



1

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Home | Site Index | Archives | Help/Feedback

SECTIONS

- [Breaking News](#)
- [Front Page \(Image\)](#)
- [World](#)
- [National](#)
- [Local & State](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Business & Stocks](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Arts & Entertainment](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Weekly Sections](#)
- [Special Interests](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [SV Magazine](#)

ON BAYAREA.COM

- [Homepage](#)
- [Comics](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Find a job](#)
- [Find a car](#)
- [Find a home](#)
- [Yellow Pages](#)
- [Home Improvement](#)
- [Home Valuation](#)
- [Online Radio](#)
- [Marketplace](#)
- [Archives](#)

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- [The Mercury News](#)
- [Advertising Information](#)
- [Newspaper Subscription](#)
- [Subscription Services](#)
- [Mercury News Inc](#)

Education

San Jose, California

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S.J. schools seek teachers from outside education

New Teacher Project

BY KATE FOLMAR
Mercury News

Confronted with an ever-deepening teacher shortage, San Jose schools plan to draw from a new pool of prospective instructors: high-achievers in other fields who are hungry for more meaningful work.

San Jose Unified wants the Bay Area's best and brightest to forsake six-figure corporate salaries in favor of devoting two years to some of California's neediest children. And if the experiences of other cities are any indication, the school district could get more takers than it can handle.

In March, the district will launch the San Jose Teaching Fellows program with the aim of giving urban education the cachet of Ivy League admission and the allure of Peace Corps service. It hopes to recruit and train 75 to 100 new teachers -- about half the district's annual new hires -- to place in classrooms this fall for at least a two-year stint.

Weary of drafting legal memo after legal memo? Help a kindergartner read her first book, the program suggests. Sick of crunching code? Teach a student how to wire a circuit.

No teaching experience is required. But aspiring instructors should plan on spending six weeks teaching summer school under the eye of an experienced teacher and learning about education theory and practice.

The starting salary for teaching fellows is the same as that of

mercury news jobs
Questions or Problems
Letters to the Editor

any other new, emergency-credentialed teacher in the district -- just under \$36,000. Advanced degrees fetch a few thousand dollars more.

While the 33,000-student district usually plucks newly minted instructors from education schools and teacher job fairs, the Fellows program ``taps a market we've never tapped before: the mid-career people who want to make a change," said San Jose's human resources director, Cheryl Petermann.

She already confronts the state's drastic teacher shortage and the Bay Area's stratospheric housing costs by recruiting from as far away as New York and the Philippines. Frequently, new hires do not have the requisite formal training and must get emergency credentials.

``These people have already gotten money; they'll be in it for service," Petermann predicted. ``We expect that if they're from this area, they'll already have a place to live, and that's a major thing for us. I'm trying to get a jump on all my other human resources friends in the valley and do this before all the rest of them do."

The school district has signed a one-year, \$170,000 contract with the New Teacher Project to put the Fellows program together. The project is an outgrowth of Teach for America, the decade-old non-profit group that recruits talented, recent college grads to spend two years in the toughest urban and rural schools.

The New Teacher Project targets a different group -- young to mid-career professionals -- and promises to teach school districts its recruitment and training secrets, so that district employees can continue the efforts without outside help.

New Teacher programs exist in 14 school districts nationwide, from New York City to Baton Rouge, La. San Jose will be the second California participant, behind Compton.

In San Jose, the program hopes to recruit a diverse batch of instructors and place many of them in downtown schools serving scores of poor children and immigrant families. The district particularly needs teachers who are bilingual or have backgrounds in math or science, said Superintendent Linda Murray.

``Here in the heart of the Silicon Valley, there are a lot of people who have that talent base," she said. ``We want people

who really want to do a service for the children who most need good teachers."

The program's advertising runs contrary to the way many educators recruit. Rather than tell potential applicants how great a school district is, or how much test scores are improving, the New Teacher Project uses blunt slogans and stresses how tough the job is.

In New York, advertisements declared that four out of five students in the neediest schools couldn't read to standards, and challenged applicants to do something about it. In the inner city of Los Angeles County, the catch phrase was: "The children of Compton deserve a Beverly Hills education."

"School districts always tell us, 'Hey, this sounds great, but there's no way you're going to get people making \$150,000 a year to quit their jobs, make \$30,000 and deal with discipline problems,'" said Michelle Rhee, CEO of the New Teacher Project. "And we say, 'You know what, these people are out there.'"

The numbers back her up.

Nationwide, the project gets about five applicants for every opening. In New York City, more than 2,000 people, including a speechwriter for mayor Rudolph Giuliani and a Viacom executive, applied for 250 openings. Some school officials have told project consultants that the rejected applicants are better than many of the new teachers the schools recruit on their own.

The ideal recruit is an "intelligent person who has no education background or training," said Katie Malachuk, the San Jose program manager. "We're trying to find people who are great critical thinkers who can quickly assess a situation and its needs, people who are achievement-oriented and results-focused."

In short, they're looking for people like Joey Vickery.

She's a new teacher with the program at Jefferson Elementary in Compton, a school district so troubled that the state seized control of it in 1993. A communications and Latin American studies double-major from the University of Nebraska, Vickery dreamed of joining the Peace Corps, but health troubles prevented that. Instead, she spent four years in Long Beach selling industrial adhesives, sandpaper and respirators

-- a job she ``absolutely hated," with a \$50,000 salary.

Now, \$18,000 a year poorer, Vickery and her husband can't afford to eat out much, travel abroad or buy a new car. The new teacher didn't have reading texts in her classroom until last month. Vickery just got her school its first photocopy machine by begging businesses to donate one. She has taught a student who couldn't read a word in September to read books by himself.

Teaching is ``the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," Vickery chirped. ``I'm totally insane, and I find myself spending every free minute of my outside life learning about new programs and trying to get things donated."

One other thing, she hastens to add: ``I love it."

The San Jose Teaching Fellows program will begin recruiting in March. The application deadline is April 23.

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 [Back to Top](#)

The Mercury News

[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Archives](#) | [Help/Feedback](#)



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