

[Join Now](#) [Activate](#) [Sign In](#)

Remote schools struggle to fill positions

Teachers in high demand in western Kansas

Posted: [March 22, 2015 - 9:49pm](#)

By **Celia Llopis-Jepsen**

celia.llopisjepsen@cjonline.com

GARDEN CITY — There is something unusual about the teachers at Kenneth Henderson Middle School, and principal Glenda LaBarbera can prove it.

On a Friday morning, she handed a reporter a list of teachers' names and offered a tour of her school. First stop, Charles Kressbach's science room.

"You can go in there and the kids are just glued to them," LaBarbera said of Kressbach and his special education co-teacher, Grant Allen, a duo known for their high-energy, animated teaching style. "They have excellent classroom management."

But their talent isn't the only thing worth noting. Kressbach is from Michigan, and Allen, from Minnesota. About 20 of 30 teachers here hail from other states.

They are transplants to this remote but bustling town of 27,000 people, nestled among the vast farms and ranches of southwest Kansas — a regional meatpacking hub that processes thousands of cattle a day.

It isn't because the administrators of Garden City Public Schools — a 7,700-student district — aren't satisfied with Kansas teachers. It is because they struggle year after year to find enough of them.

Hiring quality teachers is one of the most important tasks for any school. But reports of districts unable to find the staff they need are common, and in Kansas, those affected often are remote or rural.

At Garden City Unified School District 457, the shortage of in-state job candidates costs taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars a year — money spent on recruiting online, visiting job fairs across the country and offering incentives to prospective hires.

These efforts aren't just costly, they are time-consuming and bear implications for students. Each year, Garden City's aggressive recruiting efforts come up short, and when schools open in the fall, the district is forced to rely on substitute teachers and reshuffling students into larger classes.

This year, 14 jobs were unfilled at the start of the school year.

For superintendent Rick Atha, it is one of the biggest difficulties facing his schools, and he attributes it to the town's remoteness from larger cities. Garden City is about 200 miles from Wichita, 200 miles from Amarillo, Texas, and 250 miles from Colorado Springs.

"It's critical to put the very best teacher before our kids," Atha says. "That is a challenge. Not everybody wants to live in Garden City."

Extent of the problem

One state's surplus is another state's gain.

That is how Kressbach and Allen landed in Garden City.

Both arrived in 2011, and both were first-year teachers. Kressbach had just finished college in Michigan, where the state's recession-ravaged schools had laid off teachers and new graduates struggled to find jobs. Allen found social studies positions hard to come by in Minnesota.

USD 457 solved their problems.

"It got to the middle of June and I still hadn't found anything," said Kressbach, who recalled applying to more than 70 schools in his home state. "This came up, so I just went for it."

According to the Kansas Department of Labor, teachers are in demand in the western two-thirds of the state. Among jobs that require bachelor's degrees, six of the 10 in highest demand involve teaching — including elementary, special education and science teachers.

Sally Cauble, a member of the Kansas State Board of Education, knows the problem well. She is one of 10 members of the board, but represents nearly a third of the state's school districts — almost entirely small, rural schools.

Every one of them, she said, tell her they experience difficulties filling jobs.

"It's hard to recruit young teachers to come," Cauble said. "We've been blessed with teachers who have taught for a long time, but now they're looking at retirement."

Nationwide, there is little data on the extent of hiring difficulties at rural schools, or in places like Garden City, considered by the U.S. Department of Education to be a remote town.

In 2007 and 2009, the National Research Center on Rural Education Support at the University of North Carolina surveyed hundreds of rural school districts across the country and found the vast majority had difficulty filling openings — especially for math, science and special education.

A 2007 U.S. Department of Education report, also based on surveys, found rural schools struggled hiring teachers of foreign languages and English as a second language. More than 40 percent of respondents said it was difficult to fill these jobs, and some said the jobs simply remained vacant.

For LaBarbera, at Kenneth Henderson Middle School, recruiting often starts in early spring and continues for months.

"We can work all summer long trying to fill jobs," she said.

Her school copes with the challenge of filling positions and of budgetary restrictions by sharing teachers with other schools, including teachers of Spanish, band and orchestra. These part-time arrangements, however, aren't enough to offer students the range of choices they would otherwise have, LaBarbera said.

"We have kids that take P.E. twice or they take computer twice," she said, "because we just don't have the opportunities — or the staff — to give them multiple options during the day."

Wooing applicants

Each year, Garden City fills about half of its teaching jobs with educators from other states.

The district woos them from Alabama, Wyoming, Ohio, Texas and elsewhere, but nowhere has proved better recruiting ground than Michigan.

Last year, Garden City recruiters visited job fairs at five colleges there in a single week. About 25 to 30 Michigan teachers join USD 457 per year, creating something akin to an expat community 1,000 miles from home.

Donald Heller, dean of the College of Education at Michigan State University, said it is common for teachers to leave the state, at least to start their careers. His own school's experience confirms that.

"About a third of our graduates are taking jobs out of state," Heller said. "And that's largely because they can't find jobs in state."

This has allowed principals like LaBarbera to find top-notch teachers for their schools, but it

comes with a price.

USD 457 administrators estimate they spend about \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year on recruiting. That pays for the trips to job fairs — Garden City's recruiters traveled 25,000 miles to a dozen states last year — job publication software, advertising and modest stipends for prospective employees to visit.

It doesn't include the time lost by sending staff out of state, the cost of arranging substitutes so teachers can travel as recruiters, or the financial incentives for candidates to pick Garden City, such as a \$500 signing bonus.

For Allen, of Minnesota, the chance to pursue a master's degree sealed the deal. USD 457 extends this offer to all prospective teachers: The district will cover \$5,000 in tuition, which teachers don't have to pay back if they stay on for five years.

"That was, for me, the selling point," Allen recalls, "that pull factor of continuing my education."

Administrators also are looking at programs to encourage more local students to consider careers in education, with the hope that they will teach in the district — a strategy called "growing your own."

Both the National Rural Education Association and The Rural School and Community Trust point to grow-your-own approaches and programs that cover tuition in exchange for rural teaching as ways to address teacher shortages.

Cauble, of the State Board of Education, applauds Garden City's efforts.

"They are probably the most aggressive school district in trying different things to attract teachers," she said. "I think it's because of their desire to put the best teacher they can find in the classroom."

But she also knows Garden City is a big district in the context of western Kansas.

"A lot of school districts can't do that," she said. "Our small schools are just budget-tight."

Garden City also offers better teacher pay than many smaller districts.

Last year, the median starting pay in Kansas, among 255 school districts that reported data to the Kansas Association of School Boards, was less than \$34,000 for teachers with a bachelor's degree and no teaching experience. USD 457 offers \$37,012.

Overall, rural teacher pay in Kansas lags behind other states.

The Rural School and Community Trust ranks rural teacher pay nationwide using U.S. Department of Education data that show the number of teachers at each school district and total spending on teacher salaries.

As of 2011, the average salary for rural teachers in Kansas was \$48,477, the ninth lowest in the nation and more than \$9,000 below the average U.S. rural teacher.

Nationally, it is possible rural teachers tend to be underpaid. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education found rural educators earned \$2,900 less than their counterparts in town, \$2,700 less than those in suburbs and \$1,000 less than those in cities — even when adjusting for geographic cost of living differences.

Selling Garden City

At job fairs, USD 457 recruiters are anything but shy. While representatives for some school districts sit at their tables — and some can count on long lines of would-be employees — Garden City's staff try to coax applicants from the lines of other districts.

It is a job for someone like Kerri Steelman-Schmidt, a third-grade teacher at Garden City's Buffalo Jones Elementary, who knows what it is like moving from Michigan.

She starts conversations with job seekers who may never have heard of Garden City and didn't intend to apply.

She suggests they visit Garden City's information table to meet an administrator. She even offers to hold their place in line for another district while they do so.

Steelman can do this with confidence because, seven years ago, she had never heard of Garden City either. When she accepted a telephone interview with USD 457 back then, she had it confused with a district in New Jersey.

Yet, once she was on the phone, she liked what she heard: the promise of a diverse student body and of extensive professional development, including opportunities to learn Spanish, pursue credentials for teaching English as a second language and receive \$5,000 toward graduate studies.

"It sounded absolutely perfect," she recalls. "And then they offered to bring me down for the interview, and really, I don't know how people say no."

She also understands the urgency of recruiting. Steelman's school started the year without enough teachers. During the first semester, a long-term substitute taught the class next to hers. To help out, Steelman said, she traded classrooms for 90 minutes a day so students in both rooms could receive reading lessons from a fully certified instructor.

This is the type of situation Garden City administrators want to avoid. Elementary school is a crucial phase in developing literacy, and 66 percent of Buffalo Jones' students face the additional challenge of learning English as a second language, which superintendent Atha said makes qualified teaching all the more important.

Garden City students speak 26 native tongues, from Burmese and Vietnamese to Somali and Spanish. During the past few decades, the area's burgeoning meatpacking industry attracted workers from around the world. According to census data, a fifth of the city's residents are born abroad.

Despite Garden City's battery of recruitment strategies, administrators are worried.

The district is seeing a drop in candidates from Michigan. Anecdotal evidence indicates the job market there is improving, according to Heller.

At the same time, many of USD 457's out-of-state teachers leave within three to five years, administrators said. Kressbach, for example, will return to Michigan at the end of this school year.

This kind of turnover is yet another expense. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that non-urban school districts spend about \$40,000 each time they lose a teacher, not only to recruit but also to train a new one. That doesn't include any losses to student learning by losing experienced teachers.

"One of the things I worry about," Atha said, "is there are states now that we can't recruit from, or we recruit very little from."

He points to state aid as vital to helping schools attract and retain educators. Kansas slashed its base aid for K-12 schools following the 2008 recession, and today this funding source remains at levels similar to 14 years ago.

Educators argue what has happened to teacher salaries is a direct result. Kansas teacher pay hasn't kept pace with inflation and lags behind most states. According to annual National Education Association rankings, average teacher salaries here have slipped from 37th in the country to 42nd during the past five years.

If Garden City administrators had their way, they would hire more teachers and reduce class sizes to better serve at-risk students in this largely low-income district, where high school graduation rates trail 5 percentage points behind the state's rate of 86 percent.

They also would like to expand college-preparatory programs by adding more Advanced Placement classes and introducing an International Baccalaureate program.

Instead, they describe each year as a struggle to meet staffing needs.

Celia Llopis-Jepsen can be reached at (785) 295-1285 or celia.llopisjepsen@cjonline.com. Follow Celia on Twitter [@Celia_LJ](https://twitter.com/Celia_LJ).

— Similar stories from CJOnline.com —

Brownback signs school block grant funding bill
Mar 25, 2015



Budget wrangling leaves schools on financial roller coaster

Student brings knife to Topeka school
Mar 24, 2015



Freedom's Frontier: Heritage area borne from struggle

Parents' group files appeal in fight against Kansas public schools curriculum
Mar 26, 2015

School funding dispute heading back to high court
Mar 17, 2015

Testing for Topeka police positions scheduled Friday
Mar 02, 2015



Rural Majority: School consolidation complex, controversial



WU men drop defensive struggle vs. Central Missouri, 63-60

[Back to Top](#)



The Topeka Capital-Journal ©2015. All Rights Reserved.
[User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) [About Our Ads](#) [Terms of Service](#) [Copyright Notice](#) [Contact Us](#)



CLOSE X