First graduates of Broward College's teacher school face vanishing market

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel

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When Broward College decided to offer four-year education degrees, it hoped to fill what seemed like a dire need for teachers in the county.

But the timing hasn't worked well for the Teacher Education Program, which many hoped would provide a direct pipeline into teaching jobs in the Broward County School District. The program's first nine students graduated in December, and the district hired four of them. Six months later, all four were laid off — the result of budget and union constraints.

Thirteen more students graduated in May, but the district isn't considering them for jobs either. A few of the 22 graduates have found jobs elsewhere.

"We didn't have a crystal ball," said Aline Sarria, dean of the college's Teacher Education Program. "I know the economy has treated the Broward County School District pretty badly."

Approved by the state in 2008, the program has cost the college $4.1 million so far, with about $600,000 coming from state appropriations and the rest from tuition and other college funds. Despite the district's downsizing, many say there is still a need for the program, which offers degrees only in math, science and special education, all identified as critical shortage areas.

"What's happening now is a short term-issue," said Robert Shockley, a Florida Atlantic University professor who heads a state teacher education group. "Regardless of the budget, we know teachers are going to need to be replaced in the near future."

A 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education predicted a third of the nation's 3.2 million teachers would retire within four years. That hasn't happened yet, because the economy and poor job prospects have caused some veteran teachers to postpone retirement and others to stay put to avoid being unemployed, Shockley said. As the economy improves, jobs will start to open, he said.

Sarria said the layoffs haven't discouraged students from enrolling. The program currently has 320 students, and 70 applications have been approved for the fall. She said the graduates, even ones who are unemployed, have told her they were pleased with the program and school principals have sent emails praising the teachers.

Jamie Jacuzzo, 27, is in her second semester and is not discouraged. She said job prospects will
"There will always be a need for teachers," she said. "I know I'm going to be great at what I do, and I'm confident I will get a job."

Gracie Diaz, the Broward School District's associate superintendent of human resources, said graduates from Broward College and several other local colleges do get preference for job openings, but they were never guaranteed jobs. She said the district can't predict future funding shortfalls or legislative changes.

Last year, the district used $50 million in federal money to hire and retain teachers, but that wasn't replaced, Diaz said. While teachers certified in math and science are still more in demand than other fields, the union contract requires layoffs to be done by seniority.

Teachers with two or fewer years with the district were targeted for the cuts, regardless of what they taught. About 1,400 were laid off, with about 200 to 300 being hired back, mostly those in the math and science fields. More rehires are expected, although Diaz doubts everyone will be brought back.

Right now, the Broward College graduates remain without jobs.

"There's still a desperate need for math teachers," said Lauren O'Brien, 26, a Broward College graduate who was laid off after six months as a math teacher at Miramar High School. "This was done on seniority, which I don't think is fair. It's not based on what's best for the students."

The other graduates laid off were Sami Meyer, a math teacher at Hollywood Hills High; Jennifer Sanchez, an English for Speakers of Other Languages teacher at Meadowbrook Elementary in Fort Lauderdale; and Nicole Renton-Murray, a special education teacher at Westpine Middle in Sunrise.

"This is the problem that happens when you have layoffs, and a district doesn't have the flexibility to keep the teachers they want," said Katharine Strunk, an assistant professor of education and policy at the University of Southern California.

Pat Santeramo, president of the Broward Teachers Union, said while the union contract requires layoffs to be done by seniority, the union is willing to discuss exceptions but district officials never requested that.

State Sen. Jeremy Ring, D-Parkland, said he still thinks the program was a good investment.

"I've seen times when you have to hire a lot and times when you have to cut a lot, and we happen to be cutting right now," he said. "But I don't think it's ever a bad thing to train new teachers."