

Education

Anchorage School District offers jobs to applicants without teaching certificates, among other staffing strategies

By Annie Berman

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Students eat breakfast and color in Topaz Stotts' second grade classroom before school starts at Klatt Elementary School in Anchorage on Tuesday, Aug. 17, 2021. (Emily Mesner / ADN)

The Anchorage School District is struggling to hire enough teachers and other staff to address increasing vacancies. There are currently around 400 unfilled positions districtwide, according to Martin Lang, who heads up the school district's human resources department.

One strategy the district is using to address the issue is turning to applicants with bachelor's degrees but no teaching certifications, who are now eligible to be hired as teachers as part of a state program that will help them get certified while they teach. The district is also

increasingly recruiting international teachers with J-1 visas to fill open teaching positions, which currently number over 100.

A visit to the Anchorage School District's [online jobs site](#) reveals other offerings meant to attract more applicants: Signing bonuses up to \$5,000 plus relocation stipends and boosts to yearly pay for the hardest-to-fill positions, including special education and student nutrition.

Anchorage's challenges are connected to a broader state and national teacher shortage, Lang said during a public meeting Tuesday. During the 2021-2022 school year — the most recent national data available — the country lost 10% of its teachers due to large numbers retiring or leaving the profession altogether during the pandemic, Lang said. In Alaska, that number was even higher, he said: The state lost 22% of its teaching staff during that same year.

Years of underfunding public education at the state level are driving the [continuing](#) and dire staffing challenges, [Anchorage School Board members](#), administrators and teachers have said.

The future of possible increases to that funding is uncertain, as the Alaska Legislature [is divided](#) on whether and how to address what many educators have described as a crisis-level lack of funds. The Anchorage School District [faces a \\$98 million budget deficit](#) for the coming school year, likely meaning difficult cuts ahead. Meanwhile, longtime teachers are continuing to leave the state to pursue more competitive pay and benefits outside of the state, said Cory Aist, president of the Anchorage Education Association, the union that represents the district's teachers.

The University of Alaska system is also not producing enough teachers each year to fill the hundreds of open positions statewide, Lang said. Over the past few years in Anchorage, the vacancies have grown each year, he said.

“There is no way for us to fill all of our openings just with the number of teachers and new teachers that come in the pipeline that are available in Alaska,” Lang said in an interview. “So we have to source qualified teachers from outside of Alaska, and there is no one silver bullet that’s going to fill all of our openings.”

Biggest gaps

Some of ASD’s biggest vacancies are in special education, student nutrition and elementary education, according to Lang.

There were over 50 special education vacancies districtwide as of this week — despite [hiring incentives](#) offering those applicants \$5,000 to sign a two-year contract or \$10,000 in relocation expenses after four years of employment.

“There are fewer and fewer people choosing to go into traditional teacher certification programs, and there are even fewer choosing to specialize in special education,” Lang said. “And so that is just a continued growing area of need for us.”

Aist said the vacancies in elementary education were a new trend that he attributed partly to a rise in behavioral issues among students and a lack of resources to help address the root causes.

“We are hearing from teachers in the classroom weekly that are being bitten, being hit, being kicked,” he said.

“It’s a very challenging situation when class sizes are too large, (support staff) positions are unfilled, and it’s just becoming a very challenging working environment,” Aist said.

Emergency teaching certificates

This school year, the district has increasingly started offering teaching jobs to applicants who have a bachelor's degree but no teaching certification as part of [an emergency certification](#) launched by the state during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those certifications “allow us to hire somebody who has a college degree, but not a college degree specifically in education,” Lang said. That teacher receives an “emergency certification,” which allows them to teach in the classroom and enroll in a teacher preparation program. This year, the district has hired about 50 teachers this way. Lang said that typically, the district is using this option for longtime substitute teachers, volunteers or coaches who have some kind of educational or classroom experience.

The emergency certificate requires a full-time job offer from the district and a bachelor's degree, and is only available for one year, according to Lucy Teaford, a recruiter with the school district. Aist said this strategy reflects the district's inability to offer pay and benefits comparable to other states, and a sign that the district has resorted to hiring less-qualified instructors as a result of the shortages. “I think that that is a last-ditch effort to put people in our classrooms when what we really want are quality educators to teach our students,” he said.

More J-1 visa teachers this year

The district has also hired over 50 foreign teachers as part of the [J-1 visa program](#), a cultural exchange program that allows schools to hire international teachers for three years, with the possibility of an extension.

As part of the program, the applicants are required to be a certified teacher in their home country and have a bachelor's degree and at

least two years of full-time teaching experience — though Lang said many of the district's applicants have more experience.

The school district hired nine J-1 teachers during the 2021-2022 school year, 10 during the 2022-2023 school year, and 31 during the current school year, school district spokesman Corey Allen Young wrote in an email.

In Alaska, most J-1 teachers are from the Philippines, including 30 out of 31 of the teachers hired this year by the district.

Rebecca Carrillo, who serves as the Philippine Honorary Consul for Alaska, said that teaching in the U.S. is a popular choice for Filipino teachers who can make as much as 10 times their annual teaching salary at home.

Over half of Anchorage's J-1 teachers were hired to fill special education teaching positions, Lang said.

The J-1 program "has really helped us fill positions that we can't otherwise source any qualified teachers for," Lang said.

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