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FEATURED

Rome schools scramble to fill positions as new school year begins; teacher group president cites lack of respect, low pay for shortages

By Imani Beverly-Knox | IBeverly@RN-T.com
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A statewide trend of teachers leaving their profession in droves, citing burnout, is also being felt in Rome and Floyd County as the new school year nears.

“A burnout, and the teacher shortage, has been coming,” said Georgia Association of Educators President Lisa Morgan. “We were already experiencing a shortage in those hard to staff areas... We’ve seen in those areas it being increasingly difficult for districts to staff those positions.”

Additionally, Morgan said, though many of the same education issues and shortages existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the inconsistencies following those early months made the issues worse.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, when we first went all virtual, educators were heroes,” Morgan stated. “Then what I call pandemic fatigue cut in. Then the message became ‘we don’t care about your health or well-being, we don’t care about your family’s well-being. Shut up and teach.’ That lack of respect was something that exacerbated an already bad situation.”

According to the staffing website Teach Georgia, Rome City Schools currently has 55 open positions to fill before the school year begins on July 29. The clock is ticking: New teacher orientation begins on July 20 and teacher pre-planning begins on July 25.

Most of the vacant slots consist of 11 paraprofessional positions, 10 high school, 9 middle school positions and 5 elementary teaching positions, open as of July 5. Of those, 9 are for STEM-based classes and 6 are for language arts positions.

As part of this story, the Rome News-Tribune attempted to contact several Rome Board of Education members for comment. Board Chair Jill Fisher and board member Alvin Jackson declined to comment. Interim Superintendent Dawn Williams could not be reached for comment.

The Floyd County school system is seeking to fill vacant positions but Superintendent Glenn White said they’re not feeling the effects of a shortage in a significant way.

According to their staffing website, Frontline Education, Floyd County Schools currently has a total of 17 open positions. The most teaching vacancies were in special education, with a total of 3 open positions. However, White stated the most difficult positions to staff are STEM teachers, bus drivers and cafeteria staff.

Despite the challenges, he said, the \$2,000 salary increase allocated by the state and “a positive school culture” helped retain existing teachers and attract new ones.

However, Morgan said the \$2,000 raise doesn’t provide as much help for teachers in one of the lowest-paying states.

The Georgia Department of Education held an investigation with its Burnout Task Force, Morgan said, and the results showed the two main reasons why teachers are leaving: Lack of respect for teachers and low pay.

“A new educator makes less in Georgia than they would in Mississippi,” she added. “Even though there is an increase when you look at it from that perspective, we are still behind in real dollars buying power. Educator pay is less now than it was in 1999.”

With fewer college students graduating with education degrees and more teachers retiring, it’s leaving school districts in a crisis.

She also stated that the politicization of classrooms by the state legislature is driving teachers away as well, and the government's investment in private over public schools could potentially lower the quality of education children are able to receive.

"I can say we've had a drastic change in respect we have witnessed for teachers, particularly among policymakers," Morgan said. "Lawmakers need to be listening to the experts in the classroom when making public policy. When we as the educational experts in curriculum and instruction say, 'these are the issues we need to deal with' we need lawmakers to deal with those issues and not spending time... doing what feels like a further attack on public schools and educators."

Imani Beverly-Knox