

Program targets teacher shortage

By Israel Saenz
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CORPUS CHRISTI — When his two children and wife go to bed, Curtis Reed opens a textbook or turns on a computer.

The 39-year-old Nueces County Juvenile Probation Officer said he puts in the work so he can teach rather than punish. He decided to become a teacher in November.

"I just noticed that in everything I've done, it seems like I've taught children," Reed said. "But now I'd like to help them to make a difference by helping them to learn."

In January, Reed entered the Del Mar College Alternative Certification for Teachers Program, which allows bachelor's degree-holders in any subject to teach fourth-through eighth-grade students after a year of instruction.

Program director Karen Bridwell said the program has grown in popularity from its first class of 16 students to what will be 43 next month.

The program, which began in January 2006, assists local and area schools in filling teacher shortages, said Ann Lopez, dean of the Division of Arts and Sciences.

The Office of Postsecondary Education reports bilingual education, English as a second language, foreign language, mathematics, science, special education and technology applications are teacher shortage areas throughout the state.

"With school districts in search of good teachers, we have a source," Lopez said. "They have the demand, and we have the supply."

A search of posted job openings at local school districts -- just weeks away from the start of the public school year -- shows vacancies for at least five math teachers and two English teachers, as well as social studies and science positions. The Del Mar College program, which offers certification for English, math, science, social studies and generalist teachers, is one of 67 alternative teacher certification programs in the state. Twenty-one are operated by community colleges.

Reed, who holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and sociology and a master's degree in counseling, said going back to school after 13 years was a major life adjustment.

Students in Del Mar's two-year program must complete at least 310 contact hours of course instruction before beginning a nine-month supported internship.

"The reading is intense; there is a lot of late-night studying and lots of coffee," he said. "The entire family has had to make adjustments. My wife has to handle the children and more household duties."

Reed's experience in handing out assignments has been limited to instructing young lawbreakers to write essays to reflect on their crimes or their lives. The program's workload, he said, will enable him to empathize with the workload he'll have to give to students.

The instruction portion of the program is based on teaching an understanding of students' physical, social, moral, emotional and cognitive development, instructor Kathyron Humes said.

Humes' students try to identify a young person's needs and how best to meet them.

"We ask what will they do to actually help the students," Humes said. "We move beyond textbooks and into the application stage."

Students such as Reed may be a fairly typical example of someone who chooses this route to teaching. According to the National Research Center, a private research organization based in Washington, D.C., 70 percent of people who enroll in alternative teacher certification programs are older than 30, with nearly half working in non-education occupations prior to entering the programs.

The use of alternative teacher programs, however, has raised questions on the ease with which one can become a teacher. Brooke Terry, an education research analyst with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the programs are not easy routes to the profession.

The state requires teachers hold bachelor's degrees, complete certification programs and pass certification exams.

"Making that career switch is not easy," Terry said. "Alternative certification programs can be costly."

The Del Mar College program costs \$4,900 to enter. Reed said he is paying his financial and mental dues to enter a profession he thinks he was made for.

"Teaching is one of the most prestigious fields you can get into," he said. "It's what's in me -- to inspire others to learn."

To apply

The deadline to apply for the September 2007 Del Mar College Alternative Certification for Teachers Program is Aug. 17.

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