

Column: College Community Connection

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Teachers Needed for Tomorrow

By Dr. Al Roberts

Nationwide, schools are experiencing a scarcity of qualified job candidates for teaching positions. Declining enrollment in programs that prepare students for licensure as teachers is one cause. According to a report issued by the Learning Policy Institute, enrollments in teacher education programs dropped by 35% between 2009 and 2014. This decline represents a decrease of nearly a quarter of a million potential teachers.

The impact on school districts across the nation varies considerably. The Learning Policy Institute report noted, "Students in high-poverty and high-minority settings bear the brunt of teacher shortages. Considerable evidence shows that shortages historically have disproportionately impacted our most disadvantaged students and that those patterns persist today."

These quandaries are very much apparent here in Southside Virginia. Data compiled by the Virginia Department of Education indicates that we have the highest percent of unfilled teaching positions. Paul Nichols, Superintendent of Mecklenburg County Public Schools, says, "We have classrooms of all subject areas that are difficult to find teachers to fill. However, our greatest need is in math and science. Close to 10% of the math and science classrooms in Southern Virginia are in need of a qualified teacher. Career and Technical teachers are also very hard to find."

One proposed solution is to provide an opportunity for career professionals in other areas to obtain the credentials necessary to teach in Virginia's classrooms. Virginia's Career Switcher Alternative Route to Licensure Program is designed to do just that. To help support this effort, Southside Virginia Community College has developed a list of the general education courses required for teachers. Potential teachers who have graduated from a four-year college but lack some of the required courses, can pick up their missing credits at SVCC.

Another potential solution is to encourage local high school students to consider careers in education. With this in mind, the Virginia Department of Education developed a program called "Teachers for Tomorrow," which provides opportunities for high school juniors and seniors to receive career information, pursue dual enrollment credits, and participate in field trips where they can observe classrooms and gain teaching experience before they head off to college.

For students considering the teaching profession, SVCC offers an Associate of Arts and Sciences degree in Education. The degree is designed for students who want to begin their academic journeys at a low-cost, close-to-home institution and then transfer to a four-year college or university to complete a baccalaureate program. In addition, for people interested in working with young children, SVCC also offers an Early Childhood Programs Career Studies Certificate.

If you are interested in learning more about preparing for a teaching career, contact Dr. Dixie Dalton, SVCC's Dean of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Business (dixie.dalton@southside.edu or call 434-949-1053).

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.