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ESL Teacher Certification Program Gets Approval to Expand Statewide

After launching program in Providence and Pawtucket, RWU’s University College hopes to help more teachers support English language learners

Ryan Barker (left) and Karen Ramirez (right) were part of the inaugural class of an innovative partnership between Roger Williams University School of Continuing Studies and Providence Public Schools that’s designed to develop more certified English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teachers in Rhode Island. Now this initiative expands statewide.

January 8, 2019 | By Edward Fitzpatrick

PROVIDENCE, R.I. – University College at Roger Williams University will be able to expand its English-as-a-Second Language Teacher Certification Program throughout the state now that the Rhode Island Department of Education has granted approval.

University College launched the innovative program last year in partnership with the Providence and Pawtucket public school districts, addressing a crucial need for more professional learning opportunities for teachers who have a growing number of English language learners in their classrooms. An initial group of 30 teachers, mostly in Providence, is on target to complete the yearlong, competency-based program in June.

On Jan. 2, the Department of Education gave UC approval to expand the individualized, job-embedded program statewide, and UC hopes to partner with at least four other school districts this year, said Kristina Soprano, director of the ESL Teacher Certification Program. Multiple school districts have reached out to UC about the program, although no additional partnerships have been formalized at this early stage, she said.

“Classrooms are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse across the state,” Soprano said. “This calls for innovative approaches to supporting teachers to develop the skills needed to facilitate equitable experiences for all learners. We are excited for the opportunity to partner with more districts in Rhode Island in order to provide new opportunities for educators to learn these skills through a competency-based, job-embedded framework.”

“Rhode Island has experienced a shortage of ESL teachers since 1992,” said Associate Professor of Education Kelly Donnell, co-author of the program design and the program’s faculty liaison. “As a state, we need more opportunities to help teachers support English learners with high-quality, culturally responsive instruction. We are looking forward
to working with teachers from across the state in our academically demanding, practice-based program."

The certification program allows practicing teachers to gain ESL competencies while on the job, greatly reducing the cost and time commitment for existing teachers to become ESL certified. Many traditional programs take two years to complete.

The inaugural group started the learning process by attending an intensive summer program set up as a mix of online learning, practicum experience, and seminar-style classroom work. The majority of the learning experiences occur during the school year, when teachers work with instructional coaches to make individualized plans to progress through the rigorous program requirements while teaching full-time. Throughout the school year, teachers are engaging in coursework and practical experiences while learning and applying new instructional techniques, collaborating with their colleagues, reflecting on their practice, and receiving feedback from their coaches. Upon successful completion of the program, candidates are eligible to apply for ESL teacher certification through the Department of Education.

For more information, go to: https://scs.rwu.edu/esl or contact Kristina Soprano at ksoprano@rwu.edu.

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