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'Permanent pipeline' the goal of new teacher apprenticeship program

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Western Kentucky University is collaborating with Nelson County Schools in a unique apprenticeship program to combat the state's teacher shortage.

Gov. Andy Beshear announced recently that Nelson County Schools had received approval for its program, which establishes a high school to college teaching pipeline.

"It is a win for our state as we expand our homegrown pool of teachers and a win for students who continue earning a college degree while being able to start their teaching career two years earlier," Beshear said.

The apprenticeship program is a first for Kentucky.

"This is the first and only," said Dr. Corinne Murphy, dean of WKU's College of Education and Behavioral Sciences.

"This is the start of a very large and needed opportunity for educators in our region and in our commonwealth."

The program consists of two parts. Nelson County Schools students can earn 2.5 hours per day of place-based learning starting in the ninth grade. Throughout high

school, students can earn up to 59 hours in dual-credit enrollment through Elizabethtown Community and Technical College and WKU, with 24 of those counting towards teacher certification.

“A student can go through and earn that credit, and when they graduate from high school they will be about two years out from a teaching degree,” said Forrest Berkshire, spokesman for Nelson County Schools.

A select number of students will be chosen for the apprenticeship part of the program. These students will be paid and employed by Nelson County Schools while they finish their degree at WKU.

Associate Dean Dr. Dennis George said students will have their WKU coursework delivered asynchronously or through other online teaching methods as they work through their apprenticeship.

“But it’s really a fabulous opportunity for a student as they will get to learn their material and their coursework, then they go to their job where they actually get to apply that and put those principals they’ve learned to use,” George said.

Furthermore, the hours students accrue in their apprenticeship will give them a head-start towards teacher certification.



“It lowers some of those barriers for students who know they want to become educators and it helps (with) finding teachers and getting them into the classroom,” Berkshire said. “The nice thing is they’re going to be working under the guidance of the teachers that they possibly had in high school.”

George said Grayson County Schools should soon have its own program approved.

“We’ve been working with them since last year in Grayson County, we’re just putting the finishing touches on that,” he said.

Murphy said the program is built to be replicable across school districts.

“The teacher shortage is real, we’ve got to pull out all of the stops to address it,” she said. “This is a very promising opportunity for a permanent pipeline of students coming from high school.”

The program will benefit WKU by making the teaching profession more visible to young students in participating districts.

“This gives us a mechanism to formalize the concept of education as a profession and that teaching is a great next career for students in the high school setting,” Murphy said.

George said the program should also help with teacher retention, as apprentices grow up in Nelson County Schools and are already familiar with its people and culture.

“We can’t imagine any other group of people who would be more apt to stay for the long haul than these students,” he said. “There’s no surprises, no getting there and not liking this, that and the other.”

Berkshire said Nelson County Schools will begin hiring apprentices this summer, potentially selecting up to five of them.