

In just two sessions in WestTeach, Beth McManus has already learned plenty.

Day-long programs focusing on West Tennessee agriculture and area entrepreneurship in the pilot year of the WestStar-created program have truly been enlightening for the Union City High School Spanish teacher.

She's also had it verified how fortunate she and the remainder of the UC School System teachers are.

"One of the first things they asked us was what were the major issues at our school," said McManus, who was chosen from a list of 31 applicants along with 13 other West Tennessee teachers (12 accepted) to participate in the development program. "And, as a system, I honestly couldn't think of one.

"I heard other teachers from other systems bring up things like repairs needed at their schools and even something as simple as not having enough paper. I didn't want to sound like I was bragging, but, if anything, we have a surplus of things to help us do our jobs at Union City Schools."

WestTeach is a development program for West Tennessee teachers in Grades K-12 who aspire to be leaders in their schools and communities.

The University of Tennessee at Martin's WestStar Leadership program founded the workshop series in 2017 as an extension of its mission to equip West Tennessee's community leaders with skills and tools needed to support the region.

All teachers who applied to participate in the program were asked to get a recommendation letter from either their principal or superintendent in order for the application to be complete.

Over a three-month period, program participants will attend five sessions that will include such topics as West Tennessee agriculture, entrepreneurship and economic development. There will also be focus on welfare and social consequences, creating partnerships for economic development and industry tours in Jackson, Dyersburg, Covington and Brownsville, respectively.

A graduation banquet for the program is set for Jan. 29, 2019.

McManus is excited for both the opportunity to learn and to be included in the inaugural WestTeach class.

"The chance to network with so many people in both education and the other professionals we'll hear from and talk to will be the best," she said. "We've already participated in some team-building activities that have been beneficial and we've heard from some people in the business community who've found their passion and have been ultra-successful.

"We certainly want to encourage students to pursue higher education, but we also understand the value of getting students ready to join the workforce immediately -- whether that's in agriculture

or the general labor field. There are demands for young people eager and trained to work everywhere.”

McManus says she’s seeing an influx of enrollees locally from Guatemala and is hopeful to learn K’iche,’ a language spoken by many natives of that country.

“I want to help them learn English, but it’s difficult because even Spanish is a completely different language than K’iche.’ If they’re going to stay here and attempt to learn, I obviously want to do everything I can to help them... and that starts with learning their language,” she said.

“That would be about the only true need I see here. I myself, and I think the rest of the faculty, are blessed with everything else we need.”

McManus is in her third year at UCHS and 11th teaching overall. She is a Union City School System graduate and her father, Charles, taught English 30 years at UCHS.

“My daddy walked me into the school on my first day as a teacher here,” she smiled. “It was a special day for him for me to be here where he taught for so long and it was obviously an emotional time for me.

“This is truly a great place to work. If I didn’t already know that, it is shown to me often with what I see myself and what I hear from others at other places in the profession.”