

Press Clippings 10/9/21 to 10/12/21

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Beyond COVID-19, there's another crisis emerging in Chicago-area schools: A critical shortage of workers

By Karen Ann Cullotta

As the leader of suburban River Trails School District 26, Superintendent Nancy Wagner begins each morning with the formidable task of ensuring the latest numbers do not portend a calamity for her students and staff.

Like all educators, Wagner is keeping close tabs on COVID-19 rates during the pandemic to make certain the school community is safe. But the data proving perhaps most daunting for Wagner these days has less to do with the virus, and everything to do with a steep shortage of essential employees needed to keep the Mount Prospect-based district's four schools up and running.

"Since the start of the school year, there have been a number of days, including today, when we're asking ourselves, 'What can we go without today?'" Wagner said in a recent interview. "It's an all-hands-on-deck kind of thing, and our staff is amazing, but it's starting to take its toll."

A critical shortage of essential school employees in Illinois and across the U.S. this fall — including a scarcity of substitute teachers, school nurses, bus drivers and food service workers — has hit a tipping point this month, nearly forcing officials at one of the state's largest school districts to cancel classes recently.

Many school administrators say Gov J.B. Pritzker's recent COVID-19 vaccine mandate for school employees, while necessary, has magnified the already steep challenge of recruiting and retaining noncertified but essential employees.

Still, some experts who have researched pandemic-era employment trends say the school employee shortages this fall can be traced back to the basic economic principle of supply and demand.

Elgin-based School District Unit 46 Superintendent Tony Sanders recalled spending a recent weekend on the phone with “every administrator in the district,” trying to figure out how to comply with the state’s school employee vaccine mandate, while also having enough workers to fill positions at the district’s 57 buildings.

“We were really on the edge of not being able to open one of our schools on a Monday, and came very close, but we were able to pull it off,” said Sanders, who says the vaccine mandate, while imperative, did not give large districts enough time to arrange for in-house, weekly testing for unvaccinated employees.

Sanders said the school district is still struggling to fill hundreds of open positions, including dozens of teachers, 24 food service workers, 17 health services positions and 79 paraprofessionals who assist students in the classroom.

“Our director of food and nutrition services is literally working in lunchrooms, serving students their meals,” Sanders said.

Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent Carmen Ayala offered a slate of suggestions this week to administrators whose school districts are “experiencing staffing challenges.”

Since Pritzker issued a disaster proclamation, school districts may use technology to broadcast the instruction of one in-person teacher to other classrooms in the school that are supervised by parents, volunteers or paraprofessionals, Ayala said in a statement Tuesday.

While Ayala acknowledged that “unlicensed staff or volunteers must be under the supervision of licensed personnel who are physically present in the same building,” she said that the use of “parent mentors can strengthen family engagement, and build the school community.”

School districts can also tap into federal pandemic relief funding to pay parent mentors and tutors, hire additional staff and offer current teachers stipends and retention bonuses, she said.

“I know many districts are also struggling with a shortage of bus drivers — a problem that predates the pandemic and has only gotten worse,” Ayala said.

Chicago Public Schools students and their families have been hit hard by a dearth of bus drivers this fall, leading to the launch of alternate transportation options to transport kids to and from school each day. Driver resignations from private busing contractors prompted the cancellation of bus service for thousands of students, [leaving families searching for transportation on the first day of school](#).

CPS officials are trying to recruit school bus drivers by offering financial incentives, including signing bonuses, CPS' executive director of student transportation Kimberly Jones, said last month.

Some experts say the burgeoning employee shortages at school districts nationwide reflect a broader economic trend that has emerged during the pandemic — a lack of enthusiasm for service jobs that require working with the public, and which some view as putting them more at risk of contracting COVID.

“The demographics for some of these school employees are older workers, ages 55 and over, who face more risk and are more likely to have left the labor force during the pandemic,” said Eliza Forsythe, an assistant professor and economist at the Labor and Employment Relations School at the University of Illinois.

“It's basic economics, supply and demand, and schools might be finding it hard to hire employees when they're competing with companies that have more flexibility in raising wages,” Forsythe said, adding that in the private sector, including restaurants and retailers, “there's a lot of competition for workers, so many are paying higher wages.”

“This is a new reality that school districts are going to need to come to terms with, and start planning for,” Forsythe said.

“In the short term, schools might have their people helping out, and filling in for open positions, but that's not good for the employees, and it's not good for the kids,” she added.

When a bus driver shortage forced Des Plaines School District 62 Superintendent Paul Hertel to slash the number of bus routes from 28 to around 23, the reduction fueled frustration in the community, and added up to a longer commute to school for students.

“During the first week of school, we were asking families to be patient, because many were angry and upset, and saying, ‘You had all summer to prepare, so what happened?’” Hertel said.

“We had to explain that everything that is happening nationally is happening here,” Hertel said. “We’re doing everything we can, and we’re doing OK, but it’s not perfect.”

Wagner, the superintendent at River Trails, said she remains optimistic that potential employees will be attracted to the district’s benefits package and friendly, neighborhood work environment.

“We’re advertising, and doing everything we can, but part of the problem is some of these jobs don’t pay as well as what some local restaurants are offering,” said Wagner, who recalled seeing a sign posted in front of a nearby restaurant, promising wages of \$17 an hour.

“All of our full-time employees get health insurance, so we’re hoping that might be enough of an impetus to apply,” Wagner said, adding: “But some applicants have said they’d need their whole paycheck just to pay for day care. It looks like it’s going to be a really tough year.”

---Daily Herald---10/12/2021

Elgin Area Chamber joins in celebrating Manufacturing Month

Submitted by Carol Gieske, Elgin Area Chamber president

October is Manufacturing Month which celebrates and brings awareness of manufacturing to students, parents, people thinking about careers in manufacturing, the public, and educators.

"Elgin has traditionally been a center for manufacturing making everything from street sweepers to ball bearings," says Carol Gieske, Elgin Area Chamber president. "The manufacturing sector in Elgin is one of the largest sectors of the economy and employs thousands of people in positions that require critical thinking skills, technical skills, attention to detail, and communication skills."

According to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), Illinois is the fourth largest manufacturing state in the country, with over 18,000 companies employing over 550,000 Illinoisans.

"The celebration helps show the reality of modern manufacturing careers by encouraging thousands of companies and educational institutions around the nation to open their doors to students, parents, teachers, and community leaders," says Tony Lucenko, director of Elgin Development Group.

Manufacturing Month empowers manufacturers to come together to address their collective challenges so they can help their communities and future generations thrive.

Lucenko shared some interesting facts about manufacturing:

- Manufacturers are the number one employer of Elgin residents with nearly one in every six Elginites employed by manufacturers from around the area.
- Manufacturers are the second largest employer in Elgin, just behind education and ahead of health care.
- For every \$1 earned in direct labor income in the manufacturing sector, there will be another \$3.14 in labor income earned elsewhere which is the highest multiplier effect of any economic sector.
- For every one worker in manufacturing, there are another five employees hired elsewhere.
- By 2030, 4 million manufacturing jobs will go unfilled.
- The average annual income of manufacturing workers now exceeds \$80,000 per year according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Lucenko cited manufacturers like Elgin Sweeper, American NTN Bearing, Hoffer Plastics, Elgiloy Specialty Metals, Elgin Industries and Erwin Junker Machinery along with dozens of other local companies all make up the fabric of our vibrant and diverse manufacturing sector.

"Manufacturing has a long and successful history in the United States and in particular the Elgin area," says Mike Higgins, vice president and general manager of Elgin Sweeper Company. "Today we're seeing a resurgence to "control our own destiny" and manufacture as much as we can right here in our own country. This will continue to drive the need for more skilled workers in the manufacturing sector and bring about great opportunities for those who choose to pursue any of the many different career paths available in manufacturing."

"For many reasons, manufacturing has enjoyed a resurgence in the U.S. creating many new job opportunities in modern, high tech manufacturing facilities. If you weren't aware, there are an increasing number of great careers available in Elgin area companies, These are good paying jobs with a bright future as America returns to producing its own goods," says Mike Bilyk, president and CEO, American NTN Bearings.

Organizations such as the Elgin Development Group, Elgin Community College, Alignment Collaborative for Education, [Elgin Area School District U-46](#), Burlington-based Central Unit District 301, Fabricators and Manufacturers Association, and others help to grow and support the manufacturing industry's skilled workers. These diverse initiatives support women, veterans, students and workers through skills training programs, community building and supporting the advancement of their career in manufacturing.

On Oct. 7, [U-46](#) hosted "Explore," the annual curriculum and career expo for eighth-graders offered virtually this year and manufacturing is well represented as a career option. Local volunteers from many manufacturing companies showcased occupations available in this business sector.

"A career in manufacturing is a rewarding choice which allows individuals to essentially play an integral part of the whole economic engine of the U.S.," says Pattie Lane, Patrick

Manufacturing. "The pride of learning the technical skills necessary to carry out your part of this manufacturing industry - offers career growth from the simple tasks to the most complex manufacturing system designs - they are all incredibly important and all are valued."

Founded in 1908, the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce works on behalf of members, providing business leadership by enhancing economic vitality, advocating for business and creating opportunities. For more information, visit www.elginchamber.com.

---Daily Herald---10/9/2021

South Elgin pulls away from Elgin in 2nd half

By Allen Oshinski, Daily Herald Correspondent

Good thing style points don't count in conference standings or playoff eligibility.

South Elgin's 29-0 win against **Elgin** Friday left something to be desired aesthetically but counts just the same.

Jordan Jones ran for 2 touchdowns and Jalen Jones returned a punt for another as the Storm scored 3 times in the third quarter after leading 3-0 at halftime in the Upstate Eight matchup in South Elgin.

Jalen Jones also had 1 of 3 interceptions for the Storm defense, which came up with big plays when it needed them. Denver Davis and Joshua Camacho also picked off a pair of Elgin quarterbacks. Kanye Smith forced a safety and Cody Doolin had a sack.

One critic who gave the Storm low marks for their performance was coach Dragan Teonic.

"I thought they outplayed us and out-coached us tonight in nearly every aspect," he said. "We lost the turnover battle, we lost the penalty battle. We slipped, they didn't. In many ways, they beat us tonight. Hat's off to them. I thought they did a phenomenal job. We have a lot of work to do."

Elgin (3-4, 3-4) stayed right with South Elgin in the first half. The Maroons defense did its part, forcing 2 turnovers while holding the Storm to 75 yards. Kai Paz's 29-yard field goal with 5:20 left in the first half accounted for the only scoring.

The Storm struck quickly after the break, scoring on their opening drive capped by Jordan Jones's 3-yard run. Jalen Jones then broke the game open with his long return, weaving through traffic and staying on his feet when he appeared to be stopped near the sideline.

"I've been practicing it all week in practice, and when we executed, it worked as planned," he said.

Another big special teams play led to the Storm's final touchdown. A bad snap on a punt attempt gave South Elgin the ball at the Elgin 15-yard line. One play later, Jordan Jones took it in for his second touchdown.

South Elgin, which improved to 7-0, 6-0, tacked on a safety and another field goal in the fourth quarter. Smith wrapped up the Elgin quarterback in the end zone; he got rid of the ball just before hitting the ground, but was called for intentional grounding. A 32-yard field goal by John Skwirblies completed the scoring.

Clem McCullough led Elgin, carrying 20 times for exactly 100 yards, passing for 20 more, and picking off a pass on defense.

Jordan Jones finished with 76 yards rushing and 56 passing for South Elgin. All 3 of his completions went to Joey Viverito.