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### A two-month backlog on processing criminal background checks at the...

KELLY WIESE  
Associated Press

**JEFFERSON CITY, Mo.** - A two-month backlog on processing criminal background checks at the Missouri State Highway Patrol has forced school districts across the state to hire teachers and other workers without waiting for the results.

Under a law that kicked in Jan. 1, the checks are required for any school employees that have contact with children, from teachers to cooks to janitors. The employees are required to submit fingerprints, which the patrol sends to the FBI for a check against national criminal records.

The patrol is struggling to keep up with the added workload, though it is hiring more employees and moved to 24-hour-a-day staffing this month to better meet demand.

State education officials say the real crush of applications will come in spring and summer, when districts hire for the next school year, but about 200 checks already have been requested. Because the background checks are taking eight to 10 weeks to process, school districts are allowing new employees to start work pending the outcome of those checks.

"We hire them, bring them on and put them to work, contingent on them passing all the background checks, so they're not just sitting around waiting," said Robert Keyes, a spokesman for the Springfield School District, which has hired about 30 people needing checks since Jan. 1.

Missouri has added numerous new categories of people in need national criminal background checks in recent years. The state now requires such checks of most school employees, prospective adoptive or foster parents and those applying for concealed-gun permits, for example.

In the past five years, other states also have expanded background check requirements to cover more and more people, said Blake Harrison, a criminal justice policy specialist at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

His research found that two-thirds of states require criminal background checks of school employees, and a



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majority allow employers to conduct national checks on those who work with children, the elderly and the disabled.

Screening companies say background checks are becoming more common for a host of industries, from health care to retail. They attribute the rise to a security concern after the Sept. 11 attacks and companies' efforts to avoid liability for hiring someone inappropriate.

A study released last year by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 80 percent of human resource managers conduct criminal background checks, up 29 percent from 1996.

Jason Morris, president of Cleveland-based Background Information Services Inc., said companies are protecting themselves legally but also preserving their reputation. Companies have shifted from just screening upper management to also screening lower-level employees, something especially critical in businesses like carpet cleaning, where employees visit customers' homes, Morris said.

Meanwhile, Missouri school districts are doing what they can to get by until their background checks return.

Springfield and some other school districts already performed basic checks of state criminal records and continue to do so as a safeguard while the national check is pending.

The previous law required full-time teachers and bus drivers to undergo criminal background checks, but state education officials say the new provision could eventually add tens of thousands to the system.

State Education Commissioner Kent King said, for now, schools must be extra cautious in hiring.

"There's this tremendous influx of background checks from schools and many others," King said. "Schools need to be much more careful in their own investigation before they put people to work."

Some districts are taking extra precautions. The Lindbergh district in St. Louis County, for example, decided to check references more thoroughly - contacting every reference going back a decade.

"It is going to be a lot more time-consuming before we make a recommendation for our board," said Rick Francis, assistant superintendent for personnel. "We think that we must do that to protect our district prior to any information coming back."

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