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Teachers Teaching Teachers: MSU integrates student teachers into elementary schools



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Walking through the halls of Nixa Public Schools' John Thomas School of Discovery, its clear learning is not contained to classrooms. There is the buzzing of motors in the robot lab and the sound of laughter as students dig in the courtyard garden. It's hands-on learning, but not just for the elementary students at Nixa's magnet school.

Mingled with the elementary students, Missouri State University students pursuing teaching degrees also are gaining hands-on learning experience during a yearlong internship.

"You get to experience all the pieces of teaching and learning that you might not get in a traditional experience," said JTSD Assistant Principal Garrett Lowder. "It's the immersion nature of it."

MSU began offering this program in the 2015-16 school year. Sara Tipton, MSU's clinical instructor and Internship Academy coordinator, said it was immediately recognized for its value.

“They jumped in with both feet and were ready to go,” Tipton said. “The first year was really a learning year for the program as a whole, but the interns themselves, they really jumped in and ran with it.”

The first year, 25 MSU students participated in the program, with 29 joining the second year and 26 currently involved. The senior-year students are matched with classrooms in four districts – Logan-Rogersville, Nixa, Republic and Springfield. All the interns who have participated passed the teacher certification exam, and the involved school districts have hired more than 30 percent of program graduates, Tipton said.

Out of the 80 graduates who participated in the program, 35 were hired in southwest Missouri school districts – about 44 percent. Forty-nine students have stayed in Missouri. Tipton said others have been hired in Indiana, Illinois, Hawaii, Japan and Kuwait.

“The districts that they’re placed with see this as a very strong preparation program,” Tipton said.

JTSD Principal Jennifer Chastain agreed. “They are more prepared than the traditional beginning teachers,” she said. “They’ve spent an entire year with us, know our expectations and teaching styles, and they just have confidence.”

At graduation, if one of the former interns is employed at Nixa Public Schools, Chastain said the internship counts as a year of on-the-job experience, which qualifies them for a 2 percent jump in pay – about a \$600 increase.

“Instead of starting at step one, they are at step two,” she said.

One of the aspects making the program so beneficial, Lowder said, is the time investment. Tipton agreed, adding a traditional internship often doesn’t allow enough time for a student to acclimate to the working environment.

“You can only get so much done in 16 weeks. Time’s expanded and the immersive nature is expanded,” Lowder said.

He likened it to a medical doctor’s residency. Getting in-depth, on-the-job training, he said, is just as vital for teachers.

“We are shaping the minds of people who will go out and be the people who are our future doctors,” he said. “We have to prepare with as much emphasis.”

Chastain said she strategically places interns in classrooms with Nixa teachers who have signed up as “master teachers.” These teachers are paid a \$1,500 extra stipend – with MSU and Nixa each paying \$750. Besides this addition to a paycheck, Chastain said the school has no other expenditures for the program. In fact, she said it saves the district dollars.

“It really is a mutual benefit because there are times when an intern will substitute for a master teacher or gain experience in another classroom and that right there pays the difference in money,” she said.

David Hough, MSU professor and dean of the College of Education, said the matching stipends for master teachers are paid from Internship Academy funds.

“We support the IA using funds we would otherwise spend to pay cooperating teachers, supervisors and travel to multiple individual sites,” he said via email.

Tipton said there are plans to expand the program to additional local schools, allowing for more interns. This next phase includes placing interns in rural schools.

Chastain and Lowder said they see the daily benefits of a yearlong internship – and Tipton said she sees it in graduates who are better acclimated to the workforce and employers who recognize that.

“It’s one of the ways to prepare teachers and I think it’s a way we can have the best prepared teachers and make an impact on student learning over time,” she said.

Lowder said he projects more universities will implement similar internship structures – partly because of

conversations within the industry. He said the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation recently challenged colleges to find better ways to provide experience for students pursuing teaching degrees.

“There’s the mission right now put on them by the national organization to do this,” he said. “I think other colleges without a doubt are going to be trying these things.”

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