Willmar Schools offers teacher apprenticeship program in partnership with SMSU



Levi Jones / West Central Tribune
Natalia Torres, left, shakes Stephanie DeVos' hand at the teacher apprenticeship signing event at Willmar Senior High School on April 2. Torres is one of 15 participants in the program's inaugural cohort. It is a partnership between Willmar Public Schools and Southwest Minnesota State University.



Levi Jones / West Central Tribune
Willmar Public Schools Human Resources Director Elizabeth Windingstad speaks to the crowd April 2 at the teacher apprenticeship program's signing ceremony at Willmar Senior High School. Event attendees included program participants, as well as their friends and family. Windingstad helped organize the program in conjunction with Southwest Minnesota State University to provide a new pathway for participants to become qualified teachers.

BY LEVI JONES - WEST CENTRAL TRIBUNE

WILLMAR — Natalia Torres works as a special education paraprofessional at Willmar Public Schools. She spends her time in school working with students with special needs.

Driven by seeing the impact that she, other paraprofessionals and special education teachers have on students, Torres works to make sure students feel wanted and loved.

"I have a brother who has (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). He gets misunderstood as 'oh, he's misbehaving.' It took a toll on him and I noticed that," Torres said.

Through a new teacher apprenticeship program hosted by Willmar Public Schools, in partnership with Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Torres has a clear path to taking the next step in her career and becoming a teacher.

After three years of work in special education so far, Torres knows that she wants to do more. She wants to become a special education teacher. In that role, she will be able to make impactful decisions to be able to help students even more.

“Right now I don’t really have a lot of power. I’m not able to make decisions that would be super impactful for a child’s life, I am just helping with that. I think being a teacher would help me do more things when it comes to helping students learn,” Torres said in an interview April 2 at the apprenticeship signing event.

The Willmar School District’s new apprenticeship program is precisely for people like Torres. It is designed to open another pathway to becoming a qualified teacher for anyone looking to enter the field.

Participants in the program are able to remain in Willmar and continue working full-time in their current job while they pursue training and education to become a teacher. Rather than moving to a new city to attend classes, Torres and her peers will work hand-in-hand with teachers in local classrooms.

“Our program starts from basically high school graduation and offers a track where you don’t have to come into an apprenticeship with an (associate of arts) degree already. You get to come in and go through a three-year process of teacher apprenticeship when you are working mostly on the job, side-by-side with teachers, learning from them,” said Elizabeth Windingstad, Willmar Public Schools director of human resources.

Participants in the program will finish with a four-year degree from SMSU with licenses in elementary education and academic behavioral strategist, which is a special education license.

The program is expected to cost around $1.3 million in the first year. This cost factors in the work of a full-time coordinator and a full-time navigator. The navigator will work to follow up day to day with apprentices. The program is almost entirely by grants with remaining costs paid through tuition.

Windingstad sees a future when the program’s tuition is free.

“Ideally, we are getting to the point where we will be able to fund the entire program so the tuition will hopefully be at zero cost to all apprentices,” Windingstad said.

Apprentices will be expected to spend each school day in the classroom with teachers as well as continue their education through the summer in order to ensure that they are prepared by graduation. Participants will be able to maintain their regular jobs — in or outside of the district — while in the program as long as as long as they are able to meet the time requirements of the program.

“It is important to note that the rigor of a typical four-year college licensure will still be there. That’s the important collaboration that we have with SMSU,” said Melissa Wilson, director of students services at Willmar Public Schools. “We still have to meet all of the licensure requirements for the state of Minnesota. So the expectations are still going to be there as a traditional student would be.”

The program will include more traditional classes in conjunction with on-site work. Participants in the program will also work throughout the summer through programs offered by Willmar Public Schools.

“If they don’t have their AA degree and they need to take general school area classes, those will be a more traditional class through an online format. Then they’ll receive some on-the-job training, which could be for some of the classes and then some is related technical instruction. So it’ll combine courses with things that are being completed in the public schools,” said Stephanie DeVos, director of advising, recruitment and retention for the school of education at Southwest Minnesota State University.

Willmar Public Schools welcomed the first 15 students in a signing ceremony on April 2. Of the 15 in the first cohort, 14 were able to attend the ceremony, which marked the start of the first year.

The introduction of the program comes in response to fewer people pursuing education as a career path, leaving schools unable to find qualified teachers in both general education and special education.

“It’s in response to our teacher shortage. Not only do we have a teacher shortage in general education but in special education. There’s high demand and we need people who are licensed to work with our most vulnerable population. We have lots of kids with lots of needs and we want to make sure that we’re meeting those needs,” Wilson said.

For Torres and her peers, the apprenticeship program is a chance to continue the work that they are doing while becoming qualified teachers, something which may not have been possible through traditional schooling.

“I don’t have to leave work; I can just be here and study with my coworkers. I don’t have to travel or spend a lot on tuition,” Torres said. “I am going to continue working here while doing the apprenticeship at the same time.”