As students head back to public schools across Hawaii today, the first cadre of newly licensed teachers in the “Grow Our Own” initiative are stepping to the front of their classrooms. The University of Hawaii program, launched in January 2018, aims to turn people who are already working on campus into full-fledged teachers in 18 months. The goal is to alleviate the teacher shortage with folks who are likely to stay on the job.

It offers educational assistants, substitutes and emergency hires a flexible, tuition-free path to getting their credentials as secondary school teachers. In exchange they commit to teaching for three years in a high-need subject, such as special education, math or science.

“I wanted a job where the rubber meets the road,” said Deanna Kackley, a former educational assistant and “Grow Our Own” graduate who starts teaching science today to ninth graders at Honokaa High on Hawaii island. “I’m a Native Hawaiian woman who wants to make change in my community, move the needle.”

The Kauai native had already earned a master’s degree in mechanical engineering at Stanford but made a midcareer shift to education so she could help kids directly.

“I felt I wanted a new challenge and I wanted to grow, and I was encouraged by my colleagues and principal — that was pivotal for me,” Kackley said. She also credited state Sen. Michelle Kidani, who spearheaded “Grow Our Own,” and other legislators for funding it.

Grow Our Own, based at UH Manoa, offers a post-baccalaureate certificate in secondary education or a Master of Education in teaching, with full scholarship stipends worth as much as $20,000. It graduated 32 teachers in May and has another 24 candidates in the pipeline.

There is funding for up to 38 participants for next year, and applications are open until Oct. 1. The Legislature appropriated $600,000 for tuition stipends in each of the next two years.

“We really want to encourage people to apply,” said Corey Rosenlee, president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association. “This is a great way for people who are already working in our schools to become teachers to increase their pay and make sure that our keiki have a qualified teacher.”

The initiative is just one of several alternative paths trying to lure more people into the profession locally, in the face of a teacher shortage that spans the nation and declining numbers of college students majoring in education. The Department of Education typically hires about 1,200 new teachers each year, but it’s hard to keep up with the outflow of more than 1,000 teachers annually and the addition of more teaching positions. Over the last three years, the most common reason cited by teachers leaving Hawaii’s public schools has been to move away from the state. That outpaced even the number of retirees.

Although figures are not yet available for the new school year, in August 2018, 12,408 out of 13,437 positions, or 92%, were filled with fully credentialed teachers. Another 508 employees were working to complete a state-approved teacher education program, and there were 521 vacancies, which are filled with emergency hires or long-term substitutes, according to a presentation to the Board of Education Human Resources Committee.

“My initial indication is we’re going to be still short of special-education teachers this year,” Cynthia Covell,
assistant superintendent in the Office of Talent Management, said Friday. “That’s a chronic vacancy that is just really hard to get closed.”

“The competition for teachers has really gotten tough,” she added. “Nationwide we all need great teachers.” Last year just 84% of the 2,212 special-education positions statewide were filled with teachers who had completed a state-approved teacher education program.

Leeward Community College is tackling that problem head-on with programs tailored to the Nanakuli-Waianae community. One is a place-based Bachelor of Science in special education that is offered online or at the school where educational assistants are working.

“We had 37 candidates start with us, and currently all are still in the program,” said Christina Keaulana, special-education coordinator and instructor in Leeward’s teacher education program. “All are residents of 96792, which is Waianae. They all are educational assistants.”

Leeward also offers an advanced certificate for people who already have bachelor’s degrees. In the 2018-19 school year, 29 teachers earned the certificate, and 20 more candidates this fall will be finishing their student teaching.

“So far we’ve had a really high success rate,” she said. “One hundred percent have passed their Praxis, the bar you have to pass to be a content knowledge expert. I think that’s a good testament to the quality of the programming.” “Our program, because it is online and because it is self-paced, is really conducive to the working class schedule,” she added.

Tammy Cabral, a mother and grandmother, said the program suited her well. She had been a substitute teacher for years before being hired on an emergency basis as a teacher at Waianae Intermediate School. In May she earned her Advanced Professional Certificate in Special Education from Leeward, after 18 months of hard work, juggling her teaching job and her own studies, with support from her family and her principal.

Today she will greet eighth graders in her social studies class as a fully licensed teacher. It's an “inclusion class” with a mix of students, an approach she likes because she believes kids shouldn’t be labeled.

At student orientation Thursday evening, Cabral wore a flag-themed paper crown to put the kids at ease and start off the school year with a smile.

“It’s about social studies but it’s also about being yourself,” Cabral said. “We’re here to learn and we’re here to have fun.”

“It’s nice to be in your own community, homegrown,” she added. “When you’re in the classroom, the kids connect with you. ... Knowing that you can make a difference for somebody in your own community is huge.”

Leeward is also partnering with Chaminade University on an accelerated program that leads to a Bachelor of Science and license as a special-education teacher in four years.

“We’ve got the programs that are flexible, accessible,” Keaulana said. “We work around your needs and your schedule and your life, basically. We want you to join the greatest profession in the world.”

The Department of Education is also beefing up retention efforts, knowing that churn in new teachers just ramps up the need to recruit.

“We are going all out on teacher induction and mentoring,” Covell said. “This year we hired 15 additional mentors only for our special-education beginning teachers. We’ve spread them out across the state. It’s a pilot this year, but I believe it’s going to have huge returns.”

OTHER AVENUES

More information about these alternative paths to teaching is available online:

>> “Grow Our Own” at UH Manoa College of Education: coe.hawaii.edu/node/4507

>> Leeward Teacher Education: leeward.hawaii.edu/teach

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