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Seeking superintendents

Turnover can leave small school districts looking for leaders

**By Robert Sanchez, Rocky Mountain News
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Two-thirds of the school superintendents statewide who left their jobs in the past three years were from small districts.

This year's turnover among superintendents is no different, as some find their jobs less rewarding and more stressful.

At least 29 superintendents throughout Colorado will leave their jobs this summer, with 18 of them from districts with 1,000 or fewer students, according to the Colorado Department of Education.

Small schools make up 109 of the 182 districts in Colorado.

The number of superintendents who retire or resign from their jobs is likely to increase after the school year ends this month.

"This certainly subtracts from school stability," said Phil Fox, deputy executive director of the Colorado Association of School Executives, which also studies superintendent vacancies. "There are not enough willing superintendents in the pipeline, and that's especially more true in small rural districts than larger metro ones."

Since 2001, and into the next school year, 91 of the 140 superintendents who left or plan to leave their jobs were from small school districts, many of them fighting dwindling financial resources and stagnant student enrollments.

In the 75-student Campo School District, where there have been three superintendents in three years, first-year Superintendent Nikki Johnson said the turnover "can be disastrous."

Enrollment in Campo is projected to hit 65 students next school year, making it possible that the district might soon close for good.

"You need continuity at the top," said Johnson, a former teacher with 20 years of experience in the southeastern Colorado district. "Out here, the community has to know that your heart is in the right place, that you're going to do everything to keep the school."

A rural superintendent, by definition, is a rare breed. They're both a school leader and a small-town politician. And they do it with little help.

They have to be at every sporting event, they sometimes drive the school bus in the morning and they help prepare lunch menus. They teach classes when a substitute can't be found. They get calls from children when snow hits the ground: "Is school canceled?"

Getting someone who wants to move to a Colorado outpost with limited administrative help, few teachers and big headaches is hardly an easy sell.

"I joke that God sent me here because He was mad at me," said Bill Hines, a seven-year superintendent in the 380-student Vilas School District who will retire this summer after spending 25 years as an administrator in Colorado and Texas.



Hal Stoelzle © News

Jeff Perry, superintendent of Byers School District, teaches a lesson on the Civil War during a fifth-grade social studies class at Byers Elementary School. Perry will move to another rural Colorado school district in the fall. Byers is among at least 29 districts statewide that will lose superintendents this year.

The hours, he said, get longer and longer each year, as more emphasis is put on state student testing and federal achievement goals that are expected to be met by all schools across the country.

In his Baca County district, Hines is the person who handles all of it.

"People are tired of the hassle that comes with these jobs, where the paperwork has grown to be a mountain," said Hines, whose district has yet to find a superintendent replacement. "I can't do my job anymore because I'm doing paperwork the whole time."

Replacements hard to find

Research suggests that many other Colorado superintendents think the same way.

According to a 2003 report from the Colorado Association of School Executives, nearly one in five rural superintendents "probably" would have chosen a different career if given the chance. Only one in 10 non-rural superintendents said the same.

"In smaller districts, you might have a staff of one, and that person is your secretary and the bookkeeper, so it's easy to see why some people are disappointed with their jobs," Fox said. "We're very concerned about the situation."

Within the past five years, there has been a who's who of superintendent openings, with Cherry Creek, Denver, Douglas County and Jefferson County - Colorado's four largest districts - each getting at least one new superintendent.

This year, though, the Poudre School District in Larimer County is the only district of 10,000 or more students that will start school next fall with a new superintendent.

The vacated jobs include superintendent positions in the 73-student Pritchett district in Baca County, the 101-student Lone Star district in Washington County and the 122-student Hi-Plains district in Kit Carson County.

"I know my school board was disappointed when I told them I was leaving," said Jeff Perry, who was hired last year as the Byers School District superintendent.

Perry's wife's job was transferred this year, forcing his resignation from the 570-student district and a move 150 miles to Grand County - where he will take the head job at the 500-student West Grand district.

"I felt a responsibility to make sure (Byers) could still make progress on what we've tried to build," Perry said. "I promised I'd be back in the summer to help out in any way I can."

Jasper Butero Jr. made a similar promise.

The Hoehne School District superintendent announced his retirement in October, figuring that the job would soon be filled. He told his school board in Las Animas County that he would stay until a replacement was found for the 360-student district.

Seven months later, two candidates from South Dakota and Texas have turned down the job. A statewide search so far has been unsuccessful.

Finding a qualified candidate for any superintendent job - much less one in a rural district - is the toughest part of turnover, educators said.

For one, rural superintendents earn a fraction of the money that their counterparts in larger districts are paid.

In many rural districts, pay ranges from \$55,000 to \$65,000 a year.

Superintendents in urban school districts typically earn more than \$100,000 a year, in addition to perks such as car allowances and retirement benefits.

In Campo, Johnson, the first-year superintendent, earns \$45,000. Having spent much of her career in the Baca County district, she knew the community and she knew what to expect from a school board that signed the last two superintendents to one-year contracts.

For others new to an area, it's a different situation.

Newcomers often are met with suspicion, even from the school boards that hired them.

Job pressures 'intense'

According to the CASE study of Colorado superintendents, almost half of the rural superintendents statewide last year who came from other districts cited a lack of board support or pressure as the reason they left their previous jobs.

One in three rural superintendents overall thought their boards were not well qualified or "incompetent," the study says.

"In a small district, superintendents think they're always being micromanaged," Hines said.

"The pressures are very intense," he said. "Most of us superintendents don't sleep well at night."

Rachel Tompkins, president of the Arlington, Va.-based nonprofit Rural School and Community Trust, said all superintendents have stresses on the job, but that the personalities are magnified in small districts where the community often expects itself to be involved at every level.

"If you want one of these jobs, you have to be as interested in community concerns as you are in making schedules so the buses run on time," Tompkins said.

"You definitely need some special characteristics if you want to do well."

Butero, the Hoehne superintendent, said he has that connection with his community. He spent 29 years in the district, 20 of which as its leader.

But now, more than anything, he wants a break. Butero will have his fingers crossed the entire summer.

"I hope I get to retire soon, but I might be here next year," he said. "Who knows."

Superintendent survey

The Colorado Association of School Executives last year surveyed superintendents statewide. Among the survey findings:

77% of rural superintendents think there is a shortage of candidates available for future superintendent vacancies.

21% think there is an adequate number of candidates.

2% think there is a surplus of candidates.

40% of rural superintendents, if given the opportunity to restart their lives, definitely would be a superintendent.

31% probably would be a superintendent.

20% probably would not be a superintendent.

1% definitely would not be a superintendent.

Source: Colorado Association Of School Executives, A Candid Look At Today'S School Superintendent

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