
R.I. charter school gets go-ahead for master's program

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CENTRAL FALLS— The Learning Community charter school is establishing a graduate school of education, the first time that such a program has been awarded to a public school. Aspiring teachers will be immersed in the classroom for most of their training, taking academic classes at night and during the summer, making the program unique.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this story included a quote that misstated how long it had been since a new institution of higher education had been approved.

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The Council of Post-Secondary Education approved the Rhode Island School for Progressive Education Project on Wednesday. The charter school has received \$500,000 over a five-year period from the Rhode Island Foundation and the United Way of Rhode Island to create the program.

"This is a historic moment for us," said program director Christine Wiltshire Alves. "It's also a bold move on the part of the post-secondary education council to approve something that will serve our urban school districts."

Aspiring teachers will be immersed in the classroom for most of their training, taking academic classes at night and during the summer, making the program unique.

"Instead of the traditional master's in teaching, where you student teach for a couple of weeks, students here will spend 30 hours a week in the classroom with a mentor teacher," said project manager Melanie Griffith.

The new master's program will specifically train teachers for urban settings. In fact, the charter school already has agreements with Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket to give priority to hiring these teachers.

"Cities like Boston, New York and Chicago have residency programs," Griffith said. Research has shown, she said, that these programs produce teachers that stay in the field

longer, have lower turnover rates and better outcomes for students.

“The [post-secondary] council has a rigorous process for vetting new higher-education institutions to operate in Rhode Island,” said higher education Commissioner Brenda Dann-Messier. “Throughout the process, we were impressed by the tremendous educator preparation program being developed by the R.I. School for Progressive Education. There is strong demand for this kind of immersive, residency-based training, especially in urban districts, and I am thrilled that the council unanimously voted to approve their proposal.”

The program will offer two distinct master’s degrees, one for elementary teachers and another for principals in urban school leadership. The first master’s program will begin in June 2020. The second will launch in May 2021. They will run 15 and 12 months, respectively.

Graduates will also be certified to teach English-language learners, a real need in Rhode Island.

Although the tuition costs \$35,000, Griffith said the school is committed to covering the amount by raising money through philanthropy and nonprofit organizations.

Applicants will not need to have an undergraduate degree in teaching. In fact, the program hopes to attract individuals who are strong in content areas such as math and science. Applicants will undergo a rigorous application process that includes interviews and writing assignments.

The program will not compete with the established schools of education in Rhode Island. It will start small, with only eight applicants during its first year, doubling to 16 in four years, Wiltshire Alves said.

“We want to give as much attention to each residency as possible,” she said. “We can make a difference. Our graduates will work in small cohorts. We are trying to improve our public schools the way charter schools are meant to.”

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