

Teacher education programs struggle to place student teachers

By Pauline Liu
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Meet Camryn Christensen, a senior at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, who intends to become a teacher. She was excited when she got an offer to student teach at a nearby public school. But, according to Christensen, the school backed out last minute and told her it “couldn’t accommodate” her.

Fortunately for her, she was able to get a placement at Bishop Dunn Memorial School, a private school located on the college’s campus. According to fifth grade teacher Aspasia Vasilakos, Christensen has been an asset in the classroom.

“Camryn brought many interesting lessons to share with the students and taught me more about technology and how to better utilize it with my lessons,” Vasilakos said. “She was a breath of fresh air with a very happy disposition.”

Although Christensen’s story has a happy ending, other undergraduates and graduate students who aspire to teaching careers are not getting opportunities to work alongside teachers, according to John D’Agati, senior deputy state education commissioner.

“We’ve met with deans of education schools across the state,” D’Agati said. Many say they have been struggling to place student teachers since the outbreak of COVID-19 closed schools in March.

“We know that some teachers look at taking on a student teacher as a burden,” D’Agati said. “We want to communicate out to the field, as best we can, how important it is to give these students a chance ... consider that they can be of value to the teacher-of-record and their students.”

Teachers union leaders confirm that some cooperating teachers have been turning down placements out of caution for themselves and their students while coronavirus infection rates are increasing.

“Colleges have been hotbeds for infection,” said Cordelia Anthony, president of the Farmingdale Federation of Teachers and a science teacher at Farmingdale High School.

Syracuse Teachers Association President William Scott said health is a common concern, adding that “infections



Student teacher Camryn Christensen, a senior at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, works with fifth graders at Bishop Dunn Memorial School before it switched to remote learning in mid-November. College education deans say they are looking to place students in public schools this spring, but planning has been difficult. ✦ Photo courtesy of Bishop Dunn Memorial School

attributed to student teachers” have been reported in Syracuse.

That presents a huge problem for the more than 39,000 students who are enrolled in various levels of teacher education programs in New York State. A minimum of 40 days of field experience is required for each certification. The requirement can be fulfilled in either a single 40-day placement or two 20-day placements.

This spring will be a critical time for many aspiring teachers; they often fulfill their student teaching requirements during the final semester of their college programs.

In light of the pandemic, the State Education Department (SED) has loosened some requirements. Teacher candidates can satisfy a test requirement by passing the Assessment of Teaching Skills (ATS-W), made up mostly of multiple-choice questions, rather than the Teacher Performance exam (edTPA), which typically requires videotaping candidates teaching in a classroom.

Dan Weiss, president of Teachers Union Local 801 in Niagara Falls, told *On Board* that he sees both sides of the issue. He worries about the future of education if teacher candidates become discouraged. “They’re already facing limited student teacher placements and some might not want to continue because of the prospect of holding up their certifications,” said Weiss, a third grade teacher. “It’s a highly complex situation that’s parlayed into the perfect storm.”

A spokesman for New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) said union leaders are aware of the issue. “NYSUT has been in conversations with the state, as well as our partners on the Educational Conference Board (including school boards), about how to encourage placements during the pandemic. That work continues,” said NYSUT spokesman Matt Hamilton. He said there needs to be a “robust teacher pipeline.”

At the University of Rochester’s Warner Graduate School of Education, filling student teaching placements for

How threat of state aid cuts affect would-be teachers

The threat of 20% state aid cuts has prompted some “career changers” to rethink their ambition to become teachers, according to Colleen McDonald, who runs a two-year graduate student residency program known as the Classroom Academy.

“One applicant said, ‘I’m an engineer, and I’d like to be a math teacher. But I’m not going to leave my secure job right now with this much uncertainty,’” McDonald said.

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about 40 masters candidates requires a bit of salesmanship, said Kevin Meuwissen, Warner’s director of teacher education. The pitch: Let our tech-savvy students help with distance learning.

“We have programming in digitally rich learning and teaching. We have candidates who are learning to collaborate with teachers in online and hybrid learning environments,” he said. The university told schools: “Let us know what your needs are, and we’ll try to set up placements that meet those needs,” he said.

So far, the approach seems to be working.

“We haven’t had many incidents where school leaders have been unresponsive to our requests,” Meuwissen said.

In general, larger teacher education programs and teachers’ colleges face the greatest challenges because of the sheer number of students seeking placements. For instance, the School of Education at SUNY New Paltz is looking to place 220 student teachers for the spring semester. So, how’s that going? “Very slowly,” said Heather Finn, the coordinator of the Office of Field Experiences.

But Finn is no stranger to meeting tough challenges. She successfully filled all 100 student teacher placements for the fall semester in just three weeks, and that was right after Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced the reopening of schools.

One of those student teachers, Sarah Beattie, described her experience of delivering hybrid learning to 24 second graders in the Suffern school district – 12 at home and 12 in the classroom, simultaneously. “Although the transition to this new normal has been more challenging for some than others, it is truly incredible to see how technologically capable these young children can be,” she said.

Lately, Finn has been trying to get the word out to districts that teacher candidates from SUNY New Paltz don’t live on campus. “So they’re not bringing ‘anything’ from college,” Finn said. “And our students can be a huge asset because they can teach remotely, too.”

If placements aren’t filled for the spring, students could seek them during the summer or after graduation to fill the requirement, Finn said. But she remains determined. “I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer,” she said.

Communication most in-demand competency sought by employers

By Paul Heiser
SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

Workers need more than educational credentials to get and keep high-paying jobs, secure promotions and boost their earnings. They also need a core set of skills, abilities and knowledges, known as “competencies.”

A new report by Georgetown University’s Center on Education

and the Workplace examined 120 competencies to determine which are most in need across the workforce and within specific occupations, as well as how the intensity with which workers use these competencies can affect their earnings.

The report found that, in general, employers value cognitive competencies over physical ones. The five most valuable are communication, teamwork, sales and customer service, leadership,

and problem solving and complex thinking. Physical competencies such as strength and coordination are the least in demand.

The jobs in which cognitive competencies are used most intensively tend to be held by workers with higher levels of education. For example, about three-quarters of the workers who use communication most intensively have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 10% of workers who use

strength and coordination abilities most intensively.

Communication is the competency in greatest demand across occupations, is in the top three most-demanded competencies within every occupational group and is associated with the highest earnings gains across the labor market.

Read the report at <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/competencies>.