

The Bakersfield Californian

Internships Helping Fill Teacher Gaps

Friday, May 01 2009 11:03 AM

BY JEFF NACHTIGAL, Californian staff writer

jnachtigal@bakersfield.com

Two years ago, Johnny Cisneros was substitute teaching autistic students in Redlands, loading freight as a dock worker part-time to make ends meet.

The Highland High grad who'd worked in the oilfield supply industry for a decade wanted to teach full-time. But he couldn't stop working to earn a credential because he had a wife and two children to support.

So Cisneros jumped at a chance to start teaching full-time via the Kern County Superintendent of Schools alternative certification intern program.

"I want to start my career right now," said the 37-year-old. "I have two children and a wife. Not in a couple years after I get my credential."

Since March he's completed most of his 160 hours of pre-service training, and will soon begin interviewing for special education positions. He could earn a full salary of about \$40,000 plus benefits while working toward his teaching credential at night.

He expects to finish his credential in two years.

"It's nice to come home, after being away eight years, and give back to my community," Cisneros said.

TESTED AND VETTED

Cisneros is an "alt-cert," named for the alternative route he's taken to earn a teaching certificate.

Teacher interns are tested and vetted in their subject competency and are enrolled in an accredited university teacher program.

They're a small percentage of teachers in Kern County; there are 215, including 30 in the Bakersfield City School District and 30 in the Kern High School District.

But there are efforts to expand the ranks. Districts particularly need math, science and special education teachers.

Teacher interns end up just as qualified as those trained in traditional programs, said Tania Schalburg-Dykes, a beginning teacher program coordinator with Kern County Superintendent of Schools.

"The alt-cert is just as rigorous and effective as a traditional route," said Schalburg-Dykes.

In 2007, 35 percent of the 8,000-plus teacher interns in California taught high school, and 44 percent were special ed teachers, according to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

And 50 percent of math teachers trained in California in 2007-08 earned their credential in an alternate route to certification, the commission says.

SUPPORT A BIG DEAL

For several years, Robert Hefner worked in a special education classroom under a short-term emergency permit districts can use to fill positions in lieu of a highly-qualified, credentialed teacher.

Hefner, as he put it, was "slowly" working toward a teaching credential from Cal State Bakersfield.

The intern program "allowed me to work with other teachers and professionals, and get more specific instruction," said Hefner, now a program specialist for the Kern County Division of Special Education.

The support was a big deal for Hefner, who said being in special ed takes a lot of understanding of the students.

A high percentage of teachers prepared in intern programs stick with education. Of the 215 who began the Kern County intern program five years ago, 197, or 92 percent, are still teaching in California. The state retention rate for the same time period is 93 percent.

"For myself it was important to balance the job, my family and then also having a life," Hefner said about his alt-cert route.

TEACHER SHORTAGE LOOMS

Over the next decade, baby-boomer aged teachers will retire in great numbers while student enrollment in Kern County is projected to increase 20 percent.

Also contributing to the education gap, university teacher training programs have been graduating fewer candidates since 2005, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Kern County school districts recruit candidates in several ways.

Many teachers graduate from California universities, some teachers come from out of state -- and the Kern County Superintendent of Schools, Kern High School District and Bakersfield City School District run teacher intern programs.

Schalburg-Dykes is working to expand the Kern County program.

"My ultimate goal is to have a pool of candidates that districts can pull from, and work to expand that pool of qualified teachers," she said.