

Colorado's teacher shortage hits Greeley, Weld County schools harder than most

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Michele Warner leans in to write on a whiteboard during class at Maplewood Elementary, 1201 21st Ave. in Greeley. School districts across the country, including Greeley-Evans School District 6 are dealing with teacher shortages.



This story comes from Rick Mondt, but it could have been told by any superintendent from any school district in any corner of northeast Colorado.

A teaching position opened up in Mondt's Briggsdale Re-10 district, and the superintendent interviewed a candidate who'd made the 50-minute drive from Fort Collins to the tiny unincorporated community on the edge of the Pawnee National Grassland. The candidate had five years of teaching experience and had expressed interest in teaching in the district that prides itself on its 10:1 student-teacher ratio. They had a productive, engaging interview, but Mondt could see it in the candidate's eyes as he walked them out the door: "They didn't want anything to do with it."

Seven to 10 years ago, Mondt said he'd have 20-plus applications for any open teaching position. Now he's lucky if he gets five.

Colorado's schools are experiencing a critical shortage of teachers, and the state's rural districts are getting hit hardest.

Northeast Colorado's numerous rural districts and its relatively urban one — Greeley-Evans District 6 — are confronting the shortage in various ways, complicated by factors such as poverty and growing immigrant and refugee populations that demand more diverse skills from teachers. The University of Northern Colorado's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, one of the premier teaching programs in the nation, also has had to deal with the shortage.

Charlie Warren, a licensure officer in UNC's teaching school, said the teacher shortage is a nationwide problem, but is exacerbated in Colorado. The state is notorious for underfunding public education. According to 2015 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Colorado is 38th in the country in per-pupil funding for public education, behind states such as Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky; it spends about \$1,379 less than the national average per

student every year; Colorado schools are underfunded by about \$880 million compared to its requirements under the school finance act. This makes it extraordinarily hard for districts in the state to hire, pay and retain teachers.

"(Our graduates) can go to Wyoming or New Mexico and instantly be paid better than they can in Colorado," Warren said.

Many out-of-state school districts will offer UNC graduates relocation bonuses for moving there to teach, or they will pay for a teacher's master's degree or pay off their student loans. District 6 in Greeley offers some tuition reimbursement, said superintendent Deirdre Pilch, but it can't compete with the bonuses offered by out-of-state districts, or even those in Boulder and Denver. And District 6 is a pauper among paupers, the 10th-lowest funded district in the state.

For years, District 6 didn't have the money to pay the 3.75-percent annual teachers' raise it had collectively bargained with the Greeley Education Association. That made its pay structure look competitive on paper, Pilch said, but it drove away many teachers mid-career because that structure wasn't honored.

"We know we lost hundreds of teachers because we were freezing salaries," Pilch said.

District 6 and the GEA in March 2017 renegotiated the salary structure, which increased the base pay by 3.3 percent and lowered the annual raise to a more feasible two percent. Pat Otto, the GEA president, said that has created a better atmosphere in the district and improved its reputation, but it will be some time before its impact on the teacher shortage becomes tangible.

And District 6's high populations of immigrant, refugee and impoverished students require more specialized skills from teachers, Pilch said. More than half of Weld County's students are on free and reduced lunches. The three Weld districts with the highest rate of students on free and reduced lunch — District 6, Fort Lupton Re-8 and Valley Re-1 — also have the three highest teacher turnover rates, the three highest dropout rates and the three lowest graduation rates.

The shortage forces districts to get creative with how they fill teaching positions. Mondt said Briggsdale has had success with people who have already had one career and want to move to a small town and pursue another. It's biggest selling point isn't financial, Mondt said, but the ability to live and work in a rural area, which combined with the district's small class sizes and four-day school week appeal to some people.

"Sometimes a person fits into our school and system really well, and you might build a teacher out of that," Mondt said.

Head an hour east of Briggsdale, outside of Weld County, to Merino, south of Sterling in Morgan County, and the problem becomes even starker. Rob Sanders, the superintendent of Buffalo Re-4J School District, once hired an English teacher from Montana over the phone a week before school started. Another time, he had to fly a math teacher — the only applicant for the position — into Colorado on a private plane less than a week before school started, interview him, then fly him back home to pack up his things before he returned to Colorado again.

Not every district has to fly in math teachers last-minute, but math, science and special education teachers are in especially short supply everywhere. Mondt said he knew of some rural districts that went "three or four years" without a qualified math teacher. UNC has a hard time recruiting math and science teachers into its teaching school, even though the school's total enrollment has increased every year since 2013.

"Why would a qualified math or science student become a teacher when they could become an engineer or an accountant and make more money?" Warren said.

And students who do graduate from UNC as a math or science teacher will go somewhere they'll be well-compensated, either in another state or in a district such as Boulder, which has an average salary \$20,000 higher than the highest-paying Weld district, Johnstown-Milliken Re-5J. If the best teachers take the best out-of-state jobs, or jobs in Colorado's most affluent districts, and the next best take jobs in places like District 6, where does that leave the rural schools?

"It's a self-fulfilling prophecy," Sanders said. "We are so far behind the rest of the nation. There are some places where we have to just put a body in a classroom, and we wonder why our schools fail."

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WELD DISTRICTS BY AVERAGE TEACHER SALARY

- » Johnstown-Milliken Re-5J: \$52,097
- » Greeley-Evans District 6: \$49,386
- » Windsor Re-4: \$48,273
- » Platte Valley Re-7: \$48,191
- » Weld County Re-8: \$47,093
- » Weld County Re-1: \$45,615
- » Eaton Re-2: \$45,515
- » Weld County Re-J 3: \$42,779
- » Prairie Re-11: \$41,549
- » Ault-Highland Re-9: \$40,156
- » Briggsdale Re-10: \$38,348
- » Pawnee Re-12: \$38,348

WELD DISTRICTS BY TEACHER TURNOVER

- » Weld County Re-1: 19.85 percent
- » Greeley-Evans District 6: 17.96 percent
- » Weld County Re-8: 16.89 percent
- » Prairie Re-11: 16.67 percent
- » Weld County Re-J 3: 15.38 percent
- » Windsor Re-4: 14.2 percent
- » Johnstown-Milliken Re-5J: 12.76 percent
- » Pawnee Re-12: 12.5 percent
- » Ault-Highland Re-9: 11.29 percent