



# Mass. hunting for star teachers

## Recruits would go to toughest schools

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | May 10, 2010

State education officials plan to announce today an aggressive campaign to recruit hundreds of successful teachers to work in underperforming schools in Boston and eight other troubled school districts, in hopes those teachers can spark a turnaround.

The recruitment effort is believed to be the first-ever partnership between the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and local school districts to find teachers for specific schools. Past state recruitment drives, such as awarding signing bonuses to a select few new teachers, have been typically open to all the state's schools.

"We want to put the best and most talented teachers in front of children who need them the most," said Mitchell Chester, state commissioner of elementary and secondary education.

State officials do not yet know how many positions will be available at the 35 schools identified as underperforming, with chronically low test scores. But officials anticipate that a significant number of current teachers will be dismissed or leave on their own, creating openings.

At least two school districts will be using a federal turnaround strategy at some of their underperforming schools that calls for dismissing at least half the staff.

The recruiting campaign will kick off with the start-up of a website, [amazingteachers.org](http://amazingteachers.org), where interested teachers can learn more about teaching opportunities at the 35 schools in need. Information will also be available on Facebook and Twitter.

Chester said he is on a mission to erase the notion that working in an underperforming school carries a negative stigma about teacher performance; instead, it should be seen as an opportunity to improve student achievement, he said.

Even though the state is assisting districts with recruitment, districts will make all hiring decisions.

While many of the state's urban districts struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers, attracting top-notch candidates to the underperforming schools, where the complexity of urban education is more magnified, could prove even more difficult.

For instance, 1 in 4 students at the underperforming schools are still learning to speak English — well above the statewide average — and the state has been experiencing a persistent shortage of qualified teachers for these students, state officials said.

A host of other issues might make underperforming schools unappealing to some teachers, from the possibility they would have to work an extended day to having fewer job protections because of recent changes to state law.

But other teachers are attracted to the immense challenge of reversing years of poor results at an underperforming school, while school districts are developing incentives to attract teachers to these schools, promising such things as additional pay or opportunities for leadership roles in overhauling curriculum, state officials say.

The website will also include video testimonials of teachers at underperforming schools speaking of the rewards of working there. A private foundation in Boston provided funding for the site.

State and local officials are hoping to attract teachers from Massachusetts and elsewhere and are even trying to encourage talented teachers who work at high-performing schools in the nine targeted school districts to transfer to one of their district's underperforming schools.

Brian Denitzio recently decided to give up his position as a sixth-grade English teacher at Rogers Middle School, a highly regarded school in Hyde Park, to work this fall at Orchard Gardens K-8 School, an underperforming school in Roxbury where MCAS scores are often at or near the bottom in the state.

Denitzio will be accompanying his principal at the Rogers, Andrew Bott, who will soon take the reins at Orchard Gardens. The school opened in 2003 in one of the city's first new school buildings in years; it has been plagued with a high turnover of teachers and principals, and chronically low test scores.

"There should be more schools like the Rogers in Boston," said Denitzio. "We shouldn't be the exception."

Boston is ahead of the other eight districts in developing recruitment strategies for the underperforming schools, state officials said. The city plans to bring in teams of teachers to three of its underperforming schools, where they will constitute at least a quarter of the teaching staff and receive additional pay for working an extended school day or year.

So far, the district — working in partnership with Teach Plus, a three-year-old nonprofit in Boston dedicated to supporting urban teachers — has received more than 150 applications. The majority of the applications have come from teachers currently assigned to other Boston schools who are looking for a new challenge.

The three targeted schools — Orchard Gardens, Trotter Elementary in Dorchester, and Blackstone Elementary in the South End — were among seven underperforming schools at which Boston administrators required teachers, classroom aides, and other educators to reapply for their jobs last month.

Administrators from the seven schools ultimately rejected 125 letters of intent from employees who wished to return in the fall, forcing them to go elsewhere. At the same time, 166 requests to stay on were accepted. Dozens of teachers didn't reapply.

Most teachers not returning to their schools will probably find placement at one of the district's 128 other schools, officials have said.

Carol R. Johnson, Boston school superintendent, said the state's effort could assist the city in attracting even more quality teachers.

"There's nothing more exciting and rewarding for a teacher than seeing great results and their work pay off," Johnson said. "They want to see students do well in class, on assessments, and in life. We want to take advantage of those teachers who really want to see those results." ■

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