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'Grow Your Own' aims to address Montana teacher shortage

CAMERON EVANS cameron.evans@missoulain.com – Missoulain – December 30, 2019

A new “Grow Your Own” strategy has high schools partnering with colleges throughout Montana to train uncertified prospective teachers recruited by school districts to fill open positions.

“‘Grow Your Own’ reflects the acknowledgment that local communities may provide an answer to teacher shortages in rural and tribal communities by mining existing individuals who are unable to leave their community to attend college due to the cost of attendance and/or family obligations,” said Vikki Howard, a professor of special education at the University of Montana – Western, at last month’s Montana Board of Regents meeting.

In some cases, the program connects schools in one community with a college in another corner of Montana.

At UM Western in Dillon, where Howard helps lead the partnership program for educator prep, some 32 educators have become certified to date. The “2+2” program takes locals who have two years of college education and helps them get their teaching license in another two years while they continue teaching or working in schools.

In 2017 for the first time, UM Western partnered with Blackfeet Community College, Browning Public Schools and Heart Butte Public Schools, all on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, to co-develop and co-deliver teacher preparation for members of the communities.

“Most of our candidates were already working in the schools as aides, Class 7 Language and Culture Educators, or as provisional licensed teachers,” Howard said; Class 7 educators have verification by a tribal government representative that they’ve met standards to teach a particular language and culture.

In two years, 32 Native American elementary educators earned their degrees and became certified through the program — and all of them were hired by Browning Public Schools, according to Howard.

The program is now working on a second cohort with more than 40 candidates having applied to seek credentialing in elementary education, special education and secondary education. For this group, Western and Little Big Horn College on the Crow Reservation are partnering with Hardin schools to help ease the district's difficulty in filling teaching positions.

“Those people are really important to us because they are probably going to stay with the school for a very long time,” said Lance Olson, Gear Up liaison and guidance counselor at Hardin High School. Gear Up is a federally supported program that serves students in seventh through 12th grades and aims to improve high school graduation and college enrollment rates. “There's a good chance they're going to retire here so it gives us stability in staff.”

Howard said they just started planning with the new cohort in September, but they've already had more than 30 applicants interested in becoming certified teachers, most of whom are Indigenous. In interviews with the candidates, Howard asks them what they will need to do to

put themselves in a position to be successful in the program. At last month's Montana Board of Regents meeting, she shared the response from a candidate named Lauren:

"I have been training horses for a living. My auntie told me about this program and said that I should apply. I heard that you're only taking the top candidates, but I hoped that I would be selected so I sold some of my horses and put the money aside to attend. We went hunting and brought back extra meat and made it into dry meat so that we would have enough food. (We) put aside enough money so that we would have Internet service and bought enough gas cards to drive back and forth to class for at least three months."

Classes will start in January, and if all goes as planned, 15 of the applicants will be certified to teach by the spring of 2021.

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MSU and partners receive \$2.3 million for five-year project to educate school counselors to fill jobs in rural Montana

By Anne Cantrell MSU News Service – Bozeman Chronicle – December 28, 2019