



Published: 03.29.2008

Ariz. lawmakers seek to ease teacher crunch by expanding program

By Nicole Santa Cruz

UA COMMUNITY NEWS SERVICE

When Sam Moody, 39, a junior high school teacher, moved from rural Missouri to Clifton in August, he lived in his classroom for two weeks.

"In the morning, I would put my cot in my car and teach for the day," he said. These days, Moody is living in a mobile home behind the school, he said.

Even Bentley Terry, the principal and superintendent of Clifton Unified School District, said after his arrival less than a year ago in Clifton, a town of 2,000 in Greenlee County, he stayed in a hotel room for three months.

"It affects our schools because we are trying to bring teachers in," he said. "How can you bring someone in when you tell them, 'We don't have a house for you?'"

Now the Legislature is working to address the problem of teacher shortages at the university level. A bill that would extend an existing program to include rural areas has passed the House and is slated to be heard in the Senate's Higher Education Committee next week.

The program, dubbed the Mathematics Science and Special Education Teacher Student Loan Forgiveness Program, which is overseen by the Arizona Board of Regents, grants Arizona university students a loan to pay for tuition for up to five years if they'll agree to teach math, science or special education in Arizona.

Recipients must complete one year of teaching in Arizona plus one additional year for each year of monetary support received. The tuition loans will be forgiven for those teachers meeting the requirements.

The tweaking of the existing program, which has the capacity for 500 people, would allow a participant to teach any subject in a geographic area experiencing a teacher shortage, said Rep. David Schapira, D-Tempe.

Last year, the Legislature allocated \$2.2 million for the program, which Schapira says will be protected in lieu of budget cuts and sweeps for this fiscal year. He is hoping the same will happen for the next fiscal year, despite a projected multibillion-dollar budget deficit.

Teacher shortages in math, science and special education are nothing new, but shortages in rural counties can affect such other subjects as social studies and English and result in larger class sizes, Schapira said.

"You end up sticking a whole lot of kids in one class," he said. "It's difficult not only for the teacher but the students as well."

The program started this year. Student participation was logged at 63, and the Board of Regents is advertising in anticipation for the fall. So far, the program has 27 applicants, said Mark Denkey, assistant executive director for the regents.

Schapira said rural areas are exactly why this bill is important, but metropolitan areas can't be forgotten either.

"Some inner-city districts have the problem of cross-curriculum shortage," he added.

Ann Parker, director of admissions for the University of Arizona College of Education, agreed. "To tell you the truth, there's a teacher shortage everywhere," she said. "Even Tucson has difficulty recruiting people to teach in its schools."

The education college is also mirroring a national and state trend of dwindling application numbers for ed majors, which was down about 5 percent from fall 2003 to fall 2005, according to university numbers.

Dan Anderson, director of institutional research for the Board of Regents, said that from 2006 to 2007, the number of education degrees awarded by Arizona's universities dropped by 142.

All content copyright © 1999-2008 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.