

THOSE WHO CAN

BY LUKE GRAHAM

THE TEACHING SHORTAGE



Outside the Arellano family home in northwest Denver, visitors are not greeted with a handshake or head nod, but a whiff of something awfully good in the air.

In the basement apartment Sandra Arellano pounds flour for gordita tortillas. She keeps one eye on pots cooking beans, chicharones, chili rojo and hot dogs, and the other on her 2-year-old granddaughter.

Eleven-year-old twins Edith and Judith Rios-Arellano sit at the kitchen table, hesitant and fighting the notion of doing homework.

"I don't like homework," Edith declares. "But this helped me get my grades up. I didn't have the best grades because of homework."

By this, she means the Spanish English Exchange Program through Regis University, which encourages students across the University to spend two hours a week in a family's home in the neighborhood. Each semester about 40 students take part in the cultural immersion program.

While it attracts Spanish majors and those who want to be doctors or lawyers, it's an absolute requirement for Regis students who want to become teachers.



Regis student Andrew Reynolds works with students from Ricardo Flores Magon Academy. Before students enter the Regis education program, they are required to spend a day a week at schools tutoring.

The idea is to help aspiring teachers understand the dynamics outside the classroom. The students help with homework — on this night literacy for Edith and graphing points for Judith — but they also listen to the families, often sharing a meal.

It's about the tutoring, but it's not.

"At first the program made me uncomfortable," said Caitlin Birge, who graduated from Regis in 2014 with her education degree and is working on her Master of Arts in Education. "But then it was something I looked forward to. And nothing prepared me to be in a school and adjust and adapt better."

That's the idea behind Regis' unique approach to preparing education students for the realities of the classroom and the embattled teaching profession.

Thanks to low salaries, a lack of respect, cost of education, student debt and low job satisfaction that have sparked strikes in multiple states, the profession faces challenges nationwide.

Regis, however, remains focused on designing programs that better serve the kids who need it most and preparing teachers to commit to the role of educators for the long haul.

SHARED EXPERIENCE

Jason Armijo remembers jumping into the car with his mom, leaving the trailer park and driving up the long Federal Boulevard hill. As they took a left on 50th he would peer out the car toward the idyllic, pristine campus as it disappeared from view.

"Mom," he'd say. "Someday I'm going to go to Regis."

Armijo graduated from Regis and now is looking forward to his third year of teaching high school students whose primary language isn't English.

"I use what I learned at Regis every day. I teach them *magis, cura personalis* and show how it relates to them. A lot of teachers miss that and don't know what's going on in their students' lives.

"A lot of teachers I work with haven't had that," he said. "Poverty is incredibly hard to understand if you've never been through it or around it."

Armijo knows it too well. And, despite a college education and a good professional job, he still lives on the edge.

He works two other jobs, including scooping ice cream at a local shop. He has two roommates to help with the cost of living. After loans and essentials, Armijo lives paycheck to paycheck. He knows he needs a master's degree to increase his salary but isn't sure how he'll fund it.

"Why do we do it?" Armijo asked. "It's the relationships we have with our students (that) you can't explain. You're not just a teacher. I'm a counselor, I'm a parent, I'm a nurse. When they walk into my classroom, they are home. For me, that is so life giving."



Regis graduate Jason Armijo has found a profession he loves in teaching. Preparing for his third year, Armijo also understands the struggles a teacher faces.

Five of the seven teachers in his department are looking for new jobs, or new careers, an alarming trend occurring across Colorado.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the demand for teachers nationwide will outpace the supply by more than 100,000 by 2021. An estimated 3,000 new teachers are needed each year to fill Colorado classrooms.

Colorado's numbers don't look good: It's dead last in teacher wage competitiveness. It's second to last in the nation in percentage of first-time teachers in the classroom. Nearly a fifth of all Colorado teachers are in their first year of teaching. Colorado is also 41st in the nation in student-to-teacher ratio.

"I think it really hit us last year when we heard testimony from rural districts and superintendents who told us they can't even fill a science position," said State Sen. Rachel Zenzinger, a Regis graduate who later worked for Regis University in the Master of Arts in Education program where she specialized in Teacher Leadership. "They said, 'our principal is also the bus driver and the coach.'"

HOPE IN EXPERIENCE

Inside Ricardo Flores Magon Academy, 18 students cram into a computer lab with six Regis freshmen. At the K-8 school a few blocks from Regis — where the student population is more than 97 percent Hispanic and nearly 77 percent of students receive free lunch — one of two weekly tutoring sessions is taking place.

For most Regis education students, this is their first experience in the program. They must spend one of

their first semesters volunteering as a tutor to see if they are a fit for the education program.

For every subsequent semester, undergrads are required to spend at least 35 hours outside the program working in a school. Regis is the only school in the state that requires its undergraduate students to have their Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) endorsements to graduate. The CLD endorsements help teachers understand different cultures and how to assess individuals from different cultures in a learning environment.

All elementary education students also are required to do the classwork to get a special education endorsement.

"We're hard on students. We're not here to mess around," said Liz Grassi, the department chair for the education program in Regis College. "I'm sure you've heard the phrase 'those who can't, teach?' Well, we don't want those who can't teach (English Language Learners or ELL). We don't want those that don't want to work in schools where kids are learning English. What we prepare our students to do is be teachers who can. Because that's what is most important to us."

And on this day at Ricardo Flores, the road for teachers who can begins. Sheets on improper fractions and sequencing events consume one set of students. Others are reading and writing what their perfect Saturday would be. A little more than an hour passes, with some students racing for the door punctually at 4:30 p.m., while others linger for fruit snacks and hugs.

"Working with these kids makes me want to be a teacher more," Regis student Jess Klitzke said. "This confirms it for me. I'm called to this profession even more."

GRADUATING DESIRED GRADUATES

Glenna Donovan grew up in education.

Her father was a teacher in Boulder, so she saw teaching from all sides: the late nights grading, the early mornings planning, the parental complaints and the students struggling to learn.

She saw the successes, too.

“And those really drive a person,” she said.

Even Donovan, who is receiving her Master of Arts in Education from Regis, wasn't ready for what she'd encounter in the classroom. She student taught in a Boulder County classroom that had fewer than 10 Spanish-speaking students.

Her first year teaching, it was the exact opposite.

“I had 97 percent ELL students my first year,” she said. “They had all different levels of English and as a teacher I wanted to help these kids. But I knew I needed to get the tools to help these kids.”

That's when she found Regis.

Karla Esser, director of the Regis Graduate Office of K-12 Partnerships, works with school districts statewide not only to address the teacher shortage problem, but to provide better trained educators for schools through countless partnerships, new innovations and education opportunities.

Helping teachers gain new skills not only improves their pay, it helps increase the likelihood they will stay in the field. In most school districts, a master's degree will mean a pay increase between \$2,000 and \$7,000. Regis' CLD endorsement provides another pay boost.

Currently only 13 percent of Colorado teachers have the certificate, although the state is requiring more to earn it to meet the needs of changing school demographics.

“This is incredibly relevant to the work our teachers are doing,” said Catherine Baldwin-Johnson, the director of the ESL/Dual Language department for Jefferson County Public Schools.

About five times a year, Baldwin-Johnson puts 80 to 100 teachers into the Regis program, not only for its relevancy, but because it's taught by practicing educators, she said.

“I know our teachers are going to try strategies and approaches they learn immediately,” Baldwin-Johnson said.

Esser recently landed a \$42,000 grant from the Colorado Center for Rural Education to help 34 teachers and administrators in two rural school districts earn a 12-credit-hour CLD certificate from Regis. The hours may be put toward a master's degree or renewing their teaching licenses and in some cases, may boost their pay.



TEACHING BY THE NUMBERS

NATIONAL SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS BY 2021

100,000

TEACHER ATTRITION

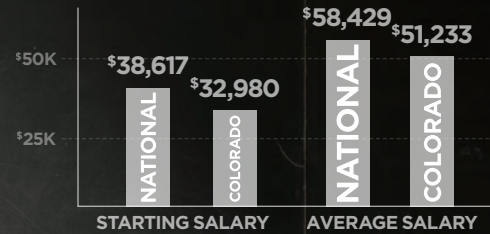
(Source: Colorado Department of Education and Colorado Department of Higher Education)

30%

of teachers leave the field in the first five years

TEACHER SALARIES

(Source: National Center for Education Statistics)



COLORADO
TEACHER
SHORTAGE
EACH YEAR

3,000

The grant is helping in Fort Morgan, a rural community about 90 minutes northeast of Denver. At Pioneer Elementary school, where the ELL population is more than 50 percent, Principal Rod Link struggles to attract teachers.

Link, along with five of his 15 classroom teachers, are taking part in the CLD certificate program provided through the grant.

With 35 percent of his staff participating, the lessons are permeating the building.

They also may achieve a larger goal.

"It's helped us create a little hub of professional development for new teachers, which I think will help us attract new teachers," Link said. "And aside from the knowledge we're gaining, I think this is going to help me retain these teachers. I always say if we can get a teacher in our building for three years, I feel like we're going to get them for a lot longer."

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Inside Jason Armijo's classroom, pages hang from the ceiling. They're from an assignment weeks earlier when his students did blackout poetry: They pieced together words and brief phrases from existing texts to create poems.

Armijo said the poems were incredible – dripping with sorrow, but also bubbling with possibilities. Armijo understands the difference a teacher can make.

He couldn't read until third grade, when a teacher took time after school to help him.

"Who knows where I'd be if she hadn't done that," Armijo said.

Many adults have similar stories about a teacher who encouraged them to stretch beyond what they thought they could do. Without them, where would each of us be?

"No matter if you're a neuroscientist, a doctor, a lawyer or whatever you've done, you learned to read from a teacher," Esser said. "Where in the world would you be without teachers? Wherever you are, and however successful you've been, a teacher helped you get there."