

Hawaii News

School begins with big teacher deficit

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Kay Zane, right, a full-release mentor, works with first-year teacher Moyrah Roberts. A full-release mentor is a teacher who has been pulled out of the classroom to mentor full time; school-level mentors, meanwhile, mentor first- and second-year teachers in addition to their regular teaching duties.

Hundreds of teaching positions across Hawaii's public schools remain unfilled as the new school year gets underway today for more than 180,000 students.

The Department of Education says 100 teacher vacancies were filled over the summer, leaving 625 positions as of last week that need to be filled for the 2016-17 academic year. The highest vacancies are for teachers for middle and high schools, followed by elementary teachers and special-education teachers.

And that number is likely to climb in the coming months. New hires in recent years have topped 1,000 teachers.

TEACHERS NEEDED

Vacancies for teachers under the same salary schedule as of mid-July:

- >> Secondary teacher: 252
- >> Elementary teacher: 195
- >> Special-education teacher: 160
- >> General-education Article VI teacher: 40
- >> Special-education preschool teacher: 25
- >> Counselor: 18
- >> Librarian: 10
- >> Special school teacher: 6
- >> 10-month student services coordinator: 5
- >> 12-month secondary teacher: 3
- >> 12-month student services coordinator: 3
- >> Preschool teacher: 3
- >> 12-month special-education teacher: 2
- >> 12-month special school teacher: 1
- >> 12-month student activities coordinator: 1
- >> Title I linker: 1

Total: 725

Positions being processed as of July 15: 100

Total vacancies: 625

Source: Hawaii Department of Education

Teacher advocates say low salaries, top-down mandates and less-than-ideal facilities all

contribute to a perennial shortage of qualified teachers.

“More teachers are leaving, and fewer teachers are going into the profession,” said Corey Rosenlee, president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, which represents 13,500 teachers. “We cannot find even emergency hires for these positions.”

As the number of new hires with in-state teaching degrees has dropped in recent years to fewer than 500, the department has been actively recruiting on the mainland. The DOE held recruitment drives between March and July in mainland cities where past drives have been successful, including Dallas; Chicago; Newark, N.J.; Portland, Ore.; Los Angeles; Las Vegas; and Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Locally, the DOE participated in nine job fairs and hosted four virtual job fairs online with a live-chat feature.

Rosenlee said schools are forced to use substitute teachers to help fill the gap.

“What we do then is we put in substitutes, and these substitutes do not need to have any content knowledge of the area they’re teaching,” he said. “We have tens of thousands of kids every day going to what I call ‘pretend schools.’ We pretend they’re getting an education, but they don’t have teachers. ... Just because you have an adult in the room doesn’t make them a teacher.”

The labor contract for teachers expires next summer, and Rosenlee said the union plans to advocate for better working conditions.

“If we want to fix the teacher crisis in Hawaii, we have to empower teachers, treat them like professionals and pay them like the professionals they are,” he said. “If we do that, we can start making dents in this and making sure that every child has a qualified teacher in the classroom.”

Starting pay for a licensed teacher this year is \$45,963, while the most senior teacher pay is capped at \$84,318. Although above the national average, when adjusted for cost of living, Hawaii’s beginning pay ranks below that of school districts with similar costs of living including Los Angeles, New York, Boston and Washington, D.C., according to HSTA research.

DOE officials contend the department’s hiring process is selective and that investments in a more robust induction and mentoring program for new teachers will continue to improve retention rates.

“Our overall trend is positive with regard to our retention of teachers in their first five years,” said Stephen Schatz, deputy superintendent for the Department of Education. “We have reason for optimism.”

The department said it won’t have updated retention figures until October, but data for the 2014-15 school year show that of the 785 teachers hired in school year 2010-

11, 60 percent were still employed five years later, marking the highest five-year retention rate in at least a decade. And for the just-completed 2015-16 school year, the average DOE teacher had put in 13 years of service.

Schatz, a former teacher and administrator here and in California, acknowledges that competitive pay does play a role.

"If we could afford to pay teachers six figures, that would be great. At the same time, we know pay isn't the only reason teachers get into or stay in the profession," he said. "We know that working conditions, the degree to which they feel part of a team, principal leadership — all of that matters. ... Often when teachers leave the profession, it's because they're not feeling effective. So what we need to do to retain them is actually to make them better at their craft and to support them with mentoring and coaching."

Hawaii was recently recognized in a national report by the nonprofit New Teacher Center as one of only four states that provide and fund "a high-quality system of new teacher support." The Board of Education since 2012 has required that all probationary teachers participate in the department's mentoring program, which assigns a dedicated teacher-mentor to teachers in their first two years.

The state has approximately 500 mentors, including a mix of full-release teachers, meaning they're pulled out of the classroom to mentor full time, and school-level mentors who mentor in addition to regular teaching duties.

"We find really effective and excellent teachers, we pull them out of the classroom, we train them, they become skilled at being instructional mentors and they mentor up to 15 beginning teachers every week for two years," Keri Shimomoto, who helps run the department's Hawaii Teacher Induction Center, said of the full-time mentors.

"When you talk about ongoing classroom-based support for teachers, I don't think you can beat that kind of professional development — having an amazing teacher to meet with you every week, to give you feedback about your work," she said.

"The department invests in this so that beginning teachers can get better faster for their students," she added. "We're really trying to accelerate the development of our beginning teachers, because we have so many. That'll be our moment of truth: when the new teachers standing before their students are as effective as their veteran counterparts."

Shimomoto works with the state's 15 complex areas to ensure schools are providing a rigorous and comprehensive induction program that goes beyond a simple orientation. The training includes, for example, professional development specifically designed for beginning teachers.

Melissa Kim, who graduated in May from Chaminade University with a master's in education, is starting her teaching career at Roosevelt High School. She and about 30 other beginning teachers recently attended a voluntary training session sponsored by the Hawaii Teacher Induction Center. Anywhere from 600 to 700 newly hired teachers go through the academy each year.

"It's always positive to be in a collaborative environment with other teachers in the same position as you," said Kim, 25. "I love this because it's fresh, it's current and you really feel like they care, they care that you're going to succeed."

The induction center also is completing the final year of a three-year pilot program aimed at figuring out which of the two mentoring models — full-release or school-level — is most effective. The Farrington-Kaiser-Kalani complex area is using full-release mentors for all beginning teachers in its 25 schools, while the Campbell-Kapolei complex area is piloting a mixed model with mostly school-level mentors.

"We're looking at what is the impact of these programs, especially those two models, and then what does it cost and how does it compare with what we're spending when we lose teachers and on recruiting," Shimomoto said. "If this is something that we feel makes the biggest difference for the students of these new teachers and that we need to invest in it, we need to show the cost benefit."

The pilot is funded in part by the Harold K.L. Castle Foundation. Alex Harris, the foundation's senior program officer for education, said the organization is hopeful that "a thoughtful investment in supporting beginning teachers improves their practice, keeps them in the classroom and benefits student learning." He added that "teachers are the most important contribution to student learning, so it's one way that we can help to improve the capacity of our current and future teachers."

With 19,000 students, the Campbell-Kapolei complex is the state's largest, requiring the most teachers. This year more than 150 teachers are in their first or second year of teaching. Heidi Armstrong, the complex-area superintendent, says she's already seeing benefits from the pilot program and credits the induction and mentoring program for improved retention rates across her 17 schools.

"Our attrition rate has significantly decreased, and our retention rate is just astronomically high," said Armstrong, a former elementary school teacher.

She said a year-end survey of last year's 134 new teachers in the complex area found 4 percent plan to leave education while 94 percent plan to continue teaching at their current school, and the rest plan to continue working in education.

"Being a new teacher is always a very difficult task, but now with all of the initiatives and demands placed on new teachers, it can be absolutely overwhelming," Armstrong

said. "And for a new teacher to have a person that they have built a trusting relationship with, that they know they can go to with any questions, concerns or just someone to talk story with at the end of the day, it's been such a support for them."