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Loudoun Tunes Up Its Sales Pitch in Quest for Teachers

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After opening 34 schools in 15 years, Loudoun County officials are used to duking it out with other school systems for teachers. But in a shrinking labor market, the search gets tougher each year. With four schools opening in August and more than 800 vacancies to fill by then, officials are more desperate than ever for an edge in the hyper-competitive, buttoned-down world of teacher recruiting.

So Loudoun recruiters are enticing candidates from Buffalo to San Juan with a little marketing shtick designed to make the subdivision-rimmed base of the Blue Ridge Mountains seem more like the Hollywood Hills, a place where dreams can come true. Their slogan beckons: "STAR IN YOUR OWN LIFE."

In fine print, recruiters say a system that has tripled in size in 15 years offers plenty of upward mobility for the young and ambitious. But with their star-studded slogan, they are trying to inject a dose of glamour into a profession that typically involves low pay and middling respect.

Some call it hokey, but recruiters say it helps them stand out in a sea of white shirts and ties at job fairs. They wear black shirts emblazoned with gold stars as well as star-shaped buttons with blinking red lights. They hand out Starbursts.

On the first day of new-teacher orientation, Loudoun officials will even roll out a red carpet on the Freedom High School sidewalk so 800 rising stars will waltz in. Every other day of their careers, the newcomers might arrive at work stiff and bleary-eyed from long predawn commutes. But on that day, there will be dancing, free food, the click of cameras, applause.

The tug of war for talented teachers heats up every spring as graduation nears, particularly among the Washington suburbs, which demand far more teachers than nearby education schools can deliver. Virginia's teaching programs produce about 3,100 graduates a year in a state with more than 7,300 job openings, according to recent data. Maryland's programs have offered only about 2,500 potential candidates in recent years for as many as 7,600 jobs statewide.

Recruiters must also fend off schools in the Sunbelt and other high-growth areas that perennially raid local talent. At a University of Virginia job fair in February in Charlottesville, 200 recruiters from as far away as Los Angeles and suburbs of Denver and Atlanta vied for the attention of 330 candidates poised to graduate from a prestigious education school -- fully credentialed and highly qualified.

For this elite group, and even for many of the less elite from other universities, recruiters will do anything for an edge. Most Washington area systems offer a starting salary of more than \$40,000, which is competitive nationally but less desirable when the region's high cost of living is taken into

account. What they lack in hiring bonuses or relocation budgets, some make up for in flair.

A benefits specialist was at the job fair to talk about retirement planning and dental insurance. But no one cares about that stuff, said Stephanie Jones Silvis, an assistant principal at Loudoun Valley High School.

"Those are questions [candidates] call back later to ask after their parents have weighed in," she said.

For those few hours, getting one step closer to hiring a full-time equivalent comes down to capturing the fancy of a 22-year-old -- thus the Starbursts and blinking buttons.

Across the way, a "Teach at the Beach" banner beckoned students to the Virginia Beach public schools. In the next room over, recruiters from Savannah-Chatham County public schools in Georgia advertised, "Come teach *near* the beach."

Even inland Chesterfield County, Va., handed out surfboard-adorned pamphlets that asked candidates: "Are you looking for a job with . . . the Wow! factor?" Its bright yellow tower display and brochure showed employees doing jumping jacks and looking "wowed!" by the county's benefits and work environment.

John B. Titus, a stone-faced Chesterfield principal in a charcoal-gray suit, sought to explain his school's new marketing campaign. "I think it's like pizzazz or something," he said. Then he confessed: "We're school people. It's not what we do."

He came to talk about serious things: rising test scores, curriculum, growth potential. But in the meat market of a job fair, he said, it's important to turn heads. He nodded to the commotion caused by a recruiter from Highlands County, Fla., who set up a rotating tower display across the room.

"It's called a poster-in-motion," said Sean A. Rego. He said he has taken the revolving images of race cars and golfers to colleges throughout the mid-Atlantic to help staff a southern Florida school system that plans to open one new school a year for the next three years.

Florida has one of the biggest teacher-candidate deficits in the country. State officials anticipate about 22,000 job openings next year, but the education programs graduate only about 7,000. Recruiters look north or anywhere they can think of to fill the gap.

Fairfax County recruiters did their bit to hold on to local graduates. They offered an early signing bonus for hard-to-staff subjects and promoted their own theme: "Imagine Unlimited Possibilities." Beneath a banner of young people riding bicycles in cloudlike bubbles, a line of prospective teachers formed, wearing name tags with subject areas.

"Come closer, my friends," said Fairfax recruiter Alice Ford. "I see chemistry, I see math, and I'm drooling."

Minjae Yuh, 22, an aspiring math or science teacher, was clear where she wanted to end up: Her top choice is Fairfax, where her parents live, or nearby Loudoun.

Others were less certain. Another math candidate, Carolyn R. Fawcett, 23, signed up for an interview with Fairfax but said: "I'm not totally sold. . . . I told my parents I'd look in Virginia Beach. That's where they live. And I have two brothers in Northern Virginia, but I'm also looking in Georgia."

For Fawcett's wandering eyes, there were a million messages. Baltimore County is "closer than you

think"; Nelson County, southwest of U-Va., is "a beautiful county and a warm community." Howard County proclaims, "Welcome home," and Loudoun County says, well, get out your sunglasses.

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