

Prospective Educators Wanted

Six Counties Looking For Applicants

‘ I Want To Be That Person ’

More Than 200 Attend 18th Regional Teacher Job Fair

By **PETE DeLEA**

Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG — Growing up, Broadway resident Ashley Lohr loved school. The 22- year- old Virginia Tech senior also loves children.

This fall, she plans on combining her two loves by teaching in the Shenandoah Valley.

“ My teachers have been super infl uential in my life and I want to be that person for children in the future,” said Lohr, adding that she wants to teach elementary school. “ That’s where my heart is.”

She appears to be exactly the type of prospective teacher that school divisions locally and around Virginia are increasingly having a difficult time finding.

On Saturday, Lohr was among more than 200 people attending the 18th annual regional teacher job fair at Harrisonburg High School. Representatives from nine school districts set up shop at the fair, hosted by the Shenandoah Valley Teacher Recruitment Consortium.

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Alyssa Green (left), a kindergarten teacher at Stone Spring Elementary School, chats with Rockingham County Public Schools’ human resource secretary Brenda Moyers at the Shenandoah

Valley Teacher Recruitment Fair at Harrisonburg High School on Saturday.

Holly Marcus / Special to the DN-R

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In addition to Harrisonburg, Rockingham, Augusta, Page, Shenandoah, Greene and Madison counties and Staunton and Waynesboro were among the divisions also looking for qualified applicants.

The event comes as districts statewide are trying to fill thousands of jobs. Virginia may be short by nearly 6,400 teachers during the next school year, according to the state Department of Education. Andrew Ansoorian, executive director of human resources for Harrisonburg City Public Schools, said this will be a tough year for recruiting. Ansoorian said 192 people preregistered for Saturday's job fair, down from nearly 400 prospective teacher applicants who registered ahead of time in previous years. He said more walk-ins than normal did come out but the total was unavailable Saturday. The number of applications for teaching jobs at HCPS also has dipped, with 2,700 applicants so far for the next school year compared to the 2,900 who applied this year.

"The caliber of candidates has deteriorated," Ansoorian said. "The volume has gone down, but the quality has gone down faster."

Further exasperating the problem, he said, has been a decrease in the number of students enrolling in college education programs.

As an example, he said, 30 education majors graduated from Eastern Mennonite University last year but only nine are eyeing commencement this year.

"That's a substantial drop in candidates," Ansoorian said. Suzan Guynn, director of human resources for Rockingham County Public Schools, said Saturday that the county has a critical need in about a half-dozen areas. RCPS, she said, has had difficulty filling teaching slots in math, special education and English. On Feb. 20, the Rockingham County School Board discussed how much it would cost to put teacher salaries more in line with surrounding divisions. According to a presentation to the board by Cheryl Mast, RCPS' director of school finance, starting teachers in the county earn \$42,100, about \$1,000 less than in Harrisonburg. That's slightly more than in Augusta, Shenandoah and Page counties; Frederick County starts at \$41,310, while Greene County pay begins at \$42,052. And the school system just isn't settling for anyone.

"We're trying to find the highest caliber and best-suited teachers for our students," Guynn said. This year, Harrisonburg also has the added challenge of filling spots for a new school. Bluestone Elementary School, slated to open in the fall, has yet to fill 14 teaching positions, Ansoorian said. "That adds an added pressure to find the brightest teachers," he said. "It's going to be a challenging year teacher wise." Divisions won't know how many openings they will have for the upcoming school year because resignations and retirements typically happen later in the current year. Roanoke County resident Jon Wilson, however, was among those who is hopeful there will be an open slot for him. Wilson, a 21-year-old music major at Bridgewater College, wants to teach music in the Valley after graduation this spring. "A lot of the school districts in the area have a lot of support for the arts and I'd love to be a part of that," he said.

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A row of potential teachers await interviews with Rockingham County Public Schools at the Shenandoah Valley Teacher Recruitment Fair on Saturday. Harrisonburg, Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta, Page, Shenandoah, Greene and Madison counties were also seeking applicants.

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