

# **Best Practices Article: Hitting the Target with Transition to Teaching in Mississippi's Poorest School Districts: High Retention Rates through Program Support, Resources, and Strategic Recruitment**

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## *Abstract*

*In order to assist in alleviating the teaching shortage in poor, rural school districts, also known as Local Education Agencies (LEA's), faculty in the College of Education at Mississippi State University sought funding that would provide financial support for a new alternate route teaching program. This program, known as Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs (LEAP), would address preparation and retention issues in teacher preparation. This article will tell the story of how this transition to teaching program used effective support, resources, and strategic recruiting in order to yield high retention rates in partner school district, often at nearly 90 percent during the first three years of teaching.*

*Keywords: alternative certification, teacher retention, teacher support*

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Mississippi has been known in educational circles as lagging woefully behind the rest of the country in terms of academic achievement. One of the more ominous educational indicators has been chronically low graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), Mississippi had the second lowest graduation rate in the country at 63.8 percent in 2010. In the American Legislative Exchange Council's 2013 Report Card on Education (2013), Mississippi ranked 48<sup>th</sup> in terms of academic gains. One of the largest stumbling blocks for local educational leaders has been the state's inability to produce quality teachers on a pace to meet growing demand. This has been particularly true on the secondary level where many 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in high poverty districts have often found themselves being educated by teachers who either were not certified in the subject matter taught or who were on provisional certification status (Mississippi Department of Education, 2014).

Mississippi has made progress in recent years toward solving the problem of filling teaching positions with capable, intelligent, and diligent educators. Universities throughout the state have worked with the Mississippi Department of Education to offer a variety of alternate route licensure programs. One such alternate route program at Mississippi State University (MSU) has helped to alleviate the teacher shortage in some school districts through an intense recruiting, preparation, and retention system and has provided scholarships funded by the United States Department of Education to teachers who accepted positions in partner school districts. This system has led to higher teacher retention rates in partner and poverty stricken districts, and has held the program accountable to these districts by fulfilling its original mission of providing highly qualified personnel in the classroom. By focusing on the specific goals of recruitment, preparation, and retention of qualified teachers, alternate route programs like the one at MSU can help solve the longstanding teacher shortage in poor rural school districts around the United States.

### **Background**

Mississippi is considered to be one of the most impoverished states in the country with more than 24 percent of the population living below the poverty line, according to recent data by the United States Census Bureau (2013). This continuous state of poverty makes the recruitment of future educators in the state challenging. Another challenge to the successful recruitment of educators in the state is its low salary for teachers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the average salary for secondary teachers in Mississippi ranked next to last nationally during the 2011-2012 school year at \$41,994. The average starting salary in Mississippi was ranked 45<sup>th</sup> out of the 50 states during the 2012-2013 school year with a salary of \$31,184 (National Education Association, 2013). This socioeconomic climate has created reluctance for university students to major in education. While this problem has plagued the state for years, it has been particularly troublesome in school districts in which the highest poverty levels were found. This problem of too few qualified educators is exacerbated by the fact that research has shown that teacher preparation and certification can significantly impact learning even after factoring environmental effects such as poverty (Fetler, 1997).

In an effort to address teacher shortages that have existed in this state, the College of Education at MSU and the Mississippi Department of Education proposed a targeted alternate route certification program in 2009 that would quickly recruit and comprehensively prepare non-

traditional candidates with a bachelor's degree for the teaching profession. The Learning and Educating through Alternative Programs (LEAP) grant was awarded to the MSU College of Education in 2009 by the United States Department of Education through the Transition to Teaching grant competition. The LEAP program offered scholarships of up to \$5,000 for candidates who would agree to teach in these "at risk" school districts for a minimum of three years between 2009 and 2014 (United States Department of Education, 2009).

The LEAP program was initially conceived as an effort to specifically address the issue of placing highly qualified personnel in those poverty stricken districts that most needed assistance. In order to accomplish this feat, partnerships were formed with 42 of Mississippi's "at risk" districts. All partner districts had at least a 20 percent poverty rate in their areas. As part of the university's accountability pledge with partner districts, the MSU College of Education agreed it would establish and coordinate the new program in such a way that these non-traditional teacher candidates would be well prepared for the challenges of teaching in districts that had high rates of per capita poverty. Under the auspice of the agreement, the MSU College of Education faculty pledged to recruit, prepare, and provide continuing guidance to program participants in order to ensure a higher than average retention rate in these challenging environments. The longstanding problem of teacher retention has been well documented (National Education Association, 2008). Some research studies have estimated that 33 percent of all beginning teachers will leave the field within their first three years (Ingersoll, 2003; National Education Association, 2008) and 46 percent of all new teachers will leave the profession by the fifth year (National Education Association, 2008). For their part, district partners promised that once initial licensure preparation was complete, these new teachers would be given high priority in the districts' hiring process.

### **Recruitment**

Mississippi has had teacher shortages in the past, which have been so severe that by 2008 more than half of the state's newly certified teachers came from alternate route programs, according to the state's largest newspaper, *The Clarion Ledger* (Brown, 2008). Although various alternate certification programs were helpful in alleviating critical shortages, districts deemed "at risk" continued to struggle filling positions with highly qualified teachers. In order to fill the vacuum of qualified teachers in these districts, recruitment goals of 30 participants per year were established by the LEAP program. Since LEAP's inception, the program has exceeded its goals and maintained its accountability to the partner districts by providing more than 150 certified teachers throughout the state in the following areas: English, special education, biology, chemistry, mathematics, social studies, physics, and foreign language. The way in which the program achieved this goal was through an intensive multifaceted marketing and recruitment approach.

One of the most unique aspects of the LEAP program involved the idea to both recruit and prepare aspiring teachers who were predominately from rural communities within Mississippi. LEAP faculty believed that local recruiting efforts would produce teachers with higher long term retention rates. Concerns of retention are addressed through LEAP scholarship funding that is tied to a minimum commitment of three years teaching in local school districts. Teachers tend to prefer working in schools that are demographically and geographically similar to where they

attended school (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). Program directors indicated this approach would help to make certain the program would be accountable in locating participants who knew some of the existing challenges in these districts and would be more quickly prepared to address these issues. It has also been argued that teachers who are recruited to teach in rural areas and have no background or family history in those settings may leave sooner due to feelings of geographic and emotional isolation (Angelski & Murphy, 1997). Having the specific goal of local recruitment in mind, more than 95 percent of all scholarship recipients were living in the state at the time they signed up for the LEAP program.

Recruiting within the state also meant that LEAP faculty could tap into a segment of the population that was defined as being underemployed; those whose level of education made them overqualified and underpaid for the jobs in which they worked. These recent graduates who had not yet reached their professional peaks were recruited through job fairs, public service announcements, newspaper advertisements, and through MSU's College of Education websites. Various methods of recruiting were used in order to attract future educators for the LEAP program. A website about the LEAP program was created and a LEAP Facebook page was also established in order to attract attention from a younger demographic of potential candidates. Other methods for recruitment included advertising in newspapers, television, the Mississippi Department of Education website, flyers at partner school districts, recruitment at job fairs, and information sessions at local workshops or conferences. However, by the end of the recruitment process, the LEAP faculty discovered that 57 percent of the candidates were referred by communicating with others.

Another key component of the recruitment process was to market the program to individuals who had a desire for a Master of Arts in Teaching-Secondary (MAT-S) degree. This specialized master's program has classes that were designed to be intensive, but also fit into the busy schedules of working professionals. Candidates had a choice to achieve their master's degree within 14 months or to take classes in order to be certified quickly. Candidates in the program also received other benefits such as the use of a university laptop while they were participating in the program. In addition, candidates also received a scholarship award of \$5,000 for agreeing to teach in one of the partner districts for three years.

### **Preparation and Support**

The cornerstone of the LEAP partnership with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) was to provide highly qualified teachers to districts that had traditionally struggled to fill core curriculum positions. The LEAP faculty were aware that a comprehensive program that intensively prepared new teachers would be the most effective way to be accountable to partner districts and improve learning for students. When socioeconomic factors for students are excluded, it is clear that teachers are the leading factors in pupil success (Carey, 2004). The LEAP coursework was adapted over time to include changes in delivery methods for classes and to offer new certification options to candidates in order to meet LEA demands.

The initial LEAP coursework was designed to give new candidates a choice in either obtaining teacher certification for an A class license (bachelor's degree level license) or continuing with their studies for a full 14 months to obtain a master's degree and class AA license (master's

degree level license). Class A licensure is awarded to teachers who meet the Mississippi Department of Education qualifications for certification, and who hold a bachelor's degree (Mississippi Department of Education, 2014). Class AA licensure is awarded to teachers who hold a master's degree. In order to be accountable to LEAs and fulfill its original commitment of quickly delivering highly qualified teachers to districts, MSU faculty adopted a course schedule that would allow students to obtain a three-year non-renewable license after one semester of coursework. Students could then take jobs in partner districts while completing their field experience requirement and obtaining the class A five-year renewable license or continuing in their studies to obtain the class AA license through the MAT-S program. The University's process of quality control with the LEAP program has involved requiring candidates to have a minimum 2.75 GPA in their bachelor's coursework and pass the Praxis examination in the core subject matter in which they wish to obtain licensure.

One of the greatest changes in the LEAP program has been the increasing popularity of the on-line coursework. LEAP's initial program of study offered only face-to-face classes through MSU's Starkville and Meridian campuses. Although early recruitment efforts were successful, many would-be candidates often lived too far away from the University's two campuses in order to take advantage of the program. According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of the state was estimated to be 2.98 million in 2012 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Given the relatively sparse population of the state and the overwhelming need that existed in many of these "at risk" areas it was decided that an on-line component to the program should be added in an effort to "shrink" the distance that existed between many of these would-be teachers and the University's campus. Today LEAP still offers its well-rounded program of study in a face-to-face format for those candidates who prefer traditional learning on the Meridian campus, but it also offers the entire coursework in an online format to fit the busy lifestyles for other candidates. Currently, 33 percent of LEAP candidates are taking classes in an on-line format. The adaptation of LEAP's coursework is unique in that it is the only alternate route certification program in Mississippi that can be taken completely on-line.

The addition of more online coursework was not the only major change to occur within the LEAP program during the last four years. One of the primary means of remaining accountable to the partner districts has been maintaining an open dialogue for suggestions and concerns. It was from this ongoing dialogue that a major new area of certification was added to the LEAP program in 2011 when special education was introduced as part of the scholarship program. Through the Teach Mississippi Institute (TMI) program at MSU, which is a certification-only program, students can now receive up to \$2,500 for obtaining licensure in special education and agreeing to work in a partner district for three years.

In addition, the LEAP faculty supported the LEAP candidates by providing the following.

- A checklist to assist candidates in understanding the step by step process of the requirements for licensure in the state of Mississippi.
- A checklist to help understand how to officially apply to graduate school and how to earn official or classified enrollment in the LEAP program.
- Help sessions in preparation for the Praxis I, as well as tutoring.
- A library of test preparation books for the Praxis I and Praxis II assessments available for candidates to check out.

- A LEAP website that provided professional resources including interview preparation, links to professional organizations, and teaching resources.
- Collaboration with the MSU Career Center and school districts around the state to raise awareness of job opportunities.
- A university site-supervisor to work with candidates during their internships.
- Mentoring for candidates during the first few years of teaching.
- A \$5,000 stipend for completing the master's degree program or \$2,500 for completing the certification-only program.
- Professional development for candidates in the summer and fall semesters.
- Review sessions for candidates prior to taking their comprehensive examinations for the master's degree.

### **Retention and Support**

The effective recruitment and preparation of new teachers for partner districts would not qualify as being accountable unless the problem of teacher retention was addressed as well. Supporting LEAP scholarship candidates through mentoring and summer professional development has added to the program's success. LEAP faculty have established a complex system of educational and professional support that has helped guide scholarship candidates through not only the application process and coursework, but even through their first years of teaching. Beginning teachers who are offered multiple means of professional support for extended periods of time are less likely to leave after their first year (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). This methodical process of support has helped to eliminate part of the worrisome problem of high turnover in LEAs.

Low teacher retention rates in poor school districts essentially slow down the learning process by restricting the schools' ability to sustain a coherent curriculum due to turnover (Guin, 2004). With these specific problems in mind, LEAP faculty designed a program that would provide support throughout the recruitment, preparation, and early teaching stages to ensure retention.

The support for each candidate into LEAP begins long before their acceptance into the program. Candidates receive a checklist that carefully guides them through the teaching licensure process. In addition, four full-time LEAP staff members are on-site to provide support and answer questions in regards to their application. In order to be fully prepared for both the Praxis I and II examinations, LEAP staff members provide tutoring and/or workshops to candidates. LEAP offices have test preparation books for candidates to check out.

A high level of support is also maintained throughout the course of their academic classes. LEAP staff members specifically work with candidates on scheduling issues, difficulty with course assignments, and serving as liaisons when necessary with course instructors. By taking these precautionary steps more than 90 percent of LEAP candidates finish their coursework and obtain their initial teaching licenses.

Although many alternate route programs stop their level of support once initial licensure is obtained, LEAP program organizers have found that steady support of newly licensed teachers throughout their early years can greatly impact their level of retention. LEAP scholarship candidates can complete courses for a master's degree in 14 months. The 14-month schedule

includes: 12 credit hours in the first summer semester, nine credit hours in the fall, nine credit hours in the spring, and six credit hours in the second summer semester. LEAP candidates can elect to complete the master's degree over an extended period of time. If LEAP scholarship recipients meet Mississippi Department of Education certification requirements, they can begin teaching after the first cohort of courses is completed. Berry (2001) said that alternate route programs that provide intensive field experience and continued support typically have maintained higher retention rates than less demanding programs. LEAP faculty work closely with both the Mississippi Department of Education and the MSU Career Center to guide program graduates into appropriate teacher vacancies. During their first year of teaching and internship, a university supervisor comes to evaluate these new teachers and provide valuable feedback in order to improve their skills. Candidates who secure a position in partner districts are also assigned a university-based mentor to guide them through their first year of teaching and help solve problems as they arise. LEAP faculty also provide a free two day professional development opportunity for new teachers to earn Continuing Education Units while learning about topics that specifically affect education in Mississippi. This continued support helps teachers grow in the profession while also helping the program remain accountable to its original purpose of filling the need for highly qualified instructors. This unique level of continuing support has allowed the program to maintain a retention rate of nearly 90 percent during teachers' first three years of service in these high poverty districts.

### **Conclusion**

The LEAP Transition to Teaching Program was a successful alternate route program, which placed 151 quality teachers in underserved school districts in Mississippi between 2009 and 2014. Recruiting locally and placing LEAP candidates in geographic regions of the state where they are most comfortable may have attributed to the high retention rate. The five-year retention rate of 83 percent is higher in comparison to the first five years across the nation of 46 percent (National Education Association, 2008). Additionally, 96 percent are still teaching in K-12 settings while only 4 percent left the teaching profession. Only 13 percent moved districts to teach outside of the scope of LEAP. Program support, mentoring, and proper preparation for the classroom resulted in LEAP being a very successful transition to teaching program.

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