

Pinellas, SPC partner on free tuition program to boost teacher pipeline

The district and college want to train special education, pre-K and primary teachers to help fill vacancies.

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BY SONIA RAO

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Rashad Harrell never thought about being a teacher.

The 48-year-old spends his weekdays as a paraprofessional, supporting teachers at Pinellas County Schools' Nina Harris Exceptional Education Center; his weeknights, a supervisor at UPS. He found the Nina Harris job seven years ago when a UPS co-worker told him about an opening.

Now, a new partnership between the school district and St. Petersburg College means he has the opportunity to gain a tuition-free bachelor's degree and become a full-time teacher.

"It feels like a gift that fell from heaven," Harrell said.

Twenty-nine district employees with an associate degree will spend the next two years training under a mentor and taking online classes at St. Petersburg College. The participants are working toward a bachelor's degree in special education or primary pre-K education and teacher certification.

The goal is a pipeline of local, high-quality teachers. Legislators in 2023 established the apprenticeship program in partnership with the Florida Department of Education as one of several ways districts could combat teacher shortages. Florida had more than 4,000 teacher vacancies in January, according to the Florida Education Association.

The Pinellas program targets vacancies for special education teachers and early elementary education from pre-K to third grade. Those are specific needs, said Nicole Gallucci-Landis, a human resources director for the district. There were 17 special education teacher vacancies and 17 early elementary teacher vacancies as of July 8, she said.

Grow-your-own programs, which focus on recruiting community members such as paraprofessionals to address local teacher shortages, have existed for decades, said Amaya Garcia, director of pre-K-12 research at the left-leaning think tank New America. But their presence has increased since the pandemic.

Eighteen states funded a grow-your-own program in 2019, compared to 35 states and D.C. now, according to Garcia's research. Lawmakers allocated \$5 million in December to support Florida's program.

District employees like paraprofessionals are a smart population to draw from, Garcia said, because they're already connected to the school and have experience working with students. And they often

boost educator diversity.

“For a paraprofessional in particular, becoming a teacher can mean almost everything,” she said

The average paraprofessional in the district makes approximately \$20,580 for 10 months, compared to an average teacher salary of around \$52,600, Gallucci-Landis said. For the next two years, apprentice teachers will receive an hourly differential, \$3 for the first year and \$5 for the second, and mentor teachers a \$2,000 annual stipend.

Garcia said there’s not yet much research about the impact of grow-your-own programs on students.

But Roddy Theobald, a principal researcher at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Educational Research, said it helps when the programs are specialized toward specific teacher groups, such as special or pre-K and primary educators. He said those programs are the most likely to have positive effects, such as increasing teacher retention and diversity, and student outcomes. Nationally, he said special education teachers are always at the top of teacher shortages.

Joycelyn Avery-Wright, Harrell’s mentor who has taught in the district for 20 years, said special education teachers are a special breed, because their kids require more.

“You have to love it,” she said. “It’s not for the faint of heart. As a teacher, I’m changing diapers, I’m cleaning noses, I’m tying shoes.”

Avery-Wright views being a mentor to Harrell as helping her peers to “get a step up in life.”

“It’s going to be a huge salary increase once they finish, and we all need that boost because we don’t get paid enough for what we do,” she said. “I’m going to help him, whether it’s with homework or whatever, to help make sure that he takes that walk across the stage.”

In late June, Harrell worked with one of his students, Talha Hussain, in an extended transition classroom, where students aged 18-22 learn job readiness, life training and communication skills. It was the last day of a summer bridge program for special education students.

Harrell assisted Talha as he assembled a white-and-black PVC pipe, working on his motor skills. They also practiced identifying his name from several options printed on a green sheet of paper. Those were exercises a teacher developed that Harrell was helping implement. Over the next two years, he will work on creating his own exercises for students, learning to manage a classroom and ensuring his students are learning from what he’s teaching.

He said goodbye to Talha with a special handshake: Dap up, high five, fist bump. Harrell will work in extended transition next year, but with a different group of students.

He can’t wait to come back to the classroom in August to start this new journey.

“If not now, when?” he said.

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