

Qualified teachers are in short supply

By Ledyard King

Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — Housing bonuses. Laptop computers. Gym memberships.

With some 200,000 vacancies, states and school districts are wooing prospective teachers with a slew of incentives.

Even so, researchers predict many won't be able to staff every classroom with a highly qualified teacher as called for by the federal No Child Left Behind law largely because teachers are leaving the classroom almost as fast as replacements are found. And with school districts having less leeway to hire unqualified teachers, the consequence could be larger class sizes, they say.

Special-education, math, science and bilingual teachers remain the hardest to find, though shortages often vary by area. The National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union, says the Midwest, Southeast and California are having the toughest time this year.

Inner-city districts, beset by crime and low parental involvement, have traditionally had trouble finding qualified instructors. But rural districts aren't faring much better.

"We have areas that are fairly remote and isolated," said state Superintendent Linda McCulloch of Montana, which is looking for instructors in foreign languages, science and special education. "Professional development opportunities are fewer," she says. "... There's no shopping mall. There's no social life for young teachers. There's a lack of housing in the area."

Rapidly expanding suburban systems also are on the prowl.

"We're always looking for teachers," said Dave Sheehan, a spokesman for the Clark County, Nev., school district, which includes Las Vegas. "This is among the worst years."

The district, the nation's fifth largest, is short more than 400 teachers — nearly half of them special education — for the school year, which starts Aug. 30. This is despite programs to lure retired instructors back to the classroom and teacher-recruitment visits as far away as Canada and Spain.

Clark is considering buying land to build town houses for teachers because home prices in the Las Vegas area have skyrocketed. It would be one of the more generous perks being dangled in front of new teachers. Typical of many, the Cumberland County school

district in Fayetteville, N.C., has teamed with local businesses to provide discounted rent and mortgages, signing bonuses of up to \$4,000 and free enrollment in local health clubs.

Several states, such as Maryland, also offer extra pay to teachers who take jobs in inner-city schools that are hard to staff.

Despite the struggles, researchers say the shortages aren't as acute as several years ago. New York City, Chicago and other large districts have increased pay and introduced mentoring programs that have cut teacher turnover, said Tom Carroll, president of the nonprofit National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

The real problem, Carroll says, isn't attracting teachers — it's keeping them.

Almost half of all teachers leave the classroom within five years. It's worse in high-poverty, urban schools where about half of teachers leave after two years, he said.

"If anything, it's getting worse," NEA President Reg Weaver said. "I cannot tell you the number of people who are just waiting to retire because of lack of support, lack of respect and [low pay]. Rather than face those conditions, they leave."

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