NCELA
National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Educational Programs

FROM PARAPROFESSIONAL TO NEW TEACHER: A SUCCESSFUL QUEST

Providing prospective teachers with a seamless curriculum that incorporates "real-world" activities into coursework in order to help link theory to practice is just one of a number of notable features of Project PRISE in Flagstaff, Arizona. Funded by the National Professional Development (NPD) grant program administered by the Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) and based at Northern Arizona University (NAU), Project PRISE is designed to prepare bilingual paraprofessionals to become teachers of English learners with disabilities in rural school districts around Yuma.

Paraprofessionals proceed through a rural field-based program that incorporates rigorous coursework and field practice leading to a bachelor's degree in elementary education (K-8) with certification in special education (K-12) and ESL (K-12). Taking the cue from research that shows teacher trainees do better when they feel supported, PRISE places participants in cohorts to encourage mutual and collegial support while in the project. An electronic community of practice also provides opportunities for participants to discuss with administrators, mentors, faculty, and teachers practical solutions to instructional challenges.

One bilingual special education teacher who is reaping the benefits of going through this program is Julio Bush. A father of two special needs children, Julio's story is one of hard work and perseverance. His mother, an immigrant from Mexico, and his father, a Korean War veteran, worked as migrant farm workers, which meant that Julio and his siblings moved frequently while growing up. Despite his nomadic upbringing, Julio was able to complete his high school education, and later became a special education paraprofessional at Yuma Elementary District 1 where he worked for 10 years. Taking one course at a time, which was all he could afford, Julio was able to complete his Associate's Degree at Arizona Western Community College in six years, while working to support his family.

While participating in Project PRISE, Julio continued working full-time as a paraprofessional during the week and took weekend and evening courses. He also had to work a part-time job to make ends meet. Julio was a proud nominee of the First-Year Special Education Teacher of the Year Award from the Somerton School District.

Project PRISE is helping to meet a high demand for qualified teachers of English learners with disabilities. Currently 71% of students in Yuma districts are Hispanic, 40% are limited English proficient and 12% are limited English proficient (LEP) students with disabilities. Yet only 25% of professional staff are certified to meet the needs of English learners, and only 1.6% of school professionals are certified in ESL and special education. Yuma area districts anticipate the need to replace 50% of their teachers over the next 5 years.

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