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Teachers take class in policy advocacy

National conference discusses ways to influence issues in public arena

BY KELLY BOTHUM
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WILMINGTON -- A group of teachers from across the country left their classrooms and headed to Delaware Saturday to learn how to advocate for educational policies that will benefit their students.

About 70 members of the Teachers Network Leadership Institute are spending the weekend here to talk about how they can individually, and as a group, bridge the gap between the statehouse, where educational policies are typically developed, and the classroom, where they are implemented.

A major goal of the two-day conference is to give teachers the chance to let their voices be heard on educational issues, such as inclusion practices, teacher retention and student testing, said Ellen Meyers, senior vice president for Teachers Network, a nationwide non-profit organization that works with public school teachers.

"You can no longer do what you want in your classroom, for better or worse," said Meyers, who directs the New York-based Teachers Network. That lack of freedom risks stifling creativity in the classroom, she added. "Teachers have to weigh in on that. Otherwise, they're going to be told what to do."

The Rodel Charitable Foundation of Delaware is hosting the group, which includes teachers from California, New York, Virginia and other states. Rodel, formed six years ago, seeks to make Delaware's schools among the best in the nation by 2012.

During the conference, members are reviewing research studies written by teachers in the institute that focus on issues such as parental involvement, curriculum and school culture. They're also getting the opportunity to network with other educators from around the country to see what they're doing and what programs are working.

"So often with teachers, you stay in your own entity. This connects us," said Aneesha Jacko, an early childhood literacy instructor in Brooklyn, N.Y., who attended the conference at Wilmington's Spencer Hotel. "I think we're doing the work that changes students' lives. When there is policy being developed that can affect those students, the voice of teachers needs to be heard."

Because Delaware is a small state, it's not as hard to create opportunities for teachers to be included when it comes to educational policy issues, said Paul Herdman, president of the Rodel Foundation. The goal is not just for teachers to get the chance to talk with policy-makers about education, but to be viewed as equal partners in the debate, he said.

Thirty teachers from all grade levels across Delaware are participating in the conference. All are nationally certified or working toward their certification, Herdman said. They meet monthly and, like other Teacher Network Leadership Institute affiliate members, conduct research studies.

The hope is that they will bring back to their schools an energy that will encourage other teachers to get involved. "There's a real commitment on their part," he said. "They're already doing above and beyond."

The Delaware contingent includes teachers such as Tamara Grimes-Stewart, a special-education teacher in the Christina School District for 10 years. It's Delaware's second year as one of 12 affiliates with the Teachers Network Leadership Institute. Working together with teachers from other areas really helps the group because it widens the focus, she said.

"It's important for us across the state to know what people are doing across the country," she said. "I can see the whole picture of what's going on. We can accomplish so much more."

The conference continues today from 8 a.m. until noon.

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