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Advocacy group says California soon will need more teachers

By Melanie C. Johnson
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When Tyiesha Sempa made her foray into teaching six years ago, she just jumped right in.

The 30-year-old, who teaches special education at Vicentia Elementary School in Corona, didn't take the traditional route of first earning her credential then taking on a classroom.

She put in classroom hours by day and took college courses by night, like many of the thousands of teachers who come out of alternative certification or intern programs each year.

Her program, Project IMPACT, is one of a number of alternative groups that are being aided by California Teacher Corps, a nonprofit advocacy group for alternative certification programs formed last month.

Teacher Corps was created with the goal of placing 100,000 teachers in schools statewide by 2020. The group's officials say even though the state's current economic woes have led to teacher layoffs and school budget cuts, the state will be facing a teacher shortage as baby boomers retire.

Sempa said Project IMPACT prepared her to teach students with special needs. She has a combination class of second-, fourth- and fifth-graders.

Tyiesha Sempa, who teaches special education at Vicentia Elementary School in Corona, put in classroom hours by day and took college courses by night, like many of the thousands of teachers who come out of alternative certification or intern programs each year.

The program made it possible for her to earn her credential by providing her the support she needed to be confident in running a classroom, the former teacher's aide said.

"The theory and instruction really do come alive when you're in the classroom," said Sempa, of Mira Loma.

Catherine Kearney, president of California Teacher Corps, said that for several decades a loose affiliation of alternative certification programs has been working to get more teachers in the classroom.

The umbrella group's mission will be to recruit qualified second-career professionals who want to teach in the public schools that have the greatest needs. It also will create new alternative certification programs in parts of California where they don't exist, she said.

The organization also plans to serve as a research resource about the effectiveness of teacher preparation in California.

Participants must have 160 hours of pre-classroom training in lesson preparation, classroom management and working with students with special needs, Kearney said.

Math, science and special education are the critical areas of need.

Last year, 50 percent of the state's math teachers came from alternative certification programs, organization officials said.

"We're looking for mature individuals with a strong desire to serve their communities and dedicated to student achievement," she said.

Despite the current cuts to education budgets and teacher layoffs, Kearney said the need for qualified and committed teachers remains.

Layoffs would be a concern if the group was only concerned about the present, but it is looking at future needs, she said.

Margaret Gaston, executive director of The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning in Santa Cruz, said several factors point to the likelihood of a continued teacher shortage.

Not every teacher who holds a credential is working, Gaston said. And of California's 300,000 teachers, about 100,000 will be eligible for retirement in seven to 10 years, she said.

Despite that impending loss, there has been a decline in the last five years in enrollment in teacher preparation programs and a steady reduction in the number of credentials issued, she said.

At the same time, the state is seeing more students entering kindergarten in public schools, she said. An adequate pool of teachers is needed, especially in critical fields like math and the sciences, Gaston said.

"We want these interns, these alternative path participants to not just stick with it, but to thrive," she said. "We want to capture their interest and energy and give them some support."

More than 80 percent of teachers coming out of alternative certification programs still are on the job after five years, California Teacher Corps statistics show.

Sempa said she would not be successful in the classroom without the help of her alternative program and the faculty and staff at her school.

"When you have that support, you can say on a rough day that you have a friend or colleague who can help you," she said. "Although we go into the classroom and close the doors, we don't do this job alone."

Alternative programs

A nonprofit umbrella organization for alternative certification programs, called California Teacher Corps, was formed in August with the goal of placing 100,000 highly qualified teachers in schools by 2020. The group provided some statistics on the achievements of alternative programs.

Teachers placed: 8,000 annually, 50,000 in the last six years.

Diversity: In 2008-09, more than half of the teachers placed were minorities.

Reasons for choice: Nearly 90 percent chose alternative programs because they want to work with children; nearly 75 percent because they believe education improves a child's life; nearly 70 percent because they want to share their expertise.