Grow Your Own Teachers

School and Community-Driven Pathways

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School districts across the nation face severe shortages of qualified staff, a circumstance which the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened.[i] The problem is particularly acute in traditionally hard-to-staff schools in urban and rural communities; in specific content areas such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); and for English learners and students with special needs.[ii]

At the same time, many schools also have difficulty finding educators of color, particularly Black male educators. Meanwhile, over one-half of students identify as students of color;[iii] however, many beneficial outcomes are associated with same-race teacher-student matching.[iv]

Over the past year, federal and state support has provided substantial opportunites for local initiatives to be expanded through teacher education and other educator workforce solutions.[v] More research will likely be needed to better understand how successful new program models are addressing educator shortages and filling persistent staffing gaps.

Grow Your Own (GYO) Program Models

GYO, as an overarching strategy, aims to eliminate school-level educator shortages while diversifying staffs and providing a pathway for local educator candidates to achieve the preparation and certification necessary to make a career in the teaching profession.

GYO involves "preparing teachers from the community for the community."[vi] Proponents maintain that the programs not only appeal to educators' preference for living and working in the communities where they were raised, but also that candidates can leverage their local and institutional social knowledge and capital to the benefit of the schools and students they will serve. In the longer run, the goal is that retention of staff and school status will improve while issues of shortages and student equity lessen.[vii]
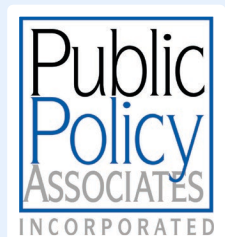
Because GYO programs are targeted at local contexts, including specific community needs, goals, and resources, a proliferation of differing models is not surprising, especially as the strategy gains momentum across the states and in distinct districts. A recent nationwide scan found that "most states have at least one GYO program, but tremendous variety exists in both program design and strategy."[viii] Currently, there are more than 25 state-level policies without cross-state coherence or consistency.[ix] Given the localized nature of the program models, some differentiation of the basic models is to be expected.

One type of GYO program model recruits educator candidates from the ranks of education support professionals (e.g., school employees such as paraprofessionals or classroom assistants, and sometimes bus drivers or custodians), as well as other adult school employees or community members.[x] The key has been to find candidates with a college degree or progress toward a degree. Some of these programs work directly with colleges and universities to recruit adult candidates into and through preparation programs by offering monetary incentives, wraparound supports, and programming to enable certification. Other program models, such as teacher cadet or Career and Technical Education (CTE), focus on secondary-level students to fill the pipeline.[xi]

> "By focusing on recruiting and preparing teachers from the community for the community, GYO programs are highly-localized and designed to meet the needs of teacher candidates and the school systems where they will work."
>
> Amaya Garcia, researcher, and author of *Grow Your Own Teachers: A 50-State Scan of Programs and Policies*

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Practically all GYO programs share a set of key elements that follow from program design choices around **target candidates** and **partnerships**. The following core elements should be considered when designing programs: [xii]

- School districts need additional **resources** and specialized expertise and materials as well as dedicated staff for training.

- Formalized GYO programs usually include more **structural components**. For example, programs with adult candidates often provide additional supports, which may include direct financial assistance or incentives such as tuition assistance and/or loan forgiveness with dedicated supports.

Although hardly universal, some GYO programs draw on **state support**. States have instituted competitive grants or other funding programs, revised certification requirements, and offer technical assistance. [xiii]

The GYO program model for adult candidates often takes place as a cohort model designed to efficiently deliver, with supports, postsecondary general and education-related courses, combined with on-the-job experiences, necessary to obtain a certificate and a local or district placement. [xiv]

The other model of GYO programs exposes secondary-level students to teaching as an attractive career, sometimes helping them onto the pathway or into the pipeline, so that they will then pursue teaching after high school, usually through a traditional preparation program. [xv]

The student-based GYO programs often work through CTE programs in local districts, college dual enrollment, and/or secondary school-sponsored experiences and activities in the field.

Virtually all GYO programs require partnerships with independent entities. [xvi] Many GYO partners are degree- or credential-granting educational institutions, such as colleges or universities with educator preparation programs.

Partners usually contribute essential expertise, programming, and supports for candidates to achieve certification and obtain employment. [xvii] Some partners offer alternative or fast-track routes to certification, sometimes through nonprofit networks.

Similar to some adult-focused program models, many of the GYO programs targeted at high school students work also with nonprofit networks and other purveyors of programmatic content and supports (e.g., Teacher Cadets, Pathways2Teaching, and Educators Rising programs). [xix]

Secondary student-oriented programs tend to be cheaper and more flexible, but also have longer-term and more uncertain effects. Meanwhile, adult-oriented programs can produce more immediate, ascertainable outcomes; however, they also are more time intensive, and subject to administrative burdens. Regardless of type, attrition is a constant challenge for many GYO programs. [xx]

Although some GYO programs have reported evidence of success, there is currently a dearth of rigorous research on their operation, outcomes, and longer-term impacts. [xxi] The evidence suggests several recurring challenges; chiefly, that GYO programs seem difficult to sustain, and because they are targeted, and localized, they may also be difficult to scale statewide.

In addition to limited and time-bound funding streams, obtaining, maintaining, and retaining qualified and committed candidates demands great front-end

efforts that sometimes lead to disappointing backend results.

Because school workforce needs change over time, mismatches may arise by the time candidates complete their GYO program, where the positions available do not match staff qualifications. Similar to overall retention in schools, retaining the educators hired out of a GYO program can also be challenging. In many cases, hard-to-staff schools may have difficulty even if GYO candidates initially start their teaching careers in the school. [xxii]

GYO programs are united by an eminently plausible conviction that teachers, schools, and ultimately students, are better off when the local community is both the source of and destination for educator candidates.

There is a strong desire to expand the programs; however, for the strategy to take root, more evaluation and study will be necessary.

Implications

PPA offers the following questions and suggestions for local and state decision-makers to consider as they develop, execute, and study GYO programs to address educator workforce challenges and diversity goals.

Key Questions to Consider

- How do GYO programs compare to existing preparation programs, recruitment, induction, and retention efforts?

- How should the challenges and opportunities stemming from the pandemic be addressed in GYO program development and realization?

- What additional resources and supports are needed to share and scale best practices?

- What practices and policies need to

be changed in order for more local school districts to participate in these program models?

Suggested Practices and Policies

Investigate GYO models to inform program design and implementation.

Systematic study of the variation in program design and impact holds the key to learning from best practices GYO programs have developed. The variability offers an opportunity to study differences in program models to better understand what works for whom.

Tailor program elements for local leaders trying to identify workable solutions to educator shortages.

Successful GYO programs should be designed and implemented to meet specific local stakeholders' needs, priorities, and goals and be able to creatively accommodate local constraints and administrative hurdles that may exist. State education agencies can provide flexibility to local school districts seeking to implement innovative models.

Identify and engage a range of community-based partners.

Local partners, such as community-based organizations, philanthropy, and businesses that strongly align with GYO program goals, design, and elements should be identified and systematically engaged to provide support and services aimed at recruiting and retaining candidates.

Incorporate quality implementation and outcome evaluation.

Program design should provide for rigorous, culturally responsive evaluation, and activities should be ongoing during program implementation. This will help document program progress, identify course corrections, and longitudinally track program outcomes for improvement.

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[xxii] See endnote xx, above.