

Chalkboard

By

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Teaching others is an art, a science, and, I believe, a calling. It is also a vocation, a means of making a living. From time to time I read articles forecasting future teacher shortages. I suspect that one causative factor in the decline of those wanting to enter the teaching profession is the monetary compensation being awarded.

Don't panic. This article is not going to be a discourse on why teachers, policemen, and firefighters should be making more money. Rather it will be more of a soliloquy on the need to pay competitive wages in the Gentry School District.

Let me quickly set the background. Gravette is twelve miles to the north; Decatur is six. Siloam Springs is nine miles to the south. Rogers, Bentonville, Springdale, and Fayetteville are a half-hour to the east. Farmington, Prairie Grove, and Lincoln are just a slightly longer drive. All of these are growing districts as is Gentry. All of us compete in the same job market. All of us have the same desire to attract the most experienced, the most qualified, the most committed professionals to fill any vacancies that occur. Even if Northwest Arkansas was not in a growth cycle, vacancies naturally occur for a variety of reasons.

Let me share a few simple, but perhaps surprising, statistics. We have 116 certified staff members on our staff. Of that group, only twenty-five have been here since or before I was hired in 1992. Of that 25, only 10 have never taught anywhere but Gentry.

At the other end of the scale, 24 teachers are either in their first or second year to be teaching at Gentry. Of that group, 9 are teaching for their first year anywhere.

Of the 116 certified staff members, 66 have taught at Gentry for five or fewer years. Finally, 91 of the 116 have come to work at Gentry since I have been here as superintendent. I will note for the record that of that 91 "recent arrivals", 50 or more came to Gentry with multiple years of experience working in other districts.

I provide you with the above information only to say that, like my counterparts in Northwest Arkansas, my goal is to attract and retain good teachers. The reason for this is simple- no other controllable factor correlates to a child's success in school as closely as does good instruction.

Certainly there are factors other than wages that attract and retain good employees. Location, work environment, parental support, peer comradeship and a myriad of internal motivators all play a part in an educator's life. If it was just money, as I alluded to at the beginning, most educators would have chosen another profession at the onset of their careers.

On the other hand, let me offer a brief hypothetical scenario. Pretend you are a young teacher, with a brand new Bachelor's degree, beginning your life in education. You want to live in northwest Arkansas because everybody says that's where everything is happening. At which district do you apply after gathering the following research on starting salaries- Springdale, \$38,021; Rogers, \$36,573; Bentonville, \$34,633; Fayetteville, \$34,420; Gravette, \$33,300; Prairie Grove, \$32,000; Siloam Springs, \$31,838; Huntsville, \$31,787; Farmington, \$30,250; West Fork, \$30,135; Pea Ridge, \$30,075; Elkins, \$30,000; Lincoln, \$30,000; Gentry, \$29,300; Greenland, \$29,108, or Decatur, 27,500?

Probably you would apply first where you could make the most money doing what you just spent four years in college preparing to do. However, you might find it difficult to get hired in the top-paying districts as the HR departments there have a large pool of applicants from which to select.

As this article comes to a close I want to emphasize, lest anyone infer something I am not intending, I think the Gentry Public School District is staffed with excellent employees. Regardless of tenure or degree or whatever, I would not swap staffs with any of our neighbors. In fact, all this musing is about how to replace that first group of 25 teachers with the second group of 24 teachers 25 years from now.