

FOCUS ON

EDUC

Flexibility key to placement in tight education market

While many school districts are having budget trouble, there are career paths to the classroom.

"There are possibilities for teachers in today's economy, but people need to be very flexible," explains Peter Eddington, director at Educational Placement Service. EPS is the country's largest teacher placement agency, and has been in operation since 1973.

Eddington notes that inquiries about teaching positions have increased at his Elmhurst branch over the past few years. "Many of these people had been teachers or education majors, but they were hired out of the classroom into private sector jobs during the boom years; and now they've been let go. So the number of people looking for teaching positions has definitely increased."

Teacher placement services have been used since the 1830's, when teachers in the eastern United States were sought for schools on the frontier, Eddington says. Many educational institutions prefer to have these corporate or non-profit agencies handle advertising and preliminary interviews, and make recommendations to potential employers.

Some districts work with agencies because of challenges that are not related to the schools themselves. EPS has been recruiting for Hawaii and San Francisco, where costs of living can be too high for someone on a teacher's salary. To address these issues, Hawaii can help with relocation costs and offers retention bonuses, while areas like Philadelphia and North Carolina offer sign-up bonuses.

A number of local people want to teach in Chicago to help their community, according to Marion Hodges Biglan, Chicago Executive Director at Teach For America. "We get a lot of people applying from this area or who are attending area colleges," Biglan says. "That helps us keep a strong presence in the Chicago area."

Teach For America is a national non-profit, which seeks recent college graduates from all major fields. Members commit to teaching for two years in an inner city or rural area. "Then as alumni, they will mentor new teachers and work as advocates for changes in our educational system," Biglan adds.

Recruits are paid by the school districts, while Teach For America can offer financial assistance with moving costs, or help them get by until the first paycheck. Teach For America members may also qualify for a student loan deferral through the organization's affiliation with the AmeriCorps service network.

"We will have 75 teachers starting in Chicago class-

rooms next fall. They'll join about 65 people who are halfway through their two-year commitment," says Biglan. These new teachers will have attended a five-week summer program, then a two-week orientation at the school where they'll work in the fall.

Nationwide, Teach For America placed 2,000 teaching positions for the 2003-04 school year. They will be placed in rural and urban schools across the country, from the Bronx to South Central Los Angeles to the Mississippi Delta.

Teacher placement agencies are directed largely toward recent college graduates, but they will also help people with valuable "life experience." However, they do not provide a teaching certificate. For them, the corps' Chicago office works with National Louis University's alternative certification program. "We believe that people with the right characteristics will be able to learn to teach effectively with the right training," she adds.

Eddington notes that many districts offer alternative certification, and areas with a charter school system, like Chicago or the state of Arizona, will let specialists in a desirable subject like math or science teach while working toward their certification.

The Chicago Public Schools' Alternative Certification Program has helped individuals with degrees in an outside field who want to become teachers. Toni Hill, CPS' Director of Routes to Teaching, explains, "CPS works with the Illinois State Board of Education and universities throughout the city to provide participants with the necessary coursework and training to become fully-certified teachers in the high-need areas of math, science and special education. Mature career changers from across the country with varied work experiences apply to our program to pursue a meaningful career in teaching, often times fulfilling a lifelong dream."

Hill believes the program's structure helps these teachers. "Programs range in length from one to three years, depending on the discipline. Throughout the program, participants are mentored and supported by Chicago Public Schools as well as faculty from the partnering university."

Educational Placement Service can be reached at 630-941-3905, or on-line at www.educatorjobs.com. Information and applications for Teach For America are at www.teachforamerica.com. CPS' Alternative Certification Program is at www.cps-humanresources.org/altcert.

— Mark McDermott

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