

Stockton Record

Teachers hit the books to implement reform strategies

Report shows educators lack preparation skills, support

By Roger Phillips

December 29, 2009

STOCKTON - As many high schools work to reshape themselves into academies focused on educating students for careers in specific fields, an essential issue has surfaced.

Who will be the teachers? And will there be enough who combine training in education with expertise in the various career-oriented classes being developed by school districts?

It is an issue likely to continue, according to a report released earlier this month by a Santa Cruz-based nonprofit organization working to improve teacher training and practices.

It also is an issue with significant implications for Stockton Unified School District - which established its career-focused small learning communities at its four comprehensive high schools this year - as well as other districts in the region.

According to the new report by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, "Many teachers lack the preparation, skills and support needed to help students and fulfill the demands of the state's reforming high schools."

But Catherine Kearney, dean of the Teachers College of San Joaquin, said solutions to this crunch are beginning to appear.

When the Teachers College opened this year at the San Joaquin County Office of Education, the master's-level program became the first of its type operated by a county education office in California.

Its focus is to prepare teachers to work more effectively with students in career-focused programs. Non-teachers working in other fields also are eligible to enter the program to pursue career/technical education teaching certificates.

"The scope of our work is around creating real teachers who are able to connect real life to high school rather than just having a teacher who is an academic expert or an expert in the career/technical side," Kearney said.

But according to the new report, much more teacher development is needed. The survey found that the majority of California high school principals believe only two-thirds of their teachers

have the "skills to promote critical thinking and problem solving, or the interpersonal skills needed to connect with students."

The report added that principals in more affluent schools were more likely than principals at less affluent schools to say their teachers had the skills to implement reform strategies.

"California's poorest communities are where reforms are most urgently needed, but they are also where teachers are likely to be the least prepared or supported to deliver what their students need," said Margaret Gaston, executive director of The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.

The center's report added, "In California high schools serving mostly Latino and African-American students, students are six times more likely to face an underprepared teacher as their peers in schools with few minority students."

Kearney said programs such as the Teachers College are addressing the issue. She also said many professionals who enter teaching as a second career do so "for social justice reasons."

"I think the center is misguided when say they're underprepared," Kearney said. "They bring vast life experience, content expertise and that commitment to service. ... They bring all that to the table, and they stay."

Kearney, president of the California Teacher Corps, an organization that represents the state's more than 70 alternative certification programs, said nearly all interns who come through the county office's Project Impact teacher certification program remain on the job after five years. Project Impact targets people interested in entering teaching as a second career.

"They're not just teachers," she said. "They're teachers in the hard-to-staff schools. They're saying, 'Put me where we're needed.' They're making a real difference in turning schools around and inspiring children to move forward in their lives."