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Education

Messiah University teams up with local school districts to tackle teacher shortage

Joseph Cress

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Teaching students at Messiah University attend a Senior Portfolio Fair on Thursday.

Jason Malmont, The Sentinel

Joseph Cress

Since she was very young, Maddie Bitz wanted to be a teacher.

Being a daughter of career educators helped along with stints as a babysitter.

“I just love being able to connect with kids,” she said. “I love being able to lead them in new ideas along with creativity.”

The Mechanicsburg Area Senior High School junior plans to put her ambitions to the test through Educators for Tomorrow, a new program that Messiah University plans to launch this fall.



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Joseph Cress

“I see myself leaning towards elementary education,” she said. “I want to teach second or third grade. I am super intrigued by the ability to do an internship while being able to do Messiah classes that would benefit me.”

Her father, Andrew Bitz, is set to become superintendent of the Mechanicsburg Area School District at the end of Mark Leidy’s contract in June. He said the district is committed to supporting this program with students who are registering for it now.

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“We strongly believe in the mission of providing opportunities that inspire students in high school to consider teaching as their career path,” he said. “The goal is to ultimately increase the number of individuals in the pipeline working towards certification.”

Dire situation

Educators for Tomorrow is one of two new initiatives being implemented by the university to address a regional teacher shortage brought on by the steady decline in college students graduating with teaching certifications and by a teacher attrition rate at an all-time high in Pennsylvania.

Historically, local administrators have noticed a gradual decrease over the years in the applicant pool for secondary level teaching positions that demand a specialized certification in fields such as math, chemistry, physics, technical education, business education and special education.



School district administrators grapple with filling job vacancies

Joseph Cress

“The pandemic accelerated that decline significantly,” said Mark Blanchard, superintendent of Cumberland Valley School District. “We are also seeing a greater number of teachers leave the profession. So, not only do we have fewer applicants, we have more openings.”

The situation has become dire. Subject areas like English, social studies and elementary education that traditionally had a broader pool of applicants are falling off. One way to address the problem is for districts to apply for an emergency permit for applicants interested in teaching as a second career. These people have college degrees and experience in a field but lack all the requirements for a long-term Level I certificate.

While Educators for Tomorrow is designed to encourage high school juniors and seniors to consider a teacher certification pathway in college, the Teacher Certification Initiative, due to launch this summer, would help people already employed in local districts to advance from a temporary emergency or intern certification to a permanent credential.

Next generation

Under Educators for Tomorrow, local high school students will participate in a one-year program where they could earn high school and college credit by taking two college-level education courses and two general courses education majors are required to take.

The program also offers the opportunity to participate in education and teaching related events hosted by the university, including guest speakers and education focused honors projects.

Students also can participate in experience-based learning in their home districts. In most cases, this will take the form of serving as a teacher's assistant.



Intermediate unit launches program to help paraprofessionals earn teaching certificates to alleviate teacher shortage

Joseph Cress

“It’s getting them in a classroom, having conversations with a teacher, walking through the day-to-day life of a teacher,” said Christina Simmons, director of Messiah University’s graduate program in education.

Educators for Tomorrow came out of discussions Blanchard had with Rob Pepper starting in November 2022. Pepper is the executive director and assistant to the president for innovation and university partnerships.

“I had seen a presentation on a partnership that Messiah had with the Cumberland Perry Area Career and Technical Center for students who are interested in health care as a potential field,” Blanchard said. He asked Pepper if it would be possible for the university to work with local districts to develop a program to cultivate the next generation of teachers in Pennsylvania.

“You have to get students while they are in high school to consider teaching as a viable option,” Blanchard said. “Anything you can do to enable students to get a head start is important. Acquiring credits is something that is important for students as the cost of college continues to go up.”

Growing from within

For many years, Messiah’s graduate program in education has offered teacher certification programs designed to help those who have already earned a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education to earn a Level I certification in Pennsylvania.

Starting this summer, Messiah will partner directly with local school districts to streamline the Level I certification track for those already teaching in local schools.

Districts will have the opportunity to coordinate cohorts of emergency-certified teachers from their schools to complete the initial certification track in 18 to 24 months via online coursework from Messiah. This allows those teachers to continue working in the classroom while they pursue the certification they need to teach long term.

“This initiative is an ideal, accessible solution for local districts who want to equip their temporary emergency-certified teachers to pursue a longer-term career in teaching,” Simmons said. “Messiah University has an established relationship with our local districts.”

Those who are considering education as a second career are often met with insurmountable barriers to certification, Blanchard said. “Messiah has created a high-quality affordable pathway for those individuals to pursue teaching as a real

possibility. These efforts will make a difference in bringing highly qualified candidates into our classrooms.”

“Programs such as this are beneficial when we have interested internal candidates that may currently hold a paraprofessional position and express an interest in teaching,” said Troy Price, the assistant superintendent of East Pennsboro Area School District. “We’re interested in growing our own teachers if we have good people who love children and have the potential aptitude to teach them.”

East Pennsboro has surveyed its paraprofessional staff to determine the level of interest in the Messiah teacher initiative program, Price said. “I meet with interested candidates to help determine a course of action.”



Public school districts across the country are facing budget deficits as Covid-relief funds dry up, leading to staff cuts.

By Joseph Cress

News Reporter

