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DESERET NEWS

2 initiatives to aid would-be teachers

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Western Governors University will open its virtual doors to would-be teachers across the nation soon, thanks to a \$10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

And Utah will launch a concurrent program to assure the availability of teachers during a time of rapid growth in the public education system.

The two education initiatives were announced Monday by U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education William Hansen and Gov. Mike Leavitt in a news conference in Washington Elementary School.

The federal grant, to be dispensed to WGU over a five-year period, is funded through the Star Schools program, a federal program to improve teaching through the use of technology.

Hansen, an Idahoan who said being in Utah was like being in "my second home," told Washington's fourth- and fifth-graders that "college is possible. Aid is available. Work hard, stay in school and get good grades. Now is the time to think about it."

The Bush administration will do its part, he said, by supporting reading programs and by helping to increase the pool of teachers across the country. The grant awarded Monday will bring courses via technology to prospective teachers who "can't go to a regular campus," he said. "Western Governors University is in front of the curve, and children will benefit."

The National Teachers College to be operated through WGU will provide opportunity for three groups in particular: paraprofessionals now working in classrooms but not fully trained as teachers; second-

career seekers, who have credentials in other fields but would like to become teachers; and current teachers who want to upgrade their proficiencies. WGU already offers a master's degree in learning technology, Leavitt noted.

The governor and others emphasized the unique nature of the proposals, which will offer competency-based credit, rather than requiring a set amount of class time. Teachers who can demonstrate competency at one level can go on to the next to expedite their completion of a course.

The Utah initiative, embodied in a memorandum of understanding, aims to add 4,000 teachers to the ranks through a competency-based online program, the governor said. The hope is to qualify teachers particularly in academic areas in which there are significant shortages, such as mathematics, science, reading and instructional technology. Teachers already in the classroom who need additional training to qualify to teach in these fields will get first consideration at half tuition, Leavitt said.

The five partners in the Utah project are the rural superintendents' association, WGU (which will offer 25 scholarships), the national and state departments of education and the Utah system of higher education. Representatives of each organization signed the memo of understanding. But the most applauded signatory was Elvia Renteria, a Washington fifth-grader. An outline of her hand enclosed her signature as a reminder of what both projects aim to accomplish — more teachers for the country's children.

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