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Some central Ohio districts can't fill all their teacher vacancies

By [Charlie Boss](#) *The Columbus Dispatch* • Monday August 17, 2015 2:27 AM

Columbus schools are starting the 2015-16 school year with more than 430 new teachers, its largest crop of new hires in years. And the district is still hiring.

As of last Monday, Columbus schools had 15 teaching vacancies. Three days later, the district filled some positions, but more resignations left officials roughly two weeks to fill 17 spots.

While Columbus officials are preparing for the start of school with the most teacher vacancies among central Ohio districts, their situation pales in comparison to urban districts across the country that are scrambling to find candidates for hundreds of teaching jobs.

“The fact that they are down with a handful of positions to fill this close to the beginning of the school year is actually promising compared to other big-city school systems,” said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large urban districts.

According to the council, schools in Louisville, Ky.; Oklahoma City; and Providence, R.I., were struggling to find teachers at the end of July, Casserly said. But they might have hired for those openings by now.

“It’s generally the norm that big-city school districts this close to the beginning of the school year will still have a number of positions to fill,” he said.

Reports of teacher shortages vary across Ohio, said Michael Rarick, executive director of the Ohio Association of School Personnel Administrators.

In Trumbull County, he said, districts face “severe shortages” of Spanish, integrated-science, math and special-education teachers as well as early-childhood intervention specialists and speech pathologists. And although several districts had no vacancies, Rarick said human-resources administrators are troubled by the drop in the number of applicants and the decline in quality.

“They are seeing more applicants who are unprepared and lack a sense of purpose and passion for the profession,” he said.

In central Ohio, most districts have filled their teaching slots.

As of last Monday, South-Western had seven positions available, four at its high schools. Licking Heights schools had openings for two school psychologists and a high-school science teacher. Westerville had three positions open, but two were filled the following day, officials said.

Leaders in those districts are confident all vacancies will be filled before school starts. South-Western, for example, has an applicant pool of more than 1,200 after hiring about 180 new educators for the fall, spokeswoman Sandy Nekoloff said.

New Albany, which starts classes today, was unable to fill a half-time technology teacher. As a result, the district will offer fewer technology courses until someone is hired next semester.

Ken Baker, executive director of the Ohio Association of Secondary School Administrators, recalls a conversation a couple of years ago with a Cleveland high-school principal who was trying to fill more than 10 teaching jobs with less than a week until classes started.

“They ended up hiring substitute teachers,” Baker said. “The problem is they may not be subject-certified or licensed in the area they teach.”

The challenges aren’t new: Urban districts tend to lose teachers in high-need areas such as high-school science and math, special education and English as a second language to suburban districts where salaries and work conditions are considered to be better.

And when teachers leave in the summer, officials have a smaller pool of candidates to choose from than in February, when they typically launch their hiring efforts.

Compounding matters this year is the uptick in teacher retirements across the state. Columbus, for instance, had to fill more than 400 teaching positions for the coming school year, compared with 235 last year and fewer than 200 for the 2013-14 school year.

Columbus spokesman Scott Varner said district leaders are confident they’ll be able to fill all the openings by the time students return to school on Aug. 26.

He said the district recruits potential hires throughout the year, including meeting upcoming graduates from local colleges and working with substitute teachers interested in a full-time position.

“It lessens the impact,” he said. “It’s not that we have to start from scratch.”

Varner said the Columbus district has extended its search out of state as well, using the city of Columbus and its amenities as a selling point to working in the district.

“Columbus is a popular and friendly place to move to,” he said. “For those teachers we may look to recruit out of state and around the area, they see living in Columbus as a great positive.”