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Department of Education & Early Development wins \$3 million grant

Grant will help recruit, prepare special education teachers

The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development has received a \$3 million federal grant to recruit and mentor special education teachers, Commissioner Roger Sampson announced today.

The grant expands the reach of Alaska's current program to mentor new and inexperienced teachers. Many teachers leave the profession in their first five years, not because of the pay, work hours or work conditions, but because they feel ineffective and isolated from other teachers, studies show. The problem of turnover is particularly acute among special education teachers in rural Alaska.

"Mentor programs help ensure that new teachers' transition into a thriving learning community is smooth and successful," Sampson said. "Alaska's students benefit from these programs by receiving the best instruction from top quality educators, and educators experience the confidence and satisfaction of knowing they have been effective."

The grant will help the State Board of Education & Early Development meet two of its main goals: 1) continuous academic growth for all students, including closing the achievement gap in reading, writing and math; and 2), promoting the continuous growth of professionals and paraprofessionals to provide effective standards-based instruction.

Over a five-year period, the U.S. Department of Education grant of \$3,023,845 will allow the state to train up to seven full-time mentor teachers, who will help recruit 108 special education teachers and guide them in their first or second year of teaching. The department expects to implement the program this winter.

The Special Educators for Alaska Project will be part of the Alaska Statewide Teacher Mentor Project, a joint effort of the department and the University of Alaska, now in its second year.

Last school year, the project linked 23 mentors with about 330 teachers from 31 of Alaska's 53 school districts.

Both projects are based on a mentoring model that seeks to develop teachers who reflect about their practices. The model was created at The New Teacher Center at the University of California Santa Cruz.

"This grant is a valuable resource toward the recruitment, training and retention of general and special educators," said Art Arnold, Director of Special Education at the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development. "Teachers who are knowledgeable, highly qualified and retained in the classrooms are a stable force for children, families and communities."

The Alaska Teacher Placement service at the University of Alaska is a partner in implementing the grant. Mentors will make contact with special education teacher applicants at job fairs, and provide first-hand knowledge about the challenges and opportunities of teaching in Alaska. Throughout the school year, mentors and participating new teachers will work together in person, by e-mail, and over the phone.

The grant also funds a pilot program in three rural school districts to provide some special education services by distance, such as through videoconferencing. "This aspect of the grant project, though small, is very promising for rural and remote districts," Arnold said.

For more information on the current mentor project, the Alaska Statewide Teacher Mentor Project, see www.eed.state.ak.us/state_board/initiatives.html.

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