

Steering Minority Teens Into Teaching

County Schools Starting Program

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In an attempt to entice more minority and disadvantaged students to become educators, Prince William County school officials are launching a partnership with a New York-based nonprofit organization that will help high school graduates earn significant college scholarships if they decide to become teachers.

Prince William school officials hope to begin the program in the fall with about 50 students from the freshman, sophomore and junior classes. Once the students are accepted, the nonprofit organization, Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers, will link them with paid mentoring teachers in their schools, place them in SAT preparation courses and help them apply to a select group of colleges that promise to reduce the students' tuition by at least 50 percent.

With those benefits, school officials believe that the program can offer students, many of whom would not otherwise consider teaching -- or going to college, for that matter -- valuable career options. Although the students would not be required to return to Prince William to serve as teachers, school officials hope that the participants would come back to help address a shortage of minority teachers, said Keith J. Johnson, associate superintendent for human resources.

The surge in Prince William's immigrant population has caused numerous academic pressures, including a need to make the school system's teaching ranks reflect the student body, which has many Hispanics and blacks, Johnson said.

By 2009, the school system hopes that its teaching staff will be diversifying at a faster rate than the student body.

"It's important to have good-quality teachers regardless of ethnicity, and it's also important to see all ethnic groups have successful role models as examples," Johnson said.

The nonprofit organization, founded in 1994, began helping students in Westchester County, N.Y., and later students in the Rochester, N.Y., area, including at the Greece Central School District, where Prince William's new superintendent, Steven L. Walts, as well as Johnson, came from. Although the program has only recently begun at his old school district, Johnson said it was popular among students.

Several colleges, all of them in New York or the surrounding metropolitan area, have agreements with Today's Students that they will finance at least half of the participants' education. Among the colleges are Syracuse University, Fordham University and the University of Connecticut.

The Prince William school district will be the first outside New York to participate. School officials want to offer students a chance to attend college locally, so they are trying persuade local universities to sign on.

Last week, Prince William school officials, along with the founder and executive director of the nonprofit organization, Bettye Perkins, pitched the idea to representatives from such schools as George Mason University, Old Dominion University and Northern Virginia Community College. Johnson said he did not know when the schools would decide whether to participate, but he was hopeful that they would.

Once the program is in place, it would operate like this: Students would apply by writing essays about why they want to be teachers, and they must maintain a B average and have a good record of class attendance. Having some minority or ethnic background is required.

After being admitted, participants would shadow a teacher and be required to tutor other students for at least two hours a week, for which they would be paid \$10 an hour. The mentoring teachers would receive a stipend of about \$1,000.

Students also would get SAT preparation training in a six-week course conducted by Kaplan Inc., which is owned by The Washington Post Co.

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