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Lawmakers, educators discuss teacher shortage causes, solutions

By SARAH MICHELS sarah.michels@bgdailynews.com

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Dishman-McGinnis Elementary School fourth-grade math teacher Alex I during class Wednesday.

Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

FRANKFORT — On the first day back in Frankfort, a group of Kentucky legislators discussed how to address a statewide teacher shortage.

Tuesday morning, the House Education Committee heard about factors contributing to the issue from a panel of education stakeholders, including Kentucky Department of Education Commissioner Jason Glass.

Glass said that as of Jan. 10, 2023, there were about 1,500 certified educator vacancies in Kentucky. During the 2021-22 academic year, the turnover rate reached 20.4%, several percentage points higher than previous years and the 14-15% national benchmark.



Panelists and legislators cited a variety of contributing factors.

Glass presented a three-pronged problem: insufficient pay, support and respect for educators.

While he said pay that hasn't kept up with inflation and weakened retirement benefits are not the only reason students aren't pursuing teaching and educators are leaving, he emphasized that they are major factors.

As teachers leave and vacant positions grow, those remaining take on additional responsibilities. Glass said this workload increase leaves educators without adequate support.

Educators also feel unsupported by the outside culture due to the politicization of their profession, Glass said.

Rep. Russell Webber, R-Shepherdsville, questioned whether the factors Glass presented are really the main causes of the teacher shortage. He said that everyone he's spoken to has cited discipline issues as their primary motivation to leave. Teachers don't feel safe or supported in their classrooms anymore, Webber said.

The number of emergency certifications awarded tripled between the 2017-18 and 2022-23 academic years, to 1,156 certifications. This reliance on educators with emergency certifications to fill vacancies is good as a short term measure, but not as a permanent solution, said Amanda Sewell, an educator for Fayette County Schools.

Teachers with emergency certifications may have plenty of content knowledge, but lack the classroom management experience needed to address growing discipline problems, Sewell said.

Rep. Steve Riley, R-Glasgow, said that the issue is manifold, regardless of their order of importance.

“I think sometimes we get locked in on one issue,” he said. “We’ve got to look in a lot of areas and peel back those layers.”

Riley said he is working with Rep. Scott Lewis, R-Hartford, on a bill putting mandatory teacher trainings on a rotation to lighten their loads.

Panelists from the Kentucky Association of School Administrators presented a list of nine measures to begin to address the shortage this legislation session, including:

- A comprehensive study of public education including analysis on wages and benefits and the perception of teaching profession;
- A web portal of resources for teacher recruitment;
- A resolution addressing multiple certification issues, including teacher testing, state-to-state reciprocity and varying grade levels of certification;
- A marketing campaign promoting the importance of education to Kentuckians;
- Funding for a model teacher recruitment and induction program;

- Funding for student teaching stipends and undergraduate teacher education scholarships;
- A resolution to create a navigable system of alternative teacher certification including adequate resources and support;
- Clarification on acceptable educator behaviors and provide clear and appropriate penalties; and
- Funding for GoTeach Kentucky and the Ambassador program to every school district.

Rep. Kevin Jackson, R-Bowling Green, said he was impressed with the recommendations, and wants to dig deeper into the costs and values of each to see if any can get any traction this session.

He said the marketing campaign in particular was a great idea, because young people are so in tune to and influenced by social media and TV.

“If we can put a positive spin on this, not only does it help them, but it also helps our current teachers and administrators and people in education today,” Jackson said. “It gives them a positive light to shine on them.”

Riley agreed.

“If you don’t promote yourself, who is going to promote you?” he said.

Sen. Max Wise, R-Campbellsville, a former Senate Education Committee chair who represents parts of southcentral Kentucky, said after the committee meeting that education is at the core of economic development and workforce development.

“You look at all the professions in the world, it all starts with the teacher,” Wise said.

He said that Warren County is a good model for education-business partnerships for similarly sized counties.

Wise said that fixing the teacher shortage will be tough, but now is the perfect opportunity to address it by listening to what the community is saying.

“It’s not just listening to school administrators, but it’s listening to the teachers within the school walls,” Wise said. “Is there a magic wand? No. If we had it, and we figured it out, every state would look to model us.”

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