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**For Immediate Release**

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## **Project REAL Helps Rockford Schools Grow Future Teachers**

Developing tomorrow's teachers today to address looming teacher shortages and mismatches between student and teacher populations is the mission of two new future teachers clubs at Jefferson High School and the Rockford Environmental Science Academy (RESA).

The clubs are an initiative of Project REAL, a partnership between Northern Illinois University Rockford schools, Rock Valley College, and several community organizations. Project REAL's goals are to improve student performance from pre-school through graduate school, to improve teacher training, and to be proactive in addressing current and upcoming educational problems. Besides Jefferson and RESA, Nelson and Rolling Green elementary schools are part of Project REAL.

The clubs are a Project REAL focus because Rockford public schools will see severe teacher shortages in the near future due to large numbers of retirements.

Debra Dimke, general director for professional development for Rockford Public Schools District 205, said 250 teachers have already declared retirement at the end of this school year. Earlier estimates calculated the loss to be as high as 500 certified teachers – roughly 25 percent of Rockford's teaching staff – at the end of the 2004/05 school year because of early retirement incentives.

Many retirements are teachers in special education, math, science, foreign languages and music. Additionally, a mismatch between the composition of the Rockford teaching force, which is 88 percent Caucasian, and the student body, and an approximately 11 percent exodus of incoming teachers leaving after their first year, have created a need for more teachers.

Club activities have included job shadowing, after-school mentoring between teachers and students, creation of a peer-mentored writing lab and a recent day trip to NIU to see teacher training in action.

During the NIU trip, students visited education classes, toured math and science labs, ate lunch in a dorm, and gained information on admissions and financial aid for RVC and NIU. Approximately 25 members of Jefferson's club attended.

"The kids really enjoyed the NIU tour," said Keri Mattson, a Jefferson High School English teacher and faculty sponsor of its club. "They especially liked the opportunity to sit in on college classes and see how professors interact with students."

The next student outing will be Dec. 7, when future teachers travel to Rock Valley College to learn more about the 2+2 admissions program between RVC and NIU, said Diane Kuehl, RVC transfer coordinator.

A 2+2 program allows students to take courses for two years at RVC, transfer to NIU, then complete a bachelor's degree.

On a day-to-day basis, Jefferson's club is "focusing on having the students work with a different department each month within the building," Mattson said. "In November, we focused on math, and in December, we'll focus on science."

Through the clubs, Project REAL partners work to generate interest in teaching areas that will experience the most shortage the soonest. Elementary education, for example, appears oversupplied with teachers, so Project REAL partners are working to generate interest in other specialties.

"Areas that especially need new teachers are special education, speech pathology, counseling, foreign languages, math, science, vocational education and art," said Portia Downey, Project REAL project manager with NIU's College of Education.

"A lot of the kids already in the clubs want to work with younger kids, but we're trying to get them to have an interest in teaching in middle schools and high schools," Mattson said.

Sharon Smaldino, an NIU education professor who directs Project REAL, said the successful startup of the RESA and Jefferson clubs bodes well for additional clubs. "The clubs will eventually expand to other middle schools and high schools so that students are ready to move into teacher education training at RVC and NIU," Smaldino said.

## Project REAL Background

Project REAL is a comprehensive and mutually beneficial partnership between Northern Illinois University, Rock Valley College Rockford School District 205, and community organizations with a focus on improving student performance and enhancing the quality of educators. A five-year, \$5 million U.S. Dept. of Education grant funds Project REAL.

Shared decision making, teacher recruitment, teacher education reform, extending pre-service clinical experiences, professional development, and enabling effective instructional leadership are key factors to ensuring a successful collaboration among project partners. The project is centered in Rockford schools.

### For More Information on Project REAL:

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