

Administrators worry about finding substitute teachers

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As school districts continue to open across the Valley, administrators say they expect finding substitute teachers on a consistent basis will be a struggle.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, in the 2010-2011 school year, there were 15,031 Pennsylvania teaching certificates issued. In the 2018-2019 calendar year, that number was down to 5,505. It's created a shortage of teachers for full-time positions, let alone those who receive the early morning calls.

Add COVID-19 into the mix and the guidance required with any potential quarantines, and it becomes that much more difficult for school districts to fill classrooms.

"For the past seven-to-10 years, finding substitute teachers has been tough for public schools across the nation," said Shikellamy School District Superintendent Jason Bendle.

"With fewer students choosing education as a career option, school districts across the commonwealth are experiencing teacher shortages and substitute shortages," added Alan Hack, Warrior Run School District superintendent.

Many of the area school substitutes attend the CSIU's guest teacher program, which allows those with a bachelor's degree to obtain an emergency permit valid for one year.

The CSIU offers three training sessions a year — January, July and October — according to Jennifer Williams, director of Special Education and Early Childhood Services. "We had 14 participants, done virtually in our July session," she said.

"Generally if we weren't under COVID-19, it's a two-day training," said Williams. "The first day is theory in the class-

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room. Day two, participants go to observe different classrooms around the region. This time we couldn't do the observations."

Helna Vincent, 24 of Danville, started substituting through the guest teacher program last August. "I feel, as a sub, I can really see a difference I make with the kids. I love working with the teachers, that's why I'm coming back this year," she said.

Although she loves working as a substitute, Vincent is worried about going back this year because of the coronavirus.

"Yes, there is a lot of concern," she said, "because I know, in a few other states, I've seen news of schools starting up early and have seen students and teachers getting infected."

Chuck Marsters, 73, of Danville, is heading into his fourth year of being a substitute teacher with the CSIU. "I recognized I retired a little too soon. I wanted to go out and do more and this is doing something for a population that needs help," Marsters said.

Marsters doesn't plan on letting COVID-19 keep him home this year.

"I did work in the hospital," he said, "so I understand that these viral type incidences can have some tragic events sometimes. Especially in our area, I don't see that very evident, that things have been kept on a neutral basis."

According to Danville Area

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— Cathy Moser, Lewisburg assistant superintendent

School District Superintendent Ricki Boyle, the district has "about 30 substitute teachers on our list but only about one-third of them are available on a regular basis."

Shikellamy has around 24 substitute teachers on their list, according to Bendle. The CSIU has a list of 71 substitutes, according to Anthony Serafini, Special Education and Special Projects Supervisor.

"This year," said Cathy Moser, the assistant superintendent at Lewisburg Area School District, "with not any sense of a total number or pool (of substitutes), we will probably have some increased challenges in finding subs on a day-to-day basis. Mostly because the pool of available people has shrunk, and with fewer people doing it, we all are competing for the same pool."

Area schools have created a list of COVID-19 protocols for both students and teachers alike and substitutes will have to follow those policies as well.

"In our own plan, we are advo-

cating self-screening at home. Do not come in if you are not feeling well. If symptoms appear during the day, our school nursing staff will handle those," said Moser.

Those policies and procedures are not only required by the state, but are also a comfort to some of those coming to work in the buildings.

Substitute teacher and mother of three, Kelly Saul-Bromwell, 42, of Danville, is going into her third year of substitute teaching.

"I don't really have concerns," she said. "I think the schools have a pretty good plan in place and they've taken precautions. They are doing their best to keep everyone safe and provide an enjoyable learning environment."

One of the factors that will be important for Vincent is, "how each specific school is handling COVID-19. I've been looking at the state website to see the different regions and what levels they are at."

"I agree with the social distancing," said Marsters. "That with it being a viral illness, having a mask on is going to be good."

Marsters also feels that it's important for the kids to be back in school in person. "I think the psychological aspect of this is pretty important that these kids come back and focus on what they were doing instead of nothing," he said.

School districts are being proactive in their attempts to attract and retain substitutes.

Lewisburg has raised its daily substitute pay rate from \$120 per day to \$125 this year. The CSIU has been signing subs up for 120-day contracts which would guarantee them at least that many days of work this school year. Shikellamy has been encouraging families to go through the guest teacher program at the CSIU.

"Even if they only want to work one to two days a month that helps us," said Bendle. "For us to fill the substitute need, we have to think outside the box."

"Staff members might have a need to be out of school on a longer basis this year based on their own pre-existing conditions or family needs. If they have children and they are sick and have to stay home to take care of them," Moser said.

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