

A New Era in Teaching: Rebuilding the Educator Pipeline



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FOREWORD

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You've probably heard the not-so-subtle joke that if Rip Van Winkle were suddenly to awaken after sleeping for a century, he would be able to recognize only two institutions in our modern era: churches and schools.¹

Nearly every aspect of education, from how we train teachers to how we teach students, has largely remained frozen in time. Even as we recognize and respect the many accomplishments of educators who have served all learners with distinction, often in the most challenging circumstances, we also understand the pressing need to change many of our systems. Educator preparation programs, in particular, seem to be preparing teachers for the classrooms of the past through approaches and pipelines conceived in the past.

The number of education school graduates is dropping at an alarming rate. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education reports that the number of college students graduating from traditional teacher prep programs dropped 35 percent between 2008 and 2019 (the most recent year for which data is available).²

The result is a teacher shortage that is creating challenges for districts across the country — and one that is hitting districts with the least resources particularly hard. In October 2022, a month or more into the last school year, nearly 60% of public schools in low-income neighborhoods had at least one teaching

vacancy. Even among more affluent districts, 41% of schools found themselves starting the year with at least one vacancy.³

From Machiavelli to Churchill, we've been advised that one should never let a good crisis go to waste. The present teacher shortage in America may seem like a catastrophe for the field, but it also provides the education system with an opportunity to reassess and course correct: to evolve into a more modern and equitable system.

The first step in reimagining education is reimagining teacher preparation: how educators are encouraged to become educators, how training is conducted, and the process of teaching and learning throughout their careers. We cannot sustain the same practices and expect different results; continuing business as usual when it comes to teacher preparation is the equivalent of shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic.

There is no reason to rely on old approaches when we could be preparing teachers through programs that lean into proven models like co-teaching and that are regularly updated to reflect the best of learning science and emerging pedagogy.⁴ Bright spots exist that show us that teacher prep can be more affordable, accessible, and relevant now than in the past. Let us shape our children's futures with open eyes and open minds about the possibilities of new models of preparing our teachers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly **half** of all schools in America were understaffed when students went back to school in 2022.⁵

The continued teacher shortage reflects both the challenge of retaining teachers in the profession as well as the shrinking talent pools within traditional educator preparation pipelines. This ongoing hiring crisis is a complex, multifaceted issue; and with so many variables at play, it can feel overwhelming for school districts seeking solutions for their teacher shortages.

Even as the number of Americans seeking a college degree has grown, participation in teacher preparation programs has declined. Solving this challenge will require school districts, policymakers and educator preparation programs to solve for four interrelated challenges:

- **Financial return on investment:** The cost of higher education is rising, but teaching salaries are not rising in tandem. As a result, would-be educators may rightfully wonder whether joining the profession makes economic sense.
- **Reaching new populations:** Traditional pipelines are shrinking; new models are needed that make teaching a compelling and accessible option for more Americans. This holds the potential to also lead to talent pipelines that better reflect the racial, gender, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of students within a school district.

- **Making preparation accessible — and high quality:** More time and money spent in a teacher preparation program doesn't necessarily mean higher quality or better preparation. Ensuring that teachers have the skills that will make them successful in the classroom means reassessing how and what is taught and ensuring rigor and relevance.
- **Pipelines for advancement:** Attracting individuals to the teaching profession and keeping them in the field will require putting the preconditions to advancement (e.g., additional certifications or degrees) within reach for more educators.

There is no miracle cure for the challenges facing education today, but happily, a number of solutions have sprung up in recent years that solve for each of the four areas above. These solutions work hand-in-hand with school districts, helping upskill or reskill existing staff, building important leadership pipelines, and opening doors to the teaching profession to students who would otherwise not have the time or resources to pursue an education degree.

A set of education-focused accredited online degree providers, including American College of Education, Western Governors University, and Lamar University, offer hybrid courses with flexible degree schedules so that students who are already in the workforce can pursue a degree on their own time. These options are often more affordable than brick-and-mortar

counterparts, sometimes coming in at less than half the price of a traditional ed degree. This can make teacher preparation programs more accessible, offer a better return on investment, and even prepare teachers with the real-world skills they need that may make them more likely to be successful and therefore stay in the teaching profession.

Additionally, these providers also often offer a variety of degree programs, from master's level courses to doctoral certificates, giving teachers who wish to advance to leadership positions the chance to obtain those credentials while balancing their classroom schedule.

Offering opportunities for advancement may help school districts retain educators and help them develop the next generation of school district leaders. Outside of the education context, employers have found that offering education benefits leads to cost savings (driven by lower hiring costs and better employee outcomes) that make the programs net-positive financially. A [study from the Lumina Foundation](#) found that for every dollar spent on education benefits, an employer gained \$1.29 in other savings.⁶

School districts are also finding solutions in grow-your-own programs and apprenticeship-based models that allow aspiring educators or administrators to earn as they learn. The real-world experience these programs offer

helps students move quickly and confidently into the field; the stipends they receive allow them to transition successfully from previous careers without taking on extra work outside of their studies.

Many of these solutions are not new but have new importance and resonance in a sector facing endemic talent shortages. These models of educator preparation are both cost-effective and adaptable to students' schedules. They also can help open up the field to students or working professionals who have never considered pursuing teaching credentials feasible for them.

While teacher preparation programs cannot solve all of the long-standing issues that the profession faces, they have the potential to both bring in new talent as well as help stem the flow of potential and experienced educators away from the classroom. School districts may feel that many aspects of teacher satisfaction (from school safety to the increasing politicization of education) are largely out of their hands. But they can take meaningful steps toward meeting their need for new educators by investing in proven, effective alternative teaching programs. These programs can empower school districts to refill their own talent pools while offering would-be educators the opportunity to enter or progress through programs tailored to their lives and goals.

A PROFESSION IN CRISIS

Ask nearly anyone to recall a favorite teacher, and they'll come up with someone. Teachers play a crucial role in forming our academic and social experience from childhood on. They are the foundation of the U.S. education system's promise of greater opportunity through education. Yet, in the last few years, this bedrock of K-12 education has begun to crack.

Nearly half of public schools in the 2022-23 school year [reported](#) that they still had at least one vacant teaching position months after the school year started.⁷ The biggest challenge to hiring teachers, according to 69% of school leaders, is [scarcity](#): There simply aren't enough candidates applying for many positions.⁸

The educator talent pipeline is at an inflection point. Higher education institutions today confer [half as many](#) bachelor's degrees in education as they did in 1970.⁹ And in some states, there are now more teachers [leaving the classroom](#) annually than graduating from in-state teacher preparation programs.¹⁰

The talent pipelines that previously met school district needs are no longer sufficient. It is clear that the K-12 sector can't use traditional teacher education alone to educate itself out of its hiring hole — if so, the sector would have done so years ago. As a result, school districts are looking for innovative solutions to ensure that they have access to high-quality educators.

School districts need solutions that not only help get more qualified educators entering the profession but also support teacher retention and promotion into leadership roles within a district. Many promising models exist,

including a wide range of grow-your-own programs; teacher apprenticeship programs; and accredited, often online, programs. These online programs (some competency based) are frequently faster, cheaper and more accessible than teacher preparation programs at traditional higher education institutions.

“We don't always do a great job of learning from one another's successes and the innovative ways people have been able to use new models,” says Dwight Jones, former superintendent of schools in Clark County and commissioner of education in Colorado. “Whether that's in teaching or leading, we haven't done as much as we can in understanding what has led to good results.”¹¹

Proven partnerships and models, some of which serve a relatively small number of schools or teachers, offer lessons for today's teacher shortage. While different in their approach, these programs all solve the same core problems: They offer a positive return on investment for teachers who participate; they cultivate new populations for inclusion in the teaching population; they create accessible opportunities for teacher advancement; and they balance rigor and time to completion.

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THE FOUR CHALLENGES

The teacher shortage doesn't hinge on one particular issue — it is a conglomeration of a wide range of shortages in specific subjects, regions and specialties. Many school districts report struggles in finding teachers for special education, English language learner and STEM positions. Rural school districts and districts serving students from historically marginalized communities are also more **likely** to face overall teacher shortages.¹²

Filling these gaps will require new approaches to sourcing and retaining talent. School districts looking to find new talent pathways or develop new programs can begin by considering four challenges that face the teacher talent pipeline:

- **Financial return on investment:** The cost of higher education is rising, but teaching salaries are not rising in tandem. Paying more to earn less means that today there is a growing economic disincentive for joining the profession.
- **Reaching new populations:** There simply aren't enough individuals in traditional educator preparation programs (EPPs) to meet the current school district needs. At the same time, these traditional programs often lack the racial, gender, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity that school districts seek in order to have teachers who are representative of the communities they serve.
- **Making preparation accessible — and high quality:** Related to the urgency of finding new populations, EPPs must work for today's learner — individuals who may already have a job, family responsibilities or other demands on their time. At the

same time, they must maintain the rigor necessary to adequately prepare educators for the classroom or school district office.

- **Pipelines for advancement:** Education is unlike many other occupations, where individuals can be promoted (either with a new title or new salary) on merit alone. Instead, many advancement opportunities require additional certifications or degrees, which take both time and money to acquire.

These complex, interlocking issues compound on one another to form substantial barriers to entry within the profession. When preparation is inaccessible and costs are high, the diversity of the profession suffers; only students who fall within a narrow demographic range (e.g., those who are comfortable with the cost of higher education and aren't saddled with additional financial responsibilities) can pursue a degree in education. And without pipelines for advancement, fewer would-be educators have an incentive to invest the time and money necessary to start in the field. It's clear that the current teacher shortage is the result of each of these problems interacting with the others continuously over time.

“The solution needs to be multifaceted,” says Sandy Husk, former executive director of ASCD and former superintendent of Salem-Keizer Public Schools. “We should start with career exploration to encourage young people to become teachers, help paraprofessionals and other classified staff who are interested in the teaching profession, and support existing educators with opportunities to grow professionally — both through leadership as well as opportunities in the classroom.”¹³

Problem 1: Return on Investment

When it comes to the cost of teacher training, it's not hard to see why many students are opting into other careers. In the last 40 years, the costs associated with college have **skyrocketed** 169%. Yet, teacher salaries have **barely** kept pace with the cost of living.¹⁴

The tension between the cost of college and teacher salaries is growing. As college has become more expensive, more would-be educators are taking on debt to finance their education. Nearly **two-thirds** of younger teachers (those under 35) took out student loans to pursue their degrees compared to 1 in 4 teachers over age 61.¹⁵ At the same time, teachers make far less than other professionals with comparable levels of education. This means that educators are graduating with more debt than previous generations of teachers while earning less than their college peers.

“You can't require a family already at the margins to take out loans to become a teacher,” argues William Hite, former superintendent of the School District of Philadelphia and CEO of KnowledgeWorks. “One of the things we were thinking about in Philadelphia is how to shift our recruiting budgets to support the education of young people interested in becoming teachers. If we can pay to both prepare and support would-be teachers (including both teacher candidates and non-teaching district staff interested in becoming teachers), it makes the profession accessible to more individuals.”¹⁶

A Georgetown study found that the median salary of middle-aged Americans with bachelor's degrees in education is **lower** than that of Americans with any other degree.¹⁷ Would-be teachers increasingly see little point in sinking tens of thousands of dollars into a degree that promises such little return on their investment.

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Problem 2: Reaching New Populations

Women have historically **faced** significant occupational segregation, working primarily in a small handful of occupations.¹⁸ For many decades, this was a boon to the teaching profession. Teaching has been one of the **top three most common** occupations for women for half a century.¹⁹

In the 1950s, nearly 70% of working women worked in one of 10 occupations. Among those were stenographers, teachers, nurses and waitresses. Today, although teaching is still a top occupation for women, only 31% of women in the workforce work in one of the 10 most common occupations. That means education must compete with more occupations to recruit individuals into its ranks.

This shift is evident in graduation numbers. Even as the number of Americans getting undergraduate degrees increased between 2005 and 2019, the number of students getting degrees in education has **dropped**.²⁰ The decline in enrollment in education degrees has affected **nearly** every state.²¹

The number of students completing teacher education programs **fell** by more than one-third between 2008 and 2019, according to a survey from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE).²² As it stands, American public schools must hire new teachers at a rate of 300,000 a year to keep up with attrition. This number is **higher** than the total annual number of graduates from all of the nation's flagship universities and the Ivy League combined.²³

At the same time, awareness of the **importance of representation** (across gender, race and other dimensions of

difference) within the teaching profession is growing. School districts are increasingly looking to new approaches that widen their talent pools while also making their teacher bench more diverse.²⁴

“The statistics on diversity with the education profession are sobering,” says Erin Mote, Executive Director of InnovateEDU, which runs the Pathways Alliance. “This isn’t just about representation; it’s about the core mission of our work. Research with Black and Latinx students has shown increases in test scores and fewer unexcused absences after having a teacher of color. Supporting teacher preparation pathways that are accessible, equitable and diverse by proactively reaching out to communities of color is one way that districts can help give their students the teachers they deserve.”²⁵

School districts seek educators who reflect the diversity of their student bodies. But today, only **6% of public school teachers** are Black.²⁶ This number is especially striking given that women of color are disproportionately represented in lower-paying caregiver jobs. Among the top five most common professions for Black women in the United States **are** nursing assistants, personal care aid assistants and registered nurses. This contingent of workers already have meaningful soft skill sets that could translate easily to teaching.²⁷ For many, the transition to teaching would also represent an opportunity for economic mobility. The average wage among Black women working in the caregiving fields noted above **is** around \$30,000 a year.²⁸ Even the lowest-paying public school districts in America **exceed** that by almost \$20,000.²⁹

Problem 3: Making Programs More Accessible While Retaining Rigor

Over the past few years, school districts have **loosened teaching requirements** out of desperation to fill teaching roles.³⁰ But this can't come at the expense of quality. Districts must find trusted partners who can help fill urgent needs quickly. Those partners, then, must ensure that teachers enter the classroom prepared and set up for success.

Expanding the pipeline of educators and meeting urgent school district needs means balancing time-to-completion, rigor and accessibility.

“Making teacher preparation programs more accessible is an essential, but not exhaustive, step to strengthen the teaching profession,” says Peter Shulman, CEO of Urban Teachers and former deputy commissioner for the New Jersey Department of Education. “Accessibility needs to be married with extensive, high-quality, relevant programming to support our aspiring teachers’ growth into skilled novice teachers and, eventually, into successful career educators. Accessibility and quality can (and must) go hand in hand; this is what teachers need for their development; what school partners seek for their classrooms; and, most importantly, what our children deserve.”³¹

For many of today's college students — and for many individuals who aspire to be college students but can't yet see a clear path toward a higher education — a campus-based, synchronous education program is difficult to balance with work, family and other life obligations. Of students enrolled in higher education today, **only 16%** live on campus, one in three are older than 25, half are financially independent and 22% are parents.³² Online, flexible programs allow a wider range of individuals access

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teacher preparation (or continuing education) programs. They also foster economic mobility due to greater equity in access.

But modality alone isn't sufficient. Coursework needs to be relevant and rigorous and reflect the most recent understanding of the science of learning. This may require that EPPs or other education and training providers offer more opportunities for on-the-job learning. They may need to alter their approach toward teaching and assessment to more closely reflect the skills teachers and administrators need most. And they may need to work in tandem with school district leaders to continually update their curriculum to reflect potential changes in learning science and the resulting pedagogy.

Problem 4: Creating Accessible Pathways for Advancement

Teacher training is only part of the teacher pipeline issue. A significant portion of teachers who leave the profession say they do so because they want to pursue other career opportunities, often in careers that allow for greater professional advancement. As American College of Education Assistant Provost Scott Bailey put it, “The mantra among teachers is *I need to do something to get out of this classroom.*”³³

“**The mantra among teachers is I need to do something to get out of this classroom.**
— Scott Bailey

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The drive to get out of the classroom and into administration is often frustrated by limited paths forward for teachers who want to advance in their career. In **37 states**, an educator must earn a master’s degree to become a principal or other school leader.³⁴ Educators may also find their earning potential is limited within a school district if they do not have an advanced degree of some type. Yet, these degrees can be costly. Teachers interested in obtaining an advanced degree often do their coursework while also balancing their current job and other family or life obligations.

The lack of opportunity for advancement poses a huge problem to both the labor pool and leadership within the profession as a whole. Superintendents and principals are leaving the field in high numbers, just as teachers are. The average turnover rate for superintendents is consistently **high**, between 13% and 16% annually.³⁵ Many superintendents step **away** from the job after hitting the five-year mark.³⁶

Pandemic stressors have contributed to a leadership crisis in the field — the rate of retirement among principals **doubled** during the 2021-22 school year.³⁷ The turnover rate for superintendents during the pandemic shot up in high-population school districts. Some estimates **suggest** it rose to nearly 25% during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.³⁸ In a recent survey, more than 60% of superintendents had at least **considered** leaving their jobs in the last few years.³⁹ These exits represent a huge loss in experience in and institutional knowledge of the public school system as well as a worrying leadership gap.

Done well, paths to advancement can solve two challenges at once — creating the next generation of school leaders as well as stemming the flow of teachers out of the profession.

THE INFLECTION POINT AND POTENTIAL PATHS FORWARD

Teacher shortages are a multifaceted problem. Many challenges that impact the sector — including school safety and culture war political pressures — are largely outside of school districts’ control.

School districts are also at the mercy of budgets driven by tax revenues and, to a lesser extent, state and federal policy priorities. As pandemic-era stimulus funds dry up, school district budgets will tighten in the coming years, which may cause the teacher shortage to get worse before it gets better. It may further limit school districts’ ability to raise teacher pay or even force districts to cut staff.

The threat of teacher layoffs, coupled with “last in, first out” policies (where teachers most recently hired are the first to be laid off) may create a chilling effect for recruiting teachers. After all, why would a paraprofessional or early childhood educator choose to invest time and money for a job that may not be there by the time they graduate or that might last only a few years?⁴⁰ “If we’re going to be in a tight budget environment,” says Liz Cohen, policy director for FutureEd at Georgetown University, “last in, first out makes it very hard to recruit teachers.”⁴¹

“ If we’re going to be in a tight budget environment, last in, first out makes it very hard to recruit teachers. — Liz Cohen ”

This nuanced problem requires a number of complementary short- and long-term solutions. Teacher preparation programs are only one part of solving the teacher shortage, and they can’t fix everything. But when so many other aspects impacting the teacher profession feel immovable for school districts, new models for educator preparation and training offer one tangible way to move the needle on the teacher shortage. And while EPPs can’t solve for learning loss or student behavior, they can prepare teachers to meet the needs in their classrooms.

Paths Forward

EPPs and other educator training and development programs can empower school districts to rebuild their talent pipelines. A number of different training solutions are available, and this diversity of options can help school districts chart the path forward on their own terms.

From developing a grow-your-own model that increases the number of teachers entering the classroom to supporting retention through partnerships with programs that provide master’s degrees and leadership preparation, school districts can find new ways of meeting long-held workforce goals by means of an alternative training model.

Enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs declined 30% from the 2012 school year to the 2019 school year. However, the number of teachers who have completed alternative teacher certification programs grew by 24% in the same time frame.⁴²

Grow-your-own programs focus on expanding the pool of potential teachers by tapping into local talent (including graduating K-12 students and paraprofessionals). These individuals earn a salary while learning how to become teachers. Teacher apprenticeships are likewise [gaining momentum](#). Tennessee was the first state to register its apprenticeship with the Department of Labor in 2022. Fifteen more states have followed suit since then.⁴³

Accredited online programs offer flexible pathways that open up the teaching profession to students who wouldn't otherwise be able to attain a teaching credential. High-quality online programs combine online coursework with in-person classroom experience to prepare teachers effectively. The online coursework can be particularly powerful for helping those already in the classroom, like paraprofessionals, allowing them to access the knowledge they would need to become teachers at a time and place that works for them. This would unlock a powerful source of talent with valuable expertise.

Solving the Four Challenges

The four challenges laid out above are difficult to overcome but not insurmountable. The good news is that there are proven practices to improve outcomes of teacher training. Even focused, localized programs like the Alliance for Catholic Education program at the University Notre Dame often [have](#) a national reach. The Indiana-based project places hundreds of graduates into over a dozen states every single year.⁴⁴

We have blueprints from school districts and EPPs of what works; they now need to scale their innovative best practices — including hybrid programming, skills and experience-based learning, and flexible degree timetables and requirements — at the national level. In doing so, these alternative ed programs can move teacher training in a new direction, one that is more effective for school districts and worthwhile for students.

Demonstrate Return on Investment

School districts may feel they are between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the value proposition of teaching. They cannot control the rising costs of college. And they often face budget limitations or collective bargaining agreements that control the salaries they offer teachers. The result is that would-be teachers have little incentive to invest substantial time and money in pursuing a career choice that could leave them in serious debt. Teaching is a labor of love for many. Yet, for the profession to sustain itself, it must also be a rational career choice. Passion alone doesn't pay the bills. School districts cannot reasonably ask teaching candidates to take on multiple loans they may never be able to fully repay.

Controlling costs may be the only feasible way to control return on investment (ROI) for would-be educators. Like school districts, teacher prep programs can't control teacher salaries. But they can work to keep their own costs low, preventing teachers from graduating with such significant debt.

For example, American College of Education (ACE) ensures its students obtain a strong

monetary ROI by making low tuition costs a high priority. According to the Education Data Initiative, in 2023, the average cost of a master's degree in education **was** roughly \$52,000.⁴⁵ Most of ACE's master's degrees cost less than one-fifth of the average master's in education. And 85% of ACE students graduate with no debt.⁴⁶ ACE also recognizes and offers credit for prior learning, partnering with community colleges to transfer past credits toward new degrees (a time-based ROI as well as a financial one). According to a Lightcast analysis, as a result of the low cost at ACE, the students' benefit-cost ratio is 19:1. In other words, for every dollar students invest in ACE in the form of out-of-pocket expenses, they will receive, on average, a cumulative value of \$19 in higher future earnings.

School districts, in turn, can help by both highlighting lower-cost options to would-be teachers or by using lower-cost programs as part of a district grow-your-own program or apprenticeship.

Expand Reach to Populations Who May Not Have Previously Considered Teaching or Leadership

An important step in addressing the teacher pipeline issue is to expand the reach of teacher and leader preparation programs to populations who may not have previously considered teaching or leadership positions. Those individuals include late career-switchers, paraprofessionals or those traditionally underrepresented in teaching.

Grow-your-own programs have become a key [measure](#) in addressing staffing shortages across two-thirds of urban and high poverty school districts.⁴⁷ A Rand Corporation national teacher survey [ranked](#) grow-your-own teacher programs as one of the top three initiatives school districts can undertake to increase the racial diversity in the education workforce.⁴⁸

Tennessee's Grow-Your-Own Teacher Apprenticeship Model offers a cost-free pathway to a teaching certification for both high school graduates and district staff looking to upskill. The Clarksville-Montgomery County program specifically targets students of color and first-generation students, with a goal of boosting diversity within the school system.

In addition to improving diversity, these programs can offer a path to individuals who either had not previously considered entering the teaching profession or who may not otherwise have the financial or time resources necessary to complete an

EPP. In the Teacher Residency Program within the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System, [half](#) of the students in the inaugural class were school district reading aides; participants were able to graduate as teachers within just three years.⁴⁹

The University of Notre Dame Alliance for Catholic Education takes a slightly different approach. It recruits students from across the country who did not pursue an undergraduate degree in education and prepares them to teach in Catholic schools. The program began nearly three decades ago in response to a teacher shortage within Catholic schools. That shortage was felt more acutely in the most economically disadvantaged areas and is one that bears striking similarity to the challenges facing public school districts today.

The University of Notre Dame Teaching Fellows program — an extension of AmeriCorps Indiana and Serve Indiana programs — has placed over 180 teachers in over 140 understaffed schools across the country. The program awards teachers a stipend, arranges housing and helps them obtain a teaching license in Indiana. Over the course of the two-year program, participants also earn a cost-free Master of Education degree. Even better, [70%](#) of program participants stay in teaching past their initial two-year program.⁵⁰

Balance Rigor and Time-to-Completion

The time requirements for obtaining the degree or credentials necessary for teaching or school leadership positions are significant and often inflexible, creating a barrier to entry for many prospective educators. What's more, the length of traditional teacher training programs makes it difficult for school districts to meet their staffing needs quickly enough to counter the profession's attrition rate.

So, in terms of curriculum, what should a school district look for when it comes to partnership with a teacher preparation program? An applied learning approach, based in real-world skills training, helps students attain a deep understanding of the profession quickly, especially compared to more traditional educational programs.

An essential element of many nontraditional teacher and leader preparation programs is that they provide the same depth as longer training courses but on a shorter timescale. Learning by doing efficiently brings students to mastery without letting go of academic rigor.

This approach falls in line with the values and goals many school districts hold in terms of hiring and recruitment, per the [findings](#) of a recent Rand Foundation Survey: "Although most districts or their states have enacted changes to boost the ranks of teachers, the overarching goal is to produce qualified teachers who want to remain in the profession, not just lower qualification requirements to boost applicants and fill positions."⁵¹

It also meets the needs and expectations of educators themselves. Research shows that underprepared teachers are [two to](#)

[three times more likely](#) to leave the field compared to those educators who attended a comprehensive preparation program that included student teaching and classroom experience.⁵² It's clear that, like school districts, aspiring teachers do not want to sacrifice quality for speed when it comes to their studies.

"Every educator entering the profession, via every pathway, deserves to be a part of an enabling environment that creates the conditions where they thrive, and teaching is grounded in the full context of students' social, emotional and intellectual lives," said Tommy Chang, CEO of New Teacher Center and former superintendent of Boston Public Schools. "Today's challenge is helping school systems build professional learning systems that retain, support and guide the next generation of teachers in the complex relational and intellectual work of classroom instruction, where the science of learning and development and commitment to equity meet."⁵³

In an interview, a curriculum support specialist working within a major public school district echoed the importance of teacher training to retention, noting that preparation is an even greater influence on many educators' decision to leave the field than compensation. "Lack of adequate preparation or training is [the] number one" reason educators leave the profession, she said, according to her research (compensation comes in at number four).⁵⁴

Reach University, a nonprofit university designed to reach aspiring teachers in rural and underserved urban communities, uses a job-embedded credentialing system. Reach

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— Tommy Chang

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students do half of their coursework in the classroom. They do the other half online. This enables students to hold a job continuously as students and have those working hours count toward their degree completion. In this way, Reach provides the means for teachers to engage in meaningful skills-building with a minimal time and financial cost.

ACE’s accelerated program is skills-based and rooted in practices teachers will encounter every day in their careers. In addition to essays

or other more traditional assessments, ACE students demonstrate mastery in the form of a mock lesson plan, professional interview reenactments and real instruction time in the classroom. ACE courses are taught by experienced practitioners with a background in K-12 education who can provide valuable insight on what the day-to-day work of teaching looks like. This rigor plays out in licensure exam scores. ACE students do as well or better than state averages on licensure exams and student satisfaction is at 94%.⁵⁵

Create Accessible Opportunities for Advancement

Many teachers are unable or unwilling to step away from their classroom careers to obtain the degree or credential necessary to advance to leadership positions. Enabling teachers to access advancement opportunities can help keep them in the education profession. It can also help school districts rebuild a consistent leadership corps that can steer the profession forward.

Western Governors University (WGU) doesn't advance students through courses based on traditional time-based credit hours. Rather, it offers competency-based degrees that allow students to move through courses at the pace of their mastery of material. Operating based on a clear set of skills-based learning goals, WGU structures its courses around performance assessments. Students are permitted to set the pace of learning. They can accelerate through material they are familiar with and repeat lessons with which they have difficulty without penalty.

School districts can also play a role in supporting their teachers' advancement. This provides dual value: Districts build the next

generation of administrative talent while also retaining teachers in the classroom while they pursue their advanced coursework. One large urban school district piloted a program to do precisely this. The school district offered teachers the opportunity to earn their Master of Education in Educational Leadership at a discounted rate through ACE. The partnership's approach was popular among educators. It grew from an original class of 24 teachers to over 500 in just one year. Sixteen years later, the partnership is still going strong. And it created the template for over 2,300 school district partnerships throughout the United States.

Reach University's programs are designed for degree seekers who already work with children or in an educational capacity. Online courses take place at night or on weekends, after work and child care hours. The result is a flexible schedule that helps students stay in the program and finish within program dates. The company [estimates](#) that about 87% of its fall 2022 cohort is on track to finish their degrees on time.⁵⁶

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER: PARTNERSHIPS IN TEACHER PREP

A confluence of factors have brought teaching to its current staffing crisis. No one solution can possibly address a problem that has been brewing for decades. In the long term, the profession will have to reckon with the deeper issues of wage stagnation, representation and leadership gaps as well as the changing demands on educators in the pandemic's aftermath. What it means to be a teacher in America has changed profoundly, and the school system has yet to catch up to meeting educators' needs.

At the same time, school districts need real-world solutions and support right now. It's time to rebuild the teacher and leader pipelines so that:

- Schools can fill positions.
- Teachers can focus on their course load without taking on extra responsibilities.
- Principals can get the support they need to lead their schools forward.

A committed and customized partnership between school districts and teacher preparation programs can help schools meet their own needs by upskilling and reskilling existing staff. That can even allow them to become the site on which the teachers they need are educated. What's more, the innovative practices employed by the teacher preparation programs described in this paper can also help open up the profession to new students who would otherwise not have the time or resources to pursue an education degree.

These programs center student needs by embracing flexibility in academic schedules, rooting curriculum in real-world training and controlling tuition costs. In so doing, they attract a variety of educator candidates from a plethora of backgrounds. Through these new models of education, professionals can receive both formal training and real-world classroom experience in a structure truly adapted to their lives and be empowered to enter the education field on their own terms.

“Accessibility needs to be married with extensive, high-quality, relevant programming to support our aspiring teachers' growth into skilled novice teachers and, eventually, into successful career educators. Accessibility and quality can (and must) go hand in hand; this is what teachers need for their development; what school partners seek for their classrooms; and, most importantly, what our children deserve. — Peter Shulman ”

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