

WEST METRO

# Metro school districts try 'grow their own' approach to hiring special education teachers

To fight shortage, education assistants are getting a chance to become teachers.

By Kim McGuire (<http://www.startribune.com/kim-mcguire/137959283/>) Star Tribune |

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Over the past four years, Samantha Ovadal has been bitten, hit, kicked and scratched while working as an education assistant at a Maplewood school that serves students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders.

Yet Ovadal loves her job, and dreams of becoming a special education teacher. The only things standing in her way are the time and money it would take to pursue her master's degree. Most likely, she would have to quit her job, creating another difficult-to-fill classroom vacancy.

But a first-of-its-kind University of Minnesota master's degree program promises to groom education assistants such as Ovadal into special education teachers by training them on the job in the classrooms where they already work.

The newly approved program is designed in part to help metro area school districts "grow their own" special education teachers who are licensed to work with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).

In Minnesota, those teachers are in great demand, but also in short supply. The problem is so dire that it often prompts school districts to share those teachers, recruit out of state and, in some instances, place unqualified staff members in the classroom. School districts also have trouble retaining special education teachers.

"The candidates that have been accepted into this program are excellent, and they know exactly what they're getting into," said Jennifer McComas, a professor in the U's Department of Educational Psychology. "They have the experience, the passion, to become excellent teachers."

So far, Ovadal and about 20 others have applied up for the two-year program, which will begin next fall. Each of the aspiring teachers is an education assistant, or paraprofessional, with a bachelor's degree and experience working in an EBD classroom.

"For me, this program provides the perfect bridge from where I am to where I want to go," Ovadal said.

## Model that makes sense

The shortage of special education teachers in Minnesota is both severe and persistent. A yearlong project undertaken by the Star Tribune found there had been a 10 percent decrease in special education teachers between 2008 and 2013, while there had been a 10 percent increase in the student population for the same time period.

Similarly, special education teachers were quitting at a rate faster than new ones were entering the profession.

John Klaber, executive director of the Minnesota Administrators for Special Education, said the departures are often fueled by the amount of paperwork special education teachers are required to complete under both federal and state law. And sometimes aspiring teachers simply aren't ready to take on the demands associated with some students — kids who might throw a desk across a room or refuse to participate in class.

"Bless the heart of the teachers who deal with the most challenging behavior, the most challenging kids," he said. "It's not surprising that they're going to have their pick of jobs. But schools can't simply wait around for them to show up at their door and say, 'I want to work for you.'"

Staff members of Northeast Metro Intermediate 916, which serves students with disabilities from 11 school districts, are all too familiar with the EBD teacher shortage.

That's why they approached the University of Minnesota over a year ago with the idea of establishing a program that could help some of their most valued education assistants become licensed special education teachers.



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([http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows\\_13992583323](http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_13992583323))

Samantha Ovadal, an education assistant at John Glenn Alternative Program in Maplewood, is one of the people hoping to take advantage of the new

Those employees, said 916's staffing coordinator Megan McAllister, are passionate about working with students with special needs and understand the demands placed on special education teachers.

By fostering on-the-job training that leads to becoming a licensed teacher, the school district can meet its staffing needs without losing valuable employees to graduate school. Students benefit because familiar faces are kept in the classroom. "It's a model that makes sense on so many levels," McAllister said.

#### **A different path to teaching**

The program, which was approved by the state Board of Teaching on April 11, will require participants to complete 36 credit hours, attend weekly seminars and work with a university instructor embedded in the school classrooms where they already work, offering instruction and coaching.

Upon completion, not only will the newly minted teachers have their master's degree in special education, they will be licensed to work with students who have emotional and behavioral disorders. Districts with employees planning on participating in the program include 916, Intermediate District 917, Minneapolis, Mounds View and North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale.

McComas described the program as intensive, but concedes it is likely to offer a quicker path toward becoming an EBD teacher than a more traditional licensure pathway.

"This, like other licensure programs, doesn't offer a 100 percent guarantee of a teaching job, but obviously their chances are quite good."

#### **Tough job, joyful moment**

Ovadal, who has an undergraduate degree in sociology, hopes to stay with the John Glenn Middle School Alternative Learning Program once she completes the University of Minnesota program.

She says it would be tough to leave the students who made her fall in love with teaching in the first place.

She recalls the precise moment when that occurred. It was four years ago, early in her career at John Glenn. She was working with a student who had bounced around from school to school in the metro area. He was in fifth grade and couldn't read.

Eventually, Ovadal, says she helped him read a kindergarten-level book "with tiny words."

"He felt like he was a tough guy, but as soon as he began reading that book, he started to smile," she said. "He was proud of himself. I was proud of him. That was the moment when I knew I wanted to be a special education teacher."

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