

Anchorage School District seeks to hire retired teachers to help fill hundreds of vacancies

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Anchorage

By Annie Berman

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An Anchorage teacher prepares her classroom for the new school year in August 2021. (Emily Mesner / ADN File)

The Anchorage School District is hoping to hire back retired teachers to help fill some of its hundreds of vacancies for the upcoming school year.

It's the first time the school district has considered hiring retired teachers full time, according to Martin Lang, head of the district's human resources department. In the past, the district has hired retired teachers only part time, via single-year contracts.

It's the latest strategy to help address the district's hiring and retention challenges: As of January, there were around 400 unfilled staff positions in the district, Lang said. There were more than 600 openteacher and other staff positions on the district's online job board as of this week.

Lang and others have linked the district's hiring challenges to a national teacher shortage. School board members and education advocates also have said other issues are helping drive the shortage, including a lack of competitive retirement benefits and lower salaries compared to other states.

Additionally, they have said there are not enough new teachers graduating from the University of Alaska each year to balance out the large numbers of teachers retiring, moving away or switching careers in the years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lang said that the district decided this fall to focus some of its hiring efforts on retired teachers because of persistent, districtwide hiring challenges across multiple departments and specialties.

Under state law, school districts that want to hire back retired teachers full time are required to pass a resolution that's approved by the school board — and to prove that they are otherwise unable to find qualified applicants.

That law exists because of federal rules that govern how and where people can be reemployed when they are collecting a pension, Lang said.

[Alaska school administrators warn of serious consequences without a substantial funding boost]

Retired teachers are slightly costlier to the district than newer teachers because they often start much higher up the pay scale, and the state must still contribute to their retirement benefits even though the teacher doesn't have to pay in, he said.

"That said, you know, the pros really at this point outweigh the cons," Lang said. "They come with a deep reservoir of experience in the classroom."

By state law, the district must prove that the subject areas or positions that they're hoping to fill with retired teachers are not receiving sufficient applications. They do this by leaving the job posting up for at least 10 days before considering teachers who've retired from the district and are already collecting a pension.

In Anchorage, the areas of greatest need include special education; elementary education; student nutrition and transportation; and math and science, Lang said.

He said he didn't have a clear sense of how many retired teachers might be interested in coming back to the classroom. But he said that other districts, like Kenai and Mat-Su, have implemented a similar plan and have had significant interest.

The Anchorage School Board is set to vote on the resolution at its March 19 meeting.

Board member Andy Holleman said in an interview that he expected the resolution to face little opposition given the significant need in the district for a broader pool of qualified educators.

"I think it will be a good thing for the district," Holleman said.

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