

Federal program produces homegrown bilingual teachers

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WAUKEGAN -- After working as a paraprofessional in Waukegan Public Schools for six years, Edith Martinez of Waukegan became a teacher after completing a federal program for local school districts to grow their own bilingual teachers to overcome shortages.

Martinez always wanted to become a teacher, but her job and raising her four children made finishing her associate's and bachelor's degrees difficult.

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Edith Martinez gives a test to a second-grader during summer school at Glenwood School in Waukegan.
(Michael Schmidt/News-Sun)

"I had started it, but it would have taken me 10 years," she said.

Through the five-year Transition to Teaching grant from the U.S. Department of Education she was able to complete her degrees in four years while working full time as a bilingual liaison interpreting in the district's special education department. The grant paid for the alternative certification program classes which were held at the University Center in Waukegan through Illinois State University nights, weekends and summers.

"It was an opportunity I would never have been able to do by myself," she said. "They walked us through every step of the way."

She graduated from the program in December, and spent the last few months as a substitute teacher and tutor. She's currently teaching second-grade summer school in the bilingual program at Glenwood Elementary School and will be assigned her first classroom in the fall.

Born in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, Martinez has lived in Waukegan for 30 years and plans on staying.

The \$1.4 million federal grant through Illinois State University was aimed at recruiting and retaining teachers in high-need school districts like Waukegan, Round Lake, Zion and North Chicago, which have a harder time meeting the growing need for qualified bilingual teachers, said project director Christina Moe. Sixty paraprofessionals went through the program, which ended in May, including 22 from Waukegan. The teachers must serve in a high-needs school for at least three years.

High-needs school districts are determined by the number of families living in poverty and the number of teachers who are teaching outside of their specialty or with provisional certificates. For example, 5.2 percent of Waukegan's 941 teachers have emergency or provisional credentials compared to the state average of 1.5 percent, according to the 2007 State Report Card.

The program benefits schools by supplying more teachers who are likely to stay in the district, as well as benefits teachers with a free education and higher salary.

"It's a grow-your-own program," Moe said. "The people who are participating in this program are people who have roots in these communities. Their children go to school here. They are going to stay in the community and give back."

All but a handful of the participants were paraprofessionals, meaning they were school secretaries, bilingual liaisons or interpreters.

A dozen of the graduates are currently pursuing Master's degrees on their own, including Flor de Maria Gonzalez of Mundelein. In Guatemala she had been a teacher, but when she immigrated to the United States her degree did not count in this country so she started over from scratch earning an Associate's degree. She was a teacher's assistant for eight years in Mundelein and Round Lake schools before she completed the Transition to Teaching program two years ago.

"It's very convenient for people in Lake County," Gonzalez said.

Now she is a third-grade bilingual teacher at Round Lake Beach Elementary School. She completed a master's degree at St. Xavier University in arts and leadership and is now pursuing a second master's degree in bilingual education.

Alicia Lozano of Waukegan also finished the program two years ago and is now a first-grade bilingual teacher at North Elementary School in Waukegan. Previously she worked eight years as a teacher's assistant and bilingual liaison. Having a program helped her through the process, which she said would have taken longer to do on her own.

"It helps to have a program," she said.