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In city schools, faculty to spare

Personnel shifted from central office to classes

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Baltimore schools are poised to start the new academic year with teachers to spare, the result of a budget reorganization that sent central office administrators back to the classroom and cut staff positions in favor of tutoring, conflict-resolution and other programs.

While the surplus has meant an anxiety-ridden summer for employees still waiting for assignments, it is expected to bring a substantial increase in the percentage of city teachers who are "highly qualified" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The extra teachers - 141 as of yesterday - will be needed to fill the many vacancies that typically occur in the first few months of the year, and in the meantime, some new teachers will be paired with veterans, making for a smoother transition. No one will be left without a job when classes resume Aug. 25.

Over the summer, city schools terminated 206 teachers who since 2005 had been unable to meet certification requirements. That, coupled with the redeployment of central office staff, increased the percentage of highly qualified teachers.

Defined as certified educators with subject-area expertise, highly qualified teachers made up about 55 percent of the city's classroom teachers last year. It is too soon to know what the percentage will be in the coming school year; officials say only that the gain will be substantial.

The teacher surplus is one consequence of the major budget reorganization that Andres Alonso implemented during his first year as chief executive officer of the city schools.

Also because of the reorganization, classes will be smaller in city high schools, which have historically been underfunded but saw their budgets increase for the coming year. Their average class size is expected to drop from 27.2 students last year to 25.4, according to figures provided by Alonso.

In city elementary schools, classes are expected to grow from 17.3 children on average to 19.1 - still below a cap of 22 that was mandated in the past.



In previous years, the central office sent staff members to schools according to a formula based on the number of students enrolled. When Alonso arrived in July 2007, he wanted to shift decision-making power to principals. Faced with a \$50 million budget shortfall, he cut 310 jobs from the central office, sent \$70million previously allocated at the central office to schools, and gave principals the responsibility of crafting their own budgets.

Many displaced central office administrators agreed to be transferred to teaching and other school-based positions, even though the transfers generally involve a pay cut next year. (A union contract entitles administrators to keep their pay for a year.)

Of the 310 central office employees whose jobs were eliminated, only 14 decided to retire - a contributing factor in the teaching surplus. As of last week, the system was searching for placements for six central office employees whose job skills do not easily transfer to a school; those six people face the prospect of being laid off.

Officials had expected that more would leave.

Overall, "it turned out better than we expected or hoped," said JoAnne V. Koehler, the system's chief human resources officer. "You have no idea how we sat up at night" looking for jobs for displaced employees.

While many school systems look for teachers until the last days of summer, Baltimore is typically left scrambling far more than its suburban counterparts. That's not the case this year.

The number of openings remaining in Baltimore is comparable to the 70 in Anne Arundel County, a district that last year had about 8,000 fewer students than Baltimore and is generally less challenging.

The city has 73 openings in grades and subjects outside the areas of expertise of the 141 surplus teachers. (A certified elementary school teacher, for example, cannot be assigned to high school math.) Long-term substitutes will be assigned until permanent replacements are found.

Howard County schools are looking to fill 15 teacher openings. Baltimore County officials said principals are interviewing to fill about a dozen vacancies.

Harford County had 18 unfilled positions listed on its Web site and was recruiting in special education, math and science.

"We are still hiring for this year with several jobs open in critical areas," said Teri Kranefeld, a Harford school system spokeswoman. "We expect to have all positions filled, but we won't have a surplus."

In Baltimore, the surplus will be useful because the city typically sees dozens of teachers leave in the opening months of a new school year, as recruits are overwhelmed by their assignments.

Last year, the city lost 197 teachers during the first semester. This year, the surplus teachers will be on hand to fill vacancies as they arise.

Using their newfound budgetary authority, principals cut about 500 staff positions from schools and instead chose to direct money toward programs providing services such as conflict resolution, college counseling and sports activities.

Alonso said many of the positions that were cut were assistant principals and teachers working in roles away from the classroom.

"Schools opted to reduce administrators and out-of-classroom personnel, but they essentially retained classroom teachers," Alonso said in an e-mail to The Sun.

Over the summer, as the central office found more money from grants and dollars that carried over from last year, principals added back about 100 of the positions they had cut. More grant money is still headed to schools and is not included in current calculations.

Last spring, the directors of several programs that previously had been funded by the central office were nervous when principals, newly in charge of their budgets, said they could not afford them. But principals redistributed money to keep and add programs, leaving many likely to expand rather than shrink.

One is the Community Conferencing Center, which provides alternatives to suspension and intervenes in conflicts such as bullying. It operated in 38 schools last year and this year is scheduled to increase to 46.

Experience Corps, funded through a mix of public and private dollars, placed senior citizens as mentors and tutors in 20 city schools last year. This year, it is expecting to operate in 17 to 19 schools, but with a much larger percentage of its budget funded by the school system.

Sports4Kids, which provides sports and recreational programs, operated in 18 city schools last year and is due to grow to 25. Schools contracting with the program might eliminate the position of a gym teacher, just as those contracting with the CollegeBound Foundation for college counseling might not need a guidance counselor.

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