



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Where Are All the New Teachers?

By State Representative Don Vruwink

As the school year approaches, I think a lot about my teaching experience. It was in the fall of 1976 that I began my teaching career. I interviewed 10 times before landing my first teaching job in the little town of Bowler in northeastern Wisconsin.

As a social studies teacher, I had to beat out 200 or 300 other candidates to get that job. How things have changed today.

According to State Schools Superintendent Tony Evers, Wisconsin has a teacher shortage that is difficult to quantify but evidence shows that over the past decade, Wisconsin's school districts have experienced high rates of staff turnover and severe shortages of teachers in the STEM curriculums: science, technology, engineering and math, as well as in bilingual education and special education.

The teacher shortage is a disservice not only to students, but also to our communities, employers, and the Wisconsin economy. I have heard from many business owners and managers who say there is already a shortage of educated workers.

It's a fact: Good teachers and good schools are good for the economy.

Unfortunately, the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs is shrinking and schools are seeing fewer people apply for teaching positions. The Public Policy Forum found that between the 2008 and 2013 school year, enrollees in Wisconsin teacher training programs declined by 29 percent.

Between 2010 and 2014, UW-Oshkosh experienced a 25 percent decline in education majors; UW-Stevens Point had an 18 percent decline; and UW-Milwaukee, which used to produce 300 teaching graduates per year, now graduates 100 per year.

This decline, coupled with other state school declines, has resulted in the smallest number of juniors and seniors enrolled in teaching professions at Wisconsin universities in two decades.

What does this mean for our school districts and students? As a result of declining teacher supply, many teachers are asked to teach an additional class at the expense of time spent developing curriculum and grading. Many teachers take their work home for no extra pay.

School districts are increasingly relying on emergency teacher licenses or “waivers.” In the 2015-16 school year, Wisconsin’s 424 public school districts were employing 1,969 teachers with emergency licenses. That’s an average of four to five per school district.

Additionally, emergency rules were adjusted allowing teachers using one-year emergency licenses to renew even if they haven’t passed the competency test.

Wisconsin used to be a nationwide leader in education. Our kids deserve the best and brightest teachers to put them on paths to success. Change has to come or we will wonder where all the teachers have gone.

State Representative Don Vruwink represents parts of Rock, Walworth, Jefferson, and Dane counties. These include the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, the Town of Janesville, part of the Village of Oregon, and surrounding townships. He can be reached at 608-266-3790, Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov, and P.O. Box 8953, Madison WI 53708.

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