

Demand for teachers sparks hiring war in Dallas-Fort Worth

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Teachers who complain about being underpaid may need to find another beef. How does \$50,000 a year for a newly minted teacher sound?

A lack of qualified instructors in some critical subject areas has set off a hiring war in North Texas. School districts are raising teacher salaries, awarding signing bonuses and offering annual stipends to lure hard-to-find teachers.

DeSoto ISD is a case in point.

The district approved a whopping 9-plus percent raise for all teachers next year and a \$5,000 signing bonus for elementary bilingual teachers and high school math, science and foreign language instructors.



MICHAEL AINSWORTH / DMN Bilingual teachers like Karla Zarate of Irving's Townley Elementary are in high demand across North Texas. View larger More photos Photo store

"We're just putting ourselves in the position of stealing teachers from other districts," DeSoto trustee Donald Gant said.

Math and science teachers with a master's degree receive a \$7,500 signing bonus in Cedar Hill, where base salaries for first-year teachers will be \$44,500 starting this fall. And in Irving, total income for first-year bilingual teachers will top \$50,000 this fall.

"What we've seen over the last four or five years has been a fairly big spike in starting teacher salaries across the board in Texas," said Richard Kouri, public affairs director with the Texas State Teachers Association. "The state average is moving toward \$40,000 a year, but in your part of the state it's up around \$45,000. It's more intense in the metroplex because of the large number of school districts in a relatively small area."

Many districts delay setting salaries until they know what other districts plan. But Irving officials approved their 2008-09 salary schedule early to lure teachers at this spring's job fairs.

"We had applicants walk by who saw it [the salary schedule] and turned back," said personnel director Robyn Wolters. "It's drawn a lot of attention, and it's catching people's eye."

Irving has the region's highest percentage of students limited in English, at 39 percent. But the district is not alone in its quest for bilingual teachers, who are being courted by recruiters across the area.

"If districts see you're bilingual, they'll just automatically offer a helping hand," said University of North Texas senior Clarissa Cantu, 22, who is scheduled to graduate this month with a bilingual education degree. "Offering money may change some people's minds about becoming teachers, and it could promote the need."

'A deciding factor'

Heather Rooth, 22, a first-year algebra teacher at North Dallas High School, said Dallas ISD's offer of a \$2,500 stipend for teaching math and another \$6,000 for teaching in a struggling school was too good to pass up.

"That was a deciding factor in whether I would take the job," she said. "I know a lot of people who won't leave Dallas because of the stipends."

Ms. Rooth said she snagged an interview and a job offer an hour after she applied to Dallas ISD. Dallas officials are considering raising the math stipend to \$4,000 next year.

In short supply are foreign language, special education, science and math teachers. The need for science and math instructors is expected to increase in 2010 when high school students will need a fourth year in those subjects to graduate.

Larry Davis, human resources director for DeSoto schools, said only seven of the more than 200 teacher applicants he spoke to at a recent North Texas job fair were certified to teach math. In El Paso, he found two math instructors out of 100 applicants.

"What you're going to see two years down the road is a panic for math and science teachers," said University of North Texas associate professor Pamela Esprívalo-Harrell. "These candidates are going to be in a very good position to be choosy about where they work."

Karla Zarate, 23, a new first-grade bilingual teacher at Irving's Townley Elementary, said recruiters often visited her classes at the University of North Texas to give out information and gifts such as pens. At job fairs, her name tag showed she was bilingual.

"People are literally pulling on you and yelling your name," she said. "They're kind of like hawks." She had several options before choosing Irving.

"The stipend of \$4,000 was a big plus especially for a recent graduate having to pay off loans," she said. "It makes a difference with the way the economy is going and gas prices."

Seeing drawbacks

But a few extra dollars are not going to close the gap between what a science or math graduate can make in the classroom vs. the private sector, Mr. Kouri said. Signing bonuses also create a vicious cycle of teacher job-hopping from one district to another to collect the bonuses, he said.

And some argue that throwing extra money at a few teachers sends the wrong message to others.

"We value all our teachers, and I think that sends a mixed signal to, say, English and fourth-grade teachers who work hard, too," said Becky Wussow, human resources director in Plano ISD, which does not pay signing bonuses.

Texas school districts employ about 300,000 teachers, but lose 10 percent to 15 percent annually through attrition, Mr. Kouri said. Between 30,000 and 45,000 new teachers are needed to fill the openings, but Texas universities are graduating only about half that number.

That forces recruiters to cast ever-widening nets to find qualified teachers. They're traveling to neighboring states and even Puerto Rico.

Fort Worth ISD bought billboards in San Diego after California teachers were threatened with 30,000 layoffs. The signs generated more than 100 phone inquiries and 20 applications, said Clint Bond, a Fort Worth ISD spokesman.

Ms. Wussow said there is a certification imbalance among graduates. The market is flooded with early childhood through fourth-grade teachers and sparse on upper-level certification, she said.

"Just about anything in secondary [grades] is critical as far as I'm concerned," Ms. Wussow said. "It used to be that secondary English and social studies teachers were a dime a dozen, but that's not the case any more."

The University of North Texas graduated 1,055 educators last year, but only 52 were bilingual, math or science certified.

Colleges' incentives

Colleges are trying to inspire high school students to choose teaching careers in critical-need subject areas. Special scholarships are being created. New programs next year at the University of North Texas and the University of Texas at Dallas will focus on attracting more students to math and science teaching careers.

Texas Woman's University professors urge students to earn dual certification in shortage areas, said education dean Nan Restine.

Those students are the ones graduating with job offers, she said, often earning more than some college professors.

"You get more bang for your buck," Dr. Restine said. "You need to get as many tools in your toolbox as we can possibly provide. The districts are willing to pay for that."

But in the long run, Mr. Kouri said districts must find ways to keep the teachers they've hired. Otherwise, it's a never-ending battle.

"Districts have to deal with retention as much as recruitment," Mr. Kouri said. "Otherwise, it's like trying to fill a swimming pool with a hole in the bottom by adding more water. You have to fix the hole, or it's just going to keep losing water."