

# New grant to help Worcester schools, public colleges draw more minority students to STEM teaching

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WORCESTER – The city’s school system and its two public higher education campuses will get a piece of a new \$1.5 million state grant aimed at attracting more minority students to a career teaching STEM in high-need districts.

Provided by the National Science Foundation, the money will specifically help the state develop its new MassTeach program, which will provide a \$20,000 scholarship and academic advising to students following a public education pathway to becoming a teacher in the sciences.

According to the state’s Department of Higher Education, which announced the initiative on Tuesday, MassTeach is intended not just to get more minority students into STEM teaching positions, where they are currently underrepresented statewide, but also to produce more teachers in general in STEM, short for science, technology, engineering and math.

“I think it will be effective,” said Luis Pedraja, president of Quinsigamond Community College, which is partnering with the Worcester schools and Worcester State University for the initiative. “Minorities are very underrepresented in the teaching pool (in general), and if you look at STEM in particular, there’s a real need.”

According the state’s records for last school year, for instance, only about 13 percent of Worcester’s full-time equivalent teachers were not white.

“We’re not really sure why” it’s been difficult to attract minorities to teaching, said Linda Larrivee, dean of Worcester State’s School of Education, Health, and Natural Sciences. It’s hard to get science majors to go into education in general, she added, given that many want to work in their actual scientific field of study.

She and Mr. Pedraja said their institutions, in cooperation with the city school system, have already been making concerted efforts to draw more students of color into teaching, starting when they are still students in the K-12 system.

“It’s very important to model for them that you can be successful” in education, Mr. Pedraja said, “and that as a teacher you’ll also be able to give back to your community. It’s not just something to benefit themselves.”

For that reason, he said, it’s especially important to have minority teachers working in the school system, to show students of color that such a career path is viable for people who look like them.

“Once we get a few in (the MassTeach pipeline), they’ll start encouraging others to join them. Little by little, they’ll forge the path,” Mr. Pedraja said.

While a key benefit for students who go into Worcester’s MassTeach initiative is the academic advising and other supports the program provides, Ms. Larrivee said the promised scholarships will likely be the major incentive for participants.

“The biggest thing about this grant program is that the biggest amount of money is going directly to students,” she said.

Worcester’s program, which is one of three in the state along with one in the Springfield area and another in the Berkshires, will create a pathway starting in the school system. From there, participants can obtain an associate’s degree in chemistry or biology at Quinsigamond before going to get a teaching degree at Worcester State via the state’s MassTransfer system.

According to the state, MassTeach’s goal is to have 50 new STEM teachers working around the state by the time the five-year grant is finished in 2023. Recruitment of students into community college-level programs will begin this fall.