

Career Series Articles

Teach First Coast answering call for new educators

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“Northeast Florida is experiencing a severe shortage of teachers,” said Carole Byrd, associate dean at Florida Community College at Jacksonville’s Downtown Campus. “Statewide, in 2004, we needed 30,000 teachers. We could only produce about 15,000.”

Byrd will also tell you the shortage is nationwide and that it’s ongoing. Class-size restrictions, retirements, advancement into other roles and natural attrition have contributed to the shortage.

FCCJ initiated Teach First Coast, an alternative certification-training program for new teachers, in June 2003. The goal then was to prepare 50 non-education majors to obtain temporary teaching certificates in six weeks of intense training. More than 1,400 people attended an information session for those 50 openings.

The program has grown considerably. Teach First Coast has the capacity to prepare 300 new teachers a year. Additional grants have helped strengthen the comprehensive program which is now designed to prepare graduates to sit for the Florida Professional Education Test and apply for permanent teacher certification. In addition to the intensive summer term, regular semesters and online instruction make it possible to prepare in as little as three to nine months.

Recent Teach First Coast graduate Tara George was born into a family of educators. Her grandmother and mother worked in day care. Her father was a high-school teacher. Her sister is a school counselor. While in college as an economics major, George tutored an autistic child her entire senior year - a charge she almost didn’t take for fear the challenge would be too great. She was astounded when the student ended up in a summer physical science program sponsored by Florida State University. It then seemed natural that she would choose teaching as a career.

That’s what she’s doing after working 10 years with the Florida State Department of Health. She’s glad for that experience. From that she learned about “dealing with the real world; and we’re trying to get these students into the real world.”

Byrd and her colleague, Program Coordinator Kathleen Foley, are recruiting potential Teach First Coast students like George. Participants must have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university. The most critical needs are for teachers in science, mathematics, reading, exceptional student education, and English for speakers of other languages.

“We are looking for highly qualified people from science and technology,” said Byrd. “Accountants can bring their superb math skills. Men and women retired from the military often are natural teachers. There are people who are underemployed who could make valuable contributions. Don’t forget moms and dads who have raised their families or had a career and want to continue contributing to society.”

“I’m in awe of the people who arrive at our door,” said Foley. “So many of them wanted to work with kids but didn’t feel they could raise a family on teacher’s pay. They’ve had their careers and now want to give back.”

Challenges of teaching are well publicized. Unmotivated students, unruly behavior, or students’ personal problems that follow them to school can be distractions from the mission of teaching. Many who enter the field from the corporate world will face a lower rate of pay. Foley said there’s a strong support system for Teach First Coast students and graduates. Principals, teachers and administrators from Duval County Public Schools have helped prepare the students with mentoring, counseling and techniques to succeed in interviews. Teach First Coast continues mentoring and aiding the new teachers throughout their first year.

“We need teachers, good teachers who want to be there for students,” said George. She is looking forward to being one of them.

For more information about Alternative Teacher Certification at FCCJ, visit www.fccj.edu/teachfirstcoast or call 904.633.8151.

*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College’s District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.