

# “Let’s Stay Together”: Examining a Grow Your Own Program in an Urban District

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*Grow Your Own Programs (GYO) have gained increasing popularity with the impact of shortages of quality teaching candidates in many school districts, particularly in urban areas. To address the lack of quality teaching candidates, school districts and states have responded creatively to recruit the best teachers for their schools. To explore some of the intricacies involved with GYO partnerships between school districts and universities, this article describes a case study of how two urban school districts partnered with a local university to provide pedagogy and support for paraprofessionals' Grow Your Own programs and their processes to build the partnerships. Specifically, it highlights the overall impressions, opinions, and feelings of stakeholders about participating in the program and the specific incidents, obstacles, and occurrences that may provide guidance and a first attempt at “best practices” for other organizations that might consider GYO programs.*

Grow Your Own Programs (GYO) have gained increasing popularity with the impact of shortages of quality teaching candidates in many school districts, particularly in urban areas. To address the lack of quality teaching candidates, school districts and states have responded creatively to recruit the best teachers for their schools. Because of the importance of quality teacher recruitment, local businesses and nonprofit foundations have engaged in providing scholarships to students to help them pursue careers in education to guarantee graduates coming back to their hometown or region for a specific time to teach. The state of Texas has endorsed similar approaches by providing Grow Your Own grants to supply its districts with support in recruitment and retention efforts of paraprofessionals through a competitive process. To explore some of the intricacies involved with GYO partnerships between school districts and universities, this article describes a case study of how two urban school districts partnered with a local university to provide pedagogy and support for paraprofessionals' Grow Your Own programs and their processes to build the partnerships.

### **Purpose**

High teacher attrition rates have been a constant variable many school administrators have weathered annually in providing the best-qualified professionals to teach students, particularly in low socioeconomic urban communities. Many graduates of top-ranked programs seek assignments in private schools or affluent suburban areas to begin and sustain their teaching careers. This paradox leaves urban administrators with unqualified pools of teachers or relegated to filling positions with full-time substitutes with little or no expertise in the highest areas of need. The current trend of teacher attrition led by smaller qualified teacher pools, resignations, retirements, and recent frustrations due to teaching during the pandemic often place additional strains on school districts. Grow Your Own initiatives can potentially provide quality teachers who are qualified and familiar with the demographics of the communities and the specific needs of their students. This research examines the inner workings that contribute to a successful Grow Your Own program at one university and local school districts it serves.

By examining the perspectives, experiences, and challenges of students pursuing a degree through this type of program, school leaders can gain their views on the value of GYO programs. Interviews with the classroom teachers, cooperating teachers, principals, and university stakeholders convey to school districts and universities the planning, scheduling, and support systems needed for successful GYO programs.

Finally, the rich descriptions and perspectives of the stakeholders provided in this qualitative inquiry give not only a voice to all the participants in these programs but also the insight necessary for university personnel to establish programs that meet the needs of students participating in GYO programs, areas such as field placement and designing courses that fit the needs of the participants as they fulfill their contracted obligations to the school districts.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding research questions in this study were related to the experiences of the participants. Researchers were interested in the overall impressions, opinions, and feelings about participating in the program and the specific incidents, obstacles, and occurrences that may provide guidance and a first attempt at “best practices” for other organizations that might consider GYO programs. The study is framed by the following research questions: What components contribute to the

growth of a grow your own program? What are the experiences of students (current paraprofessionals), collaborating teachers, principals, university principals, and university directors in a grow your own program?

## **Literature Review**

There has been a national concern with principals experiencing difficulty in attracting qualified teachers to their schools. While the reasons behind the teacher shortage are debatable, the inability to hire the best teachers to work with students in low-income schools is well documented (Castro, Quinn, Fuller, Barnes, & University Council for Educational Administration, 2018). Although the average starting salary for teachers has increased significantly over the past 20 years, studies indicate a continued decline in the number of teachers entering the profession through traditional teacher education programs, particularly in the areas of STEM and special education (Ingersoll, May & Collins, 2019; Behrstock-Sherratt, 2016). Because of alternative approaches to certification, only about half of the graduating teachers in any given year are hired as public-school teachers (Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobald, 2016). The issue, according to Ingersoll et al. (2019) and Posey (2017), is not a "quantity of available certified teachers" issue, but rather a deep dissatisfaction of newly hired teachers with the climate of the public school and its various mandates. Ingersoll (2019) points to statistics that indicate, although the number of minority teachers has doubled since the late 1980s, efforts to keep minority teachers in classrooms are undermined because of turnover related to poor working conditions and other issues associated with disadvantaged schools. Wronowski (2018), to address these reasons and more, promotes a teacher recruitment and retention tool that increases teacher empowerment within the framework of the learning organizations. In a similar approach, Grow Your Own programs became popular in the last decade as a "grassroots" approach to change the status quo in local schools and school districts (Skinner, Garretn, & Schultz, 2011).

### **Shortage of Teachers**

The population of students of color in public schools across America is increasing. It is estimated currently, approximately 50% of the population of public schools are students of color (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019). However, that percentage is expected to increase to 56% by 2024 (Jones et al., 2019; National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2017). While there has been an increase in students of color, there has not been a corresponding increase in teachers of color. Research in 2011 indicated there are shortages of teachers in many public-school districts in our nation. According to Swanson (2011), researchers estimated 2.7 million new teachers were needed to fill teacher shortages between 1998 and 2009. In addition, some 200,000 teachers were projected to be required each year following to meet the profession's needs (Swanson, 2011). Reasons contributing to the shortage of teachers include teacher attrition, retirement, and turnover (Swanson, 2011). Also, according to the Texas Comprehensive Center (2018), teachers have tendencies to teach at schools like the ones they attended in locations near their hometowns. This fact may negatively impact the quality and quantity of qualified teachers desiring to teach in lower-performing schools (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018).

When there is a documented shortage of qualified teachers needed to fill the ranks, and despite the data that suggests that far more teachers of color are prepared annually, the number of teachers of color entering the profession remains low. Skinner (2010) reported that while colleges

and universities have responded to meet the shortage of teachers, the candidates in these programs stay white and female. As a result, the teaching force remains 80% white and largely monolingual (Jones et al., 2019; Garcia, Manuel, & Buly, 2019). Of the 3.2 million teachers in public schools, only 6% are Latinx, and 7% are African American (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). Moreover, approximately 2% of the U.S. teaching population is African American, and less than 2% are Latino (Jones et al., 2019). So, while the number of students of color increases, the number of Latinx and African American teachers constitutes only a tiny percentage of the teaching population.

English language learners (ELL) are a rapidly growing segment of the population of students in the United States (Garcia et al., 2019). Furthermore, ELL students struggle to grasp academic content, particularly when placed in classrooms with teachers who lack adequate, specialized training in the appropriate pedagogical strategies to address English learner needs (Kennedy, 2020). Therefore, research supports the advantages of providing native-language instruction to ELLs as they acquire the English language (Kennedy, 2020). The predominantly White female teacher population cannot often meet the needs of the growing multilingualism found in schools today (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019).

It is essential to note the deficiency of qualified teachers is not distributed evenly amongst all schools but is more acute in high poverty schools (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). With many students of color attending public schools, these students' areas are often considerably populated with economically disadvantaged students. Due to the shortage of teachers, especially teachers of color, these areas must often resort to hiring teachers possessing temporary or substandard teaching permits (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). "Teachers of color continue to be disproportionately assigned to under-resourced schools in low-income urban communities (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019, p.25)." Students of color are more likely when compared to their White and more affluent peers, to have teachers not certified in the core subjects as teachers (Barton & Coley, 2009).

As a result of failing to meet the needs of a growingly diverse student population, states and school districts have sought solutions to increase teachers of color in the teaching profession. Grow Your Own (GYO) programs are rising in many states as an answer to addressing the needs of a diverse student population (Gist, 2019). GYO programs are not focused simply on recruiting individuals of color to work in the teaching profession. These programs are designed to prepare teacher candidates who understand the complexities of diverse learning populations and the nature of the relationship between the schools and the communities (Skinner, 2010).

## **Why Grow Your Own?**

There are several benefits to having diversity in the teaching workforce, according to the Texas Comprehensive Center (2018). When teachers of color reflect minority students, improvement is realized in student achievement, school attendance, advanced course enrollment, and enrollment in colleges and universities (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2018).

The national Grow Your Own Collective (GYOC) defines GYO programs as "highly collaborative, community-rooted, intensive efforts for recruiting, preparing, placing, and retaining diverse classroom teachers who dismantle institutional racism and work toward educational equity (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). Grow Your Own programs have been described as a strategy used by states and communities to "employ to help recruit and retain teachers of color" (Valenzuela, 2017, p. 1). When qualified teacher shortages exist in teacher preparation programs and the teaching profession in general, GYO programs are considered pathways for states and

school districts to address this growing need (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019; Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2019). These "homegrown pathways" to the teaching profession offer access to the profession for "people of color from varied class, social, and linguistic backgrounds (Garcia et al., 2019; Gist et al., 2019).

Grow Your Own programs are exciting for a variety of reasons. First, they require teacher preparation programs to modify existing classic tracks to the teaching profession by training their focus away from the brick and mortar of the college campus and toward alternative paths. Programs of this type play a significant role in the preparation of teachers and the recruitment of teachers of color (Garcia et al., 2019; Gist, 2019). According to Gist (2019), once candidates involved in a GYO transition to becoming the teacher of record, there is a strong indication these teachers will remain in the profession. Retention is a crucial benefit of GYO programs (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019).

Candidates who participate in GYO programs are often established community members dedicated to the teaching profession and have served as aides, parents, and community activists (Gist et al., 2019). This concept is vital because established community members are less likely to move away at the end of a certification program. Moreover, established community members are vested in the community, which increases the likelihood they will remain in the community. GYO programs develop pathways for people of color from various social and linguistic backgrounds to become teachers (Gist et al., 2019). Proponents of GYO programs desire to diversify the teaching profession and improve the overall quality of teacher preparation programs (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019).

In many cases, the success of GYOs is dependent on funding from private entities and other state agencies (Ramirez, 2007). Evidence validates that GYO programs that offer strong financial, academic, and social supports are effective recruitment and retention strategies for districts (Muñiz, 2020). Additional benefits of GYO programs include a reduction in teacher turnover costs, increased stability in student-teacher relationships, and more experienced teachers (Muñiz, 2020). Collaboration between universities, state agencies, neighborhood groups, and school districts is a key to the success of GYOs (Ramirez, 2007). When meaningful collaboration occurs, GYO programs can generate highly qualified educators to teach in the geographic locations, content areas, and grade levels that typically face shortages (Muñiz, 2020).

## **GYO Grants in Texas**

In September of 2018, Texas Commissioner Mike Morath announced that the Texas Education Agency would accept Grow Your Own Teacher Grants for the 2019-2021 school terms (Texas Education Agency, 2018). According to the press release, school districts may use the grant to encourage high school students to consider teaching as a profession. Paraprofessionals, teacher-aides, and long-term substitute teachers are eligible to use the grant to pursue certification (Texas Education Agency, 2018). According to Commissioner Morath, the 2018 grant emphasized small and rural districts that had previously been identified as high-need districts for certified teaching candidates. An emphasis to address the needs of small and rural districts was seen as an appropriate investment in Texas education. A vital goal of the 2018 grant was to facilitate diversity and increase the pool of teachers entering the profession (Texas Education Agency, 2018).

The second cycle of the grant provided opportunities for school districts to pair with approved regional service centers and institutions of higher learning to apply for grant awards. In

a January 2019 press release, the Texas Education Agency announced 36 school districts and teacher preparation programs were awarded grants in the second cycle. According to Commissioner Morath,

“Research shows that 60 percent of educators in the United States teach within 20 miles of where they went to high school,” said Commissioner Morath. “Because we know our future teachers are currently in our high schools, the goal of *Grow Your Own* is to help increase the quality and diversity of our teaching force and to better support our paraprofessionals, teacher's aides, and educators, especially in small and rural school districts.”

According to information provided in the press release, the Grow Your Own Grant funds:

- 51 current teachers to receive stipends to lead Education and Training courses, including for dual credit, beginning in the 2019-2020 school year;
- 123 paraprofessionals to receive a bachelor’s and teacher certification and project them to be full-time teachers starting the 2021-2022 school year;
- 51 paraprofessionals to receive a teacher certification and project them to be full-time teachers starting the 2020-2021 school year;
- 15 teacher candidates to participate in an intensive pre-service experience and project them to be full-time teachers starting in the 2019-2020 school year;
- 94 teacher candidates to participate in a year-long clinical teaching placement and project them to be full-time teachers starting the 2020-2021 school year; and
- 52 high schools to start or grow Education and Training programs.

Information in a flyer published by the Texas Education Agency identifies three pathways provided in Cycle 3 of Texas Grow Your Own Grant (Texas Education Agency, n.d.). The first pathway offers funding to local education agencies and regional service centers. The grant aims to implement education and training courses in high school. The focus of this pathway is to provide high school students with dual credit courses. The second pathway focuses on the recruitment and support of paraprofessionals, instructional aides, and long-term substitutes. Through this pathway, the recipients remain employed with the district while they work towards becoming certified teachers. The third pathway is a new provision for the grant. In this pathway, the focus is on developing highly qualified teachers by providing support through a year-long clinical teaching assignment or an intensive pre-service teaching experience with a clinical component.

## **Methodology**

### **Setting**

The study was conducted with students attending a mid-size, urban-commuter university in the western-regional part of the U.S. The university has a predominantly non-traditional student body, with 43.9% of the undergraduate students identified as first-generation college students. Multiple resources are utilized to address the needs of the students, and 79% of the undergraduates complete a degree after five years.

## Participants

To understand the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders, the study examined the input of students (current paraprofessionals), collaborating teachers, principals, university principals, and university directors in the grow your own program included in the study. Each group will be detailed below.

The student participants included 12 undergraduate females who were selected through a criterion-based nomination process. The criteria for student participants included a) being an educational paraprofessional at the elementary, middle, or high school level, (b) working in one of the local school districts which collaborated with the university on this project, and (c) having completed at least one year of undergraduate coursework. Additional demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Student Participants' Demographics*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Years as Paraprofessional</b>
Shannon	26	White	3
Judith	24	Hispanic	2
Tyna	31	Black	8
Leslie	25	Hispanic	2
Angelica	29	Hispanic	5
Cathy	24	Black	3
Anna	27	Hispanic	4
Veronica	34	White	7
Linda	32	Hispanic	8
Lillian	40	Hispanic	12
Charisma	35	Black	5
Laura	22	White	1

The district stakeholders are represented by the four building principals and 12 cooperating teachers at the participating schools in which the paraprofessionals worked. The principals provided feedback in the coordination, recruiting, and professional development of candidates in the program and broad experiences working with participants. Cooperating teachers provided training experiences and worked intimately with the paraprofessionals as they traversed through the school year.

University stakeholders were the last group of participants to contribute to the study. They included four supervisors at each of the participating schools and the College of Education program director of student internships. University supervisors worked in the school, supervised paraprofessional interns in the classroom setting, provided immediate feedback, and provided professional development of relevant topics. The supervisors served as a bridge for the university and schools to provide the most effective experience possible to candidates in the field. The university director was the last component. The role of the director was to organize the experience of students in the teacher education program. The university director worked with university faculty to work outside of the traditional university schedule to create sections of undergraduate courses available for paraprofessionals to attend outside of their district. Additionally, the

university director was responsible for assigning supervisors who would understand the non-traditional aspects of the paraprofessionals as students.

## **Procedure**

The researchers used an interpretive qualitative approach to identify common themes from participant responses and document collection. The participants' responses and documents were analyzed to determine themes that emerged regarding the overall impressions, opinions, and feelings about participating in the program and the specific incidents, obstacles, and occurrences that might provide recommendations and a first attempt at “best practices” for other organizations that might consider GYO programs.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data from the study was collected from in-depth interviews and field notes. All of the data was used for target triangulation of the results. Additional data were drawn from available demographic records, transcripts from college work, and scores on state certification exams.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore matters related to the experiences in a new grow your own program. The method involved in-depth discussions of the design, strengths, and areas of growth needed in an open format for participants to share.

One formal, one-hour semi-structured interview was held with all 12 student participants at the campus where they served with students. One formal, 30-minute semi-structured interview was held with all 12 of the cooperating teachers at their campuses, four principals at their campuses, four university supervisors at the campus served, and the university director at the university. To protect the participant's identity and confidentiality of the information received from the participant, data were collected for each participant and identified by pseudonyms for the students and sample type and numbers such as Administrator/University Rep 1-9, or Teacher 1-11.

After gathering participant feedback, researchers identified common themes across all participants. The researchers utilized inductive coding to allow the themes to emerge from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Triangulation of all of the data collected and converged was used to add validity (Angen,2000). Participant validation of the identified themes provided additional validation.

## **Findings**

As a result of the researchers' data collection and qualitative analysis, an understanding of perspectives and themes emerged. These themes were categorized using the participants' voices and reflections for discussion purposes and were categorized in three areas: 1) addressing teacher shortages, 2) program structure, 3) student recruitment and 4) program funding. The stakeholders provided valuable perspectives of how the grow your own programs were beneficial.

### **Addressing Shortages**

Building principals were asked to describe the challenges of finding qualified individuals to teach in their schools regularly. Principal responses included the experiences of shrinking candidate



pools – the increased use of substitute teachers unable to pass certification exams to fill needs – high attrition rates of novice teachers. Principals expressed frustrations of increased achievement demands without the human resources to provide the best experiences for students. For example, one principal shared her experience of attending five teacher fairs one year and only securing two candidates from the available pools. She further explained a teacher fair she attended as "an experience on shark tank. You have multiple districts fighting for the same qualified candidates. The school or district that wins is the one with the most resources and desirable environment. That is a barrier for inner-city schools." Another principal described filling teacher vacancies as "like playing a game of fitting a square peg in a hole for a circle. You do your best to make it work even if it's not the best situation for the students." These types of examples led to the participants and their districts exploring the Grow Your Own Opportunities with an effort toward increased creativity.

Building partnerships from "ground zero" with another nonprofit educational organization was the most considerable obstacle for the participating school districts to implement the GYO programs. One of the participating school districts started its program with paraprofessionals by utilizing its chamber of commerce for local funds until the district could secure a GYO grant with the state. One principal shared, "We had to think out of the box. We have these resources right here in our backyards, and we had to find a way to take advantage of them. Our superintendent was very supportive, and the Chamber of Commerce came through." The initial assistance provided the first group of paraprofessionals with funding for tuition and flexibility regarding time from the building principals to attend classes.

Student participants were excited to take advantage of the opportunity to become certified teachers and were proud the districts were investing in them. One participant shared, "I grew up here, and my kids go to school in the district...to know I will be a full-time teacher soon makes me proud to know I can make a difference." Most of the student participants were thankful for the chance to receive a degree and the additional salary that will come along with it. They would not have been able to afford to go to school on their own or just didn't know how to go about becoming a teacher. One participant provided insight "I just needed to work...I didn't know anything about college to become a teacher...none of my family went to college." Unfortunately, this was the experience for eight out of the 12 participants. Being first-generation college students did not provide the social capital for the participants to know how to go about receiving a degree and certification to become a teacher. The GYO program provided the money for them to take the subsequent steps. The structure of the programs benefitted the student participants and will be highlighted in the next theme.

## **Program Structure**

The educational relationships and support began when the districts linked with a university to support the students through the certification process. The partnership between the school district and the local university identified a need for coordination in three significant areas: scheduling evening courses, tuition assistance, and academic support systems. The identification of these areas of coordination had multiple sources. Some of the needs were quickly identified due to the district's ability to "pilot" its initiative ahead of the state funding. In contrast, other requirements became apparent only after stakeholders could convene and engage in meaningful conversations. While the areas in need of coordination seem to be minor, the reality is, in that space of time, the individuals involved in the partnership were required to both "think outside of the box" and

coordinate efforts toward a goal that was not an institutional norm. While all organizations have purposes related to partnerships and cooperation among communities and organizations, few invest the time and energy into supporting individuals through the activities that must occur for these types of goals to come to fruition.

The university director served a significant role in facilitating the academic and certification components with the paraprofessionals. Before the advent of the program, the university held most of its teacher preparation classes during the day. With the partnership that evolved as a result of the GYO, profound scheduling accommodations were necessary. The director coordinated with teacher education faculty and set up courses specifically for working students and completed their degree plans. The director commented:

"All faculty members are on board and willing to adjust their course schedules to accommodate the needs of our paraprofessionals. I am asked periodically how many paraprofessionals are in our program and where they are in their degree completion. The associate dean's office has been instrumental in assuring that we can accommodate these students' schedules."

As part of the certification process, all participants are expected to attempt various certification examinations successfully. The university established alternative "preparation sessions and workshops" for the participants in the GYO program. The director was able to select workshops offered on Saturdays and the required practice examinations on alternative schedules, which served to enhance the participants' opportunities for success at alternative schedules to enhance the chances for success.

When commenting about academic support, one principal bragged, "Our people are confident and feel prepared to not only teach in the classroom but also prepare thoughtful lesson plans and engage students from what they have learned in their courses."

One of the paraprofessionals commented how the accommodations helped as the cohort navigated through the program, saying, "Working a full-time job while going through the program is hard because of being in the classroom all day and then meeting for classes into the evening. But having it available for me to get done knowing I will have a job at the end makes it worth it."

Creating these types of collaboration led to rich experiences and constant support for students to perform successfully in their courses and ensure they were well prepared for state examinations for certification. Key personnel in the school districts and university were required to engage in constant communication and joint problem solving to identify issues and mutually work through various options to find the best experiences for the paraprofessionals. The frequency communication is what made the partnership work.

### ***Recruiting Students***

At the time of this writing, the initiatives shared by the local districts and universities can best be described as just past their infancy and beginning to gain momentum. Since initiation, the number of districts partnering with the university has doubled from two districts with four paraprofessionals to four districts, one of which received state funding. As college and university expenses are often perceived as barriers to learning, there is a clear need to appropriately communicate and market the program. Moreover, building-level principals need to be educated on the cultural aspects of the GYO program in developing ownership and a heightened sense of belonging within their community. Not only do paraprofessionals need to know about tuition

assistance and support, but district administrators also need to be aware of the opportunities to share and facilitate the development on their campuses.

The districts involved in the study incorporated a recruitment and selection strategy that sent flyers to potential participants and principals, identifying paraprofessionals that were working in their schools to attract strong candidates into the program. It was important the principals were familiar with the potential candidates and that the principals saw the candidates as having the potential to be leaders in the classroom and teaching profession.

Following this method, buy-in was immediate with both the school administration and the paraprofessional to reciprocally benefit one another. Before beginning the program, it is interesting to note that some of the candidates had already invested three or more years in their school districts as paraprofessionals. As an aside, the three-year investment was determined to be a measurable goal of the GYO concept. To strengthen the partnership, the university director assisted former students not affiliated with the GYO program who could not secure employment after graduation in securing interviews for vacant paraprofessional positions in partnering districts. In this way, the former students would benefit from the additional experience of serving as a paraprofessional in the school setting. The university director briefly described how these identifications take place with students:

"I meet with the Teacher Center Executive Board twice yearly. The Human Resource Directors on the Board advise the Center on-field and student-teaching placements. They contact me to schedule district meetings to meet with their paraprofessionals. These individuals are either current students enrolled at the university or interested in pursuing their teacher certification by obtaining a bachelor's degree."

Because each partner district's HR department is involved, there is an alignment through the program concerning expectations, opportunities, and the hiring process. Moreover, the communication between the building principal and the HR department is enhanced because of the additional need to convey assessment and other information regarding participant progress and the desire to identify potential participants in future GYO cohorts. The identification of talent plays one of the most extensive roles, and it takes a team being on the same page to know what to look for in candidates that would be a good fit for support in the program.

### ***Funding***

Once identified as a participant in the program, the biggest hurdle for most potential teachers is financial support to enroll and complete a teacher education program at an accredited university. This step provides that gateway for most students who decide to take this route because they can still earn an income while receiving tuition assistance for courses. Without financial aid, most candidates would be locked in their current career path. The students enrolled in the program receive up to \$11,000 towards their bachelor's degree and certification, with the agreement to teach three years as a classroom teacher in the district. This financial arrangement is in alignment with other programs across the state. Participants were in support of the contract. One paraprofessional commented,

"I never knew about how to become a teacher. I just needed a job. After working at the school, I enjoyed working with the teachers and helping students succeed. The grant has opened a door for me I could have never imagined before."

This story echoed the same sentiment from another paraprofessional,

“I didn’t have a college fund or any money to go to school. When the principal told me she wanted to invest in me because of how great I was with the student, I was happy. It made me feel good to know I was appreciated and that they wanted to help me.”

School districts were creative in finding opportunities to help fund scholarships for students, paraprofessionals, and current teachers to engage in professional growth, utilizing partnerships with private-sector organizations and local chambers of commerce. The grants related to the Grow Your program from the state augmented and, in some cases, replaced the school district efforts to provide funding for professional growth. One principal commented how the grant provided an advantage,

"I was fortunate to be one of the first schools with the GYO grant from the state; I had two paraprofessionals that were great on my campus. To help them and know they will be on my campus to serve my students as certified teachers were invaluable. I hope the program expands more to our students wanting to enter education."

The financial assistance afforded these participants made a positive difference in the choices.

### **Discussion/Implications for Practice**

With the current teacher shortages, school districts must intentionally find strategies to identify, prepare and hire the best applicants. Grow Your programs provide a hometown advantage school districts can use to recruit potential teachers that will be qualified and provide intangible qualities many applicants may not possess immediately about their specific districts. Relationship trust-building is one of the most crucial components of working with students, families, and communities (Bryk and Schneider, 2003); hiring from within jumpstarts the process for all stakeholders because of the familiarity with personnel and systems.

Moreover, the current social environment and the uncertainty of "what schools will look like" are significant reasons for school districts to think "outside the box" and find ways to grow the competent individuals with whom the communities have already established relationships. The risks associated with filling any positions via the application/interview process can be exacerbated in environments fraught with time constraints and the anxieties related to how teaching and learning in public schools will be redefined.

The concept of recruiting from within provides a considerable advantage to school districts and university partners. Participants echoed sentiments of not knowing about college or what path they needed to take to become teachers, in addition to financial barriers to college. Starting the process as early as high school with teacher cadet programs is essential in establishing a pipeline. Additionally, districts and university partners need to increase opportunities to engage students and their families about navigating pathways to become a teacher and providing financial incentives and other information on funding college. Districts should also consider paraprofessionals’ initial inductions to the school district as opportunities to develop a pipeline for the candidates to become invested as life-long employees for communities and contributing alumni for universities. School districts are allowed to identify talent at all levels and introduce education as a viable career. District personnel can provide real-life experiences in the profession and introduce education to many who may not have considered it a professional path.

Regarding universities, GYO programs are an occasion to strengthen mutually beneficial partnerships and with school districts, state officials, and nonprofit and community organizations. These collaborations should create long-term funding initiatives and enhanced academic and programmatic supports for participants in GYO Programs. GYO programs have the potential to

benefit the enrollment and diversity of student experiences. By including candidates who might not have ever considered education as a profession, the university experience becomes significantly more robust as it includes candidates with non-traditional backgrounds.

The implications for increasing the teacher pool in districts of need, developing local talent, growing teacher education programs, and providing the best teacher preparation experience are plentiful in GYO programs. District and university leaders have a responsibility to coordinate partnership opportunities and continue to think out of the box to build programs that benefit school-aged children through the development of teachers with whom students can identify. By utilizing local talent, these programs can lead to increased levels of positive culture and school climate, model the importance of investing in one's community, and build meaningful relationships with many local families that can only result in high student achievement and success.

### **Future Research/Conclusion**

Initial results about the implementation and expansion of GYO programs are inspiring. Through the stories of paraprofessionals, cooperating teachers, principals, and university stakeholders, it is easy to understand that focused investment in people, especially people who have already demonstrated an investment in a school district, has the potential to provide significant benefit, not only to measurable factors, but also to those factors that are often unmeasured or difficult to measure: school culture, sense of community, local investment, and overcoming “brain drain.” Future research in this area is essential, as long-term impacts of Grow Your Own programs may provide a yet-unseen formula for improving student success and addressing elements of the socioeconomic and cultural divide that permeate our society.

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