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EDUCATION

1 in 10 Missouri teachers thinking about calling it quits, survey shows

Claudette Riley Springfield News-Leader

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A recent survey of more than 8,000 Missouri educators showed that for some of them, the pandemic proved to be too much.

In mid-February, a year after COVID-19 was first reported in the state, 10% of the teachers said they were leaving the profession.

Of those planning to retire or resign, 62% cited the pandemic as their reason.

Paul Katnik, assistant commissioner of education in Missouri, said if the exodus comes to fruition, it will exacerbate a national teacher shortage that will be felt in rural, urban and suburban districts.

"We have had concerns about teacher shortages for years, way before the pandemic showed up," Katnik said. "We have particular concerns in areas like science and math and special education."

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Katnik said the decisions educators make now regarding their careers will have lasting impact in the lives of students.

"What's at stake is their education," he said, noting any uptick in exits will cause ripples in the state. "Minor changes in percentages, stacked on top of what we were seeing before the pandemic, will have real consequences for kids sitting in classrooms, needing an education."

In 2020, four researchers connected to Missouri State University's College of Education heard rumblings about a potential educator exodus and put together a survey to try to capture what was happening in the profession.

They sent the survey to each public school educator with an email on file with the state — nearly 67,000.

"When we started, we didn't know if we could get this out quick enough and get enough responses back," said Jon Turner, associate professor of educational research. "In the email, we said 'We want to be able to provide your voice as a teacher, as an educator in Missouri, out to the public.'"

The survey results

The result was overwhelming. Of 8,040 educators who filled out the survey, 63% were classroom teachers, 23% were content specialists, 12% were in other adjacent roles.

Experience levels ranged from one year to 45 and — similar to the demographic make-up of the profession in Missouri — 82% were female and 93% were white. The district type was 44% suburban, 42% rural and 14% urban.

Turner said educators from all over the state indicated plans to retire or resign.

"We had good responses from all those regions around the state," he said. "There was not a region that was left out, as far as the responses we received."

The other MSU researchers involved in the survey include assistant professors Ximena Uribe-Zarain, Kennedy Ongaga, and Kelly Wynne.

In the survey, 45% of teachers planning to retire this year cited the pandemic as a major factor. However, it was the reason given for 72% of teachers who planned to resign this school year.

Katnik said DESE and state-level education advocacy groups and teacher unions are watching the resignations and retirements closely.

"Hiring season gets started in March and extends through the start of the school year," he said.

He said preliminary data collected by MSU through the survey, and by others, indicate that a higher than normal amount are contemplating an exit.

"A lot of data across the country certainly showed teachers were exhausted and thinking about it," Katnik said. "It will come down to what they end up deciding."

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Katnik said the unprecedented nature of the past year makes predicting this year's level of retirements and resignations nearly impossible.

"None of us have been through a pandemic before. We're all in new landscapes here, or uncharted waters — whatever metaphor you want to use," he said.

He said it's unclear if widespread availability of the vaccine, lower infection rates, lower hospitalization rates, and more schools returning to in person learning will spur some of the teachers to reconsider leaving.

"That could certainly change people's minds on how safe they feel in schools and working with children," Katnik said.

Claudette Riley is the education reporter for the Springfield News-Leader. Email news tips to criley@news-leader.com.