



From Custodian to Teacher

Cal State East Bay grant tackles urgent teacher shortages with staff-to-faculty roadmap

BY NATALIE FEULNER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARVIN TSO

SEPTEMBER 6, 2017

Share this

Cal State East Bay credential student Dan Poulos (B.S. '10, Criminal Justice Administration), had a plan for his life: He'd graduate from college with a degree in criminal justice,

work as a police officer for 15 to 20 years, retire and become a middle or high school history teacher.



Cal State East Bay student Dan Poulos is accelerating work toward his teaching credential thanks to new funding aimed at keeping certified school staff in the region.

Instead, Poulos is currently a custodian at Redwood Alternative School, a job he took to put himself through graduate school, but that he fell in love with because it gave him the opportunity to work with at-risk youth. And thanks to a new grant from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing designed to help classified (or non-teaching) school staff members earn their credentials, the 28-year-old has decided to skip over a life in police work — and he may be in the classroom as early as next fall.

“Going the police route, I would have brought the same compassionate attitude I use [with the kids] to that role,”

Poulos says. “So the way I see it, there’s still a lot of crossover between what I thought I’d be doing and teaching — especially in the sense of being a role model.”

The \$80,000 grant called, “Credential Pathways: California Classified School Employee Teacher Credentialing Program,” was awarded earlier this year to the East Bay Consortium, which includes Castro Valley Unified School District, Pittsburg Unified School District and West Contra Costa County School District. It provides \$4,000 per year for up to 20 qualified and hand-selected participants (Poulos among them) to attend Cal State East Bay’s credential program.

Poulos and several others were already working toward their teaching credentials when the grant funding came in. But according to Sherrie Beetz, assistant superintendent of human resources for Castro Valley Unified School District, many were having a difficult time paying for tuition and balancing their coursework while also student teaching and maintaining full-time jobs.

“The help with tuition has been great, and Sherrie Beetz and my supervisor Charlotte Irwin [have been] helping me figure out how to do my student teaching and go to school without losing income,” Poulos says.

A STATEWIDE PROBLEM

When Beetz first sent out an email about the grant program to district staff, she didn’t expect any interest. In fact, she was prepared to give up the four spots allocated by the grant to her district. Instead, she was flooded with applicants from across Castro Valley.

The brainchild of Beetz, staff from Pittsburg and West Contra Costa County school districts and Cal State East Bay Professor,

Teacher Education Department Chair Eric Engdahl, Credential Pathways is designed to not only help people like Poulos become teachers, but will also support Bay Area districts buckling under California's overwhelming teacher shortage.

"[Beetz] and I had been talking about the teacher shortage and one of the things that came up, given the cost of housing in the Bay Area, is the untapped resource of people who are already living and working in the area," Engdahl says. "We realized similar conversations were going on in other nearby districts [such as Pittsburg and West Castro Valley] so we decided to develop a 'grow your own' program."

California not only has the highest student-teacher ratio in the nation, the state would need to hire 135,000 teachers beyond current hiring needs just to get to the national average.

According to the California Teachers Association, California not only has the highest student-teacher ratio in the nation (24:1 compared to 16:1), the state would need to hire 135,000 teachers beyond current hiring needs just to get to the national average.

Coupled with enrollment in California teacher education programs dropping by 75 percent in the past decade according to the Learning Policy Institute, and the cost of living in the Bay Area at an all-time high, local schools in particular are hurting for qualified teachers. The subjects of highest need are math, science and special education.

Beetz believes part of the problem with hiring teachers for these areas, specifically in math and science, is that there's more money to be had in the private sector, where many entry level jobs have comparable requirements to education. She said in her district, starting teachers make an average of \$60,000 including benefits, whereas the starting salary for a science researcher in San Francisco is \$77,000 and up, according to the salary reporting organization Glassdoor.

“Basically we're all competing for the same teachers,” Beetz says. “But that's why we're tapping into the classified staff who live in the community and already work here.”

In truth, it's a relationship that Cal State East Bay has long had with K-12 schools throughout the region, but the grant simply makes the arrangement formal — and provides a much-needed boost in potential employees.

According to Engdahl, upward of 75 percent of Cal State East Bay students in the university's credential program stay local. For Beetz, that not only increases the number of candidates she can interview each year, it gives her confidence that she's getting graduates who are highly qualified.

“We have a lot of teachers from Cal State East Bay and that partnership is something we want to foster,” Beetz said. “The in-classroom experience Cal State East Bay students have, is a huge part of the program, not an afterthought. They come out prepared, they’re well trained and they’re already immersed in the community.”

A FLOURISHING PARTNERSHIP

Since many of the grant participants work full time, Beetz and Engdahl, along with representatives from the other two districts, agreed that in order to make the program work, flexibility would be key.

RISING IN THE EAST: THE CAMPAIGN FOR CAL STATE EAST BAY IS UNDERWAY

Want to support students like Dan Poulos? Interested in funding tomorrow’s teachers through the College of Education and Allied Studies? Learn about our goal of raising \$60 million in honor of our 60th anniversary, and how you can help fund initiatives such as teacher education scholarships. For more information visit us online, or contact Fern Tyler at

And so far, they’ve been right.

For example, a clerical employee at Castro Valley High School who participates in the program plans to work a weekend day this fall so she can have time Monday through Friday to student teach without losing income.

And Poulos is transferring his day job from Redwood Alternative to Castro Valley High School since

fern.tyler@csueastbay.edu
or (510) 885-2433.

**RISING IN THE
EAST**

that's where he will be student teaching. His day will begin early, doing grounds work before classes start at 6 a.m. Then, once students arrive, he'll transition into

student teaching. After the final bell, he'll go back to work as a custodian and take classes at Cal State East Bay at night. It's a lot to juggle, but he says it's worth it.

That sort of willingness to work with nontraditional students is what Engdahl reports makes Cal State East Bay and the credential program unique.

"This reflects the philosophy we have at East Bay to find a way to help every student succeed," he says. "Education isn't the process of [weeding] people out, but finding creative ways to make everyone successful. If we're teaching that to our future teachers, we also need to practice it as a program."

BUILT FOR SUCCESS

As school starts up in districts around the region, and professors and students like Engdahl and Poulos enjoy their last weeks of summer, the grant program participants — both employers and students — are confident it will succeed.

As for Poulos, he's nervous about what the next year holds in terms of workload, but eager to finally see his dreams come to fruition.

“I’m very excited, it’s what I’ve wanted to do and what I’ve been trying to do,” he says. “It’s quite a jump to go from maintaining the buildings and grounds to the other side (teaching), but I’m ready. Where I was [previously] ‘Custodian Dan,’ now I’m going to be ‘Mr. Poulos’ or ‘Mr. P.’ It’s going to be great.”

NEXT STORY



FEATURE

Meet Trunger

The app that solves your mobile food problems, and the Cal State East Bay entrepreneurs behind it

SEPTEMBER 6, 2017

SUBSCRIBE TO EASTBAY TODAY



EAST BAY

© 2017 CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, EAST BAY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.