

High school’s ‘Grow Your Own.’ *It’s not what you think*

By MELISSA CROCKETT MESKE
macmeske@ibjonline.com

In December 2022, Civic Memorial High School in Bethalto held a ribbon-cutting event for its new American Education program, which had launched in the fall. The program is funded through an American Pathways grant from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). This “Grow Your Own” program allows students to begin working toward a teacher certification while earning four college credits from Lewis and Clark Community College.

This innovative program is one first step toward addressing the teacher shortage crisis here at home and across the country. Students enrolled in this program are guaranteed a job interview with Bethalto School District upon completion of their teacher certification. Bethalto School District works with Birdie Pruessner, Cathy Laramee, and Yvette McLemore in the High School Partnership program at Lewis and Clark Community College.

Bethalto School District Superintendent Dr. Jill Griffin talked more about the new program in a recent interview with the Illinois Business Journal. “In partnership with Lewis and Clark, our ‘Grow Your Own’ program offers dual credit to enrolled students. First, the kids are excited about getting college credits while in high school. But it is also igniting a passion in the students about the idea of teaching as a career path early on.

“The students are exposed to environments within the classroom that include special needs, early childhood, elementary education, and even administration,” Griffin said further. “Students enrolled in the American Education partnership program as a part of an educator pathway exploration also shadow district administrators and certified service personnel as well as a variety of classroom teachers.

“Angie Neilson is immersing them in everything she possibly can so that the students see what the ‘big picture’ is in education as a career field. And everyone involved is incredibly open and candid about what they are doing. I think those are the most important takeaways from this program,” Griffin added.

Angie Neilson is a Bethalto School District Career and Technical Education (CTE) educator as one of the district’s Family and Consumer Sciences teachers. She also coordinates the high school partnership program for the district with Lewis and Clark Community College’s American Education program.

“The students experience our Child Development Parenting class at first, then they’ll experience the Early Childhood Education setting,” explained Neilson. “They follow a series of modules as set up by the Illinois Network of Child Care Resource and



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Referral Agencies (INCCRRA), a state-wide organization which is a resource for making high quality, affordable early care and education and school-age care options available for children and families in Illinois.

“By exposing them to a variety of experiences, grade levels, classroom environments, educators, administrators, and other district personnel, we also are working to match them more closely to what it is they think they might want to do on an education career path. We had one section to offer our first year; we now have two sections with about 40 students enrolled. Our next goal is to become an active part of Educators Rising, which is a student organization of aspiring education leaders,” Neilson said further.

“The ‘Grow Your Own’ concept helps with teacher retention as well. The idea to ‘teach where you live’ is appealing to many. In fact, our first ‘Grow Your Own’ student, Madeline Ehlers, will graduate from college in May and has been hired by Bethalto School District to start as a special education teacher in the Fall of 2023,” Neilson noted.

Griffin added, “Students in the program are also in demand in ways we nor they ever imagined. They are being invited to high level meetings throughout the community to talk about their experience and to mentor with other leaders and influencers. Kiwanis breakfasts, school district and regional board meetings, professional learning community gatherings – added opportunities the program has sparked for the students and giving them maximum exposure before enrolling in a college education that might otherwise end up being an expensive lesson in a ‘not-so-good’ career fit.”

Kaitlynn Niemeyer, a junior at Bethalto’s Civic Memorial High School, noted first and emphatically how much she loved working with kids. “I shadowed the school psychologist first because I thought that’s where my interest was but found out it was a ‘no.’ I dove into the classroom environment

and fell in love with it. I know exactly what I want to do; I am not clueless now. This program has given me a true sense of direction.”

Niemeyer also had the recent opportunity to address the Illinois State Board of Education about the program and share her experiences. As for next steps on her path after high school, Niemeyer is considering the elementary education program at McKendree University and is also looking at Vanderbilt.

“At the high school, we’re all about ‘the next,’” said Bethalto’s Civic Memorial High School Principal Justin Newell. “We’re always asking the students about it – what’s next? And they’ve got to have an answer. They have to be able to wrap their thoughts around the question of how they can be contributing members of society.

“Our teachers do a good job of building foundations in education within our students,” Newell added. “The partnership we have with Lewis and Clark tears down barriers and exposes them to more of the ‘outside.’ High school should always be an exploratory opportunity that helps them define their next.

Madison County Regional Superintendent Rob Werden shared his own story, with its roots harvested during another era of the educator drought.

“I’ve been in education for 30 years now, and the reason I got into education was because there was a teacher shortage,” said Werden. “Back then, it was a shortage of ag teachers. I ended up an ag teacher. I grew up on a farm in Prairie town and got my agriculture degree at [SIU] Carbondale. I was a Farm Bureau assistant manager, then a manager, for two years right out of college.

“There were two gentlemen, Larry Pfeiffer and Dean Dittmar, with the group known as Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education (FCAE), that were working with the agriculture industry to

grow and expand ag education in the state of Illinois,” he added. “They came across me and asked if I’d be interested. I said no and laughed the whole idea off at first.

“I didn’t have a teaching degree or certificate, but they said that they could help me get that,” Werden added. “They told me, ‘You’ve got your four-year degree and enough industry work hours (which at that time was 2,000 work hours) so we can help you get your teaching certificate.’ Long story short: I decided to take them up on it and went into ag education because there was such a demand.

“Flash forward 30 years, that is what is happening still now,” Werden said further. “The shortage has continued, but now it’s expanded. Into all subject areas. Science, math, English, career and technical education programs, all areas. They’re all hard to find and fill, and at all levels. There continues undoubtedly to be a teacher shortage, and it’s expanded into all areas now.”

The regional superintendents’ group of which Werden is a part has done a survey over the past five years with district superintendents throughout the state of Illinois, with close to a 100 percent response rate. “The superintendents are all saying this shortage is real, and in fact, they’re worried about people starting to tune out about the situation because they hear about it year after year,” he noted.

“Now we’re working to figure out the best ways, or best practices, for recruiting. For example, my office is offering \$500 to any school district in Madison County who wants to start a Future Teachers of America program, or any type of ‘Grow Your Own,’ where you can recruit students to start pursuing an education pathway while they are still in high school.”

Other “Grow Your Own” high school programs in the region include Collinsville, Highland, Triad, and Southwestern High Schools. Edwardsville and Granite City are looking at starting a program as well.

The National Education Association estimates there’s a shortage of roughly 300,000 teachers and staff across the U.S. The teacher shortage is particularly pronounced in rural school districts, where the need for special education teachers and STEM teachers is high.


The state Legislature has made some changes to address the teacher shortage in Illinois. In 2022 the cost of renewing an expired teaching license was reduced from \$500 to \$50, and the minimum age of paraprofessionals in K-8 classrooms was lowered from 19 to 18.

As for the dire situation in substitute teaching, a new Illinois law rolled out in 2023 allowing college students enrolled in an education-related field with at least 90 credit hours to start substitute teaching before they complete their college degree – yet another innovative approach to hopefully help address another statewide, and nationwide, critical educator shortage.

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