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In some subjects, teaching jobs in R.I. will remain hard to come by

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Each year, about 1,000 students receive education degrees from the eight teacher preparatory programs run by public and private colleges in Rhode Island.

Fresh off a semester of student teaching, they embark on job searches, believing their degree and passion will land them in their own classrooms. Too often what they find instead is disappointment.

In a good year, Rhode Island school districts hire between 200 and 250 new teachers. But in the past couple of years, the recession has forced districts across the state to lay off teachers and shutter classes. No one knows yet how many fledgling teachers began full-time work in the state this fall. But two of the state's largest districts, Providence and Warwick, hired only a fraction of the numbers for 2010-11 that they have in the past. And it doesn't look like Rhode Island will need many more teachers in the future. The region is experiencing a demographic downturn. In the past five years, the number of students in Rhode Island public schools has dropped from 151,600 to 140,900.

Rhode Island and the entire Northeast will continue to lose student population over the next decade, according to an analysis by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, which estimates the number of Rhode Island high school graduates will drop another 7 percent by 2020.

However, Rhode Island also has a slightly older teaching force than the national average, an indication that a significant number of teachers will be considering retirement in the next several years. The vast majority of the state's teachers — 68 percent — earn top step, meaning they earn a minimum of \$54,000 a year and have worked in the schools for at least 10 years, according to numbers compiled by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, a business-backed policy organization. Compounding the glut, many teacher candidates specialize in elementary education — precisely the area with the least demand for jobs.

Rhode Island school districts are desperate for good high school math and science teachers. But fewer than 50 education students a year major in math education, and just 19 majored in biology, 4 in chemistry and 3 in physics in 2008-2009, according to data collected by the Rhode Island Department of Education. Another high-need area is secondary special education, but hundreds of students continue to specialize in elementary special education, another over-saturated area.

So does the state need 1,000 new teachers trained each year, many of whom want to stay in Rhode Island?

Maybe not.

“It is very likely we will continue on this demographic trend, so I think teacher training programs need to be more strategic with the labor market demands, in terms of managing their program size,” said Kenneth K. Wong, chairman of the education department at Brown University. The second priority for the state's teacher training programs should be “quality control,” Wong says. “We need to be aggressive in making sure we are selective,” Wong said. “We have to tighten the entrance as well as introduce more rigor in our training programs so the quality is higher.”

Education Commissioner [Deborah A. Gist](#) says now is the perfect time for Rhode Island to step up efforts to improve teacher quality.

Gist made it harder to become a teacher in Rhode Island by raising the “cut score” students must reach on a basic skills test to be accepted into the state’s teacher training programs. This test is required for all students who fail to score highly enough on the SAT, a college admissions exam.

While research is mixed on how important these factors are in preparing highly-effective teachers, Gist says she is convinced that only candidates with high skill levels should enter the teaching profession.

The new standards take effect in 2011-2012 and will likely affect the size of all the state’s teacher training programs to varying degrees. RIC, the state’s largest teacher training program, churns out about 300 new teachers a year, and is expected to be affected most dramatically by these changes. Rhode Island College officials say they are bracing for a smaller class next year.

“I meet teachers all the time who do not have a job and really want one,” Gist said. “It’s a simple matter of supply and demand. That’s not necessarily why we raised the score, but we knew when we raised it, we could do so without worrying we wouldn’t have enough teachers.”

This has been a particularly bleak year for teacher hiring. Across the state, districts are cutting back — eliminating foreign language instruction, music and gifted programs while increasing class size.

Providence, the state’s largest school district, hired just 39 teachers this year, 6 of whom were from the district’s long-term substitute teacher pool. Of the 33 other “new hires,” just 9 were first-year teachers, said Providence schools spokeswoman Christina O’Reilly.

Warwick, the state’s third-largest district, typically hires between 35 and 40 teachers a year, said Rosemary Healey, the district’s human resources director.

For 2010-2011, Warwick hired just six and called back six laid-off teachers.

Competition for the slots is fierce, particularly at the elementary school level, Healey said.

“For elementary teachers we have people subbing for us for five, six, seven years before they get a long-term sub assignment,” Healey said. “You have to remember, we’ve closed three elementary schools in the past three years.” Yet, districts continue to struggle to fill critical areas, such as secondary math, science and special education. Often, students who are skilled in math and science enter other professions, such as engineering and computer fields, or find they enjoy lab work and want to do research, said Mary M. Sullivan, director of the Rhode Island STEM Center at RIC that focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics. “For a social studies position, we might get 200 applicants,” said Barrington Supt. Robert O. McIntyre. “But you can put a math or science position up, and you’re lucky if you get 25.”

Although hundreds of recent graduates from the state’s teacher training programs cannot find jobs, officials at RIC defend their program.

The market for teaching jobs goes up and down every decade or two, they say, but through good times and bad, RIC has continued to train the bulk of the state’s teaching force.

“Are we serving the students well? I think we are,” said RIC President Nancy Carriuolo. “If a student really wants to study in a particular program, I don’t think we should be saying they shouldn’t. We do need to be honest with them about the job market.”

Carriuolo says she sympathizes with graduates looking for jobs. But, she says a teaching degree imparts skills that can help graduates in a variety of settings, if they are unable to secure a teaching position.

When she graduated from college in 1970 with a degree to teach high school English, her adviser warned the job market was tough.

“But he also said I should follow my passion because I would never succeed unless I loved the field that I chose,” Carriuolo said. “So I went into it anyway, and he was right, there were not a lot of jobs in upstate New York.”

Some of her classmates never got teaching jobs, she says, and instead went into other professions — journalism, editing, entry-level management positions.

Carriuolo was one of the lucky ones. Valedictorian of her class, she got two job offers that summer and started her career that fall, teaching ninth- and tenth-grade English at Kendall (N.Y.) High School.

“I started in K-12 education, and now I am a college president,” she said. “A teacher preparation program educates students for leadership roles in and outside of public education. Just look at our alumni who started as classroom teachers, and now are leaders in a variety of settings.”

One thing is certain: Rhode Island College’s teacher training program will shrink next year when the higher standards for admission go into effect.

“We will adjust,” Carriuolo said. “Rhode Island College has been in business since 1854 and over that time there have been many recessions, many ups and downs. We are committed to making whatever kinds of adjustments we need to make.”

BY THE NUMBERS R.I.’s teachers

50,000+

Approximate number of adults certified to be teachers in Rhode Island

15,000

Total number of certified teachers currently teaching in the state, both public and private schools

12,000

Number teaching in R.I. public schools

1,000

Approximate number of graduates from the state’s eight traditional teacher training programs each year

390

Number of graduates who specialized in elementary education in 2008-2009

49

Number of graduates who specialized in math in 2008-2009

44

Number of graduates who specialized in secondary special education, mild to moderate in 2008-2009

19

Number of graduates who specialized in biology in 2008-2009

4

Number of graduates who specialized in chemistry in 2008-2009

3

Number of graduates who specialized in physics in 2008-2009

Source: R.I. Dept. of Education Teacher training in R.I. — A snapshot

Roughly 1,000 new teachers were certified in Rhode Island in 2008-09, including about 130 for whom program details were incomplete.

Institution	2008-2009 graduates	Most popular specialty area	Graduates in specialty
Rhode Island College	297	elementary	197
University of Rhode Island	158	elementary	43
Providence College	106	secondary and special education	73
Salve Regina University	120	elementary	46
Johnson & Wales University	47	elementary and special education	31
Roger Williams University	52	elementary	34
Brown University	23	secondary English/secondary history	8/8
Rhode Island School of Design	12	art	12
Source: R. I. Department of Education and cited institutions			

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