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EDUCATION

Deer Valley Unified bucking statewide teacher shortage trends

Longtime teacher says district's administrative support makes the difference



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(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA/STEVE STOCKMAR)

Kindergarten teacher Lisa Hoelzen is in her 32nd year with Deer Valley Unified. Her classroom at Copper Creek Elementary in Glendale (pictured) is the same room in which she's been teaching for 27 years.




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The numbers regarding Arizona teacher vacancies are nothing new. Neither are the contributing factors.

The September report from the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association – the annual data deep dive – features results provided by 139 districts and charter schools (https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.aspaa.org/resource/resmgr/documents/press_releases/ASPAA_Press_Release_-_Septem.pdf) throughout the state. The survey focused on teacher vacancies, fill rates, and contracted teachers who have severed employment as of September for the 2024-25 school year.

Although results show a ninth consecutive year with an Arizona teacher shortage, the data do show slight improvement.

Of vacancies across the state this year, 25.4% remain unfilled. That number in September of last year was 29.7%, and the current figure is still less than the 26.6% found in September 2022.

Reasons why teachers are leaving also remain largely unchanged from previous years.

An Arizona Department of Education survey, also in September, of nearly 1,000 teachers who left the profession after 2023 shows large numbers left because of a lack of administrative support for classroom discipline. More than two-thirds of respondents cited low pay among reasons for leaving.

What's more is data from the Arizona Classroom Teacher's Attrition and Retention Dashboard (https://www.azed.gov/teach/classroom-teacher-attrition-and-retention-dashboard) found that almost 21% of teachers who left Arizona schools in 2023 were in their first four years of teaching.

"Survey results reinforce the need to increase funding for public education," the ASPAA wrote in the summary of its September report. "Arizona teacher pay remains one of the lowest in the country."

Arizona ranks 32nd for average teacher salary at $60,275, more than $9,269 below the national average, according to the National Education Association (https://www.nea.org/resource-library/educator-pay-and-student-spending-how-does-your-state-rank). The same report shows that Arizona's per-student spending of $11,321 ranks 48th nationally.

One district, at least, is bucking the trend.

Deer Valley Unified School District as of Oct. 14 shows 97% of its certified teaching positions filled. That's even higher than one year ago when the start of the 2023-24 school year showed 95.5% of certified teaching positions filled. Deer Valley is the state's sixth largest school district with 33,353 students. Mesa Public Schools is the largest (64,500) followed by Chandler Unified, Tucson Unified, Peoria Unified, and Gilbert Public Schools.

Kindergarten teacher Lisa Hoelzen is in her 32nd year with Deer Valley Unified. In fact when her school, Copper Creek Elementary in north Glendale, opened 27 years ago she not only got to select which room she wanted for her class when the building was new, it's the same classroom in which she still teaches to this day. A couple fellow teachers on faculty at Copper Creek even had Hoelzen as their kindergarten teacher in that same room.

So Hoelzen knows what it takes to maintain a long teaching career.

She also knows what works against a lot of teachers.

Before landing with Deer Valley Unified in the beginning of her career, a lack of administrative support is what drove out teachers, Hoelzen saw.

"There was no training, there were no materials," she recalled. "And so as you're looking at all this, you're thinking, 'Are you kidding me? So I have to figure this out all by myself.' So there you are standing in front of 25 little ones and you're thinking, 'I don't have a clue even where to start.'"

To wit, of the Arizona Department of Education's September survey (https://www.azed.gov/communications/horne-warns-crisis-attracting-and-retaining-classroom-teachers), almost half of teacher respondents (47%) said they were dissatisfied with their administration and just over 45% were unhappy with working conditions.

Deer Valley Unified addresses support head on, Hoelzen adds.

This year a brand-new math curriculum arrived and with it all related material with training. Same with implementing a brand-new English Language Arts curriculum. New special ed teachers that Hoelzen's class receives include a mentor from the district.

The hours can still be long. While the school day itself goes from 8:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Hoelzen arrives at 6:15 in the morning and leaves at 6 at night, but "by choice" she adds.

And other contributing factors remain.

She was called on to diffuse a situation on campus recently where a parent screamed at another teacher. The parent eventually apologized, although "not feeling respected as a teacher" is among the Arizona Department of Education survey's top reasons teachers cite for leaving.



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The data do show that the formula Deer Valley Unified School District is applying seems to differ from statewide trends in terms of teacher shortages.

Hoelzen says that comes in the form "enthusiasm" teachers must bring to the career, but more notably from administrative support.

"You have to have support, support, support in place in order for people to feel comfortable enough that they can make mistakes," she said.



(https://gamma.creativecirclecdn.com/yourvalley/original/20241028-170747-2a6-DVUSD2.jpg)

Kindergarten teacher Lisa Hoelzen teaches her students at Copper Creek Elementary in Glendale on Oct. 24. A couple fellow teachers on staff at Copper Creek actually had Hoelzen as their kindergarten teacher in that very room.

(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA/STEVE STOCKMAR)



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