



Life Lessons teacher Irene Jeffries at Jefferson Elementary School on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023 in Everett, Washington. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

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52 Everett Public Schools employees become teachers through new program

Paraeducators, graduation coordinators and other staff joined teaching certification programs at universities in the state.

By Surya Hendry

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EVERETT — Last year, Irene Jeffries was a paraeducator at Jefferson Elementary, helping students with disabilities learn life skills.

This year, Jeffries is returning to the life skills classroom as a teacher.

“It hasn’t sunk in yet,” Jeffries said. “I don’t know if it ever will.”

Jeffries is one of 52 Everett Public Schools employees who got their teaching certification in June through a new district program. Paraeducators, graduation coordinators and other staff across the district joined teaching certification programs at schools like City University, Western Washington University and Western Governor’s University.

On average, these employees already had four years of classroom experience, program coordinator Dulce Ruiz said, also noting 40% were people of color.

Ruiz met with employees to help them coordinate their work and college schedules. She also helped them create payment plans and find scholarships for the program.



Irene Jeffries goes through her life skills tasks box of prompts on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023 in Everett, Washington. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

The City University program cost \$11,000. Three students qualified for \$8,000 scholarships from the district.

Starting in July 2022, Jeffries was part of a cohort of 19 students at City University. She took classes on Individualized Education Plans, behavioral management, de-escalation practices and classroom culture.

Jeffries became a paraeducator in 2021 so she could have the same schedule as her children, who attend Jefferson in south Everett. She was assigned to the life skills classroom, where many of the students are nonverbal and have Individualized Education Plans.

She enjoyed the challenges of working with kids who each had specific needs.

“It’s a very organized dance that you have to learn very quickly,” she said.

Over time, Jeffries became interested in teaching. Over half of the pupils at Jefferson Elementary are students of color, but Jeffries, who is Black, didn’t see that diversity reflected in the teaching staff. She wanted to “help students see themselves in the adults they were working with.”

She continued her education while working as a paraeducator during the school year. Then, she took time off in the spring to student-teach at Jefferson. At the end of the school year, Jeffries earned her teaching certificate.

In June, she learned Jefferson’s life skills teacher was moving to Lowell Elementary. Jeffries applied for the job and got it.

From her time as a paraeducator, Jeffries already knows seven of her nine students, who are between the ages of 6 and 11.

She’s focused on building good relationships with the five adult staff members in her class. Because of her time as a paraeducator, she “knows what it’s like to feel valued,” she said. She wants to make sure the behavioral techs and paraeducators also have a voice in her classroom.

Jeffries is also writing lesson plans and thinking about appropriate challenges for her students, including basic money skills, phonics and board games.

“Time in my classroom just flies by,” Jeffries said.



Irene Jeffries shows how her students will use a communication board for exercises and other tasks in the classroom on Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023 in Everett, Washington. (Olivia Vanni / The Herald)

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Jeffries is now working toward her master’s degree through the partnership with City University. She wants to study nonverbal communication strategies.

Tackling a degree while teaching full-time is “bananas, in the best way,” Jeffries said.

Next year’s teacher training program already has 34 staffers signed up, Ruiz said. More people may sign up as the school year continues.

Everett Public Schools has 54 new teachers this year. Six are from Jeffries’ City University cohort.

Due to a \$28 million budget deficit, the district had 42 full-time teaching jobs and 24 paraeducator positions on the chopping block in March.

School starts Wednesday.

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