YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY•YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY•YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY•YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY• YOUR NEWS, YOUR PAPER, YOUR WAY

Arizona public schools struggle to fill teaching positions as leaders brainstorm school staffing solutions

By Analisa Valdez
Cronkite News

PHOENIX – Public school educators say they are some of the most underpaid and overworked laborers in the country.

In 2023, Educators for Excellence polled thousands of teachers about their experiences and workloads and found that while 80% of teachers are likely to spend their entire careers in the classroom, only 14% of teachers would recommend the job to others. These striking statistics come as no surprise for educators who have been dealing with the pitfalls of school staffing shortages for years now with little to no reprieve.

The Arizona State University Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College's annual Strategic School Staffing Summit earlier this month highlighted a collection of potential solutions, but now the question remains if any of them will incentivize teachers enough to commit to the classroom long term.

Across the school districts in the state, more and more educators are quitting or are considering leaving the profession. Against the backdrop of lack of affordable housing, the rising cost of living, political discourse and stagnant wages, the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association (ASPAA) found that by January 2023, of the more than 7,500 teaching positions that had been vacant at the beginning of the school year, over 82% remained either still vacant or were filled by people who didn't meet required teaching qualifications.

"This is a predominantly 80% female-dominated profession and so it's expected that women do this unpaid labor for their children, for the students, because we're seen as more maternal," Arizona Education Association President Marisol Garcia said. "But … on the other end, Arizona educators and most educators across the country do not have family leave, do not have health care coverage for their children, do not have high rates or really great medical insurance for if we do get injured or if we do have children.

"How are we taking advantage of this labor, this exploitation of labor particularly in a female-dominated workforce, and yet not putting up any supports that allow them to continue to be happy and healthy and stay and continue to do the job that we're expecting them to do?" Garcia asked.

In Arizona – where the average teacher's salary ranks 32nd in the nation, according to the National Education Association – the teachers posing this question are typically the ones considering leaving the profession.

The Next Education Workforce initiative at the Fulton Teachers College aims to tackle some of the issues plaguing classrooms by inviting presenters, educators, researchers and other experts in education from across the country to the virtual two-day staffing summit.

Honing in on staffing structure, the summit highlighted some of the main characteristics of strategic school staffing as distributed leadership, compensation structures, innovative teaming, extended teacher reach and technology that optimizes educator roles. A common theme was counting on "enabling conditions," such as equitable and sustainable funding for schools, flexible state and district policies, strong focused leadership and access to high-quality technical assistance, in order to maintain the strategic school staffing structure.

"All of this is the set of enabling conditions, the data systems and structures. All of this has huge bearing on our ability to do this work," Executive Director of Next Education Workforce Brent Maddin said during opening remarks at the summit. Logos of many of the organizations, higher education institutes, school districts and nonprofits that contributed and presented at the event were on full display to give, "a sense of the breadth of people that are doing this work, arm-and-arm, between universities and school systems. We are all part of the solution," Maddin said.

Statewide policy solutions for school staffing

A proposed policy solution from Gov. Katie Hobbs seeks to have voters extend Proposition 123 and raise the State Land Trust Permanent Fund distribution, which would fund Arizona public schools over the course of 10 years. Hobbs estimates her plan would raise $118 million for school support staff, $347 million for teacher pay raises and $257 million for general school funding.

"Prop 123 might be able to mitigate a little bit of the turnover and the exodus that we're seeing. But, by itself, it isn't going to solve it," Sen. Christine Marsh, D-Phoenix, a supporter of Hobbs' plan and former Arizona Educational Foundation teacher of the year, said. "We have tens of thousands – somewhere around 60- to 70,000 certified teachers in Arizona – who won't teach. So it really is not a teacher shortage, it is a shortage of people who are qualified and willing to teach, so there's a lot more we absolutely need to do. With the legislative makeup the way it is, I don't know if we've got very much hope of too much happening."

The Republican plan to raise teacher pay also seeks to tap into Prop 123 but specifies funding for teacher raises and seeks to keep the land trust distribution at 6.9%, compared to 8.9% under Hobbs' plan. In addition, Arizona Rep. Matt Gress, R-Phoenix, is sponsoring HB 2608, which passed in the House earlier this month. The bill would require the State Board of Education to conduct a retention study among school districts and charter schools.

But with varying opinions and proposals across the board, bipartisan agreement on how to fund Arizona educators seems unlikely.

AEA President Garcia said she supports Hobbs' plan and letting districts manage how they spend their funding versus the Republican plan, which she says incentives pay per performance. "I'm excited that people are talking about this because clearly we've been raising the issue for forever."

Calendar

Feb. 27: Navajo County Board of Supervisors meeting, 9 a.m., county governmental center in Holbrook.

Feb. 27: Winslow City Council meeting, 6:30 p.m., Hubbell Building, 523 W. Second St.

March 5: Snowflake Town Council meeting, 7 p.m., town hall, 81 W. First South St.

March 6: Winslow School District Governing Board meeting, 6 p.m., district board conference room, 800 N. Apache Ave.

March 7: Taylor Town Council meeting, 7 p.m., town hall, 425 W. Papermill Road.

March 7: Winslow Arts Council meeting, 4:30 p.m., city hall conference room, 21 Williamson Ave.

March 9: Bucket of Blood Re-Enactors meeting, 2 p.m., Historic Courthouse, 100 E. Arizona St. in Holbrook.

March 12: Navajo County Board of Supervisors meeting, 9 a.m., county governmental center in Holbrook.

March 12: Holbrook School District Governing Board meeting, 6 p.m., district conference room, 1000 N. Eighth Ave.

March 12: Joseph City School District Governing Board meeting, 6 p.m., district board room adjacent to the elementary school.

March 12: Winslow City Council meeting, 6:30 p.m., Hubbell Building, 523 W. Second St.

March 13: Winslow Friends of the Library meeting, 4 p.m., library, 420 W. Gilmore St.

March 13: Holbrook City Council work session (optional), 6 p.m., city hall, 465 First Ave.

March 13: Navajo County Fair Board meeting, 7 p.m., fair office at the county fairgrounds, 404 E. Hopi Drive in Holbrook.

March 14: Snowflake School District Governing Board meeting, 5 p.m., 682 School Bus Lane.

March 14: Winslow Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors meeting, 5:30 p.m., chamber office, 523 W. Second St.

March 14: Dusty Desert Quilt Guild meeting, 6:30 p.m., Holbrook Public Library, 402 Park St.

March 14: Winslow Historic Preservation Commission meeting, 5 p.m., city hall conference room, 21 Williamson Ave.

March 19: Navajo County Community College District Governing Board, 10 a.m., Tiponi Community Center on the Painted Desert Campus of Northland Pioneer College in Holbrook.

March 20: Winslow School District Governing Board meeting, 6 p.m., district board conference room, 800 N. Apache Ave.

March 21: Winslow Arts Council meeting, 4:30 p.m., city hall conference room, 21 Williamson Ave.

March 26: Navajo County Board of Supervisors meeting, 9 a.m., county governmental center in Holbrook.

NPC/NAVIT has 31 students qualify for SkillsUSA state event

Regional qualifying rounds for SkillsUSA are now complete. Thirty-one students from Northland Pioneer College (NPC) and the Northern Arizona Vocational Institute of Technology (NAVIT) are now gearing up for the statewide competition, which will be held on March 28 and 29, in Phoenix.

The regional SkillsUSA events included high school competitors from Arizona's District 7, which is comprised of Holbrook, Joseph City, Winslow NAVIT, Snowflake, Heber-Overgaard, Blue Ridge, Colorado City, Dishchiibikoh Community School, Flagstaff, Fredonia Moccasin School, Grand Canyon, NAVIT, Page, Round Valley, Saint Johns, Show Low, Whiteriver and Williams unified school districts.

The cosmetology SkillsUSA event took place at NPC's Show Low campus on Feb. 5. NPC's Winslow cosmetology group dominated the podium. In the post-secondary division, Winslow NPC cosmetology student Lekira Begay took first place, with fellow cosmetology student Faith Joe finishing second. In the secondary division, Winslow cosmetology NAVIT student Terianne Skaggs finished first. She also received a scholarship to NPC. NAVIT cosmetology students Adriana Morales and Ortencia Salazar finished second and third, respectively.

NPC's new Skills Center at NPC's Show Low campus hosted the Feb. 9, regional competitions in automotive, carpentry, electrical, masonry, welding and leadership. In the automotive competition, NAVIT student Dawson Lee of Snowflake took first place. Flagstaff High School's Jonathan Chapman placed second and NAVIT Snowflake student Jose Ruiz finished third.

For the carpentry competition, NAVIT Holbrook student Abrian Roanhorse finished first. Caleb Tsinnijinnie of Page High School took second, and Holbrook NAVIT student Chase Salabye placed third. In the post-secondary carpentry division, NPC student Jeremy Begay took first.

Snowflake High School swept the electrical competition, with Cade Hall placing first; Anthony McKey, second; and William Mathewson taking third. In the post-secondary division, NPC Holbrook student Kaden Matott took first-place honors.

In the masonry secondary competition, Holbrook NAVIT student Samuel Noble took first place. The silver medal went to Snowflake High School's Thor Webster and fellow Snowflake student Parker Sherwood finished third.

Flagstaff High School's Cannon Eagar and Ethan Overton finished first and second in the secondary individual welding competition. Snowflake NAVIT student Owen Rhoton finished third. NPC student Paige McCartney of Holbrook took first place in individual welding for the post-secondary division.

The team from Flagstaff High School, comprised of Peter Barnes, Logan Othan, and Ezra Rupp finished first in the welding fabrication competition. Second place went to the team from NAVIT's St. Johns location, Corbin Becker, Lucas McGinnis and Pacer Wiltbank. The Holbrook NAVIT team of Bray Crandell, Seth McCray and David Williams finished third.

NAVIT Snowflake crushed the field of welding sculpture competitors. Payden Packard took first, Kaely Blace second and Tabitha Lubeski rounded out the group in third place.

For the job interview event, NAVIT Snowflake's Emily Reveles received the gold, Jose Ruiz the silver and Johanna Lechuga the bronze in the post-secondary division.

For the job skills demo, NAVIT's cosmetology students ruled. Audra Rhoton of Snowflake took first. Holbrook's Ortencia Salazar finished second. Third place went to fellow Holbrook cosmetology student Adriana Morales. In the post-secondary competition, NPC's Lekira Begay of Holbrook took first.

In job skill open demo, Holbrook NAVIT cosmetology student Terianne Skaggs finished first in the secondary division. Classmate Faith Joe took first in the post-secondary.

The firefighting competition for SkillsUSA Region 7 was held at NPC's Northeastern Arizona Training Center in Taylor on Monday, Feb. 12. NAVIT student Josiah Moffatt of Snowflake took first place, while fellow firefighting students Diego Colon and Elias Leslie took second and third-place awards.

Gold medalists at the state event qualify for the annual National Leadership and Skills Conference (NLSC). The national event will showcase the best career and technical education students from throughout the United States on June 24-28, in Atlanta, Ga.

SkillsUSA is an applied method of instruction for preparing America's high-performance workers enrolled in public career and technical programs. It provides quality education experiences for students in leadership, teamwork, citizenship, and character development. It builds and reinforces self-confidence, work attitudes, and communication skills. SkillsUSA is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and is cited as a "successful model of employer-driven youth development training program" by the U.S. Department of Labor and is an OSHA Alliance partner.

NPC's Talon Gallery presents 'Realism and Abstraction: A Dual Artistic Journey'

The work of two local artists, Aaron Hatch and Jen Olson, blend in a shared storytelling of the human condition, in the "Realism and Abstraction" art exhibition currently featured at Northland Pioneer College's (NPC) Talon Art Gallery.

Although unique in the artistic methods they use, and in their preferred canvases, Hatch and Olson's creative journey comes together to portray a shared desire to capture what it means to be alive.

For Hatch, who works primarily with acrylic and mixed media, his large-scale paintings allow him to create and express ideas and feelings that can only be expressed abstractly. "I like to create art that takes more than a passing glance to see," he said. "I like to create art that does more than decorate, but that tells a story." In Hatch's expressive landscapes and portraits, common themes include loneliness, memory, individualism, relationships, and self-expression. "My paintings aren't a faithful recreation of life. They are not snapshots of memories or vistas." He explained, "My art attempts to express the experiences and emotions of life."

A native of Arizona, Hatch is self-taught and finds inspiration in music, architecture, abstract expressionism, the southwest, classic literature, and vintage photography. Hatch's work can be viewed on Instagram @aaron.hatch.art.

Jen Olson grew up surrounded by creativity and fine art. Raised in a family of musicians, artists and writers, Olson developed a deep passion for all things creative. Olson holds a bachelor's degree in fine art and is a gifted singer. She worked as an accomplished professional choir director for many years. She is also a self-taught artist and has drawn on the experience of becoming a mother for inspiration. "Catching small moments between baby tending and toddler wrangling, painting began as a simple way to grab precious 'me-time,'" she explained. For Olson, her art grew into a way to explore the roles, identities, expectations, and realities of being a modern woman and mother. Her art tells a story of womanhood.

"My goal is to acknowledge the hidden value of women on their terms with color, water, and light," she said. "At the root of all my work, is a deep desire to shine a light on all things feminine; Mother Earth included. I love to capture the honest beauty of motherhood, one that is complex and visceral, blissfully sweet, yet at times overwhelming, mundane, or darkly painful." She explained, "I enjoy painting women who bypass culturally fabricated shame and oversized purity culture to own their sexuality, taking it away from those who commercialize or abuse it, and giving it back to the women from whom it came in the first place."

Olson works primarily with watercolor and creates custom portraits and figure paintings for women from all over the world. She has received placements and accolades in several juried art competitions. View more of Olson's work on Instagram @jenolson.art or her website: www.jenolsonartwork.com.

The Realism and Abstraction art exhibition is open to the public from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Fridays through March 24, at the Talon Gallery located on NPC's Show Low (White Mountain) campus. The gallery will be closed during NPC's spring break from March 11 – 15.

Hatch and Olson will also give artist talks during a free public reception from 7 to 9 p.m. on Friday, March 1, at the Talon Gallery Everyone is invited to come speak to the artists about their work.

For more information, visit www.npc.edu/talon-art-gallery or contact Gallery Director and NPC Art Faculty Magda Gluszek at magda.gluszek@npc.edu.

Sparklight to award $15,000 to support STEM education

Phoenix – Sparklight, a leading broadband communications provider, invites schools and organizations serving K-12 students to enter its sixth annual "Dream Bigger" contest for the opportunity to win $2,500 for their science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) project or club.

K-12 schools and organizations in communities throughout the 21 states Sparklight serves are eligible to participate. Entries can be made at sparklight.com/contest by sending a photo and written summary outlining how the funds will be used for a technology project or group and how it will benefit students. Six winners will each receive a $2,500 donation.

"STEM education helps students develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills needed for academic and career success," said Trish Niemann, Vice President of Communications Strategy. "Through Sparklight's annual Dream Bigger contest, we are proud to help fund STEM-based initiatives that encourage students to develop these skills and find their passion within this rapidly growing career field."

Entries will be accepted now through March 12, at sparklight.com/contest. Twelve finalists will be selected by Sparklight, and the six winners will be determined by public online voting from March 14 through March 21 at the same site. The finalists and winning schools and organizations will be highlighted on Sparklight's Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) pages.

For more information or to enter, visit sparklight.com/ contest.