

Schools need deafening solution to 'quiet crisis'

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They're calling it the "quiet crisis" facing our schools.

But efforts are afoot to step up public awareness of the problem: The lack of qualified math and science teachers.

"There are many needs of course in schools, but the need for qualified math and science teachers is especially daunting," Dom Belmonte, director of teacher preparation for the Golden Apple Foundation, told the Daily Herald's Emily Krone in a story published today.

The problem of finding math or science teachers with a math or science background is "acute and getting more acute," said Paul Kelter of Northern Illinois University's school of education.

And the solution begins when those potential future teachers are in high school. Schools need to step up teaching of math and science to get more qualified teachers later on.

As Krone reports, only half of current seniors at local suburban high schools tested as college ready in math on the ACT college entrance exam as juniors. And just 34 percent made the grade in science. And since there is a limited supply of qualified math and science professionals, the demand is great for them in areas outside of teaching. And that means they can find a more lucrative job outside of the classroom.

Nearly 60 percent of physical sciences teachers did not major or minor in that subject and that 36 percent of middle and high-school math teachers and 27 percent of science teachers did not major or minor in those subject areas, according to the U.S. Department of Education statistics reported by Krone.

To keep qualified teachers in these fields, even when they did not major in that subject, schools are looking at continuous training to keep up with innovations in math, science and technology.

Schools need to be on the lookout for grants and other ways to pay for this training and parents and taxpayers need to understand the importance of the training as schools compete for the best teachers.

Des Plaines Elementary District 62, for example, received a grant through the Illinois Math and Science Partnership to hold summer workshops for math and science teachers. "The challenge for us is to keep up with new math and science discoveries and the way in which technology has shaped those two areas," said Diep Nguyen, District 62's assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

With greater emphasis on teaching the basics in schools and with rapidly changing technology, it's imperative that schools do all they can to keep their current teachers trained in math and science and to find the best and brightest among applicants so that we can see better performance from students in the future.