MANHATTAN -- Jorge Estrella was working at a Wal-Mart in Dodge City and looking at a long, difficult path through college when good fortune came to him.

Estrella had wanted to be a teacher since he was a child growing up in Mexico City. He became a student assistant to an English as a Second Language teacher in his high school after moving to Dodge City in the ninth grade. Estrella had been hoping to enroll in a community college when his teacher told him about the BESITOS program at Kansas State University.

BESITOS, which means "little kisses" in Spanish and is an acronym for Bilingual Education Students Interacting To Obtain Success, is in the third year of a five-year, federally funded grant to develop bilingual education and ESL teachers. The program boasts 26 undergraduate students, all of whom are working toward education degrees with an endorsement in ESL and course preparation for states that offer a bilingual education endorsement.

Most of the students in the program had low test scores and grades in high school and are the first generation in their family to live in the United States, said Kevin Murry, co-director of the ESL/dual language program. Murry said many of them would not have gone to college if not for the program.

"There are so many students from underrepresented groups who simply do not get the opportunity to go to college. They don't have enough information to apply, they don't know what steps to follow, they speak a first language other than English and they can be intimidated," Murry said.

Niza DeCarlo, project director, searched high schools in Kansas for candidates who wanted to teach ESL as bilingual educators. Estrella, now a senior in secondary education, fit the bill. He came to Dodge City from Mexico, and moved back and forth between the two countries until graduating from high school.

"BESITOS has done a lot for me. It would have taken a long time to get through college without this. I would have had to take breaks from school to earn money," Estrella said. "They keep us on track. It's very
supportive. There is always somebody pushing me to do what I have to do, which is important because to be a minority and a second-language learner at a university for me has been very hard."

Estrella plans on returning to Dodge City to teach or to get a master of education degree after receiving his undergraduate degree.

"It's something I've always dreamed about, to be a teacher and have a master's degree," Estrella said. "I went through the process of learning a second language. I know what a second-language learner has to go through."

The program encourages the students to work in Kansas school districts, many of which are desperate for teachers who can teach ESL and who are bilingual. Many of these students have the advantage of coming from the very neighborhoods that they will teach in.

"There is already tremendous interest in these students. Districts are constantly courting them," Murry said.

Students are required to volunteer in schools while in the program. In return, they receive a scholarship for tuition, fees and books, along with a monthly stipend. The program helps them with housing and scheduling and provides tutors, mentors and a student lab. The students hold weekly meetings. Tina Reilly, a senior in elementary education from Emporia in the program, said the students form a support system for each other.

The results have been spectacular. The cumulative grade point average for all students is 3.18. At least 13 students have held a 4.0 grade point average for a semester. Nineteen have been on the honors list and 23 have qualified for outside academic scholarships.

Irlanda Gutierrez, a sophomore in elementary education from Manhattan and a native of Nicaragua, was working at a Manhattan pre-school before winning her scholarship, which allowed her to go to school full time.

"I knew it was a great opportunity, because I really wanted to get through school and I hadn't been able to go full time," Gutierrez said.

Lotus Hazlett, whose father emigrated from Nepal, took a long path to arrive at K-State. She worked as a teacher's aide before going to a mission in the Dominican Republic. She still wasn't sure if K-State was the best place for her until the first day of orientation for the program.

"Not only will you be teachers, but you will be advocates for children who have no voice," co-director Socorro Herrera told the new students.

"I knew right then that I had made the right choice," said Hazlett, now a senior in secondary education from Salina.