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Piscataway teachers learn ESL instruction

Educators work with one of most diverse communities in Jersey

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Piscataway is one of the most diverse towns in the state, with more than 60 languages spoken, including Gujarati, Hindi, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

For preschool and elementary teachers, this makes the already difficult task of connecting with children just developing communications skills particularly challenging. Many students take separate English as a Second Language classes, but the township board of education decided that wasn't enough, according to Jennifer Simon, spokeswoman for the Piscataway district.

Through a partnership with The College of New Jersey, the school system enrolled 26 of its non-ESL primary teachers in graduate courses for the certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL). School officials hope that having more teachers trained in advanced ESL techniques will give students learning English the needed attention outside ESL classes at a crucial age in development.

When the 2006-07 school year started, the ESL population jumped 15 percent from the previous year, said Carolyn Keck, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. About 40 percent of the children currently enrolled in the town's preschool system speak a language other than English at home, Simon said.

Chris Puder, kindergarten teacher at Knollwood Elementary School, said there have been times when he explained something to a child and the student just stared back silently. Puder said the graduate courses help him understand the internal struggle causing the child not to respond.

"In a lot of cases, we're the only English they get during the day," said Puder. "Before, I was a little apprehensive when a child is silent. You don't know if they are scared of you. We're learning to appreciate the silent period."

The courses emphasize that many rules and concepts that most English speakers pick up in conversation cannot be assumed for ESL students. Teachers are taught techniques to act out ideas through dramatic gestures and visual cues, and they learn methods to address cultural differences and accommodate different rates of growth. The courses, which emphasize literacy instruction, benefit even non-ESL childhood learners, Keck said.

"You just provide a more language-rich environment for them," said Stacey Thomas, a Children's Corner preschool teacher taking the course. "These classes have really made a difference for me with my own students."

Classes began in September 2007 and the teachers will complete 15 credits worth of courses by May 2009. The courses are taught once a week at the Randolphville School in town.

Currently, The College of New Jersey has only worked with Piscataway on this initiative, said Keck. A similar program has been enacted with teachers in Union City.

In 2006, the state started offering summer classes at three state universities to train teachers to work effectively with English language learners, but teachers do not earn TESOL certificates.

The program costs about \$144,000 for 26 teachers. The district funded the program through the federal No Child Left Behind program and the state Early Launch for Learning Initiative program, said Keck.

Keck said the district plans to continue the partnership with TCNJ with another round of classes next year.

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