Hunting for Talent
By Carol Patton
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Over the last several years, many school districts have been struggling to fill vacant teaching positions not just in quantity but also with quality teachers, especially in math, science, special education and English as a Second Language, areas where teachers are most hard to come by.

Next year, U.S. schools will need 1.7 million to 2.7 million newly hired teachers to meet increasing student enrollments and replace retiring baby boomers and other teachers who relocate or abandon teaching, says economist William J. Hussar at the National Center for Education Statistics.

On top of that, 30 percent of suburban school teachers and 50 percent of urban school teachers will leave within three years of entering the profession, according to Status of the American School Teacher, a 2003 survey published by the National Education Association.

But school administrators have no intention of flailing the white flag. As the competition to find quality teachers grows fierce, districts are becoming more aggressive and creative in the way they recruit. Some are promoting teaching careers to middle school students and college football players. With new programs and incentives in place, their strategies are working and filling large gaps in the classroom without sacrificing quality instruction.

A Good Teacher Is Good to Find

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has nearly 24,400 teachers and high teacher turnover. Since 2003, the district has tried to recruit roughly 2,000 teachers each year just to open the school year, says Cindy Soell, the district's director of instructional recruitment in Miami. Teachers of middle school science and middle and high school math are among the hardest to find because fewer education students are majoring in those subjects.

Although the majority of its teachers come from in-state colleges, the district has added nonconventional recruitment strategies to its to-do list.

Soell, who is behind the district's efforts to personalize its recruitment process, assists prospective teachers by addressing questions or requests they may have to enhance the
district's retention efforts. For example, she has helped incoming teachers from different cities or states check the quality and location of apartments they may have seen online.

Soell has met with football players at the University of Miami after football season from 2001 to 2004 to persuade players to become substitute teachers and then transition into full-time teachers, citing their slim chances of turning pro. She suspended this practice given high turnover in coaches, who were her contacts, but she hopes to resume it in 2008.

Administrators hire up to 75 teachers from Teach for America, the national corps of recent college graduates of academic majors who commit two years to teaching in urban and rural public schools. Most are eligible for Florida's three-year temporary teaching certificate, which requires a bachelor's degree and passing a subject knowledge test or completing college courses in the subject with at least a 2.5 GPA. They have three years to complete courses at a local university, focused on classroom management strategies to lesson planning. They attend a preservice training, or abbreviated internship, which Teach for America conducts. If they then opt to pursue a teaching career, they must qualify for the state's five-year professional teaching certificate, which means they must pass the state's general knowledge, professional preparation and education competence exams.

"We use [TFA] as a recruiting agency," Soell says, adding that a few graduates are placed in urban areas with impoverished neighborhoods. She says most new teachers live with their parents in the suburbs and that working in urban schools often means long commutes. And housing near urban schools is too expensive for most of them.

In the upcoming school year, the district also plans to hire 100 teachers from Visiting International Faculty, or VIF, a worldwide cultural exchange program for teachers and schools. Educators from such countries as Canada, New Zealand and Spain temporarily move to the U.S. on a three-year cultural exchange, or J1 visa. Since VIF serves as their sponsoring agent—not the district—the organization assumes various responsibilities that include handling government paperwork as well as conducting background checks and new teacher orientation. Most recruits have prior teaching experience and many have advanced degrees, Soell says. Not only does the program provide teachers who possess a greater mastery of diverse subject areas, but students benefit from the cultural exchange.

**Houston's Teacher Retention Program**

Recruiting teachers is one thing. Retaining good teachers is another challenge. The Houston Independent School District uses a performance incentive pay program. It rewards teachers in three areas: acceptable or improved student grades for each school building based on state accountability ratings; improved student test scores on the Stanford 10 and Aprenda 3, which are both norm-referenced achievement tests; and better test scores on the annual Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam, compared to scores of students in other similar districts throughout the state. Depending upon the outcomes, teachers in noncore subjects like art or physical education
could earn an additional $500 to $1,000 and core teachers could earn up to $3,500 more each year.

"For the most part, teachers are saying you're finally going to acknowledge my hard work," says Beatrice Garza, executive general manager of human resources at HISD, whose annual teacher vacancy rate dropped from 800 openings in 2001 to a manageable 100 last year. "We're under a microscope right now to see whether or not this works and how successful it's [being] implemented."

**Career Changers**

Another 50 individuals head to the Miami Teaching Fellow program, reaching out to career changers, from accountants to biologists, who are eligible for Florida's three-year teaching certificate. The program has a small staff that monitors the district's Web site that is dedicated to the program, where recruits apply online. Selected candidates attend a five-week institute, with coursework in areas such as lesson planning and classroom management strategies, and a teaching practicum for math, science and special education. In exchange for training, candidates each receive a $1,000 stipend.

Back at home, the U.S. military is also being tapped for talent. The district participates in career fairs to attract former soldiers, sends out e-mail blasts, and is involved in the U.S. Department of Education's Troops to Teachers program and Operation Teach, which is Miami's newest program funded through a five-year, $1.47 million DOE grant.

Operation Teach aims to recruit up to 50 military personnel back from service with a college degree and eligible for the state's three-year teaching certificate. To prepare them, Miami-Dade College created preservice courses that include classroom management and the teaching and learning process. Soell adds that the grant pays for tuition, books, testing and the application for state certification.

**Grow Your Own**

Some school district administrators haven't experienced much luck in recruiting teachers internationally or from other states, so they stick to their own backyard. Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky., hires about 500 teachers each year. Almost half are recruited within a 300-mile radius of the city while the rest come through the alternative certification programs. The accelerated university programs help career changers transition into teaching, says Robert Merrick, director of human resources in the district.

The Louisville area supports four universities. Over the school year, the district's human resource specialists, who double as recruiters, watch up to 400 student teachers deliver a lesson late in the semester, which Merrick says is not a common practice at other districts. The specialists make evaluations based on the rigor of the lesson, student engagement and level of questioning. They use these observations in conjunction with interviews, prior work experience, academic scores, a writing sample and references to help determine who will be offered teaching jobs.
The district also opens its doors to other professionals wanting to try teaching. Local universities offer six teaching transition programs, each requiring students to complete 30 to 36 credit hours. Each program is different, preparing individuals for specific subjects. To be admitted, students must have graduated college with at least a 2.75 GPA and pass both the GRE and the PRAXIS teaching test in their subject area. They also must complete 12 hours of pedagogical course work to receive a temporary provisional teaching certificate from the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board.

"Our goal is to put role models in front of those students and encourage them to pursue their dreams and ... to consider teaching."

For prospective teachers focused on critical needs areas like science or special education, district leaders will pay up to $500 in tuition for each three-hour class. Kentucky requires teachers to have a master's degree in education or their subject area within 10 years of certification, so they graduate with a teaching certificate and a master's degree.

"These are folks who already have degrees and work experiences, probably older with families, who can't afford to take on two years as students again and build a traditional route," Merrick says. "We work with our local universities to make them aware of what our needs are, like math or science, so that the school of education talks with folks in the math and science departments to make students aware that they might want to consider teacher credentials while getting their degree in biology."

**Minority Recruiting**

Sioux Falls School District in Sioux Falls, Ill., focuses close to home. To keep up with the demand, district leaders hire roughly 100 teachers per year. But administrators have a challenge: they are trying to recruit minority teachers to reflect its student population, says Fred Aderhold, assistant superintendent for instruction and human resources. Out of 20,000 students, 19 percent are mainly black, Latino or Native American, while only 1 percent of the district's 1,600 teachers are minority.

The school is producing a 15-minute video featuring interviews with minority teachers about why they chose their career and how they became teachers. The video is scheduled to be shown next year to middle and high school students. "Our goal is to put role models in front of those students and encourage them to pursue their dreams, and encourage them to consider education and teaching," Aderhold says. "If we develop student interest, we'll find some way to nurture that along the way."
Using the Private Sector

Schools can serve as teacher magnets if they develop a reputation for giving teachers respect and needed support, allowing them to be involved in making decisions and creating a safe, orderly workplace, adds Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association.

The New Teacher Center in California, which links policy, practice and research to support beginning teachers and administrators, held last month its Ninth National New Teacher Center Symposium, called Cultivate the Future Through Sustainable Teacher Induction. For more information, go to www.newteachercenter.org

Even if salaries are mediocre, districts can sweeten compensation packages, and lure good teachers, by borrowing creative strategies from the private sector.

Some large companies have agreements with local restaurants, clothing stores and car dealers to give discounts on products to all employees. School districts could offer similar benefits. Employees could show a school ID or paycheck stub to participating businesses, for example, and receive a discount off a car or big screen TV. As an added perk to a teacher's salary package, this can be an effective recruiting and retention tool.

Weaver wonders why districts haven't embraced such programs. "If administrators are looking to recruit and retain, they have to recognize it's a shared responsibility," he says. "They can't do it by themselves."

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Marketing Campaigns for Quality Teachers

Some districts experience recruitment problems because they lack strong marketing skills.

It's not uncommon for districts to assign marketing tasks to a teacher who doesn't know how to develop a marketing plan and is too busy juggling a dozen other projects. That's a big mistake, says Becky Shermis, dean of teacher education in the graduate school of education at Kaplan University in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "You've got to work with a [marketing] expert to make sure your materials are very professional," Shermis advises. A big part of marketing includes surveying teachers to find out why they stay. She suggests classifying teacher responses based on their tenure status and subjects they teach. Once categorized, the information can serve as the foundation of a marketing campaign that promotes their city, district or school environment as a great place to live and work. This could attract potential teachers from across several states. "You've got to really build strong support systems," Shermis says, "when you're recruiting new teachers to let them know you're taking care of them."