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Piscataway teachers earn certifications to teach English as a Second Language

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At the end of the school day each Wednesday, Randolphville Elementary's 500 students head out the door while about two dozen teachers from across the district make their way to the school's media center.

The 26 prekindergarten, kindergarten and first-grade teachers are taking classes to earn their certifications in teaching English as a Second Language.

The program is a district initiative being offered through the College of New Jersey at no cost to the teachers.

"Between 2005-2006 and 2006-2007, our ESL (English as a Second Language) population went up 15 percent," said Carolyn Keck, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "So we were saying, 'How are we going to be serving these students, and shouldn't we be building an infrastructure to serve them?'"

At the time, ESL teachers either pulled non-English speakers out of the classroom for special instruction, or "pushed in" to the classroom to offer assistance to the students during regular instruction times.

Now, all of the general education, nontenured prekindergarten through first grade teachers are learning how to teach English as a Second Language themselves. The certification process involves taking classes for two school years and one summer, and then passing a certification test. The courses began during the 2007-2008 school year, and the teachers are set to take the certification test next spring.

GRAMMAR CONCERNS

During this week's class, Professor Yiqiang Wu talked to the teachers about common difficulties for new English-speakers.

Wu's digital projector beamed a series of grammatically incorrect phrases such as, "I woken up early this morning," and "She has went to Germany," onto a projector screen.

Wu explained that English grammar can be difficult to grasp.

"There are so many exceptions that it is difficult," he said.

Keck said that a wide range of languages — 52 at last count — are spoken in the homes of the school

district's students. But, she said, the skills teachers learn in these classes are already proving helpful to native English-speakers, in addition to non-native speakers.

"One of the courses they took exposed them to literature that can be used very well (in the classroom)," she said. "The kinds of resources, the kinds of materials and book titles, are very appropriate for literature in general."

Karen DePalma, a long-time teacher and current support specialist at Knollwood Elementary, said the lessons she and her fellow teachers are learning have proven fruitful.

"Part of the assignments for the class is to create lessons we can use," DePalma said. "We've gathered this potpourri of lessons that we can use."

LESSON COSTS

Chris Puder, a kindergarten teacher at Knollwood, said he has learned that it is normal for ESL students to stay silent during the first week or two of class while they observe and become comfortable at school.

Keck said the after-school course has proven popular with the teachers, and said the district plans to start another set of teachers on the course to certification next school year.

Keck said it costs the district about \$6,000 for each teacher who attends the class. The state Department of Education's Early Launch to Learning Initiative pays for prekindergarten teachers to take the class. Federal No Child Left Behind funds are used to pay for the kindergarten and first-grade teachers. The teachers pay nothing, but get the benefit of the district's pay raise given to teachers with a bachelor's degree plus 15 additional college credits.

Puder said he plans to use the credits toward a master's degree in teaching English as a Second Language.