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Teachers wanted: B.C. at 'crisis' point in effort to fill jobs

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B.C. Teachers Federation president Glen Hansman says there was already a lack of substitutes before the shortage of teachers became a crisis this year. ARLEN REDEKOP / VANCOUVER SUN

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Teachers have their pick of jobs in British Columbia, but the head of their union warns that some students are going without their specially trained educators who are covering substitute positions that districts haven't been able to fill.

B.C. Teachers Federation president Glen Hansman said students requiring one-on-one attention or support in small groups from special education teachers are shouldering the burden of staffing issues.

"The bulk of the time, it's the child who's supposed to be receiving special

education services who's unfairly having their program bumped that day," Hansman said.



There was already a lack of substitutes before the shortage of teachers became a crisis in the current school year, he said, adding some school districts don't have enough special education teachers either.

"The students with special needs are legally entitled to those accommodations and we've been putting a big spotlight, as have parents, on the fact that the system has been underserving those students for many, many years."

The Education Ministry couldn't say how many teachers are still needed across the province after a landmark Supreme Court of Canada ruling last year restored smaller class sizes and composition of classes after the previous Liberal government stripped those bargaining rights from teachers' contracts in 2002.

"Schools and districts are very near the end of hiring over 3,500 full-time teachers, the largest hiring campaign of teachers in B.C.'s history," the ministry said in a statement.

A task force of education experts appointed to assess workforce challenges is expected to provide recommendations by the end of the month, it said.

Hansman said the starting salary for teachers in British Columbia is the second-lowest in Canada, after Quebec, so that's deterring people from moving to the province, where the high cost of housing is an issue.

He said the Coquitlam and Central Okanagan school districts were among those that "got out of the gate" early with hiring strategies after the top court's ruling.

He singled out the Vancouver School District for acting too slowly.

"Vancouver seems to be the No. 1 star with not doing itself any favours when it came to recruiting people," Hansman said.

David Nelson, associate superintendent of the Vancouver school district, said 470 teachers were hired last spring but many have resigned to work in other districts closer to where they live as jobs opened up.

"Our recruitment team has been working countless hours, evenings, weekends, as soon as we knew of the Supreme Court ruling and we did our very best to keep out in front of it," he said. "But it's been hard to keep up when you're also seeing teachers leave on the other end."

Nelson said a team of 10 people travelled to a Toronto recruitment fair of 4,800 teachers last month but only two people accepted jobs.

The district has implemented a \$1,500 moving allowance as an incentive for anyone arriving from another province and is also looking into providing temporary home stays, Nelson said.

"So asking employees or individuals who work for the school board if they have a room or a suite they'd be willing to make available either for a short- or long-term to help a candidate in relocating," he said.

Brent Mansfield was an elementary school teacher for three years before he

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left his job in 2010 to run a non-profit group but the long hours working from home and lack of social contact brought him back to his passion for teaching last June.

"It was a personal decision that came at a really strategic time," he said.

"I actually found that within 24 hours of jobs closing, I'd had multiple offers, which never would have happened before," Mansfield said, adding he got his first pick for a position at a school four blocks from his home in Vancouver, where he teaches grades 3 and 4.

"They have a school garden and I knew a couple of the teachers, and that was my dream."

Several teachers at the school are recent graduates of the University of B.C.a, Mansfield said.

"That was almost unheard of," he said of his previous stint in teaching. "That being said, the struggle on the opposite side is we're actually short of teachers so oftentimes when someone's sick it's actually a (special education teacher) who's covering. It's a little chaotic right now while the system gets settled down."

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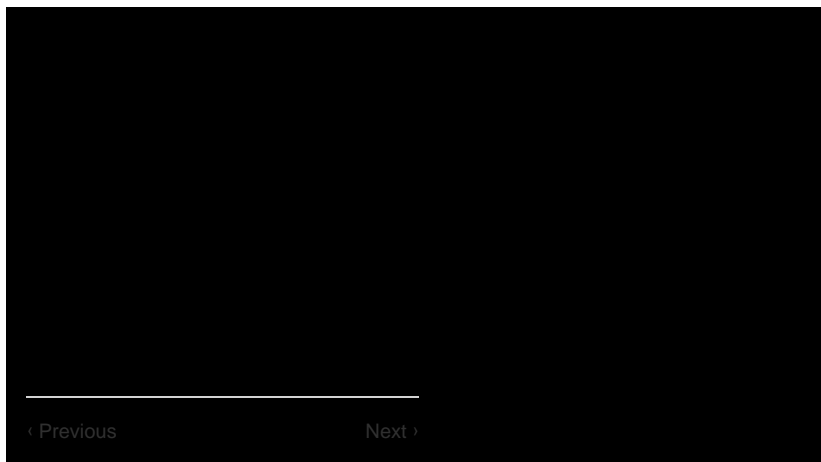
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