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**IARSS Survey: Illinois Schools Struggle with Teacher Shortage Made Worse by COVID-19**

**SPRINGFIELD –** In a remarkably challenging year for education during the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois school districts report the teacher shortage crisis has worsened again, with more than nine in 10 schools now saying they face a shortage in quality educators.

The Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS), representing the leaders of Regional Offices of Education and Intermediate Service Centers in every Illinois county, has partnered with Goshen Education Consulting and Illinois State University for a fall 2020 survey of nearly 600 school districts statewide on the depth of the teacher shortage crisis and what should be done about it.

The results, as seen in previous studies, are sobering:

* 77 percent of schools report they have a teacher shortage problem
* 93 percent of schools report they have a problem finding substitute teachers
* 938 teaching positions – 17 percent of those schools participating in the survey were looking to fill – are either unfilled or filled with someone not qualified for the position
* More than 250 classes have been canceled and nearly 200 moved online because school administrators could not find educators to teach them
* While the teacher shortage has been at a crisis level for several years, 65 percent of schools surveyed say the problem is getting worse and 86 percent expect shortages will be an issue in the coming school years

The COVID-19 pandemic’s effects were evident in the survey. More teachers were hired by 37 percent of schools and more paraprofessionals were brought in for 40 percent of schools to deal with educating during the pandemic. Nearly one-third of schools reported challenges in hiring support staff to make COVID-19 education work.

Some schools reported they could not respond to the survey with as much data as they usually would because of day-to-day challenges presented by the pandemic.

One school superintendent reported additional expenses of nearly $600,000 in additional teachers and long-term substitutes for COVID-19 demands. “COVID concerns have caused most of our retired teachers who sub to not sub this year,” said one west-central Illinois superintendent.

Of the 938 positions reported as unfilled or underfilled by less than qualified employees, special education topped the list at 195 positions. Other subject areas with high numbers or percentages of unfilled or underfilled positions include math, P.E., science, computer science, school psychologist and career and technical education.

Schools report nearly universal applicant shortages across all grade levels, from pre-kindergarten through high school. The shortages grow slightly by grade level. Most open positions are from teacher retirements and resignations.

The most severe teacher shortages are reported in west-central Illinois school districts (89 percent), unit school districts (85 percent), and rural school districts (87 percent). More than half of districts believe their geographic location is hurting their ability to attract quality teachers.

With several years of data showing clear, troubling trends in the increasing teacher shortage crisis, survey organizers are working on a number of recommendations to address the problem from all angles. The recommendations and more in-depth discussions of the shortage problem will be featured in white papers to be released in the coming weeks.

Among the areas being considered are additional state investment in remote learning technologies that have become relied on during the pandemic, more teacher endorsement opportunities to address shortages in specialized educational areas, and new strategies to recruit and retain teachers at all points in their careers: from those considering becoming educators, to those already in the field but considering leaving, to those who retire early but come back to teach.

“This year has been an exceptionally challenging one, and our latest study reflects clearly how schools have had to fight through many types of shortages to provide the best education possible – in the classroom and virtually,” said Mark Klaisner, IARSS President and Executive Director of the West40 ISC west of Chicago.

“This latest survey will prove extremely valuable as we work with our colleagues and our schools to identify new ways to attack this problem, and turn around these numbers in the years to come. It will not be easy, but it will definitely be worth it.”

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