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An Education Problem Looms

In a time of layoffs, the state hopes to inspire a new generation of educators

By Seema Mehta

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As thousands of laid off California teachers sit out the school year, educators are worried about the long-term effect of losing so many teachers. Some instructors are considering leaving the state or even the profession, and if history is any indication, fewer young people will pursue careers in teaching.

"The pipeline issue is one of the most significant challenges that we're dealing with, with the layoff situation or the pink-slipping," said Margaret Gaston, executive director of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, a Santa Cruz-based nonprofit focused on strengthening California's teacher workforce.

Faced with severe budget cuts, school districts last spring issued more than 27,000 pink slips. Although many of those teachers were eventually rehired by school districts, thousands are still out of work, existing on a combination of unemployment benefits, their savings, spouses' wages and substitute teaching income when possible.

Heather Hottinger was one day shy of becoming a permanent teacher when she was laid off from her job at [Vintage Magnet Elementary](#) in North Hills in July. Since then, the new mother has applied for every teaching position she hears of, only to find herself in competition with scores of others.

To make ends meet, the 32-year-old is seeking substitute teaching assignments in Los Angeles and Temple City schools but has only worked three days this school year. She and her husband are considering a move to Texas, which has more teaching openings and where other relatives moved after earning credentials in California.

"All I want is my classroom. This is what I wanted to do my whole life, and I keep getting pushed away," said Hottinger, who is among 2,143 Los Angeles Unified School District teachers, counselors and administrators who are no longer employed full-time. "Did I go into the wrong field? I definitely have second thoughts."

The state is facing a looming teacher shortage as baby boomers reach retirement age and fewer young people are expected to enter the field. Nearly 55,000 teachers could retire over the next seven years, according to WestEd, a San Francisco-based nonprofit research and education agency.

In addition, the layoffs are having a ripple effect on the next generation of teachers: Past economic downturns in California have produced fewer teachers. In the years after the

dot-com bust, the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs declined 13% and the number of new teaching credentials dropped 17%, according to the Santa Cruz teachers center.

"We are confident that California once again will recover out of this economic slump, and it will be reflected in the hiring practices of schools and districts," Gaston said. "We want to make sure there is, one, an adequate pool of teachers from which principals can choose candidates that match the job openings, and, two, in that pool we have teachers who are training or prepared to take those challenging assignments in shortage areas."

Concerns about the next generation of teachers have prompted statewide and national recruitment efforts.

The Obama administration has requested \$30 million for a national campaign that focuses on young adults and mid-career professionals and on such high-need areas as science and math. In addition to reaching out to potential teachers, the U.S. Department of Education hopes to improve training programs. President Obama and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan plan to hold events in the fall highlighting the importance of teaching to the nation's future.

"It's a noble profession. In many other countries, children do aspire to be teachers, and they are regarded as some of the most important people in society," said John White, the education department spokesman. "That's what we need to do, so that we not only replace the teachers who are retiring but bring the most talented people to the field. . . . We need them to aspire to be the next generation of teachers."

The California Teacher Corps was formed earlier this year, with the goal of placing 100,000 new teachers into classrooms over the next decade. The organization focuses on recruiting professionals who are changing careers.

"There are people who had considered teaching who now are a little bit frightened off by it," said Catherine Kearney, president of the nonprofit. "One of things we can do is be proactive and talk more and plan more for what's in our future. The future is really here now."

Kate Robertson, 24, thought she *was* the future. Then she was laid off after her first year.

"After I finished the credential program, I started to hear that it's really hard to find a job. Why didn't anyone tell me this?" she said.

She was considering a combination of substitute teaching and working as a waitress to get by until she got a new job at [Larchmont Charter](#) in August. The school will find out later this month if it needs to cut more positions. "I don't think I would have chosen another route. I might have, had I known it would have been such a struggle."

Many teachers said they will weather this storm because they cannot imagine any other career.

Jennifer Galvin, 45, decided she wanted to be a teacher in second grade. Her father had just died, and her teacher helped her deal with her grief and uncertainty.

"She was just so warm and open. I was very, very, very shy," she said. "She would give me hugs, she was patient with me, she let me be myself and she let me know that I was safe."

Galvin taught in the Bay Area for 15 years, but moved to Folsom to be closer to her family. She made the four-hour commute to her old district for two years, but it was exhausting, so she found a job closer to home. As a new teacher with little seniority, she has been pink-slipped each of her three years in the Folsom-Cordova Unified School District. The first two times, she got a phone call asking her to return days before schools were to open.

So in August, as Galvin has done every summer for the last 18 years, she bought supplies -- folders, pencils, hand sanitizer, crayons -- for every child in her classroom.

The phone never rang, and the supplies are boxed in her garage.

"I thought I would be a teacher forever. I don't know what I'm going to do if I don't get called back soon," she said. "I don't wake up not thinking about it, and I don't go to bed not thinking about it."