

## Group Grooms College Students to Become Teachers

**The program aim to help new instructors return to home turf**

By Meryl Harris, The Journal News

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TSTT College Students pose with Executive Director, Dr. Bettye Perkins, at the annual Career Development Workshop.

Realizing a dream, Christina Torres is teaching her own Spanish-language classes for the first time at John Jay Middle School in Cross River.

Helping her to complete her dream is Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers. It has groomed 156 local, mostly minority, college students who are training to become teachers.

Torres is a pioneering member of the nonprofit group that is dedicated to bringing the best of local minority and other students back to Putnam, Rockland and Westchester counties to teach.

This is a "marvelous opportunity for a group of students who may not have had an opportunity to pursue a college degree," said Brewster Superintendent Mark Lewis. "And we certainly need minority professionals in the teaching ranks, not only in the urban areas but in suburban" areas as well.

The training begins in high school as the carefully selected students are asked to work with mentors, tutor other students, teach in summer internships and travel to colleges who agree to give them a teacher's education at half the normal cost. Once they are accepted into college, the teachers-in-training continue to have a mentor, and are groomed to present themselves at their best during job interviews.

Tomes said the group gave her an essential boost.

"They were so helpful and have given me so many resources. It was just the incentive I needed," said Torres, 22, who graduated from Yorktown High School and whose mother is a principal at a school in Harlem.

There are to be about 150 Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers high school students this year as the program into Brewster, Mahopac, New Rochelle, and Fairfield, Conn., while doubling its numbers in Ramapo and Spring Valley high schools from five participants each to 10.

Continuing participants include Fox Lane in Bedford, Woodlands in Greenburgh, Haldane in Cold Spring, Hendrick Hudson in Montrose, John Jay in Bedford, Walter Panas in Cortlandt, Ossining, Mount Vernon, Peekskill, Somers, White Plains, Yonkers, Yorktown and Nyack.

“With the shortage of teachers who are competent and qualified, were hoping that some of the students will come back and teach in East Ramapo,” said Manny Stein, instructional supervisor of business and school-to-work programs for the Rockland district.

New Rochelle is joining the program for the first time this year.

With minorities comprising half of the students and a staff that is 75 percent white, educators in the city are selecting three or four students for the program hoping they will come back to teach in the district.

“We think it's a great opportunity,” said Superintendent Linda Kelly.

Each school pays \$2000 per student to the organization, whose executive director, Bettye Perkins, works with a staff of three. Selected by the school districts, the students must have a grade point average of 80, write an essay on why they want to teach, have recommendations from teachers and guidance counselors and show leadership skills and good attendance.

Among the 10 college students who will look for their first full-time teaching positions this spring is Jeffrey Cole, 21, who is finishing the five-year bachelor's/master's program at Manhattanville College in Purchase with dual certification in elementary and special education.

He's on the honor roll, in the honor society, and hopes to teach elementary school next year, perhaps at his alma mater, Yorktown. His internships and tutoring have included stints as a music teacher and as an instructor of "life skills" at the Board of Cooperative Teaching Services, teaching students about bank accounts, budgeting and taxes.

“I teach kids who are 4 years old, adults, senior citizens, any opportunity” Cole said. “Teaching was the one thing I never wanted to think about. My guidance counselor in high school suggested I tutor at middle school, and I just loved it. I got the bug. I got hooked. I love this. The kids and I have a connection. I love the environment, I love the challenge of it. You're working, working, working and all of a sudden that light comes on.”

Syracuse University is new to the program this year, joining Fordham, the College of New Rochelle, Gordon College, from which Torres graduated, Manhattanville, Marist, Marymount, Mercy, Pace, St. Thomas Aquinas, SUNY Albany, Texas College and the University of Connecticut.

Begun in 1995 by educators and guidance counselors hoping to close the minority gap among teachers, the program's first graduate was Emerly Martinez, now in his second year of teaching social studies at Ossining High School, where he hopes soon to be a teacher/mentor for the group.

The work is as rewarding as he hoped it would be.

“Because of me, these kids are going to leave my classroom learning something they didn't know,” he said.

Torres said her first week "went really well." The hundred or so children she teaches in five classes a day, are “great, very active, and they participate. And the staff is wonderful.”

Her boss, John Jay Middle School Principal Douglas Both, said Torres impressed him from the start.

"She was just was so genuine about the mission of working with kids. It was all about kids, and not about Spanish – that was almost incidental." Both said.

"Just her sense of ethics, of morality, her sense of herself were just so genuine and natural. Those are the kinds of people who are natural teachers. Anybody can learn the subject matter, but having those instincts and passion and compelling goals, that's what great teachers are all about."