

Schools

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needs a middle school math teacher or high school English instructor — not to mention outlining minimum college requirements and job experience.

Candidates therefore are typically slotted into classes and subjects where they have adequate backgrounds. Farmington thus avoids one major pitfall of American education. There are districts around the country that are under the gun for sometimes assigning specific classes to teachers not certified to teach them. In a study by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, it was determined that more than 20 percent of high school teachers do not possess undergraduate minors in their particular subjects.

"We'd certainly try to fit people into their field, background, their specialty," said Larry Lobert, executive director of personnel in Farmington schools, during a recent interview at his office in the Lewis Schulman Administration Building.

Signing on

The online application system is off to a popular start. Lobert said there were "several thousand hits" on the system this summer.

"We now require that anyone interested in applying for a job with Farmington Public Schools to at least log on and fill out their application electronically," Lobert explained. "The notion is that technological proficiency is something we require on our staff."

Applicants also don't have to fret over confidential, personal information being picked up by anyone other than the intended recipient.

"Some fields are encrypted," Lobert said. "It is protected." Developed in collaboration with Farmington Hills-based Frostbyte Communications Inc., it's a system that's a timely godsend, given the current backlash against public education and projected heavy teacher retirements shortly into the 21st century.

"According to Lobert, annual turnover in recent years has been about 50-60. This summer, with the application and screening system in place, about 75 teaching jobs were filled. Even though people want to teach in Farmington, the selection process is getting more problematic every year.

Finding good help

"It's harder and harder," Lobert said. "We find good candidates. But we're noticing the difference in the supply. It's more of a seller's market these days. That doesn't mean we aren't getting some great people."

For Lobert, the job is being compounded by the need to pull substitute teachers from the fill-in ranks, creating holes in that roster. "We're our own worst enemy sometimes."

As tough as it is now to keep the full-time and substitute rosters replenished, Lobert is looking five or 10 years ahead with some trepidation.

The hordes of teachers hired in the late 1960s and early 1970s are reaching retirement age. Nationwide, the supply being turned out by colleges and universities might not meet the demand caused by an aging workforce. How will enough outstanding candidates then be found, even by districts such as Farmington — which Lobert said has the luxury of attracting top-notch faculty?

"My worst fear is that we'd get (up to) 100 retirements in a year," he said. There currently are about 830 teachers employed by the district, making between \$32,100-\$66,700.

Another fear for educators is the realization that school districts will be scrutinized even more by the public. Those districts face certain criticism if they don't take a proactive stance to address issues such as the projected shallow pool of

EDUCATION UNDER FIRE

BY TIM SMITH, STAFF WRITER

quality teacher candidates, including finding new, innovative ways to replenish it.

"We don't have the luxury anymore of standing still and expecting that the very best candidates are going to come to our doorstep," he said.

Tough test

What the Internet system does is give Farmington administrators a quick, efficient method to not only deepen the candidate pool, but weed out potential mistake hirings. That is an important consideration, with the increasing public pressure on school systems to provide the best possible education — which really boils down to personnel directors recommending the best possible educators be signed on by school boards.

With that in mind, how do Lobert and other district decision-makers find out which applicants have the best chance of not backfiring on them? It starts with a stringent site-based interview process. A fter potential candidates apply, principals such as Lewis — who previously produced detailed job postings and preferences — try to match needs and players. They quickly whittle the long list to a short list of 15-20 candidates per job. Then, they ask 24 questions of the Gallup SR1 Teacher Perceiver.

"It is more about teaching style and work style issues than right or wrong, good or bad," Lobert explained. "It's about what you bring to the classroom."

That merely reduces the list to up to 10 finalists. From that point on, they really get a workout.

Next up are questions designed to measure whether finalists possess "The Most Critical Knowledge and Skills" as developed by the American Association of School Personnel Administrators. Interviews delve into areas such as classroom management and attitudes about diversity.

"We're looking for proficiency in all of those areas," Lobert said.

Only the beginning

Those who make the grade are recommended to be hired. Those who fall short receive "sorry" letters via the applicant database they signed onto in the first place.

A lot of the candidates have come into my office and said, "What a workout," Lobert said, with a smile. "Those who make it are appreciative that the quality measures are there and feel real positive about emerging as the finalist."

One teacher who recently went through the process, Lisa Drane of East Middle School, said it was exhaustive. But she stressed that residents should take solace in knowing "that there definitely is an efficient screening process intact" in Farmington.

Even after teachers are hired, the task isn't over. There is a four-year probation before

tenure is attained; through-out, numerous education workshops and staff development endeavors must be participated in. Teachers and principals this year are beginning new evaluations, which focus on setting mutual goals and trying to reach them.

Those efforts are essential for districts to ward off later criticism about how well educators are performing and to frustrate movements to do away with the tenure system.

"If you do a good job at the front end," Lobert said, "the whole tenure issue becomes moot... Between the selection process and four years of probation, if we don't know if we have a good teacher then shame on us."



From the top: Farmington schools Superintendent Bob Maxfield says the criticism of teachers does not correspond with mostly favorable public opinion polls.

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There's still time to try for spot on NFWB team

Kids may tryout for the NFWB Cobras beginning at 8 a.m. today at Founders Fields 5, 6, 7 and 8, on Eight Mile Road, two miles east of I-275.

The tryout schedule is as follows:
8-10 a.m. for 16 year olds;
9:30-11:30 a.m. 11 year olds; 11

a.m.-1 p.m. 12 year olds; 12:30-2:30 p.m. 13 year olds; 1-3 p.m. 15 year olds; 2:30-4:30 p.m. 14 year olds; 3-5 p.m. 10 years and younger.

Players are asked to arrive a half-hour early to sign in.

All players need to bring bats, mitts, helmets and cleats.