WHY TEACH DAY

ECU hosts students considering careers in education

By Kelly Soderlund
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Middle and high school students aspiring to be teachers heard Wednesday what the job entails from people who do it every day.

East Carolina University hosted Why Teach Day for students from Pitt County and Greene County schools. The goal of the program, sponsored by ECU’s Rural Education Institute in the College of Education, is to get students from rural communities on a university campus and talk to them about the benefits of becoming a teacher.

“Certain students have not had the exposure or support to even be on a university campus,” Brenda Jones, associate superintendent for human resources for Pitt County schools, said. “Right here in this county, there were students who had never been to East Carolina University. So the idea was to at least get them involved and understanding what school is about first and second to select teaching as a career.”

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Brittany Maples
Eighth-grader at Pactolus School

ECU officials also wanted to use the daylong session to address the state’s teacher shortage and recruit students to teach in the communities where they were raised.

“Research shows that if middle school kids are introduced to careers and professions early on, they’ll be more apt to take hold of that profession,” Tarrick Cox, director of the North Carolina Legislators’ School in the College of Education, said. “With our current teacher shortage, if we go ahead and grow our own teachers starting with middle school students, we can help increase the number that we need. (We want) to get them interested in teaching, number one, as well as to go back into their hometown and to become teachers.”

Education officials are projecting a need for 80,000 teachers statewide during the next 10 years, Vivian Covington, director of teacher education at ECU, said. North Carolina will need 8,000-10,000 teachers each year, she said. About 3,500 people are graduating from the University of North Carolina system each year with teaching degrees, she said. But only 2,500 are going into teaching, Covington said.

Pitt County Schools started sponsoring the program more than 10 years ago after being identified by the General Assembly as a school system that could benefit from recruitment programs, Jones said. After budget cuts, the school system lost funding for the program, but ECU’s Rural Institute offered to sponsor it, she said.

Students listened to elementary, middle and high school teachers discuss the rewards of teaching and why they selected teaching as a career. Students asked questions about what they need to do to become a teacher, how teachers work with students who have different learning styles and what types of grades are required to obtain an education degree.

Students then were separated by age group and attended breakout sessions. High school juniors heard about the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program at ECU, a scholarship program for teaching majors. The junior year is crucial because it’s the time students should be sending out college applications, Jones said.

“A lot of times, the kids don’t know or don’t have a parent who can encourage them and tell them they can do it,” Jones said. “They wait until their senior year and say, ‘I think I can go to college.’ We try to take that junior group and talk to them about the kinds of things that they need to be doing: getting

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applications out, looking at the Teaching Fellows (program) and the scholarship program.”

The more than 100 middle school students learned about the Teacher Cadet program, which is a planned course of study at the high schools geared toward students who want to be teachers. The students do an internship their senior year and teach for one week.

The program reinforced the ambitions of students at Pactolus and Bethel to be teachers.

“I want to be a teacher because I just want to help out the young lives of America,” Brittany Maples, eighth-grader at Pactolus, said. “This program helped me look at another perspective.”

“I thought this experience was educational, and it gave me a better outlook on what I want to do,” Tiffany Pettaway, eighth-grader at Bethel School, said. “I want to become a math teacher for middle-schoolers.”

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