

Washington, D.C. - By Kris Kitto

The Herald-Sun Washington Bureau

Donald Barringer never realized his childhood dream of becoming a pediatrician.

But the 24-year-old Durham resident found what he might say is an even better way to work with children every day.

The second-grade teacher at Pearisontown Elementary School remembers the day he first considered teaching as a career option. A fellow student-council member at his Charlotte high school had just won a college scholarship to study education through the North Carolina Teaching Fellows program.

"I was like, 'Whoa, that was just a sign,' " he said.

Barringer said he saw in the program an opportunity to pay for college and begin a career that would make a difference in children's lives.

He won the same scholarship the following year and headed to N.C. Central University to begin his four-year preparation for the classroom.

The program responsible for guiding Barringer, who was recognized as the Durham Public Schools' employee of the month for April, now may become the model for an effort to get young people to fill the growing number of vacancies in America's schools.

U.S. Rep. David Price, D-4th, has introduced a federal bill modeled after the North Carolina program, which offers \$26,000 college scholarships to high school seniors who will commit to teaching in the state's public school system for four years.

Jo Ann Norris, the NCTF administrator, said the 19-year-old program has provided the state with more than 4,700 highly coveted teachers.

Principals, she said, like hiring NCTF teachers, who benefit from an innovative, comprehensive curriculum. This year's coursework includes a summer road trip for the program's sophomores.

The cross-state excursion will provide the future educators a lesson in North Carolina history and culture, as well as job prospects.

"On this bus trip, many of them will get offers, even though graduation is three years away," Norris said.

Wake County, she said, employs the most NCTF alums, with 338 in its ranks.

With the national No Child Left Behind Act's looming teacher-quality deadline, the popularity of the NCTF teachers doesn't come as a surprise.

Under federal law, all public school teachers must have full certification, a bachelor's degree and demonstrated competence in their subject matter by the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

According to Norris, North Carolina has about 9,000 teachers who do not meet these standards.

"We have too many children being taught by long-term substitutes," she said.

Schools often throw substitutes into classrooms because new teachers don't stick around for their second year.

Melinda Anderson at the National Education Association said the attrition rate for new teachers always has been high.

"Almost half of all teacher turnover is due to dissatisfaction or teachers seeking better careers," she said via e-mail.

Keeping teachers in the classroom, then, may be just as important as recruiting new ones.

Price said he hopes the proposed national teaching fellows program would address teacher retention.

"The whole idea of the program is not just to give them a scholarship but to give them a professional identity and some support," he said.

Price said the national effort would include mentor programs and mid-career educational opportunities for teaching-fellows teachers.

Most teachers in the North Carolina program make a long-term commitment to education, Norris said. About 82 percent of NCTF teachers return to the classroom after their fourth year, when their commitment has been fulfilled, she said.

Like North Carolina, many states already have teaching fellows programs in place. Price said the national plan would allow existing programs to grow and new programs to start.

Barringer said that, while he has trouble finding time to tackle the mountains of paper work his job requires, he has enjoyed professional growth and the family-like atmosphere at Pearsontown.

Only in his third year, he already helps train other second-grade teachers.

He said he sees the importance in what he's doing and the continued need for good teachers.

"When you think about education, we all had to go to school," he said, "and we wouldn't be where we are today if it wasn't for a teacher."