Bad economy, negative perceptions are blamed

Interest drops in teaching careers

By Michael Goot

CAPITAL REGION — With bleak employment prospects, more rigorous evaluations and negative perceptions of educators, fewer people are choosing a career in teaching.

Colleges across the Capital Region are reporting a slight decline in applicants and enrollment in teacher preparation programs.

Union Graduate College’s enrollment in education-related courses has dropped 26 percent since 2010. The number of students taking classes has declined from 593 in 2009-2010 to 518 in 2010-2011 and 440 in the past year.

Enrollment in master’s degree classes is a good barometer of the teaching market as New York state requires people to obtain a master’s degree within five years of when they start teaching.

Patrick Allen, dean of Union Graduate College’s School of Education, said that the weak economy and the current poor perception of teachers are having an impact. “When Schenectady has 1,350 applicants for nine positions, that makes the paper. It’s going to make people pause: ‘Do I want to commit to this?’ Secondly, I think there’s been a barrage of teacher bashing from all kinds of public and state entities,” he said.

New York State United Teachers spokesman Carl Korn said he is not surprised that fewer people are seeking to study education. Districts across the state have cut about 35,000 education jobs since the start of the recession. “With the state budget cuts and the new property tax cap, school districts are eliminating programs, including art, music and physical education, and when you listen to some of the partisan attacks on teachers and their unions and the dwindling job prospects, it’s not really a surprise that fewer young people are choosing education as a career,” he said.

It’s unfortunate, he said, because schools need bright, creative young people to enter the profession.

Korn said teachers have been made scapegoats for struggling schools, which he said are often more the result of a high percentage of students in poverty than bad teaching.

The criticisms of teachers include that they are not being held accountable and unions are destroying schools, Allen said.

It is true teachers are under more scrutiny. Under the new teacher evaluation system, teachers will be judged partly on how much academic growth students have shown based on test scores and goals they have set.

But Allen points out that teachers often don’t know what kinds of students they are going to get when they design these goals.

It is a dramatic shift for teachers.

“There are people are saying ‘I don’t need this’ and leaving,” Allen said.

That could be a plus if other people are willing to step into those jobs, according to Allen.

Similar decreases

Other colleges are reporting similar declines in enrollment in the past few years. Robert L. Bangert-Downs, dean of the University at Albany School of Education, said the drop in enrollment in the school’s master’s degree and doctoral education programs began around the time of the economic crisis as job prospects dimmed. Enrollment in master’s degree programs dropped from a recent high of 711 in the fall of 2009 to a low of 555 in the spring of 2011. However, it went up back up that fall to 590.

Bangert-Downs attributed part of the drop to a change in state regulations.

The university also has degree programs in curriculum design and instructional technology. A few years ago, the New York State Education Department said those degree programs cannot be used for certification. Then, they recently reversed course, which Bangert-Downs believes will cause an uptick in interest. Both applications and enrollment are up for the current year.

It can be a challenging environment. Bangert-Downs said today’s teachers have to keep up with changing technologies and changing curriculum of students. They have to deal with an increasingly diverse student population — not just in urban schools but suburban ones as well.

In addition, he said people are telling him that there are too many childhood education majors chasing too few jobs.

Fewer people are switching careers to become teachers, according to Margaret McLane, interim dean of the School of
Education at The College of Saint Rose. A few years ago, McLane said, the college may have had students from the business world who were interested in a new career. That is no longer the case.

"In this economy, people are less likely to give up their position — whatever it is — on the chance that they’ll be able to get a teaching job," she said.

The college has also noticed a slight decline in the number of students pursuing education degrees.

"We’ve seen shifts in our program. We’ll see more students going into special education or communication sciences disorder — rather than elementary [education]," she said.

Given this climate, prospective teachers have to broaden their skills. Bangert-Drowns of UAlbany said there are still places that are hiring in high-demand areas such as for math and science teachers. Also, degree programs specializing in curriculum and educational technology are offering new job opportunities.

His advice: Be as marketable as you can by being qualified to teach in multiple areas, such as special education or English as a second language.

adapting to needs

Colleges say they are adapting to meet new needs. McLane said students that are seeking to be elementary school teachers are now required to take additional math and science courses, and St. Rose has added additional courses in math and science into its program.

Union Graduate College has also boosted its offerings in math and science. Last year, the college received $1.3 million in funding through the federal Race to the Top program to provide a $40,000 full-tuition scholarship and stipend to students who plan to teach science or math in a high-needs district for four years after graduation. Allen said this program, which will continue through the 2013-2014, has averted deeper drops in enrollment at Union Graduate College.

The college also has created certificates of advanced study to help teachers boost their skills in mentoring, teacher leadership, data analysis and National Board certification.

Union Graduate College’s teacher preparation program includes a yearlong internship at a local school, where the student teacher is mentored by a veteran teacher. This compares with shorter programs at other institutions that may only be a semester or less in length, according to Allen.

There is also more extensive training in literacy and special education. This kind of preparation, Allen said, is the reason 70 percent of Union graduates are able to find jobs in teaching.

He remains a strong proponent of teaching as a career because there is always room for people who have a passion for working with children, he said.

“The requirements in order to succeed in that fashion in that area have been ratcheted up significantly. People just need to be aware of that.”

Education experts believe there will always be openings for qualified teachers. Bangert-Drowns of UAlbany said he thinks that as the economy improves and older teachers retire, hiring will pick up.

“I don’t see anything in the future that says we don’t need to invest in education,” he said. “The real issue is whether people have the will to invest.”

funding challenges

Education funding will remain an issue, according to Bangert-Drowns.

“No one likes to pay taxes but they want their children to have creditable economic opportunities,” he said.

But openings for new teachers may be few. Teachers who have been laid off are placed on what are referred to as “recall lists,” allowing them to berehired if a position opens. Also, school enrollment has declined slightly over the last five years.

This is weighing on current students’ minds.

College of Saint Rose student Kim Moshier, who is from Orange County, said she is more confident about her employment prospects.

“T’m a math education major, so I think I have more of a chance of getting a job than other education majors,” she said.

Harrison Edwards of Chichester, who is also attending Saint Rose, is less confident about entering the job market with a master’s in history and is not sure what he will do.

“I guess go for a master’s in something else, so I can have more options,” he said.

Despite the challenges, Bangert-Drowns believes people will still teach.

“There’s a group of people where their heart and soul is in teaching. I don’t think we’re losing them all. They have a natural predisposition to be nurturing to people,” he said.