**To address shortage, Evers’ budget would allow districts to rehire retired teachers**

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Years ago, when the Iola-Scandinavia School District would post an elementary teaching job, it’d get several hundred applicants.

Administrator Ray Przekurat says that’s now down to 30 or 40.

For a high school social studies teacher, it’d be 60 to 80. Now it’s 10. For science, 20 to 25, now maybe five.

And for specialty areas such as Spanish or tech ed, “You’re lucky to get a candidate,” he said.

So that’s why he’s backing a provision in Gov. Tony Evers’ budget that would allow districts to rehire retired teachers, who could continue to collect their pensions while earning a new salary.

The provision would reverse a 2013 change Republicans pushed through to address so-called “double dipping” by public employees. It also would follow a recommendation from a Blue Ribbon Commission on Education Funding, which urged the change to help school districts address a shortage of teachers.

Sen. Luther Olsen, who co-chaired the commission, said he supports the idea but would rather take it up outside the budget.

But GOP colleague Duey Stroebel, who sponsored a 2013 bill that banned retirees from receiving their pensions if they took another government job at more than half-time, said he would oppose including the measure in the budget or as a standalone bill.

“When you’re not retired anymore, you shouldn’t be collecting your retirement benefit,” said Stroebel, R-Saukville.

Republicans included the change in the 2013-15 state budget, barring retired public employees from claiming a pension if they are rehired and then work at least two-thirds full-time hours. That budget also included a provision requiring a break in service of at least 75 days before a retiree could be rehired, rather than the old 30 days.

The Evers proposal would prohibit teachers from having an agreement in place when they retire to come back and work for the district. Also, their pension payments couldn’t increase due to the salary they earned while working again. But the break in service would go back down to 30 days.

Przekurat said the change to the break in service is particularly important because school district contracts run through July 1. Requiring 75 days means a retiree couldn’t come back until mid-September, after school has already started.

He added the struggle to find teachers is particularly pronounced in rural areas for a number of reasons, including the starting salaries his district can offer compared to those in more urban areas.

When the district posted a high school science teaching position last summer, it got zero applications, Przekurat said. It then used a search service that led to the hiring of Andrew Schefelker, who was killed in last month’s chain-reaction car crash on I-41.

Przekurat said two retired teachers and two recent graduates who had just finished their student teaching applied for the job after it was recently posted, and one of the new grads has now been hired.

He said the district is also looking to increase its starting salary, which was boosted two years ago to $36,250. With neighboring districts in the range of $38,000 to $40,000 and being a rural district, he said, it has made it more of a challenge to find applicants.

“Just the overall decrease of candidates in teacher education programs is really hurting the whole state,” he said.

According to the Department of Public Instruction, 12,323 people entered a Wisconsin teaching program in 2010, but there were just 7,956 in 2016, a drop of 35 percent. Likewise, the number of people completing the programs has dipped significantly with 3,426 in 2016, compared to 4,749 in 2010.

The department’s slideshow on the issue shows 5,031 teachers left the profession in the 2016-17 school year with 3,426 new teachers coming in, a net loss of 1,605.

The agency also uses data on emergency licenses as its best gauge of teacher shortages, a spokeswoman said. That’s because districts can only seek them if they can’t find a fully licensed candidate to fill a job.

There were 2,248 emergency licenses issued for the 2017-18 school year, compared to 1,126 in 2012-13.

Some have speculated that fewer people have been going into teaching in Wisconsin since Republicans pushed through Act 10 in 2011. But Wisconsin is not alone in the crunch for teachers as there has been a drop nationally in the number of students majoring in education, along with those already in the classroom leaving the profession for other fields that pay better.

Olsen, who voted for the 2013 change as a member of the Finance Committee, said part of the impetus behind it was the belief that people were being prevented from getting jobs because retirees were filling them.

Now, he says the “world has changed in six years,” and it’s clear school districts are struggling to find employees.

Members of the blue ribbon commission are now considering what bills to introduce, and Olsen said he’s hoping the change for teachers is part of the mix.

“It’s not that they’re doing it and keeping people away from these jobs. It’s just there’s nobody to take them,” Olsen said.

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