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Few jobs for graduates of R.I. teacher preparation programs

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Nicole Peckham thought she was being smart.

Majoring in elementary education at the University of Rhode Island, Peckham, who grew up in Coventry, knew teaching jobs in Rhode Island were hard to come by. So, following her adviser's advice, she also earned a middle school endorsement in social studies. The credential allowed her to teach at both elementary and middle schools, and, she reasoned, would improve her chances of getting a position in her home state.

No such luck.

Despite her high grade point average — 3.6 — and her positive experiences during her two student-teaching assignments, Peckham found few job openings to apply for when she graduated from URI in May.

"I've put out 17 applications and the only call I got was just the other day, to get my name on a subbing list in North Kingstown," Peckham, 22, said. To pay the bills, Peckham has kept her job at Gold's Gym in East Greenwich. She says she's willing to substitute teach — for years, if that's what it takes — to get her chance in the classroom.

"I am surprised I am here right now without a job," she said. "It's still a shock that I haven't made it into my own classroom."

Peckham's situation is familiar to hundreds of education majors who want to stay in Rhode Island.

Linda Kent Davis is the director of the career development center at Rhode Island College, which runs the state's largest teacher preparation program.

"We are having very candid conversations with our students, telling them that the market is exceedingly difficult right now," said Davis. "The first question I ask them to ask themselves is, 'Is my career goal to teach? Or is it to teach in Rhode Island?' Because those are very different questions."

The Northeast has had a tough market for years, Davis says, while some states in the South, Midwest and West have teacher shortages and are actively looking for new teachers, particularly in hard-to-fill areas such as high school math and science.

Graduates who consider moving away stand a better chance of landing a job, Davis says. But that can be a big obstacle for native Rhode Islanders.

“They don’t want to hear that they have to move,” Davis said. “I was told by my colleagues when I first came to Rhode Island that a lot of Rhode Islanders want to stay here. But I had no clue at the level of commitment people have to stay in Rhode Island.”

David Prior of North Smithfield says he is willing to work anywhere — provided it is in Rhode Island, or close by in Massachusetts and Connecticut, which also have competitive job markets for teachers.

Prior, 23, graduated from RIC last year with a 3.2 average, certified to teach social studies and history at the secondary school level.

He feels lucky to be on the substitute teacher lists in North Smithfield, Lincoln and Woonsocket, earning about \$70 a day. He works nights and weekends at the Beef Barn in his hometown to make ends meet.

“It’s been tough,” Prior said. “I had one interview at Ponaganset at the end of August, but I did not get the job. They told me hundreds of people applied for it.” Despite the odds, hundreds of students in Rhode Island continue to pursue teaching, convinced their talent and commitment will win out in the end.

Christina Lawrence grew up in Connecticut and attended Vassar College for her undergraduate degree before moving to Providence to attend Brown University’s program for a master’s degree in teaching.

She fell in love with the area and graduated in May 2008, certified to teach high school English.

Lawrence, now 26, says she knew jobs in her field were scarce. But she had faith that the reputation of Brown’s program and the contacts she had made student teaching in Providence schools would help her land a full-time position.

Two years later, Lawrence is still waiting for her dream job.

“I wound up doing after-school programming at a nonprofit in Olneyville,” Lawrence said. “Obviously, I would love to be teaching in Providence, but statewide, it seems like only a handful of high school jobs got posted each year and every time I apply, it seems like 100 to 200 people are applying.”

So why is Lawrence staying in Rhode Island?

“I think part of it is I feel I’ve built connections, personal, social and professional, and it’s home now,” she said. And, Lawrence says, she remains convinced teaching is the right profession for her.

“I love it,” she said. “But it’s just frustrating to think you went to school to do this, and you can’t use that knowledge.”

Elizabeth Grzebien of Warwick landed a teaching job — but it’s 4 ½ hours away from home.

She graduated from RIC in May, certified to teach elementary school with a specialty in special education. Now Grzebien, 21, is teaching at the Irasburg Village School in northern Vermont, about 20 minutes away from the Canadian border.

“I love it,” she said. “The teachers I’m working with are so supportive.”

Her family and her adviser at RIC, Prof. Greg Kniseley, encouraged her to apply out of state. Kniseley suggested a website that helped Grzebien find her job and offered a workshop to help his students prepare for job interviews called “Winning a teaching position in a tight job market.”

“We’re a professional program and our objective should be to help our students get a job,” Kniseley said. “We know that our students face a huge challenge in finding their first teaching position.

“My advice is, if you want to teach, you have to expand your search beyond the 50-mile radius where you live.”

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