



Contact: Madison Fantozzi
863.298.6872/954.594.9808
mfantozzi@polk.edu
polk.edu

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Polk State and Polk County Public Schools launch Teacher Apprenticeship Program

Thursday, July 10, 2025 — Polk State College and Polk County Public Schools formally announced the launch of the Teacher Apprenticeship Program during a celebration on the College's Lakeland Campus on Tuesday.

The program is made possible by a Pathway to Career Opportunities Grant (PCOG) of more than \$281,000 from the Florida Department of Education. The grant, approved in December 2024, will cover tuition, books, transportation, and supplies. Students will complete the program at no cost to them.

"Today has been a long time coming," Polk State President Angela Garcia Falconetti said. "Our faculty and staff have worked very hard with our grants team and Polk County Public Schools to make this happen."

The first cohort features seven students, ranging in age from 21 to 47, selected by Polk County Public Schools following an application process. To be eligible, students must hold an Associate in Arts degree and currently work as a paraeducator for the district. Through the program, students will co-teach in the classroom with an experienced teacher while pursuing a Polk State Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education.

"The legislature has recognized the role that paraeducators play," said Frederick Heid, Superintendent of Polk County Public Schools. "They have recognized the hard work you put in and the difference you make in students' lives."

The cohort kicked off the program this summer with an eight-week "boot camp" session that lasts daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with foundational classes. Beginning in August, the participants will spend two years in the classroom working alongside veteran teachers while completing their college credits.

"This program has a lot of potential," said Diana Nicholas, paraeducator at South Pointe Elementary School. "It helps paras fill teachers' vacancies and have a future in elementary education."

Students will graduate at the conclusion of the Spring 2027 Semester and will enter the workforce with two years of teaching experience. Polk County Public Schools will ensure that all who complete the program will have a job after graduation. The Teacher Apprenticeship Program will address teacher shortages and retention.

"While you are part of the public school system, you are also a part of us," Falconetti told the students. "It's exciting to get to be able to learn on the job, to be able to get credit for that, and to be able to graduate with a bachelor's degree from our institution."

Polk State and Polk County Public Schools are in the process of applying for another PCOG grant through the Department of Education to launch a second cohort with up to 15 participants. That cohort would start during the Summer 2026 Semester with another boot camp-style session.

"I applied for this program, because as a single parent, this is a chance for me to no longer live paycheck to paycheck," said Tamika Kelly, paraeducator at Scott Lake Elementary and a student in the program. "This apprenticeship is free. It gave me the fulfillment of knowing I'm a future teacher in Polk County."

###