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EDUCATION

CREATIVE STEPS GROW TEACHERS

Faced with chronic teacher shortages, the Palm Beach County School District is taking a creative and sensible approach: it's growing its own.

At four high schools, the district is giving students an opportunity to work at on-campus preschools as part of a child-care education program. The hope is that the teenagers will maintain their enthusiasm for teaching children and return to the county to teach after they complete their educations.

The county's 700 child-care centers also need teachers, especially since a new state constitutional amendment went into effect, requiring free pre-kindergarten education for all families who want it.

The teacher shortages are part of a national trend that some states are handling better than others. In Florida, grow-your-own programs are one way school districts are coping with the unfortunate fact that only about half of the state's 6,000 annual education-degree graduates pursue careers in education.

In Broward County, for instance, an Urban Teacher Academy Program is training students to teach in urban schools. Successful students receive college scholarships in exchange for agreeing to return to the county to teach in one of the school district's Urban Academy schools.

In Palm Beach County, students at four high schools — Dwyer, Lake Worth, Olympic and Santaluces — get experience working directly with children in addition to studying texts on child development. Next year the district plans to take more teacher candidates and double the size of the four on-campus preschools, at which parents pay \$3 an hour for child care four mornings a week. Palm Beach Lakes High School, which has a Teachers Academy, plans to add early-childhood classes.

Students who are at least 17 and complete the coursework of the child-care academies will get 40 hours of training, as required by law, to work in a day-care center. Sixty hours of training results in a child-development associate certificate and nine credits toward college, plus the opportunity to become a higher-paid lead teacher in a preschool.

The beauty of the program is that it helps students develop a career path in early-childhood education. That's preferable to relying on less-skilled and lower-paid people to teach in settings that are increasingly important to the overall educational experience. And, because the newly trained teachers will be home-grown, they're more likely to be a good fit for Palm Beach County preschools, and more likely to stick with teaching as a career.

This is a forward-looking approach to a problem that, without this intervention, would only keep getting worse.