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OPS 'growing' seven teachers from current employees

By Bobbie Hayse Messenger-Inquirer
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Tiara Collishaw, Estes Elementary School instructional assistant, second from right, works with students Christopher Steward Melendez, left, Yolanda Lopez Ramos and Alexis Mata Mata on Wednesday during class at Estes Elementary School.

Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer | awarren@messenger-inquirer.com

Owensboro Public Schools is moving forward with growing its own teachers from current employees.

The Kentucky Department of Education has made strides in recent years to help school systems with this effort.

In August, it awarded 10 districts across the commonwealth each with one-time \$50,000 grants for Grow Your Own teacher programs. OPS was one of the recipients.

The initiative is encouraged by the KDE and is made in an effort to bolster the number of educators currently working in the commonwealth in a time when fewer and fewer students are graduating with teaching degrees. The “grow your own” method involves classified employees, or support staff individuals who work for public school systems who are not teachers, becoming certified teachers. Many of those employees have bachelor’s degrees, but they aren’t educators.

OPS previously announced that it would be partially funding the cost for certifications for five of its current employees. Now, thanks to two grants, it will be able to help fund all seven applicants of the first Grow Your Own class. Scholarships for two of the employees will be provided by the Hager Foundation and the Marilyn and William Young Foundation. The scholarships will fund half of the program’s total cost, and Western Kentucky University has discounted the rate for all seven participants as part of the partnership for the Grow Your Own program.

OPS has committed from \$10,500 to \$11,550 to cover half of the cost for five employees to earn their teacher certifications, according to OPS Chief Financial Officer John David Sandefur, with budgeted costs totaling \$26,250 to \$28,875 through COVID-19 relief funds, if approved by KDE.

The seven OPS employees who will be the recipients of these scholarship funds are Erin Bales, Newton Parrish Elementary School instructional assistant; Jerome Taylor, LBD teacher at Owensboro Middle School; Meaghan Glenn, Cravens Elementary School instructional assistant; Myles Walker, OMS instructional assistant; Kim Hogg, LBD teacher at Cravens; Tiara Collishaw, Estes Elementary School instructional assistant; and Megan Kurz, LBD teacher at OMS.

David Phillips, OPS director of diversity, equity and inclusion, who is leading the program, said the seven employees will also have current OPS educators paired with them. He said having a mentor like that is helpful for new teachers starting out.

He also said the district plans to continue offering this program each year they are able to. It may not be seven each year, but "we will keep it going," he said.

Taylor has been teaching with the city schools system for about 12 years. He graduated from OPS, so when an opportunity came up for him to become an instructional assistant while working toward his master's in business administration, he took it.

"I had other plans to pursue something else, but I love working with the kids," he said.

So when he learned of an opportunity to become an official teacher, he wanted to take that, too. This school year, he was hired under emergency teacher certification status as a learning and behavioral disabilities teacher at Owensboro Middle School. Educators are able to be emergency certified as teachers when needed and under specific circumstances.

Taylor knew he wanted to become a teacher in the OPS system, so he was able to be hired as one while he worked toward that goal.

"I'm invested in this school system," he said. "Working with kids is my calling. I love working with the kids. I know how to get down to their level and teach them to learn in different ways. Every kid learns differently, and I try to figure that out and help them."

Collishaw has been working with OPS since 2019, when she first came to the area from the Philippines. She currently assists students who are English learners. She said that job attracted her because she thought she and the students would have something in common.

"I liked the idea that these kids are just like me," she said. "I am a migrant, so I was thinking this will be a shared experience for us. I was new in the country, these kids are new in the country. I was learning all these new things about the culture here in the U.S., and I thought this is something I can see myself doing for a while as I am also journeying and integrating in this new community."

Seeking teacher certification seemed like a good next step toward that process, she said.

So far, the Grow Your Own program has been helpful, she said, and she is excited about the next steps.

"When I first learned about the district doing research on what the staff population looked like, I was very appreciative of that, and that they wanted to see what human resource they already had, and they were willing to work with us, the classified staff, and help us along," she said. "They have been very

supportive of the staff. Just the idea that within the district we can seek advancement, and they are willing to provide that kind of support. It's been very encouraging.”

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