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WKU holds signing day for WCPS teachers seeking certification

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(From left) Warren County Public School teachers Jason Cole, Suhey Cal teachers tract of Western Kentucky University's Grow Your Own program turns signing to join the program at Gary Ransdell Hall on Tuesday evening teacher, certified special education teacher or principal preparation tract instruction that fits with their working schedules at a third of the cost for themselves, WKU and WCPS. (Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com)

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Athletes aren't the only students at Western Kentucky University to get a signing day.

Educators from across the county joined WKU leaders Tuesday for a signing event celebrating the first cohort of Warren County Public School teachers seeking certification through the university's Grow Your Own program.

Susan Keeseey, department chair of WKU's School of Teacher Education, called participants the "future of education" and said they will receive flexible, hybrid instruction to fit their working schedules at a third of the cost for their bachelor's or master's degree.

"We love having Warren County being our partners in the school, (they're) next-door neighbors and friends, and so having them be a partner is really exciting," Keeseey said. "I think it's a great chance to really grow more teachers, so it's a win-win for all of us and the kids in our community."

Teachers' tuitions are split between themselves, WKU and WCPS. Each is placed into a certified teacher, certified special education teacher or principal preparation tract depending on their career goals.

"They've already shown their dedication to the district, and this is a way that the district can also support them and know that they're going to stay," Keeseey said.

After certification, teachers are expected to stay within WCPS for at least three years, but many may choose to stick around longer. WCPS' cohort consists of 37 teachers — 10 seeking teacher certification, 12 seeking special education certification and 15 seeking principal preparation.

Keesey said the program goes a long way to address the ongoing certified teacher shortage seen in WCPS and districts across the country. The district currently has around 50 open certified teacher positions, though that number can change day-to-day.

Keesey pointed to the special education cohort as an example of a major success of the program. She said special education positions have been in high demand for a “long, long time” across numerous districts that never seem to have enough qualified applicants.

WKU has partnered with 16 districts since the program began just over two years ago and currently oversees around 300 participants, Keesey said.

WCPS Superintendent Rob Clayton said in addition to benefiting the district, the program will be “life-changing” for many of the participants.

“It's really a proud moment to be able to provide this opportunity for the adults that sacrifice so much working with our kids,” Clayton said. “We are accustomed to

changing students' lives, we're accustomed to giving them hope, and when you have that opportunity to do it with adults, it's equally as special.”

Clayton said the partnership with WKU is a culmination of around a year and a half of work, including conversations about personalizing instruction and accounting for their ongoing teacher responsibilities.

“This training program has been developed in collaboration with Warren County Public School leadership, and that's been a great process as well,” Clayton said. “What it reminds me is that everybody visiting this wants to make it better for our educators but also improve the outcomes for our students, which is why we're here.”

When asked if he thought his eventual replacement was in the room with him, Clayton laughed and said “I hope so.”

“There’s a lot of capable people here,” Clayton added.

Amber Raymond, an assessment coordinator and English teacher at Warren Central High School, will complete the program through the Principal Preparation Cohort track along with 15 other educators.

Raymond is in her eighth year teaching in WCPS. She said her role as a coordinator gave her a “taste of leadership” that she now has the chance to pursue further.

“That kind of gave me the confidence to be like, ‘OK, I can do this,’” Raymond said. “And you can't turn down an opportunity like this — to walk through it with people in your districts — and I've been to school at WKU for all of my degrees so far, so why not keep going?”

Raymond is also a wife and mother of a 3-year-old boy. She said it would have been years before she received her certification if it weren't for the program due to the cost and the time constraints of traditional tracts.

“I'm grateful for this opportunity because this is something I've always wanted to do,” Raymond said. “They gave me the opportunity to do it. It probably would have been 10 years from now before I finally got up the courage and saved up some funds to get it done.”

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