

## **Creativity in meeting teaching needs**

### **RCSD eyes nontraditional candidate pools for help**

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It was a match made from necessity: Rochester's Enrico Fermi School 17 needed a Spanish speaker for a bilingual classroom. Yanelys Ortega was looking for a career improvement from her job at Subway.

The only catch was that Ortega, a Cuban refugee, is not a teacher. She's not a professional sandwich artist, either. She's a pediatrician, with three years of professional practice in Cuba before leaving with her husband.

School 17 Principal Caterina Leone-Mannino was undeterred. Ortega is now a long-term substitute in the bilingual teacher position, and looking to gain certification in the fall. The Rochester City School District which, like schools everywhere faces a major shortage of teachers in certain areas, is hoping to tap into nontraditional candidate pools more often.

"She ran a wing of a hospital in Cuba, so I think she can handle this," Leone-Mannino said. "Why not (try)?"

Ortega is one of eight people now serving as substitutes in RCSD who came from another country — most often Cuba — and have a different sort of professional expertise. While some alternate pathways to teaching certification exist in New York, the district is pushing to make it even easier for people like Ortega to get a teaching position.

The U.S. Department of Education designates where there is a particular need for certain sorts of teachers in different regions of the country. In New York's Big Four districts (Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers), they are career and technical education and bilingual education, both for special and general education students.

At the same time, enrollment in teacher training programs has declined sharply in recent years. Nazareth College, for instance, awarded 480 teaching degrees in 2006 but only 213 in 2015.

Ortega does not yet speak English fluently, but teaches the Spanish half of a bilingual classroom. She said her students help her with English and her colleagues help her with the craft of teaching.

"I still get to work with children," she said in Spanish. "The psychology is the same — how they think, how they behave, how medication might be affecting them."

The New York State Education Department, which licenses teachers, has established a separate pathway to certification for people coming from another career or another country. The main difference is that it does not require a graduate degree.

“I know the state is trying to make accommodations because there’s such a teaching shortage,” said Ann Walton, the coordinator of certification and graduate advisement at the College at Brockport. “(But) if people want to teach and be compliant, they’re going to need to find a registered program so they can get the proper credentials to teach. ... Certainly, students deserve highly qualified teachers.”

While many refugees who settle in the United States were deprived of meaningful education or work in their home countries, others — including Cubans and Syrians — often have significant training and work experience.

As a doctor in Cuba, Ortega said she was only earning \$40 a month. She and her husband were on a professional trip to Ecuador when they absconded, making their way to the United States two months later.

She has been teaching at School 17 since January, when another Cuban recommended she apply. She’s now planning to enroll in Brockport in the fall to gain her certification and make a career in the classroom.

“If there’s something technical about teaching, (other teachers) tell me I should do this or that,” she said. “But, subs often come from other countries, so they bring with them not only those experiences, but what they know from their past careers.”

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**Yanelys Ortega teaches at Rochester’s Enrico Fermi School 17 in April. Ortega is one of eight people serving as substitutes in the Rochester City School District who came from another country and have a different sort of professional expertise.**

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