

Urban teacher exodus swells

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If ever a teacher were bred to work in Minneapolis public schools, it's Tim Kaari.

His mother, Ann, served three terms on the school board. His father, Warren, taught [history](#) for 32 years in city schools. Kaari was a product of those schools. And for eight years that's where he's taught.

But come next week, the award-winning teacher will report for new-teacher orientation in Bloomington and join an exodus of Minneapolis-trained teachers to suburban schools.

He's revved up about teaching gifted and talented kids at Hillcrest school, but the day he signed his Bloomington contract, "I was driving down 35W and for a few minutes I was thinking, 'Oh my God, did I make the right decision?' But I did, and I feel good about it."

The migration out of Minneapolis has swelled as falling enrollments have forced layoffs for hundreds of teachers. But it's been exacerbated by others, like Kaari, who'd prefer to stay but say they are discouraged by ever-tightening budgets or disheartened by building or district leadership they find inadequate.

The city's loss is the suburbs' gain.

"When Minneapolis has a mass layoff, we benefit," said Dan Walker, an assistant superintendent in St. Louis Park.

Licensing records show that 238 teachers and administrators who worked in Minneapolis in 2003-04 worked elsewhere last school year. Suburban districts hired two-thirds of them.

Suburban hiring officials say they prize Minneapolis teachers for their experience with poor and minority students and for their thorough training.

Both are important as suburban student bodies diversify and the need grows for specialties such as teaching English as a second language to immigrants.

"An ESL teacher coming out of Minneapolis is gold," said Nancy Rajanen, executive director of human resources for Robbinsdale schools.

Her district hired five Minneapolis teachers and 10 other Minneapolis employees for last school year. Chaska, looking for a new high school principal, hired Paul McMahan away from the North Side's Patrick Henry High School.

The migration continues even though Minneapolis salaries are competitive enough that suburbs can't always afford to pay Minneapolis teachers for their seniority.

"Don't think that Minneapolis is unique," said Shirley Schwartz of the Council of the Great City Schools, a trade group for urban districts. Nationwide, teachers often leave big urban districts for higher salaries, to work with less-needy students and to teach where resources are more plentiful and enrollments are stable, she said.

Minneapolis Superintendent Thandiwe Peebles said she regrets losing teachers, especially when that breaks up teams that are starting to jell and raise students' test scores.

Weary of instability

Some city schools are hard-hit. North Star school alone has lost five teachers to the Osseo and Anoka-Hennepin districts. The north Minneapolis school has enjoyed lower staff turnover than normal for high-poverty schools. But layoffs are hitting there. And junior staff not already axed know they're likely to be laid off or displaced when the school merges with Jordan Park next June.

"The biggest thing for me was instability," said Sarah Gute, who left North Star last fall to teach first- and second-graders for the Osseo district's Woodland school. She was in her sixth year with Minneapolis and had gotten [layoff](#) notices five times, only to be rehired. The last time, she had to go part time; the Osseo job gives her a full-time paycheck.

Amy Goodrich will split her time between kindergarten classes at Woodland and Edinbrook schools in the Osseo district this fall. She's taught at North Star for 6½ years; her husband, Frank, is at Minneapolis Edison. She chose not to wait to see if Minneapolis would [call](#) her back after sending her a [layoff](#) notice this spring.

"Frank and I don't like to let things happen to us. I couldn't spend the summer waiting and wondering," she said. Moreover, the teacher with whom she has teamed at North Star is headed for the Anoka-Hennepin district.

A loss for Minneapolis

Kaari's departure from the Minneapolis district bothers his mother. "It's hard because Warren and I have given years and years of our lives to this district, and Tim is a good teacher," said Ann. She's tutored for years at W. Harry Davis Academy, where Tim has taught for eight years. "It's too bad he's not going to be there for the kids."

Donna Drone can vouch for Kaari's impact. Not only did he coach her grandson, Juan Cisneros, to a national [History](#) Day championship. But Kaari's extra academic coaching helped Juan compete better once he moved to Hopkins. "He puts in way more hours than he ever was paid for, and he believes in the kids," Drone said.

Symbolic slaps

The little things have helped to convince Kaari that leaving was the right decision. His Bloomington principal, Paul Schullo, has asked him for a list of the items he'd like to have in his classroom.

"Which maybe doesn't seem like a lot but seems very welcoming and professional and making sure a teacher has the tools they need to be effective with the kids," Kaari said.

He contrasts that with the canned e-mail card Davis teachers got last year from an administrator on teacher appreciation day. "We don't need gifts and presents, but some acknowledgement that the work we do is really important," he said.

Another symbolic slap to him was that Minneapolis delayed [layoff](#) notices to teachers until mid-June, just after school was out. "You have people who first of all are leaving the school with no closure, and you're giving people two weeks less to find a job.

"In the buildings, the teachers need to keep doing more and more and more, and it never seems to be good enough," he said. "There's not a lot of praise. There's not a lot of respect for what we bring."

But suburban schools value their skills.

Kaari lists those skills: classroom management, teaching skill, curriculum knowledge and working with a diverse student body. "When layoffs happen, these teachers are just snapped up because of our training," he said.

Schullo is expecting great things once Kaari is at Hillcrest, given a teaching demonstration Kaari put on to get hired. "He's so good with kids. ... He had them eating out of the [palm](#) of his hand with the things he was talking about," Schullo said.

Kaari sounds energized for teaching gifted fourth- and fifth-graders at Hillcrest in Bloomington, in a program for kids who test at the 99th percentile. He's giving up the tenure he earned in Minneapolis, although he can earn it back after a year in Bloomington. He's also trading his eight years of seniority in Minneapolis to start over on Bloomington's list. That's why as a hedge he's taking a leave from Minneapolis schools, which is good for up to three years.

Peebles was shocked to hear that Kaari is leaving. She said she's working on leadership issues and is eager to tailor training to what teachers think they need, especially when they're worried about meeting achievement goals.

Kaari discounts the significance of his departure. "There's a lot of really good teachers in Minneapolis, and many are choosing to stay, which is great," he said. But when committed teachers choose to leave, he added, "Minneapolis needs to figure out why."

He doesn't see that happening. "The school board is not in touch with what's going on," he said. "They've declared themselves a [policy](#) board, and they're not in the schools enough talking to people and finding out what's really going on."

Staff writer James Walsh contributed to this report.

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