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# Schooling during COVID creates some labor challenges for Garfield County schools

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Glenwood Springs Elementary School teachers Holly Armstrong and Ali Luck conduct online class from their classrooms with students who are at home or another remote location.

*Courtesy RFSD*

Roaring Fork School District officials have become accustomed to a few “summer surprises” as the new school year approaches and last-minute teacher resignations come forth.

Perhaps not a surprise this year, though, a few more resignations than usual were turned in, as the district announced in late July that it would be starting the 2020-21 school year with online distance learning to guard against the spread of COVID-19.

Depending on the public health risk after the Labor Day holiday weekend, the district is expected to announce this week whether it’s ready to begin bringing some students back into the classroom by Sept. 21.

Either approach has caused teachers and staff to give pause for different reasons, so it was not unexpected that the district saw 10 teacher resignations in late July and August before online sessions began Aug. 17.

That’s not an unmanageable number of resignations, said Amy Littlejohn, human resources director for Roaring Fork Schools in Glenwood Springs, Carbondale and Basalt.

And, with an existing pool of teaching applicants to work from, the district has been able to backfill most of those positions, she said.

“We can correlate half of those (resignations) to COVID reasons,” Littlejohn said. Others were a result of teachers simply deciding to take new jobs elsewhere, she said.

“Some of them had said they were not comfortable coming back with the pandemic, and we also had some single parents who wanted to stay home with their kids while we’re in this environment,” she said.

To help accommodate teachers who also have their own school-aged children, the district sent out a request in early August for available daycare openings. Providers were asked to accommodate students ages 5 to 12 during the day and help provide direction during their online learning sessions.

Angie Davlyn, senior projects manager for the Roaring Fork Schools, said the district ended up filling 30 positions and had more available that were not ultimately needed.

“We knew that was a critical piece to getting teachers back in the classroom,” Davlyn said of teachers who are choosing to conduct their online class sessions from their physical classrooms.

When the district first asked teachers how many of them could use help with daycare, the number was closer to 100, Davlyn said.

“We were surprised a bit at the lower numbers, so people were able to do something different, and some are bringing their own children into the buildings,” she said. The district agreed to accommodate that, as well.

As it does every August at the start of the school year, the school board at its Aug. 26 meeting adopted a resolution declaring a “critical shortage” of teachers, bus drivers and food service workers. That allows the district to hire retired teachers and staff who are already collecting retirement benefits, without any restrictions.

Another area of critical need even before the pandemic hit was having enough substitute teachers to cover classes when a regular teacher is out. That’s even more challenging during the COVID restrictions, Littlejohn said.

“We’ve definitely lost a lot of our regulars in this environment,” she said. “We are actively recruiting, and doing a lot more training of our subs who have stayed on so that they are able to assist with distance learning.”

Garfield Re-2 Schools in New Castle, Silt and Rifle decided to return immediately to the classroom across all grade levels for the new school year. But it did not see an inordinate number of teacher resignations, said Theresa Hamilton, director of communications for the western Garfield County school district.

“We certainly did receive quite a few comments over the summer from staff with concerns about themselves or family members if we returned to in-person instruction,” Hamilton said.

But, the district was able to work with some of those teachers to devote their teaching efforts to the district’s optional distance learning platform, she said.

About 770 district students are doing remote learning, while 3,800 are physically in the schools, Hamilton said.

“We have 23 full-time staff devoted to our distance learning platform, and many others providing both online and in-person instruction, predominantly at the high school level,” she said.

A school district mill levy override approved in 2018 to help boost teacher pay has also helped with hiring and retaining teachers each year, Hamilton said.

Overall, the district hired about 36 new teachers this year.

“That’s a significant improvement from pre-mill levy days of 70-80 new teachers each year,” she said. “We are pleased that our teacher turnover rate has declined and seems to be staying relatively stable.”

The western district does have its hiring challenges same as the Roaring Fork Schools, though, especially when it comes to food services, bus drivers and substitute teachers.

“Our nutrition services department is four people down and we have been supplementing with temporary workers,” Hamilton said. The district’s transportation director and mechanics are also driving routes until two bus driver positions are filled, she said.

To meet the ongoing need for substitute teachers, the district last year introduced a building-level substitute program, where each school has a go-to person to fill in during teacher absences, instead of handling it through an on-call system.

With the practice this year of cohorting students and teachers to limit disease spread in case of an outbreak, that has become even more imperative, Hamilton said.

And, with more teachers being diligent about staying home if they are sick or exhibit any of the traditional COVID-19 symptoms, that also will tax the substitute teacher pool, she said.

“We are trying to keep substitutes to individual buildings so that they do not break student/staff cohorts,” she said.

The Roaring Fork District was discussing a similar building-level approach to ensuring better availability of substitute teachers last spring, before the pandemic hit.

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