



Union Creates Licensing Program for Laid-Off Teachers

ST. PAUL FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

■ THE ST. PAUL TEACHERS' UNION IS SPEARHEADING AN effort to help out-of-work teachers earn new licenses to fill a perennially hard-to-staff niche: special education.

The new licensure program, being developed in conjunction with the state and Hamline University, is part of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers' vision to create a diverse and talented pipeline of educators across Minnesota, recruiting middle school students to mid-career changers.

The effort is "not just 'How do we recycle these old teachers?' but 'How do we get some really good teachers in there?'" said Dr. Karen Hammel, an adjunct faculty member with Hamline University's School of Education and a special education teacher in Minneapolis Public Schools. St. Paul's veteran teachers are familiar with urban schools, "know the kids, know the community, have relationships in the building," Hammel said. "That's something that other alternative licensure programs can't do."

Dubbed CareerTeacher, the Innovation Fund project has three major components, the most complex of which is the licensure program. During the intense yearlong classroom residency for both current teachers and mid-career changers, participants will spend four days a week co-teaching in schools and one day a week attending professional seminars. The residency is designed to provide rigorous, research-based training so graduates leave confident in their command of the classroom.

The first class of roughly 20 teachers will begin the program this fall, earning a completely new kind of special education license

that will allow them to teach general special education throughout the state. This first year, the program will be open only to licensed, out-of-work or underemployed Minnesota teachers; after that, CareerTeacher will open up to all professionals. Although CareerTeacher is still in the planning stages, interest is already high among the hundreds of Minnesota teachers not working or not using their licenses.

"I receive calls or emails on a weekly basis, saying, 'Tell me, is the program ready?'" said Mary de Leon-Denton, project manager for the St. Paul Innovation Fund grant.

CareerTeacher's higher education component includes a similarly challenging classroom immersion program for college students, in addition to recruiting efforts to attract more math and science majors into the profession.

This extensive field training "provides the resident an entire year to practice with an exemplar teacher before they're handed the keys to the classroom," Denton said. "It ensures us that they're highly qualified and ready to accept the

responsibility of being the teacher of record, and are not going out there learning to teach their first year and practicing on our students."

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MARY CATHERINE RICKER

President, St. Paul Federation of Teachers

The third aspect of CareerTeacher is a teaching exploration program in high schools, which encourages teenagers to learn more about the profession through an after-school club and education courses. That effort is active in one St. Paul high school, Denton said. The federation aims to expand it widely by next school year, with plans to move into middle and elementary schools. The goal is to draw as many outstanding students as possible into teaching.



Minnesota has “a gorgeously diverse student population,” Denton said. “As is the case with most school districts across the nation, our teacher population does not accurately reflect our student population.”

The St. Paul Federation takes pride that CareerTeacher is “homegrown,” said Denise Rodriguez, a vice president there. From writing curriculum to forming a partnership with Hamline to negotiating state approvals, every piece of the program is being built from scratch. The partnership with Hamline was a natural fit, as the university already has several alternative licensure masters’ programs in place for Teach For America volunteers and other professionals entering the classroom. Getting state approvals for the program and compressing state special education license requirements into a yearlong residency format have been more complicated, Rodriguez said.

“The union’s position is, not everyone can teach,” Hammel said. “Why not find these people who really can and who’ve shown quality teaching and just happen to have gone into the wrong content area and use those talents?”

“Taking people with great experience and getting them back into the classroom is a good idea.”

The major obstacle to CareerTeacher’s future success is money. While the Innovation Fund has provided a solid start, the St. Paul Federation is seeking additional funds to pay teachers in the residency program a stipend. Plans are in the works to apply to AmeriCorps for additional support. Denton estimates that providing resident teachers a living stipend plus covering the cost of books, fees, and health insurance could run as high as \$27,000 per teacher. Operating expenses for the program as a whole could reach \$1 million a year.

CareerTeacher’s emphasis on training teachers through a long-term residency program echoes a similar effort bankrolled by the Bush Foundation of St. Paul: creating a consortium of six local universities, including Hamline, to

transform how new teachers are prepared for the classroom, said Michelle Bierman, supervisor of instructional reform and preservice teaching with St. Paul public schools. The parallel programs will provide rigor and continuity to teacher training in the region and increase student achievement with high-quality educators, Bierman said. When these newly minted teachers arrive in the classroom, “there’s not as much of a learning curve.”

The St. Paul school district has signed an agreement with the federation committing to support CareerTeacher by helping provide master teacher instructors and job placements for program graduates.

CareerTeacher has helped the union-district relationship evolve, said Mary Catherine Ricker, the president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers. “Instead of the stereotypical relationship where you’re pointing out each other’s flaws,” the Innovation Fund work “gives the district the opportunity to see the value of how [the union] can organize around an educational practice or an educational idea just as easily as we can organize around a great contract idea,” she said.

Yet it has still been difficult to overcome some potential funders’ skepticism of a union-led effort, Ricker said. “Cooperation should never be about winning and losing,” she said. “This is a situation, with that said, where everybody wins. Our union’s members get to see us as a professional home for their ideas. The district gets to solve a perennial problem with a perennial solution. Our students absolutely get really high-quality teachers in front of them for the long haul.”

The federation hopes eventually to expand CareerTeacher to disciplines beyond special education, Bierman said.

“There’s a huge need to tap another funding source,” Denton noted. “In the economic climate we’re in, it’s extremely difficult. We are looking at every angle we possibly can.”



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