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Teaching is no 'safe haven' for those laid off from other jobs

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By Dana Hull



Pink Slip 2.0

When John Sphar was laid off from his engineering job, he took stock of his life and decided to reinvent himself as a teacher.

A natural science geek who has a bachelor's degree in biology, Sphar loves teaching science and physics at Andrew Hill High School. His classroom is decorated with large posters of Albert Einstein and the Wright Brothers; during a recent lesson on sound, he showed his students a YouTube video of a singer breaking a wine glass with his voice.

But Sphar, who is in his second year of teaching at Andrew Hill, lacks seniority in the East Side Union High School District and is one of 129 teachers in the district who got "pink slips" earlier this spring.

"I'm 55 years old. I don't really have time to change careers again," Sphar said. "I'm going to try to stay in teaching no matter what, but it might not be at Andrew Hill."

Statewide, more than 27,000 teachers received formal warnings in March that they could be laid off. Union rules dictate that layoffs be done by seniority, so the vast majority who got pink slips are younger teachers who are in their 20s or early 30s.

But there's another, far smaller cohort: midcareer professionals, known in the trade as "re-treads," "switchers" or "career changers."

"The pattern is last in, first out, so age is no buffer," said Margaret Gaston, executive director of the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in Santa Cruz. "Teaching is no longer the

safe haven that it once was, and midcareer teachers are often the most junior when it comes to seniority."

Teaching experts like Gaston say that it typically takes three to five years for a new teacher to get their sea legs. Midcareer professionals have one built-in advantage: They often bring an incredible passion for subjects like math, biology, chemistry and physics to their new jobs.

"Math and science is a field where there's a shortage of qualified teachers, and midcareer professionals have a deep, deep knowledge of the subject matter," Gaston said. "We desperately need these teachers. We don't want them to get laid off; we want them to succeed."

Some school districts, like San Jose Unified, have issued layoff warnings but decided to "skip" over certain categories of teachers, regardless of seniority. SJUSD has exempted special education, math, science and bilingual teachers from recent layoff notices.

California has more than 300,000 public school teachers, but there's no statewide data system that tracks how many of them are career changers — or how many career changers may get laid off.

In recent years, local teacher preparation programs have seen hundreds of applications from Silicon Valley professionals eager to make the switch to the classroom. Many were successful in other fields, but felt a midlife calling to teach.

Robert Ferrera directs the elementary teaching program at Notre Dame de Namur University. The Belmont campus is known for helping midcareer professionals navigate the courses, tests, and two semesters of student teaching needed to earn a teaching credential. So far, he says, applications for the program remain strong, despite all the uncertainty. The bigger challenge, he says, is making sure that people are choosing teaching for the right reasons.

"If you are thinking of teaching because you are trying to escape from something else, you're probably not the best candidate," Ferrera said. "We look for people who have a love of a particular subject, or a lot of experience with kids and young people. There has to be a real motivation for wanting to teach."

Irene Hashimoto, who came to teaching after years as a technology consultant for accounting firms, is also facing a pink slip. Hashimoto, 53, grew up in Japan and has a master's degree in linguistics. She's taught in Soledad and Salinas and currently teaches Japanese at Silver Creek High School in the East Side Union High School District.

"I love my students," said Hashimoto, who teaches four Japanese classes and one English class. "They give me a lot of energy and encouragement, and I find that very rewarding. If I get laid off I'll look for another job, but this is the career I'd like to stay in."

John Sphar's road to the classroom was a long one. When he lost his job in 2001, he worked with his wife, a mortgage broker on the Peninsula. But after volunteering in his daughter's science

class in Palo Alto, he was hooked. He always thought that he'd make a good teacher; volunteering convinced him that it was something he'd also enjoy.

Typical of new teachers, he student taught at two schools, and worked at one more before settling into Andrew Hill in 2007.

"The speed of light goes $7\frac{1}{2}$ times around the Earth in 1 second!" said Sphar recently, as teenagers in his 9 a.m. physics class struggled to stay awake. "That's pretty fast."

Sphar feels like he's just beginning to find his groove in the classroom.

"The frustration is that as a new teacher, you really want to get settled," Sphar said. "When you bounce around from school to school, it's a real challenge. I'm hoping to teach for another 10 to 15 years, and then retire."