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Teacher Shortages Spur a Nationwide Hiring Scramble (Credentials Optional)

By [MOTOKO RICH](#) AUG. 9, 2015



Ashlee Pepin in her classroom in Petaluma, Calif., last month. Ms. Pepin opted not to teach as an intern while she was still earning her credentials, though many prospective teachers do. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

ROHNERT PARK, Calif. — In a stark about-face from just a few years ago, school districts have gone from handing out pink slips to scrambling to hire teachers.

Across the country, districts are struggling with shortages of teachers, particularly in math, science and special education — a result of the layoffs of the recession years combined with an improving economy in which fewer people are training to be teachers.

At the same time, a growing number of English-language learners are entering public schools, yet it is increasingly difficult to find bilingual teachers. So schools are looking for applicants

everywhere they can — whether out of state or out of country — and wooing candidates earlier and quicker.

Some are even asking prospective teachers to train on the job, hiring novices still studying for their teaching credentials, with little, if any, classroom experience.

Louisville, Ky.; Nashville; Oklahoma City; and Providence, R.I., are among the large urban school districts having trouble finding teachers, according to the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large urban districts. Just one month before the opening of classes, Charlotte, N.C., was desperately trying to fill 200 vacancies.

Nationwide, many teachers were laid off during the recession, but the situation was particularly acute in California, which lost 82,000 jobs in schools from 2008 to 2012, according to Labor Department figures. This academic year, districts have to fill [21,500 slots](#), according to estimates from the California Department of Education, while the state is issuing fewer than 15,000 new teaching credentials a year.

“We are no longer in a layoff situation,” said Monica Vasquez, chief human resources officer for the San Francisco Unified School District, which offered early contracts to 140 teachers last spring in a bid to secure candidates before other districts snapped them up. “But there is an impending teacher shortage,” Ms. Vasquez added, before correcting herself: “It’s not impending. It’s here.”

With state budgets rallying after the recession, spending on public schools is slowly recovering, helping to fuel some of the hiring. In California, Gov. Jerry Brown persuaded voters in 2012 to pass a sales and income tax measure that raised funding for public schools.

But educators say that during the recession and its aftermath prospective teachers became wary of accumulating debt or training for jobs that might not exist. As the economy has recovered, college graduates have more employment options with better pay and a more glamorous image, like in a [rebounding technology](#) sector.

In California, the number of people entering teacher preparation programs dropped by more than 55 percent from 2008 to 2012, [according to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing](#). Nationally, the drop was 30 percent from 2010 to 2014, according to [federal data](#). Alternative programs like Teach for America, which will place about 4,000 teachers in schools across the country this fall, have [also experienced recruitment problems](#).

And that has led districts here — and elsewhere — to people like Jenny Cavins.

Ms. Cavins, 31, who once worked as a paralegal and a nanny, began a credentialing program at Sonoma State University here in Rohnert Park less than a year ago. She still has a semester to finish before she graduates. But later this month she will begin teaching third grade — in both English and Spanish — at Flowery Elementary School in Sonoma. Ms. Cavins said she would lean on mentors at her new school as well as her professors. “You are not on that island all alone,” she said.

Esmeralda Sanchez Moseley, the principal at Flowery, said she could not find a fully credentialed — let alone experienced — teacher to fill the opening. “The applicant pool was next to nothing,” she said. “It’s crazy. Six years ago, this would not have happened, but now that is the landscape we are in.”



David Kimari, a high school cross-country coach in Santa Rosa, Calif., stepped in to fill a Physical Education teaching vacancy despite not having credentials. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Before taking over a classroom solo in California, a candidate typically must complete a post-baccalaureate credentialing program, including stints as a supervised student teacher. But in 2013-14, the [last year for which figures are available](#), nearly a quarter of all new teaching credentials issued in California were for internships that allowed candidates to work full time as teachers while simultaneously enrolling in training courses at night or on weekends.

In addition, the number of emergency temporary permits issued to allow noncredentialed staff members to fill teaching posts jumped by more than 36 percent from 2012 to 2013.

At California State University, Fresno, 100 of the 700 candidates enrolled in the teacher credentialing program this year will teach full time while completing their degree.

“We don’t like it,” said Paul Beare, dean of the university’s school of education. “But we do it.”

Some educators worry that as school districts scramble to fill empty slots, the quality of the teaching force could weaken.

“There are not enough people who will look at teacher education or being a teacher as a job that they want to pursue,” said Carlos Ayala, dean of the school of education at Sonoma State University.

Ashlee Pepin, 31, turned down several opportunities to work as a teaching intern while still earning education credentials at Sonoma State because, she said, she had seen the difference “between a teacher who is passionate and has a lot of skill, and a teacher who is just there.”

Ms. Pepin, who graduated in June, will begin teaching special education next week at an elementary school in Petaluma, north of San Francisco. “I wanted to make sure I was prepared,” Ms. Pepin said on a recent morning as she sorted through old textbooks in her new classroom.



Ana Margarita Sanchez, a masters degree student in the education school at Stanford University, was hired as a fourth-grade teacher after a brief chat and a phone call with a recruiter. Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Recruiters from Oklahoma City have traveled to Puerto Rico and Spain on the hunt for teachers, while in Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina, the superintendent, Ann Blakeney Clark, tells audiences at every community meeting she attends that the schools are desperate to hire. “I’ve gone on to say ‘Everyone in this room knows someone who was a teacher, who is a teacher,’” Ms. Clark said. ““And I am asking you to email, text or call them and invite them to teach in Charlotte.””

Last spring here in Rohnert Park, about 50 miles north of San Francisco, the superintendent, Robert A. Haley, found a creative way to fill a vacancy for an elementary school physical education teacher: He had his daughter’s high school cross-country coach fill in temporarily.

The coach, David Kimari, 26, who has worked as a home health aide and is studying kinesiology, will continue to teach P.E. this school year at two elementary schools in the district. He will begin taking teacher credential courses next January.

When Mr. Kimari started teaching, administrators gave him binders full of lesson plans left by his predecessors, and he asked a teaching friend in Oakland for advice. “I went into it like ‘Oh, man, I don’t know what I am getting myself into,’” said Mr. Kimari, sporting a tie-dyed bandanna and socks on a recent, scorching afternoon when he had assembled girls from the cross-country team for a summer conditioning session in a state park.

But he said that he realized that, “as long as you are passionate and as long as you can communicate with other people and you don’t give off hostile vibes, you can pick it up along the way.”

Linda Darling-Hammond, professor emeritus of education at Stanford University and head of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, said the United States should plan more for teacher shortages. “Other nations create incentives and supports in order to be able to fill the needs in a much more deliberate and conscious way,” she said.

In the near term, teachers may not yet [be heralded](#) with the fever pitch of first-round sports draft picks, but qualified candidates are in high demand. Earlier this spring, Ana Margarita Sanchez, a master’s degree student in the education school at Stanford University, chatted briefly with a recruiter from the San Francisco schools at a reception on campus. Two weeks later, the recruiter followed up with a 45-minute telephone interview, offering her a job on the spot.

“I was definitely taken aback by the intensity,” said Ms. Sanchez, 25, who will be teaching fourth grade at a bilingual elementary school later this month.

“The ball wasn’t really in their court,” she added. “It was in mine.”