Bill Lindquist, an assistant professor at Hamline, talked to his class about how to engage students to think beyond the obvious during a math and science teaching class.

$40 million aimed to transform teaching
By JEAN HOPFENSPERGER, Star Tribune

$40 million from the Bush Foundation aims to transform how Minnesota trains its educators.

Minnesota's teacher training is about to undergo its most significant overhaul in decades, fueled by a $40 million Bush Foundation grant announced Thursday.

Roughly half of the state's teachers are expected to retire or leave the profession within the next 10 years -- creating an opening to vastly change how the next generation is trained to step into those classrooms and boost student achievement, said foundation president Peter Hutchinson.

"Today, [education] students mainly go to class, take notes and read books. That's got to change," he said. The infusion of money will be used to aggressively market the teaching field to the state's best and brightest, and to provide less training in university classrooms and more inside local schools, guided by mentor teachers.

The $40 million is the biggest single investment the St. Paul-based foundation has ever made, Hutchinson said.

Under the plan, 14 universities in Minnesota, North and South Dakota will guarantee that the 3,500 teachers they graduate each year will be able to lift student test scores in their classrooms in one year, every year. Currently, thousands of Minnesota students fail to meet that basic benchmark.

"When the history of our college is written, this will be considered a historic moment," said Jean Quam, dean of the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development. "To be able to rewrite curriculum, and be given funds to do it, is remarkable."

At St. Cloud State University, "the way we teach hasn't changed much since our institution was founded in 1869," said President Earl Potter. "For our entire history, we've prepared people using a standard model, and then handed them off to schools, never knowing whether they've been successful." A collaboration between universities and colleges, local schools and a philanthropic foundation to track and affect teacher effectiveness "is unprecedented," he said.

What happens next will likely be watched closely by educators around the nation.

**Targeted recruiting**

A key to success will be attracting the right students to the teaching profession, said Susan Heegaard, a Bush Foundation vice president.
Instead of simply waiting to see who applies, schools of education at colleges will begin recruiting people with specific skills or backgrounds. That could include mid-career professionals working in math or science, and individuals with cultural and racial backgrounds that reflect Minnesota's growing student population, she said.

Achievement gaps have been persistent in Minnesota between minority and majority students. But research shows those gaps melt away when students consistently experience effective teaching, Hutchinson said.

The plan has drawn praise from groups ranging from the Minnesota Board of Teaching to education scholars to the state's teachers union. They particularly endorse the goal of making curriculum more relevant to the needs of today's students and continuing support for fresh graduates with teaching degrees.

Some question whether it's realistic to guarantee that a freshly graduated teacher will be able to lift the academic achievement of every student in the class.

"Who are the people in the schools who will be supervising the [new] teachers?" asked Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. He recalled that as a student teacher, he was assigned to a classroom headed by an athletic coach who was not an ideal mentor. Bright stars among student teachers could find themselves disillusioned if they land in the wrong setting, he warned. He asked if there would be rewards for making progress, and consequences for not making progress.

Hutchinson said that teachers would be placed in schools prepared to support them and that mentors would be trained. At this point, there are no plans for rewards and consequences, he said, but that could change.

Starting salaries for teachers in the metro area are about $30,000 to $39,000 a year, said Tom Dooher, president of Education Minnesota, a union representing about 70,000 teachers. Dooher said that he supports the Bush plan, but that "if you elevate the standards, you need to elevate the pay."

Karen Balmer, executive director of the Minnesota Board of Teaching, believes the experiment will result in new, innovative teaching in Minnesota classrooms. She hopes to take lessons learned -- good and bad -- and translate them into state teaching license standards, she said.

Meanwhile Linda Hanson, president of Hamline University, said the initiative is one more example of Minnesota's national leadership in education. "It's unparalleled," she said, "and it's the Minnesota way of doing things."

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