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Fat paychecks are luring Montana's teachers to Wyoming

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Melissa Rocchio hesitantly drove from Helena to Gillette, Wyo., two years ago to interview for a teaching job there.

Hesitantly, she said, because the Helena native and Carroll College graduate had her eyes set on teaching in the Helena Public Schools. Having been to Gillette only once before as a teenager, she wouldn't have picked it as the place she would call home.

"I thought, 'I'll go practice my interview skills,'" Rocchio said.

On her drive back home, the Gillette school district called her and offered her a fifth-grade language arts position that paid her \$43,500 to start — nearly \$10,000 more than what she could earn in Helena and nearly \$20,000 more than what she could earn in a rural school district in her home state.

"I said, 'I think I'm willing to take the risk and try something new,'" she said.

This year, she will earn almost \$50,000, which helps her and her husband Matthew, who is a welder, afford a lifestyle full of sports and outdoor activities in Gillette.

"We realize money isn't everything, but it sure is nice," she said.

Rocchio is one of more than 400 teachers from Montana who have signed on to teach in Wyoming's booming education industry in the past few years. The trend has school districts across the state — particularly low-paying rural districts — nervous about their ability to continue recruiting new teachers.

"I call them the Wyoming machine, because they are, they just dominate," said Scott Chauvet, superintendent of Fort Benton Schools and former superintendent in Stanford.

The overall budget for K-12 education in Wyoming is about \$1.2 billion this year, compared to approximately \$704 million in Montana. Montana has approximately 140,000 students enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grades, while Wyoming has 85,000 students. That means Montana spends about \$5,000 per student, while Wyoming forks out more than \$14,000 per student.

"We're really in a boom period right now," said Tim Lockwood, public information officer at the Wyoming Department of Education.

Lockwood was referring to the growing coal-mining industry in Wyoming. A federal mineral tax on the mining industry has helped the state's overall economy greatly in the last few years, but a good chunk of that money gets distributed to schools annually Lockwood said. For the first \$200 million collected in federal mineral tax revenue, education gets 44.8 percent annually. Lockwood said education gets one-third of the revenue above \$200 million.

He also said the state has a block grant model to fund schools that gives districts the choice of how they spend their state dollars.

"We give them a shoebox, basically full of money," Lockwood said. "They can spend it however they

want. We just have to equitably fund them."

Schools across Wyoming have chose to use their shoeboxes to improve teachers' salaries.

Chauvet recalled when one of his teachers left Stanford two years ago to be a part-time reading specialist in Wyoming.

"She was paid better wages and benefits than she was as a full-time teacher in Stanford," he said. "I just thought that was pretty sad that a half-time teacher made more money than they did full time here in Montana."

Montana teaching graduates traditionally leave the state for better paying jobs. The number of Montana's new teachers leaving for jobs out of state hovers somewhere between 70 to 80 percent, according to the Office of Public Instruction. Places such as Las Vegas previously were hot spots for Montana teachers since schools were being built at a feverish pace there. However, with better pay just across the border, Wyoming is becoming a destination for those such as Rocchio who want to live a Montana life, but can't afford to live here.

"Wyoming is easy to go to," said Linda McCulloch, Montana's superintendent of schools. "Wyoming looks like us."

Rocchio and her husband go on ski trips in South Dakota, have visited Devil's Tower for rock climbing, play in adult sports leagues and more.

"We've done quite a bit," Rocchio said. "You might have to drive a lot, but it's pretty similar (to Montana), other than I hate being away from my family."

Gildford native Kami Kennedy graduated from the University of Montana-Western in 1995 and taught in Dillon for five years before she and her husband decided to move to a ranch near Buffalo, Wyo.

"It was more of a family decision," she said.

When she started in Buffalo in 2000, she earned \$32,000, which was just slightly more than she earned in Dillon.

"It was really close, it was really competitive," Kennedy said. "The states weren't that far apart."

However, she said that after two years, her salary jumped significantly — by \$4,000 one year and by \$5,000 the following year. She now earns \$48,900.

Lockwood said Wyoming has renewed its commitment to funding education within the last three years. The block grant formula was in place for several years, but within the last two years there have been significant increases in what school districts are receiving, he said.

In fiscal year 2005, the state spent \$770 million on education and upped it to \$842 million in FY2006. In FY2007, the Wyoming Legislature gave schools slightly more than \$1 billion, Lockwood said.

"We have basically beefed up that funding model," he added.

Part of the state's strategy dates to a 1995 Wyoming Supreme Court ruling that called for education to be a "fundamental right," which led to an additional \$150 million to \$200 million being spent annually on education, according to Tribune archives.

Lockwood said mineral tax revenues started shooting up in 2004, and then the Legislature made a concerted effort in 2006 to put schools ahead of everything else.

"The goal of the Legislature, unofficially, was to get our teachers' salaries in the top ten in the nation," he said. "I think it would have been a lot harder (without mineral tax revenue)."

Eric Feaver, president of the MEA-MFT education union said Wyoming has another big advantage over

Montana: There are only 47 school districts there as opposed to the 420 here.

"You have 420 taxing districts, 420 budgets ... you have 420 things that are 10 times what Wyoming has," Feaver said.

Teachers that have left Montana for Wyoming say there are other benefits to working there besides the pay. For starters, Wyoming is similar to Montana in many ways, according to people who have lived in both states.

"It's really no lifestyle change," said Tobin Novasio, the former superintendent and principal in Geyser who also worked as a principal in Ten Sleep, Wyo., for a year. "The only difference is that the wind didn't blow quite as much (in Wyoming)."

Novasio, who grew up in Red Lodge, said the atmosphere in Ten Sleep, which is nestled in the Big Horn Mountains east of Worland, is much the same as Geyser's.

Ten Sleep's school district is approximately the same size as Geyser, and Novasio said his pay there was similar to Geyser at \$64,000. However, since he was only principal in Wyoming, he worked 50 days less a year and saw more of his paycheck because of a better retirement program.

"It was actually my dream job," he said. "Financially, there's just no reason to stay in Montana."

Lockwood said retirement contributions in Wyoming vary by district, as do insurance benefits.

After working in Ten Sleep, Novasio moved back to Montana to be closer to his daughter in Billings and recently took a position as the junior high principal and superintendent of the kindergarten through eighth-grade Elder Grove district on the outskirts of Billings. He took a \$15,000 annual pay cut to return. However, he said he's enjoying the new job because there is at least one other principal he works with and, in an elementary district, he doesn't have to be the athletic director as well.

In Gillette, it seems as if the opportunities are endless for teachers and students, Rocchio said.

Elementary students in the district receive two weeks of swimming instruction at the Aquatics Center every year. The school district also has a planetarium at one of the junior high schools and fifth-graders attend a three-day environmental camp in the Black Hills each year.

Rocchio said the school district also gives her the opportunity to earn 30 continuing education credits. In addition, once she starts working toward her master's degree, the district will reimburse some of those costs.

"It's truly beginning to feel like home, and I'm so blessed my husband and I can have the kind of life we do have here," she said.

Kennedy, who teaches at the high school in Buffalo, is working in a brand new school. There also is a new middle school there.

"It's a very nice building," she said. "I don't know when the last new school was built in Montana."

Lockwood doesn't have an estimate on how many schools were built in the past 15 years in Wyoming, as there is a statewide School Facilities Board that handles all the construction. However, he does know the state is busy because it has trouble getting enough construction crews, thus delaying some school plans.

"We cannot build them fast enough to keep up with the rising cost of inflation," Lockwood said.

The Professional Teaching Standards Board in Wyoming, which licenses teachers, has 416 licensed educators who earned their education degree at a Montana university — a small portion of Wyoming's approximately 10,000 teachers. But the PTSB numbers don't reflect teachers who moved from Montana to Wyoming, but earned their degrees at an out-of-state university.

Feaver said Montana's AA school districts do a good job of competing salary-wise with surrounding states, except for Wyoming. He added that even a few Class A school districts are pushing their salaries near the \$30,000 range.

"I believe they will make every effort to compete with Wyoming," he said.

However, there's a much larger disparity when it comes to Class B and Class C schools here.

"I don't know what to do about that," Feaver said. "I don't believe the state of Montana knows what to do about that."

Just before leaving Stanford this summer, Chauvet had a new teacher lined up for second grade, but in July the prospective teacher called the Stanford and declined the position, which paid \$22,000 to start. Instead, she took a job in Wyoming. Chauvet had to ask a retired teacher to come back for another year in order to fill the position.

He said he wishes teachers' starting pay could be increased, but when there are a lot of veteran teachers, it makes increasing an already overstretched budget difficult. Instead, that discussion needs to happen in Helena and legislators need to take note of what is happening just south of here, he said.

"They're just killing us, there are no two ways about it," Chauvet said. "All these young teachers, they just know it. They know they can go right across the border and the salaries and benefits are much better."
