



## 'The blessing is all mine'



### Superintendent buys houses for international teachers

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**M**aria Lani Bagunas landed in the United States with six boxes and four pieces of luggage. Her husband was back in Bahrain, where he was recovering from a stroke. Lani Bagunas, who is from the Philippines, had taken a teaching job with Topeka USD 501. She didn't know what to expect after her long journey. What she found in Topeka was free room and board, thanks to her new boss, superintendent

See HOUSING, Page 4A

**TOP:** The houses purchased by Topeka Public School USD 501 superintendent Tiffany Anderson are fully stocked with appliances, furniture and amenities to help lessen the stress of international teachers moving to Topeka. **MIDDLE:** Anderson and district administrators pray Aug. 1 with Filipino teachers Anderson helped adjust to living in Topeka. **BOTTOM:** Roy Tiongson shows a photo of his father, Raul Tiongson, as inspiration for why he came to the United State to teach in Topeka Public Schools. Tiongson is from the Philippines and had taught in Qatar. PHOTOS BY EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL



# Housing

Continued from Page 1A

dent Tiffany Anderson.

“I’m really grateful for the support that I’m having right now,” Lani Bagunas said. “With a warm welcome and great support, I’m really thankful for that. I did not expect any.”

Anderson has purchased several houses in Topeka over the past seven years.

The houses have been used to help teachers needing transitional spaces to get back on their feet. More recently, Anderson has used the homes for Filipino teachers as they immigrate to the United States.

“It’s important to provide wraparound services to the whole family in ways that you can,” she said, “and if you don’t do that, you know who will.”

## Anderson invests her own salary back into Topeka Public Schools

Anderson said she has invested about 20% of her salary into buying houses to use as transitional places for educators.

“This allows my salary to be recycled right back in the community,” she said.

Anderson said she wants to personally ensure the well-being of her staff.

“It makes a big difference psychological and mentally,” Lani Bagunas said. “I can only speak for myself. I really felt like I was welcome and I was secure. The security was that I will not be alone here in Topeka.

“So somebody will be with me, you know, the support system will be OK. It will be great.”

One house is used for staff members from the Philippines who are already here. They don’t pay rent but will eventually cover utilities.

Another property was previously used for a Ukrainian family and district staff or their families in need. A special education agency is renting the home for five years to support special needs young adults in need of affordable housing.

A third property is rented to a USD 501 parent for affordable housing as they save for home ownership.

The most recent property purchased is for additional faculty from the Philippines who will move to Topeka in mid-August. About 40 Filipino teachers are expected to join USD 501 this fall, said Pilar Mejía, direction of cultural innovation.

## Topeka superintendent seeks housing savings for teachers

With the cost of living rising, Anderson said she has convinced multiple apartment complex providers into giving reduces rent rates for educators. According to Anderson:

- The Chalet offers an 8% discount for teachers.
- Raintree Apartments waives the application fee and gives a 10% discount on monthly rent.
- Kansan Towers offers reduced rent prices depending on the floor layout.
- Wheatfield Apartments waives the application and administrative fee, along with offering a \$250 rent credit.

Anderson said she would like to find a way to provide ride-sharing services through the district for international teachers who don’t have driver’s licenses or vehicles.

Her efforts have resonated with international



From details like marks left on the wall to blinds fitting in the windows, Tiffany Anderson on Aug. 1 closely inspects the work done on her latest house, where international teachers will be offered a free place to live while working for the district.



Filipino teachers join Topeka Public Schools superintendent Tiffany Anderson, third from left, and other district administrators in front of a house on S.W. Granthurst Avenue. Anderson purchased the house to help transition teachers to their new community. PHOTOS BY EVERT NELSON/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

teachers.

“I am so thankful to the district and to the community that we have here, because my family and I fell in love with what we have here,” said Roy Tiongson, who is from the Philippines and taught in Qatar before coming to Topeka. “I want to make sure that I thank Dr. Anderson for all the deeds that she’s been doing for us, not only for the Filipino community, but also for the teachers in the district.

“This is the first time that I experienced a superintendent that will take care of the teachers to be honest.”

Anderson also said she is in the early stages of seeing whether district’s school board would approve purchasing properties that can be used as transitional homes for international teachers and U.S. teachers in need of assistance.

“Places in rural areas — the school districts buy houses,” she said. “So, I’m buying houses and I have many of them. That’s not sustainable for me to keep buying houses. I have a number of mortgages now.”

## The struggles that come with being an international educator

Within Topeka Public Schools, 27 countries and 39 languages are represented. As of this school year, Filipino educators will be the largest of any other nationality.

“The powerful thing is the families that come to 501 because they’re staff, but they’re also parents,” Anderson said. “So, it’s really diversifying our student population in addition to helping diversify our international staff.”

Anderson saw a need to support the international teachers after seeing the struggles they had when immigrating to Kansas.

“God gives us what we have for the benefit of others,” she said, “and so, the blessing is all mine.”

Most of the international teachers come over on two main visas:

- J-1 visa, an exchange-based program that allows teachers from foreign countries to learn about American education and take that knowledge back to their home countries.

- H-1B visa, which allows people to come into the country to work specialty jobs that require a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

James Austin, a USD 501 attorney who covers the district’s immigration cases, said the visas prevent family members accompanying the teachers from working, which can cause a financial strain.

Tiongson said he has lived in the United States for several years, but he and his family still struggle financially because he is the only one who can work. His wife has the experience and the educational background to work in the medical or educational field.

“That’s one of the transitions that we’re still having a difficult time with because when we were in the Middle East, both of us were working,” he said. “Here, I’m the only person working.”

chael Berry, human resources manager, in a written statement. “However, nationally and locally, the teacher shortage has continued to grow, especially in areas with increasing demand, such as special education.

“Therefore, in areas where there are no candidates, recruiting internationally people who are highly qualified experienced educators who are eligible to work in the U.S. has helped us fill classes that may have otherwise been vacant with diverse, talented staff.”

Nearly 20 years later, the district is actively investing in the growing international community.

Cherryl Delacruz was the Kansas Region 2 teacher of the year in 2024. She immigrated to Topeka 165 years ago from the Philippines.

“It really truly is a very humbling experience,” Delacruz said. “However, it’s also been a privilege to have the opportunity to advocate for staff and teachers and our students. Like I said earlier, I didn’t come here on my own. It really, truly represents a collective or community collective effort.”

Anderson has built a team of teachers to improve the lives and experience of those immigrating to Kansas to teach in USD 501.

Within this team, she has longtime teachers who have immigrated, the district’s media team, the district’s attorney who also facilitates the immigration process and, more recently, iBridge Education Inc., a recruiting firm that processes foreign educators and helps facilitate hirings across the country.

iBridge CEO Lolita Brown said she was amazed with Anderson’s work and USD 501’s dedication to teachers.

“She’s phenomenal,” Brown said. “Don’t take it that my words are to praise her just because we are in this interview. I am humbled of how she shows her authentic self and she is not a showoff with her way of helping.”

“In the landscape of education, we need people like her.”

As part of the expansive wraparound services the district provides for the USD 501 community, they have been working to collect furniture and home essentials donations to help make the transition for international teachers and their families smoother.

## Anderson and Topeka Public Schools ask community for help

Anderson said she hopes to include as many organizations and community members in the process. She said she’s hoping for people will donate time or resources to the initiative.

Aarion Gray, general director of instructional services, said the district is looking for more renters to give reduced rent rates.

“Our staff believe in the mission of service above self and we are grateful for any landlord that wants to join us in giving added discounts to Topeka Public School educators as they join by investing in our staff’s mission of service,” Gray said in a written statement.

Often, international teachers come to Kansas with few personal belongings. They often don't have furniture, kitchenware or vehicles and sometimes possess few clothes.

### **The impact Anderson and TPS has made on international teachers**

Since 2006, Topeka Public Schools has welcomed international educators to breathe new life into the district.

"Our goal in Topeka is to hire our graduates and members of the immediate community and most of our staff represents our Topeka community," said Mi-

Gray also said they are looking for dealerships to reduce cost for vehicles.

Bill Cochran, director of transportation and campus police for USD 501, arranged for bus passes. The district has also partnered with Lewis Toyota.

"An educators discount or a public service employee discount that helps teachers, military, police and fire officials would be another way to invest in our city by making housing affordable for educators who are serving the most vulnerable in our community," Gray said in a written statement.

For those interested in donating time, home necessities, services or other things, contact Gray at [agray@tps501.org](mailto:agray@tps501.org).