

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**INTERVIEWER:** And the Minneapolis school board also heard last night that with the start of the new school year just three weeks away, the district is short 280 staff, but Minneapolis is not alone. Schools all over Minnesota are feeling the crunch of too many positions that are still open. John Magas is the superintendent of Duluth Public Schools. He's here to talk about staffing in the district. Welcome, Superintendent. How are you?

**JOHN MAGAS:** I'm doing great. Thanks for having me.

**INTERVIEWER:** Good, thanks for being here. Say, just how short staffed are you in Duluth?

**JOHN MAGAS:** Well, we are short staffed basically between 50 and 60 positions right now. We're short about 18 teaching positions, and we still have a couple of weeks to go for the hiring, but then we're short about 40 non-certified staff, and that would include things like bus drivers, custodians, food-service workers, clerical, and other positions. So we're in a better spot than we were last year, but I think that there's still a definite need just like in many other parts across the state and country.

**INTERVIEWER:** What positions are the hardest to fill?

**JOHN MAGAS:** I think it varies. I think sometimes the high need, special-education paraprofessionals, just because it sometimes can be a very intensive position with intensive needs. It can be quite rewarding, but it can also be quite challenging. So sometimes those are hard to find. Previously, our bus-driver positions were hard to find. But right now, I'd say bus drivers, custodians, and food service are our highest-need areas.

**INTERVIEWER:** How out of the ordinary is this staffing shortage, and what are you hearing from other superintendents?

**JOHN MAGAS:** We're hearing across the state. I'm involved in the Association of Metropolitan School Districts as well as our regional superintendents meetings and MASA, and we're hearing across the state, it's a huge issue. Right now, unemployment in Minnesota is at like 1.8%, which is an all-time low, and so I think that that combined with some of the challenges that we've seen from the pandemic with sometimes additional pressures on schools and additional needs there, unemployment, and the change in the job market. Those are all things that have affected the labor shortage.

**INTERVIEWER:** Some district leaders have said that the talent pool is smaller than they've ever seen it before. Is that right?

**JOHN MAGAS:** Very much so. I think that we-- there are still very good people out there, but the-- the private industry is paying more for a lot of their workers, and so as wages go up in other areas, we would love to be able to raise our wages proportionately. But because of our fixed budgeting, we run into problems there, and I think that's--

Part of the problem is that I think it would be great if the state could loosen some of the funding and provide some additional relief for schools. Maybe come back in special session and work on some of the spreading of that \$9 billion in budget surplus to our schools so that we could be ready to meet the needs of our students and families.

**INTERVIEWER:** This sounds like this needs a short-term fix and a long-term fix. What's the short-term fix?

**JOHN MAGAS:** Well, I'd say short-term fix is that we're really doing some things to recruit and retain in different ways. We're meeting with university students face to face, talking to them about our positions, talking to them about working in the district while they're going to school. We're also recruiting younger individuals. Students who are finishing high school, as well as retirees who are interested in coming back.

I think too, we're really trying to appeal to people's civic mindedness. It's as much about helping our schools and helping our students. It's not just a job. I think sometimes people might think, well, I'm not really wanting to be a substitute teacher. But if they know that they've got some free time on their hands, and they care about schools, getting them involved in those positions has been helpful.

We're also doing some things, looking at our pay scales, making sure that we have better orientation, and support for new employees, looking at starting affinity groups with different employee groups and also just trying to make sure that we ensure that we have a great, great working environment. Thinking about things like exit interviews, but also not just exit interviews, kind of the concept of stay interviews, talking to people and saying, what would it take to have you stay here? So those are all different things that we're trying to make sure that we're dealing with the short term.

**INTERVIEWER:** The long term, as you mentioned, sounds like it's more state money to pay better wages.

**JOHN MAGAS:** I think that's a significant impact. I think if we look at just the job market, and what it takes to get high-quality employees, it's hard to compete with various fast-food jobs paying \$17, \$18 an hour, and sometimes our paraprofessional positions pay less than that, and we've just raised our bus-driver positions, but it still makes it hard to compete with some of those positions.

We do have great benefit packages, and I think that's a huge draw. But as some of our younger employees say sometimes, you can't eat your benefits. We might have great benefits, and it might be a good overall package, but when it comes to putting food on the table for a family, it's important for us to think about those different options.

But I do think that fully funding education through the state, particularly right now when we have such a significant, significant budget surplus with \$9 billion on the table, it would make sense for the state to go back into special session and allocate some of those funds for the desperate needs that our schools are facing.

**INTERVIEWER:** So that may not happen. So you're looking at a fall that you may fall short when it comes to staffing. Are you worried about existing staff burning out because they would be overworked?

**JOHN MAGAS:** Yeah, I mean, I think that that's a definite concern when we talk about making sure it's a great work environment. If you're asking everybody to step up again and again and cover people's classes when we're short substitutes or things like that, or when we're asking people to work extra hours, that can create some additional stressors on the system. So it's important for us to make sure that we're being thoughtful about that. It is a concern though.

**INTERVIEWER:** In the spring, I thought I remember hearing that you stepped in to be a substitute teacher when staffing was tight. You're going to do that again?

**JOHN MAGAS:** Yeah, actually, it was in January and February and a several times as well throughout the course of the semester, I worked as a special-education paraprofessional. I worked as a teacher. I did different supervisory work, but really, it was our whole team.

Our whole team of administrators and other support people really, really stepped up. I just wanted to make sure that, you know, that I was modeling from the top as far as if it was an expectation that we're all stepping in. All means all, and I wanted to make sure I stepped in as well, but it was really a team effort of all of our administrators, all of our teachers, and many others.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did you learn from the experience?

**JOHN MAGAS:** It's always a good reminder of who we serve, that we're here for our students, and I think any time you can spend more time with students as an educator, especially once you get into administration where you're working more with adults, it's important for us to really think about things from the voice of the customer and the lens of the customer, and our customers are a student. So I think, spending time with our students and seeing things through their eyes as well as looking at things through the eyes of our staff who are closest to the work at hand, that was really insightful for me.

**INTERVIEWER:** So before you go, I know that school's going to start in Duluth as September the 6th, I believe, just a few weeks away. How are you thinking you're going to make your staffing goals?

**JOHN MAGAS:** I feel completely confident that we're going to have the staff we need to start the year strong. I think that it's important that we continue to keep our sense of urgency on this because starting with everybody pitching in, doing more than we would normally expect, is a hard place to start, and I think making sure that we continue to value education and value putting our money where our mouth is as a state. I think it's important for us to consider those funding streams and consider how we can do this, but I feel completely confident that we're going to start a great school year here in Duluth.

**INTERVIEWER:** All right, Duluth Public School Superintendent, John Magas, thank you so much.

**JOHN MAGAS:** Thank you.