

Local districts make headway in struggle to land teachers

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Kindergartners Grayson Downs (left) and Jaxon Twisselman show teacher Barb Tingle one of the educational toys they've discovered at school last year. Tingle graduated from Sahuarita High School in 1984, and attended SUSD her entire school career starting with kindergarten.

The battle to recruit and retain teachers at Continental School and in the Sahuarita Unified School District is looking more promising for the 2016-17 school year compared to other Arizona schools.

Arizona has lost thousands of teachers to states offering higher salaries, and fewer students at state universities want to go into the profession, according to reports.

Teacher contracts have been signed for next school year, and while Continental School District is fully staffed, Sahuarita Unified School District has 11 teaching positions yet to fill, eight fewer than posted on its website about 10 days ago.

“We are certainly doing better than last year,” said Scott Downs, SUSD assistant superintendent of administrative services.

An Arizona School Administrators Association survey in November 2013 showed that of 79 districts responding — about one-third of all public school districts in the state — 62 percent had open teaching positions while 42 percent had mid-year openings.

That same year, districts and charter schools reported that 938 teaching positions were filled by long-term substitutes, up 29 percent from the previous school year, according to the Arizona Department of Education.

Of the 11 positions open at SUSD, Downs said two are covered by long-term substitutes.

“Those long-term substitutes are working on their certification, but the Arizona Department of Education requires that we still post them,” Downs said.

Continental Superintendent Scott Hagerman said Continental had two teachers retire at the end of the school year and two long-term teachers last year, but there are no long-term subs for 2016-17. Of the 38 full-time teachers on the roster, eight are new to the district.

Fewer prospects

According to a 2015 report by the state Department of Education's Educator Retention and Recruitment Task Force, state universities produce enough graduates to fill just 50 percent of the open teaching positions and over the last five years, thousands of teachers have left the state.

From 2012 to 2013, there was a seven percent drop in university students studying to become teachers.

The competition for teachers is intense. At a job fair May 19, the highly touted Vail School District was hiring teachers on the spot, some of whom weren't certified yet. Many districts depend on long-term substitute teachers to fill positions intended for certified teachers.

SUSD had 312 full-time teaching staff in the 2015-16 school year, 163 of those employed with the district five years or longer, and 14 long-term substitutes.

There were also 61 new teachers hired last year, a dozen in newly created positions, Downs said. Fully staffed, SUSD will have 326 teachers at the district's nine schools this year, with about 6,000 students district-wide, according to the district's website.

Of the staff hired, 23 are new and five are long-term subs, but that number may change, Downs said.

“Math and science teachers as well as special education teachers make up most of the open positions left to fill,” he said. “If those positions are not filled, classes will be taught by long-term subs or classes will be condensed.”

One of the key findings by the ADE task force was the need for Arizona schools to focus on teacher retention.

ADE reports that nationally, 46 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Educators cite low pay, work conditions and administration as the top three reasons teachers quit.

The ADE reported that the average beginning teacher salary in Arizona in 2015-16 was \$31,874.

Hagerman said with the passage of Prop. 123, a 7 percent teaching raise was implemented resulting in a base salary of \$36,740 at Continental for a starting teacher with no experience.

SUSD gave teachers a 4 percent raise with Prop. 123, amounting to a base salary of \$35,628 and an additional \$3,000 if they teach math, science or special education.

Continental and SUSD have created plans to help retain their teaching and encourage new hires to teach in their districts.

The K-8 has about 15 teachers who have been with the district more than 5 years.

Hagerman sees Continental's size — just under 600 — is a plus when drawing teachers.

“I think because we are smaller district, we are able to make the process of considering joining Continental more personal,” he said. “People can see how they can be successful and how they have a voice in the process of helping students.”

What is Continental's pitch to prospective teaching staff?

“We started giving tours of the school, talking about what we are doing and how we support teachers at Continental,” Hagerman said. “Most of the work was about building relationships and getting them to see our vision.”

Hagerman said the district has recruited a new special education staff, two from the Tucson Unified School District, each with more than eight years of experience in the field.

“The third one was someone who has been part of our community and is moving to the position,” Hagerman said.

To help with teacher retention at SUSD, Downs said the district is continuing a mentorship program and professional development. To increase morale, the district has held yearly intramural games, movie nights for staff, athletic events and hosted recognition programs for teachers and support staff.

UA helps out

Downs has also spearheaded the Sahuarita Teaching Fellows program in partnership with Renee Clift, associate dean at the University of Arizona's College of Education, offering students pursuing teaching careers a series of stipends that amount to \$2,800 at the end of their student teaching experience at SUSD.

If the Sahuarita Teaching Fellows are hired by SUSD, another three stipends amounting to \$2,000 would be awarded at the end of a third year of contracted service, totaling a \$4,800 incentive to be a part of SUSD.

“We are looking to recruit prospective teachers with ties to Sahuarita,” Downs said. “They either live here or have graduated from the district and they know the area already.”

Downs said the district has selected two teaching fellows with direct ties to Sahuarita for fall.

Rita Hardy was selected as a Sahuarita Teaching Fellow and will be interning at Walden Grove High School teaching English this fall. Hardy has lived in Sahuarita for five years and has four children attending SUSD schools.

She is working toward her master's in education through the Teach Arizona program at the University of Arizona.

“It was a school board member, John Sparks, who told me about Sahuarita Teaching Fellows and I applied for it and got in,” Hardy said. “I can't wait to get started. The classes I'm taking at the UA now are intense, but my husband is so supportive and it helps to be already familiar with the SUSD community because of my kids.”

Sahuarita Primary School teacher Barbara Tingle attended SUSD schools from the time she was a kindergartner through high school, graduating from Sahuarita High School in

1984. Her husband, Burton Tingle, taught math in the district for 48 years and was an SHS football coach for 44 years.

“We have been embedded in the community for decades and if you are recruiting college students who already know Sahuarita and the district's teaching environment, it's a bonus for not only the teachers themselves, but for the district. Think of what they already know,” Barb said. “There is a student teacher in the district who I taught in elementary school. She already knows the campus and she's fitting right in.”

Clift said that community support with the Town of Sahuarita is a factor for recruiting and retaining educators.

“We will be working with the teachers partnering with the Teaching Fellows, but we need the communities themselves to encourage their graduates who want to teach to come back to their schools,” Clift said. “They need to feel valued enough to be asked to come back.”

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