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DISTRICT PARTNERS WITH PILLAR COLLEGE TO CULTIVATE TEACHERS

Accelerated, cost-reduced program enables paraprofessionals to obtain teaching credentials

“We are growing our own teachers in Paterson,” says Paterson education advocate

PATERSON – How do you get more teachers in the classrooms? At Paterson Public Schools, one answer could be, “We grow our own.”

The district has partnered with Pillar College to create a way for paraprofessionals who are already working in the district's schools to become teachers.

“We have a lot of paraprofessionals who have 60 credits or associate’s degrees. This program helps those paraprofessionals complete their bachelor’s degrees and become certified teachers,” said Superintendent of Schools Eileen F. Shafer. “This is a tremendous advantage for the district because these are people who are already in our classrooms. They know our students and their families. At the same time, our staff members can achieve their teacher’s certification without taking on a tremendous amount of student debt.”

At a presentation before the Board of Education on Wednesday, March 15th, Pillar College Associate Vice President Dominic DiGiacchino said that the new partnership is based on the N.J. State Department of Education’s 5-year pilot program on Certificate of Eligibility (CE) and Certificate of Eligibility with Advance Standing (CEAS). The state’s pilot program allows candidates with bachelor’s degrees to waive one of the following state requirements for teacher certification:

- A minimum number of subject-matter course content credits
- A minimum grade point average
- A minimum score on a state-approved assessment of basic skills or core competencies
- A passing score on state-approved Praxis subject matter assessments.

Paterson Public Schools is one of more than 200 school districts approved by the state for the pilot program. DiGiacchino said that Pillar College offers a 2-year accelerated bachelor’s degree competition program.

Since 2018, four cohorts of district employees had enrolled in the program. However, the urgency of the national teacher shortage led Pillar College to offer an accelerated bachelor's degree program for paraprofessionals, instructional aides, substitute teachers, and coaches to earn their bachelor’s degree in even less time – three semesters instead of four – and at a reduced cost. Pillar College’s annual tuition is \$23,000, the least expensive private four-year college in New Jersey, according to DiGiacchino.

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To offset tuition costs, DiGiacchino said that in addition to the federal Pell Grant and the state’s TAG Grant, Pillar College offers per semester grants of up to \$3,500 to eligible students plus additional \$500 per semester grants and a one-time \$2,500 “Superintendent’s Grant” from the college available to eligible students upon enrollment.

“Where the real savings come in when we condensed it from four semesters to three semesters, which is a 25 percent savings overall in tuition,” said DiGiacchino. “Students will save overall on their tuition \$11,500.”

28 district employees are currently in the program.

During the public comment portion of Wednesday’s meeting, Paterson Education Fund Executive Director Rosie Grant gave the partnership her approval.

“We are growing our own teachers in Paterson,” Grant said.

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