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Program aims to keep new teachers in classrooms

By Judy Chia Hui Hsu
Seattle Times staff reporter

For decades, the small, rural Rochester School District had a hard time keeping new teachers through their first five years.

But by participating in the New Teacher Project beginning last fall, the Thurston County district hopes to retain 85 percent of this year's 20 incoming instructors, said Assistant Superintendent Kim Fry. Rochester is one of seven school districts, along with two educational service districts, to join in the New Teacher Project. Spearheaded by the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP) with a four-year, \$3 million grant from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the program aims to draw attention to mentoring and other ways that Washington's public schools can keep more of their beginning teachers.

CSTP, a three-year-old Kitsap County-based nonprofit that focuses on teacher training and development, also has commissioned research through the University of Washington. According to a 2006 study, nearly 27 percent of new Washington teachers quit their jobs within five years, said Marge Plecki, an associate professor at the UW's College of Education.

"We're looking at improving the first five years of their professional lives because we know that most people who decide to stay for five years then decide to stay on," said Jeanne Harmon, executive director of CSTP.

New teachers leave the profession for a host of reasons, Plecki said: low pay, dissatisfaction with school leadership or environment, or lack of ongoing professional training.

After helping to fund the Digital Learning Commons, a nonprofit that gave secondary schools access to



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Marcy Yoshida is a peer mentor with the Highline School District.



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First-year Highline District teacher Karen Herschleb, left, works with students Tehuun Enkhbold, Fanta Kamara and Farhan Mohamed while being observed by mentor Marcy Yoshida, far right.

online classes several years ago, Paul Allen and his sister Jody Allen Patton wanted to see where they could have the most impact in changing public education, said Peter Berliner, senior program officer of the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. They learned that the interaction between teacher and student is a key element of student success, so the foundation gave CSTP \$750,000 last year to launch the New Teacher Project.

The foundation hopes to help schools keep their new teachers and give them better training, Berliner said. Funding for each district varies depending on its size.

Rochester School District, which serves 2,100 students, is building a mentoring program, Fry said. In past years, an informal effort, which haphazardly paired experienced and novice teachers, was inconsistent: Some new teachers had productive relationships with their unofficial mentors, while others were left to navigate their classrooms and the school system on their own.

Sitting in a classroom learning how to teach is different from leading a classroom full of students, Fry said, so beginning teachers need the help.

Last fall the district used a different approach by training experienced teachers to become mentors. There are now six mentors, one for each of the five schools in the district and another for special education.

The district holds quarterly training sessions for new teachers and conducts quarterly classroom observation sessions and conferences.

CSTP funding for the district worked out to about \$35,000 a year, Fry said. It pays for a weeklong summer training session and a yearlong stipend for the mentors.

The money also has allowed the district to extend its summer orientation session for new teachers, create a reference handbook and provide four to six skills-building classes a year.

Fry said she's pleased with the connections teachers have built with one another, adding that a few who had struggled earlier have already been able to seek help.

Meanwhile, the Highline School District, a 17,500-student suburban district south of Seattle, is using the New Teacher Project to reshape a well-established mentoring program.

The district serves a racially diverse population with many English-language learners and poor families, said Marcy Yoshida, a mentor at Highline. "This is a hard place to teach, and you have to be really good."

Yoshida is one of the district's three peer mentors, experienced teachers whose only job is to visit schools to meet with new teachers, who number 87 this year. Highline is hiring another full-time mentor with its \$75,000-a-year CSTP funding.

Highline retains only 48 percent of its new teachers through five years, according to a 2006 study conducted by Redmond's Center for Educational Effectiveness.

While \$75,000 may not seem like a lot for a district of Highline's size, it helped establish a mindset that new teachers need help to thrive, Yoshida said.

"When you invest early, you have longer-term payoffs," said Plecki, the UW professor.

Judy Chia Hui Hsu: 206-464-3315 or jhsu@seattletimes.com

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