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From the Denver Business Journal:
https://www.bizjournals.com/denver/news/2018/01/12/cover-story-colorados-universities-tackle-teacher.html

COVER STORY

Cover story: Universities tackle Colorado's teacher shortage

Colorado has too few teachers, leaving the state short of the highly trained workers that businesses want. Here's what local universities are doing about it.

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Jan 12, 2018, 3:55am MST **Updated: Jan 12, 2018, 7:32am MST**

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Avondine Hill, CU Denver MA and Teacher Licensure student with students at Hinkley High School.

Graduating more teachers from universities in Colorado is one of four key strategies outlined in the Colorado Department of Higher Education's new strategic plan to address the rapidly growing shortage of public school teachers statewide.

And doing that requires more partnerships between universities and school districts, said Kim Hunter Reed, CDHE's executive director.

"We're talking more about being equal partners, not just graduating great teachers, but being engaged in what the districts are looking for," Reed said.

The conversation stemmed from a decade-long problem: Fewer college students are choosing to be teachers, and school districts across the state are finding it increasingly difficult to find, hire and keep quality teachers. That can lead to larger

class sizes and less one-on-one attention for students, as well as less-qualified people becoming teachers.

According to CDHE's report "Colorado's Teacher Shortages: Attracting and Retaining Excellent Educators," which was done in conjunction with the Colorado Department of Education, the problem stems from several areas, such as low teacher compensation, the fact that nearly a third of Colorado educators will be eligible for retirement over the next several years, lack of funding for schools, and high attrition rates due to working conditions and test score demands placed on teachers.

The issue is especially pronounced in the state's rural districts, with 74 percent of all districts here considered rural. The percentage of state funds allocated to those districts is 9 percent, 8 percentage points less than the national average of 17 percent.

And, said Colorado Commissioner of Education Katy Anthes, another piece of the problem is the negative stigma associated with being a teacher.

"That's something we need to be doing right away that we heard pretty clearly," Anthes said, speaking of meetings she's held with various education stakeholders across the state. "We need to make sure we're elevating the profession and encouraging people to go out and become a teacher."

Meanwhile, enrollment in and completion of educator preparation programs have declined by 24 and 17 percent respectively since 2010.

"We need to make sure that we have the strongest eduation possible to make sure every student has the best teacher to meet their full potential," Reed said. "[And] you can attract great business to our state if we continue to evolve our programs and approve and educational system."

With that in mind, the Denver Business Journal looked at what seven major Colorado institutions are doing to help boost the pipeline of teachers flowing into the state's increasingly desperate school districts.

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