14, Idaho lost 1,979 teachers and gained only 934.

The flow of people into Idaho's teacher training programs dropped from 8,393 in 2009 to 5,397 in 2013. Bad as that was, the stream of experienced teachers moving into Idaho from out of state has been choked off - from 898 in 2007-08 to 68 in 2013-14.

Money is one reason. Since 2000, Idaho's political leaders have chosen to cut the share of personal income devoted to public education by more than 25 percent - a loss of more than \$500 million a year. That's dropped Idaho's per pupil expenditures - and teacher compensation packages - into the nation's basement.

If you want to teach, you'll probably make more money working outside the Gem State.

At the same time, the political class chose to wage war on its teachers - using testing as a weapon to punish low-performing schools or impose merit-based pay. A series of punitive reforms - dubbed the Luna laws after former state Superintendent Tom Luna - were passed over the objections of educators, and repealed by the voters.

All of which led the Legislature's Office of Performance Evaluations to declare in 2013 that Idaho faced "a strong undercurrent of despair among teachers who seem to perceive a climate that disparages their efforts and belittles their contributions."

A year ago, Highland School Superintendent Brad Baumberger echoed those sentiments by telling the Tribune's Mary Stone: "There is no attractive reason to become a teacher in the state of Idaho because of the pay, because of the process just to get into the classroom and because, when you get in the classroom, the poor evaluation process you have to go through to stay in the classroom."

Propping up this fragile system is a cadre of baby boomers still teaching in Idaho's classrooms. What happens when they retire? Who will replace them?

If Idaho's GOP-dominated Legislature thinks two consecutive healthy school budgets will fix the problem, it is delusional. The state spent 15 years digging itself into this hole.

There's no telling how long it will take to get out. - M.T.