

Collaboration in Registered Teacher Apprenticeship: Strengthening Systems to Support a Sustainable Special Education Workforce

AUTHORS

Kaleigh Pickett
Jennifer Malone
Reesha Adamson

Journal of Special
Education Preparation
5(2), 6-16

© 2025 Pickett et al.
Licensed with CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0
License

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33043/zd5386v-v7j>

ABSTRACT

Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs offer a sustainable and innovative pathway for preparing pre-service special education teachers, particularly in rural and low-resourced communities. Exemplary programs integrate competency-based learning, rigorous on-the-job training, and structured mentorship, enabling apprentices to apply theoretical knowledge in real-time K–12 settings. This article explores how two university-sponsored teacher apprenticeship programs in the Midwest use innovative collaborative approaches to strategically combine the efforts of the educator preparation provider, Department of Labor (DOL), and local education agencies (LEAs) to foster a diverse teacher pipeline, address equity, and provide comprehensive mentorship and systematic support to teacher apprentices through the Registered Apprenticeship model. Challenges, benefits, and specific examples of apprenticeship implementation are discussed, highlighting the replicability of these programs as a solution to special education teacher shortages. Authors provide an analysis of programming and collaboration, which underscores the importance of continued investment, cross-sector collaboration, and support to sustain and scale innovative workforce development models for building a pipeline of educational professionals.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, paraeducator, special education, teacher apprenticeship, teacher preparation, teacher shortage, workforce development

Special education teacher shortages are a persistent national challenge (Billingsley et al., 2019) and are even more severe and persistent than in general education (Sutcher et al., 2016). These challenges are compounded particularly in high-poverty, high-minority, and rural areas, where many rural schools describe it as “very difficult” or “not possible” to fill teacher vacancies (Brown & Riden, 2023; Hedin et al., 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). These shortages stem from a range of factors—including high attrition, increased student needs, and the financial and logistical barriers to teacher certification (Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024; Tompkins, 2023). Traditional preparation models often fail to meet the needs of nontraditional candidates, contributing to a lack of workforce diversity and preparedness (Heath, 2024).

In response to persistent teacher shortages and a lack of workforce diversity, initiatives such as Grow Your Own in states like Illinois and California have demonstrated success in creating sustainable teacher pipelines (Espinoza et al., 2018). A teacher apprenticeship model for paraeducators in special education can be a structured, earn-and-learn pathway that enables paraeducators to become fully licensed special education teachers while continuing to work in schools. By targeting paraprofessionals, two critical challenges in special education (i.e., the persistent shortage of special education teachers and the lack of diversity in the educator workforce) can be addressed. Many paraprofessionals are racially and linguistically diverse and are already embedded in the communities they serve, making them ideal candidates to

help diversify the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas, 2018). One approach is through Registered Educator Apprenticeship Programs, sometimes referred to as Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs (RTAP or RAP).

RAPs have emerged as a promising pathway to address these shortages. These models offer candidates paid, immersive experiences in K–12 classrooms while completing certification-aligned coursework. By integrating academic and practical training, apprenticeship programs reduce financial burdens, create accessible entry points into the profession, and offer real-time support systems that foster retention and educator effectiveness (Fallona & Johnson, 2019). These programs promote a more stable, diverse, and responsive teacher workforce, particularly in high-need areas such as special education (Hedin et al., 2024). In addition, because paraprofessionals who participate in RAPs bring classroom experience and established relationships with students, they are more likely to succeed and remain in the teaching profession compared to those entering through traditional certification routes (Billingsley et al., 2019).

The success of these programs relies on intentional collaboration across systems. Cross-sector planning should begin with the formation of multi-stakeholder advisory boards composed of university faculty, district leaders, and representatives from workforce development agencies. No single institution can develop and sustain an apprenticeship model that meets current industry needs alone. Instead, universities, school districts, and workforce development agencies must coordinate efforts to support candidates academically, professionally, and financially, as has been done by several special education teacher preparation institutions across the country (Brown & Riden, 2023; Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024).

This article explores the critical role of collaboration in teacher apprenticeship programs, focusing on three essential partnerships: (a) within institutions of higher education (IHEs) – including financial aid, academic advising, student support services, and curriculum development and implementation; (b) with K–12 school districts – through structured mentorship, prior learning assessment (PLA) coursework, and communication feedback loops; and (c) with workforce development and labor agencies – leveraging grant funding, case management, and wraparound supportive services.

Through analysis of two midwestern university-sponsored teacher apprenticeship initiatives and the broader literature, this article offers recommendations for designing collaborative systems that support scalable, sustainable teacher preparation pipelines.

COLLABORATION WITHIN IHES

Universities can better support apprenticeship programs by reimagining and integrating services such as financial aid, academic advising, and student support to create a cohesive framework tailored to apprentices. Financial aid offices can develop funding options specific to apprentices, advisors can guide course selection aligned with apprenticeship goals, and support services can address personal and professional development. Additionally, aligning curriculum with competency-based education and emphasizing real-world, mentored learning experiences allows faculty to equip apprentices with the practical skills needed to succeed in their roles.

Financial Aid

One of the first barriers students often encounter when planning to attend an IHE seeking teacher certification is the systemic barrier of working with offices

of financial aid. The knowledge and flexibility of this office play a critical role in ensuring program completion for teacher apprentices. Financial aid offices can be responsive to teacher apprentice needs by providing training and assistance for teacher apprentices in navigating traditional university funding, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Pell Grants. Additionally, financial aid offices can seek out and embrace opportunities for education funding for teacher apprentices by coordinating with Department of Labor (DOL) funding like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which can fully fund classroom training, provide up to 50% of the teacher apprentices salary in reimbursement for the school district providing on-the-job training, and in some cases provide supportive services for teacher apprentices in need such as childcare vouchers and transportation assistance (Employment and Training Administration, 2023)

Another way that financial aid offices can be responsive to teacher apprentices' needs is by building flexible payment structures that support retention and program completion. These flexible payment structures, such as delayed tuition billing for grant recipients or payment plans paced out over 12-months to align with school district salary schedules, can allow teacher apprentices to persist in their training, despite financial challenges. Because these financial aid strategies rely primarily on targeted staff training and administrative alignment, not systemic overhaul, they offer a highly replicable solution for institutions looking to improve their support systems for nontraditional student apprentices.

Academic Advising

A challenge faced by many apprentices when enrolling in IHEs for K–12 teacher preparation is navigating the coursework and certification require-

FIGURE 1: Pathways for Paras, Apprenticeship Onboarding Checklist

Pathways for Paraprofessionals Checklist



To become a Special Education teacher through the Pathways for Paras registered apprenticeship program at Missouri State University, It is highly important that you complete each of these tasks!

As part of the Pathways program, you are considered a Department of Labor registered teacher apprentice. Benefits of the apprenticeship program include:

Hands-on Experience: Gain practical, on-the-job training.

Earning While Learning: Receive a salary during training, even student teaching.

Industry-Recognized Credentials: Obtain credentials recognized by the industry and Department of Labor.

Career Advancement: Access higher-paying job opportunities.

Mentorship and Support: Benefit from guidance by experienced professionals.

Financial Assistance: Potential support for education-related expenses.

FOLLOW THESE STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY PARTICIPATE IN PATHS FOR PARAS PROGRAM

Complete the Interest Form

This will let us know that you would like to be in this apprenticeship program. [Pathways for Paraprofessional Interest Form](#).

Apply to MSU

For undergraduates, select the **Special Education/Cross-Categorical BSED** program. It is free for undergraduates to apply. For graduate students, select **Special Education, Alternative Certification Track, MSED**. There is a \$60 application fee for graduate students. [View this page for more information on applying.](#)

Fill out the FAFSA

Go to the [FAFSA website found here](#) and complete the steps to fill out the FAFSA.

Apply for Financial Aid

[TEACH Grant](#)
[MSU Foundation scholarships](#)
[Outside scholarships](#)

For Questions: [Make an appointment with a Financial Aid advisor.](#)

Schedule Appointment with your Advisor For both Graduates and Undergraduates, [view the education advisement page](#), and then schedule an appointment with an advisor.

Register through MO Jobs

Create an Individual profile on [MO Jobs](#).

FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant

Undergraduate students enrolled at least part-time in a registered teacher apprenticeship program can apply for the [FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant here](#)

Register for Classes

After meeting with your advisor, you can register for your classes at your earliest registration date and time. For assistance with registering, you can ask your advisor or [review this webpage](#).

Complete, Sign, and Submit FERPA Form

Please use [this link to find the FERPA form to complete](#). This gives permission for MSU to communicate with your school district. You will need to sign onto MyMissouriState in order to complete it. It is vitally important that you sign and submit this form.

Apprenticeship Agreement Form 671

Please e-sign Apprenticeship Agreement Form 671 to confirm your participation in MSU's Pathways for Paras Registered Teacher Apprenticeship program. This is a digital form that will come to your MSU email from the DOL during your first semester in the program.

Note: You should check your university email regularly. All communications, like financial aid and Pathways updates, will come through here and not your personal email. For questions or concerns, please contact PathsforParas@MissouriState.edu. For general information about the program, [check out this website](#).

ments issued by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. One midwestern university with a special education-specific RTAP has developed a useful approach to ensuring success for teacher apprentices that includes several replicable resources and systems, beginning with selecting an advisor, or a small team of these specialized advisors, to be dedicated to the teacher apprenticeship programs. These dedicated advisors should meet regularly with the teacher

apprenticeship coordinators at the IHE to discuss student concerns and coordination.

A defining feature of successful advising in RTAPs is intrusive, or proactive advising, where advisors regularly check in with apprentices, track progress on both academic and apprenticeship milestones, and offer support before challenges become barriers (Varney, 2012). Another way this university is leveraging existing infrastructure to support

teacher apprentices is by changing how they block time for advising meetings. These time slots are 30 minutes for traditional students, and 1 hour for teacher apprentices. This allows teacher apprentices and their advisors additional time to work through complex scheduling needs and discuss any barriers to persistence and program completion, making plans to accommodate the unique needs teacher apprentices face. IHEs seeking to replicate this model can begin by dedicating a small team of advisors, co-training them with teacher apprenticeship leads, and creating a shared online space that maps course enrollment, district-based instruction, and grant compliance requirements.

In addition to this ongoing communication and support for the advisors in learning about teacher apprenticeship, this university has also created a document that walks the apprentice and their advisor step-by-step through the multifaceted process of enrolling in coursework offered by the university, coursework offered through their school district, registering as an apprentice, and completing the various paperwork requirements for financial aid, grants, etc.

This advising model is highly replicable, requiring only a strategic allotment of time for advising appointments, coordination of collaboration and co-training between advisement and apprenticeship staff, and the development of simple and user-friendly resources to guide apprentices through the complex process of registration and funding.

Reimagining Existing Student Support and Career Center

Universities have long-standing traditions of providing supportive services for students on their campuses (i.e., tutoring centers, student counseling and healthcare services, and career centers). While these resources can be invaluable to the university students on campus, access to these important

services can be limited for students who are considered remote learners, or those who attend classes on campus during non-business hours (Brown et al., 2020). IHEs can leverage innovative practices developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Raaper & Brown, 2020) to expand access to student services such as telehealth, asynchronous tutoring, and remote advising, which can be leveraged to support teacher apprentices.

University career centers can play a critical role in supporting teacher apprentices by shifting from traditional job-seeker services to career advancement tools tailored for working professionals. While apprentices often bring strong soft skills like communication and adaptability, they need targeted support to transition into certified teaching roles. Reimagined career services should offer resources such as advanced interview workshops, personal statement guidance, educator-focused networking, and mentorship opportunities. These supports position apprentices not just for entry into the profession, but for long-term growth and leadership in education.

By adapting existing institutional structures through flexible delivery models, proactive advising, and career-aligned mentorship, institutions can embed these highly replicable support systems into a framework for wrap-around support that meets the needs of nontraditional student apprentices.

Curriculum and Implementation

Further intra-university collaboration must take place with the faculty developing and overseeing the related technical instruction coursework offered by the university, as well as its implementation in schools during on-the-job training for apprentices. This collaborative effort must begin in the RAP planning stages to align the curriculum intentionally and appropriately with apprenticeship competencies and labor standards set by the industry. Competency-based education

(CBE) models are growing in apprenticeship, which was previously primarily time-based. In recent years, RAPs in certain sectors have chosen to adopt CBE approaches to designing related technical instruction curriculum (Jobs for the Future, 2020). CBE emphasizes the mastery of skills and concepts rather than credit hours or seat time (Katz, 2015), which differs from the approach traditionally taken by many university teacher preparation programs.

The development and implementation of competency-based apprenticeship curriculum in teacher preparation relies on teacher candidates having regular access to real-world classroom settings in which to learn and practice the behaviors of effective teaching. However, it is also true that some states report their teacher workforce as 30% first-year teachers (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2025); thus, ensuring a meaningful and positive field placement for apprentice teachers requires strategic collaborative efforts between the LEAs and the IHEs. At times, schools may need to develop creative solutions to ensure apprentices can learn from high-quality practicing teachers while on the job.

While specific curriculum needs will vary across programs and institutions, replicability efforts should focus on ensuring apprentices have access to CBE, allowing them to apply skills in real-world contexts as often as possible. Because field placements using components of CBE are becoming a common attribute of teacher preparation programs, scaling of efforts that are already in place should be an initial focus for institutions building RAPs.

By reimagining institutional processes and leveraging existing infrastructure, IHEs can create a cohesive, scalable framework that aligns academic, financial, and student services in support of teacher apprentices. This comprehensive approach is particularly impactful for

special educator preparation. According to Billingsley et al. (2019), novice special education teachers often face significant stress and burnout due to the demands of the job, especially when they are inadequately prepared through traditional programs. An apprenticeship tailored specifically for special education prepares candidates in a gradual, mentored, and competency-based manner, increasing their readiness and likelihood of long-term success.

This type of collaboration is essential not only for improving certification outcomes among teaching apprentices but also for positioning IHEs as central partners in state-level strategies to develop a diverse and stable special education workforce.

COLLABORATION WITH SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Effective teacher apprenticeship programs in special education rely on strong, sustained collaboration between IHEs and K–12 school districts. District partners play a critical role in bridging coursework with classroom practice, providing mentorship and supervision, facilitating job-embedded learning experiences, and shaping the practical components of certification pathways. This section outlines the structural components of university K–12 school district collaboration that support effective apprenticeship implementation, with particular attention to mentorship, assessment of prior learning, and feedback systems that collectively enhance candidate readiness and workforce alignment.

Structured Mentorship

In the traditional language of apprenticeship, the “journey worker” is the certified and seasoned expert who will shepherd the apprentice through their learning, provide modeling and feedback on performance of duties over a specified length of time, and serve as a

TABLE 1: Examples of University-Level Collaborations and Reimaginings to Support Apprentices

Office/ Service	Challenge	Reimagined Model	Collaborative Solution	Replicability
Financial Aid	Systems not originally designed for adult learners working full-time; limited understanding of DOL funding streams.	Support for apprentices navigating FAFSA as independent adult learners; coordination with workforce grants (e.g., WIOA, Fast Track); flexible payment plans aligned with school district pay schedules.	Train financial aid staff to assist apprentices with FAFSA and integrate DOL grants like WIOA; implement flexible tuition billing aligned with apprentice pay schedules.	Requires cross-training and administrative support but utilizes existing aid infrastructure.
Academic Advisement	Advisors unfamiliar with unique apprenticeship requirements (e.g., grant eligibility, district-delivered courses, employment status).	Dedicated advisors trained in apprenticeship coordination; extended appointment times (e.g., 1 hour); shared guides and tools for navigating district-based coursework and grant compliance	Appoint a small, dedicated team of advisors; provide apprenticeship-specific training; extend advising time; co-develop shared resources (e.g., enrollment guides).	Replicable with modest investment in staff time and collaborative planning.
Career Center	Services designed for first-time job seekers; misaligned with needs of paraeducators seeking upward mobility.	Tailored coaching for advancement from paraeducator roles to certified teaching positions; emphasis on career mobility within K–12 systems.	Refocus services to support in-district career advancement; offer coaching on certification pathways, promotion planning, and strategic career development.	Requires adaptation of career coaching frameworks and staffing adjustments.
Curriculum Implementation	Traditional curriculum and pedagogical models misaligned with apprenticeship structures; limited use of CBE.	CBE aligned with apprenticeship standards; collaboration with school districts to embed practicum and other experiential learning into apprentices' employment roles.	Involve faculty in apprenticeship planning; redesign coursework to align with competencies and on-the-job training; maintain strong faculty-apprentice connections.	Scalable where faculty are open to curricular innovation and field-based integration.

DOL= Department of Labor; WIOA= Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; FAFSA=Free Application for Federal Student Aid; CBE= Competency-Based Education

general sounding board for the apprentice during their training and education in their new skilled trade. In the language of education, we have historically referred to these individuals as “cooperating” or “mentor” teachers. It is true that to be effective in their roles, novice special educators need systematic mentoring and coaching (Larios et al., 2022). Mentorship of pre-service teachers has been identified as a protective factor in novice special educator retention (Chang & Drescher, 2023). Novice teachers who receive in-district mentoring support in their first years in the classroom report significantly higher feelings of well-being when compared to those who do not

receive mentoring support (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019).

LEAs and IHEs can work together to ensure apprentices are receiving critical on-the-job learning experiences under the high-quality supervision and facilitation of their mentors by determining not only the entry-level qualifications of a potential mentor, but exemplary characteristics that potential mentor teachers should embody in order to provide the most optimal learning experience for the teacher apprentices. These guidelines may vary across different programs or even school sites but will maintain the same priorities for a quality mentor- including attitude

and character, professional competence and experience, communication skills, and interpersonal skills (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). Mentors who view themselves as merely providing a classroom placement to practice teaching are more likely to perceive themselves, and their role, as simply a cheerleader instead of educative mentors whose role is to provide targeted support (Larios et al., 2022). Knowing that, mentors selected will need the technical skills of teaching and professional competencies to mentor teaching apprentices. The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, in partnership with American Insti-

TABLE 2: Sample District-Led Coursework and Associated Competencies in Special Education

University Course	Competencies	LEA Implementation
Introduction to Special Ed.	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of special education processes including screening through ethical application of placement procedures for children and youth and the general educator's role in this process.</p> <p>Demonstrates knowledge of the characteristics of students with different disabilities covered under IDEA (i.e., ED, LD, OHI, TBI, autism, language disorders, hearing impairments, and visual impairments) and of students who have specific conditions (e.g., ADHD) that may or may not qualify for services under IDEA.</p>	<p>Real-Life Student Case Studies</p> <p>Shadowing Experiences</p> <p>Co-writing evaluations and IEPs with a mentor teacher</p> <p>Presentations to school staff at PD</p>
Intro to Teaching Cross-Cat	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of classroom organization and management procedures appropriate for use with student groups that include students with disabilities and others with diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Develop an understanding of primary factors that maybe associated with problem behaviors and demonstrate knowledge of strategies, management systems and positive support that may reduce or eliminate problem behaviors.</p> <p>Demonstrates an understanding of the impact of various uses of instructional and adaptive technology on the learning and independent functioning of children and youth with disabilities.</p>	<p>Guided classroom walkthroughs with debriefing and reflection</p> <p>Data collection and analysis practice</p> <p>Running and planning intervention groups</p> <p>Co-teaching with technology integration</p>
Working with Families of Exceptional Individuals	<p>Identify and discuss various strategies to develop collaborative relationships with families, educational professionals, and students with diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Demonstrates an awareness of multicultural issues which impact the education of children and youth with disabilities and other diverse teaming needs.</p>	<p>Participate in team meetings</p> <p>Meet with/observe an interpreter</p> <p>Conduct a classroom materials audit</p> <p>Develop and maintain weekly family newsletter</p> <p>Interview students</p>
Transition	<p>Demonstrates knowledge of the role of transition services as part of special education services and the importance of such services on the career/vocational and post-secondary educational outcomes for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs</p>	<p>Participate in transition meetings</p> <p>Shadow work study program</p> <p>Co-develop a transition fair with local agencies and employers</p>

tutes for Research (2019), published a *Mentoring and Induction Toolkit* that is a useful starting point for teams to collaboratively identify their preferred attributes of a high-quality mentor for apprentice teachers.

Additionally, training can be provided directly to mentors, giving them tools and strategies to provide targeted support to apprentices over their on-the-job experience. This training provided to mentors should be rooted in

professional problem solving, proactive and open communication, and collaboration, and it should clearly outline the responsibilities and roles of the mentor and apprentice in the instructional setting (Larios et al., 2022). Knowing that systematic mentorship is crucial to preparing special educators, close partnerships and collaboration with school districts through the apprenticeship model could improve the quality of mentorship new teachers receive.

In most cases, teaching apprentices are working alongside or under the guidance of a licensed educator for 2 years while they work to complete their preparation program. The paraeducator and special educator dyad in many special education settings is easily adaptable for intentional co-teaching models, which have been proven to lead to gains in teaching ability and the academic achievement of students (Grossman, 2010). However, this arrangement requires careful plan-

TABLE 3: Sample Roles and Responsibilities

The University Team will...	The District Instructor will...	The Apprentice will...
<p>Support apprentices through obtaining their college degree at Missouri State University and in obtaining DESE K-12 Special Education certification by offering a dedicated academic advising team, apprenticeship and funding support, and coursework that meets Missouri graduation and certification requirements and has relevance in K-12 classrooms.</p> <p>Support districts in delivering quality University-level instruction using provided resources on their campus, that will prepare student apprentices for the common summative assessment at the end of a semester.</p>	<p>Use University provided resources in addition to “on the job” experiences to prepare your apprentices to take and pass the common summative assessment at the end of the semester with proficient demonstration of the course competencies.</p> <p>Communicate with the University regarding apprentice progress or performance in a district PLA course as appropriate or as requested.</p> <p>Offer PLA courses in accordance with the sequence provided, to only approved apprentices, and in a way that is mindful of the use and protection of resources shared with PLA instructors that are developed and/or curated by MSU Faculty members to prepare the student to pass the common summative assessment with a proficient score.</p>	<p>Meet with their dedicated academic advisor before each semester for guidance and permission to register for classes until their advisor releases them.</p> <p>Approach the work and resources assigned by districts with the same effort and care as campus-provided courses in preparation for their common summative assessment.</p> <p>Diligently prepare for, and pass, the common summative assessment at the end of their PLA semester through university LMS, scoring 80% or higher.</p> <p><i>**If mastery is not achieved on the first assessment, participate in reteaching/ reassessing recommendations if the credits are desired.</i></p>

PLA = Prior Learning Assessment

ning to allow the apprentice to both fulfil the duties of their paid role, as well as receive ample time to observe and practice the behaviors of teaching (Fallona & Johnson, 2019).

PLA

Another way that RAPs can collaborate with school districts to support teacher apprenticeship is to develop pathways for awarding credit for prior learning experiences. Many universities have an existing policy surrounding earning credit by assessment or experience, such as has traditionally been the case with coursework in subjects such as modern languages or computing. Given that some students enter their professional studies in the field having already learned foundational skills and concepts from life experiences, on-the-job training, or even military service, they are often able to either satisfy the course requirements through external assessment or complete an assessment developed by the academic department faculty (Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Hedin et al., 2024; Missouri State University,

2023).

PLA or credit for prior learning in teacher apprenticeship could be awarded for a variety of experiences or professional development opportunities that may be available to apprentice teacher candidates in their employing school districts already (Hedin et al., 2024). As Brown and Riden (2023) recently suggested, it is paramount that universities work with community partners to identify specific needs in teacher preparation. Programs looking to develop their own PLA coursework could begin by recognizing and co-creating courses or trainings with K–12 school partners that could be offered as on-site reflections of content typically delivered on campus.

Receiving on-site instruction and closely monitored field experiences can provide apprentices with opportunities to engage with instructional experts in their school district, showcase their growing skills in the teaching trade, and get a head start on learning district-specific programming and curriculum that is typically not available to pre-service teachers receiving all their training at

universities. Developing school district partnerships that allow credit to be earned for prior learning can also reduce tuition costs for educator apprentices. With a possibility of major tuition savings across their training programs, teacher apprentices may be able to enter the workforce with less student debt. One midwestern university-sponsored special education RAP has awarded 3,268 credits to teacher apprentices for high-quality evidence of prior learning, which has saved apprentices approximately \$986,936 in tuition costs over the last 3 years of implementation (Pickett & Adamson, 2025).

Communication and Feedback Loops

When developing school district partnerships in registered apprenticeships, communication and feedback from school districts are essential for programmatic sustainability and growth. The collaborative process here begins with creating a voluntary and visionary advisory board. This board can be as formal or informal as the program needs

it to be, but should be chaired with a variety of representatives from the LEAs, IHEs, Offices of Workforce Development (OWD), and DOL. This advisory board will set the foundation for what the apprenticeship partnership looks like, delegate responsibilities based on strengths and resources, and serve as a sounding board as implementation issues arise.

Following initial collaboration on curriculum and standards, districts then deliver instruction through authentic classroom placements in special education settings. These experiences are planned and facilitated by qualified school district personnel in alignment with established and rigorous competencies provided or co-developed with the IHE. It supports a clear flow of research to practice, allowing for educators at the K–12 and university levels to collaborate on priority content, methods, and strategies. It allows fine-tuned changes to be made as the training is occurring, allowing apprentices to develop the skills and knowledge that employers value. The expectations of all members of the apprenticeship team should be clearly communicated and readily available.

Engaging in intentional collaboration with LEAs ensures that teacher apprenticeship programs remain instructionally rigorous, responsive to workforce demands, and grounded in the realities of special education practice. By co-constructing training experiences, establishing robust mentorship systems, and maintaining continuous feedback loops, these partnerships not only support apprentice development but also advance local and statewide efforts to stabilize and diversify the special education teacher pipeline.

COLLABORATION WITH DOL AND OWD

State DOL and OWD have been partnering with industries to provide

apprenticeship opportunities that cultivate strong and diverse workforces that have powered communities since the founding of this nation (Office of Apprenticeship, 2021). In 2023, the U.S. Department of Education endorsed teacher apprenticeships as part of its national strategy to raise the bar in educator preparation, highlighting the model's potential to transform how teachers are recruited and trained in high-need areas such as special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This section outlines the services and initiatives out of these offices that benefit teacher apprentices and teacher apprenticeship programs.

Case Management and Supportive Services

An initial and sustained benefit to collaborative work in registered apprenticeship with the DOL and OWD is the staff case managers. When apprentices begin to seek funding or supportive services through the OWD, they are assigned a case manager who assists them in navigating funding and registration, as well as ensuring that apprentices are linked to any service or support that may meet their needs as they work towards certification. This team specifically helps to bridge the gap between a teacher apprentice's knowledge of registered apprenticeship through the DOL and knowledge of the teaching profession by meeting monthly with university apprenticeship coordinators and faculty overseeing teacher apprenticeship programs.

In addition, apprenticeship programs and participants can access supportive services through the OWD. Supportive services are described as necessary to prepare a participant with the resources needed to participate in career and training services. Knowing that many individuals who are attracted to apprenticeship model programs are considered nontraditional students, and are often

career changers or caregivers, supportive services can ensure that teacher apprentices are able to bring those associated value-added experiences to their school district, including cultural competencies, language skill, instructional experience, and commitments to their community, without experiencing restrictive barriers to entry or completion (Muniz, 2020). Examples of supportive services that may be available to eligible apprenticeship participants include funds to support transportation to and from work or training, including car repairs and gas cards, childcare, dependent care, housing, legal-aid services, assistance for acquiring attire, tools, etc., that are necessary for the occupation that the apprentice is training in (OWD, 2024). These services aim to remove specific barriers to teacher certification, including providing access to childcare, which has been identified as one of the leading barriers to recruiting and retaining diverse paraeducators and preventing them from getting their teaching license (Gardner et al., 2019).

Workforce Funding

The shortage of qualified special education teachers is a national concern, with research highlighting financial constraints as a primary obstacle for individuals pursuing certification (Billingsley et al., 2019). Many prospective educators, particularly paraprofessionals and career changers (Muniz, 2020), hesitate to enroll in higher education programs due to the upfront costs associated with tuition and fees. According to Garcia and Weiss (2020), financial incentives, including tuition assistance, play a vital role in increasing the pipeline of special education teachers.

One of the most substantial benefits of registered apprenticeship to apprentices is the potential to access workforce funding to offset the cost of required coursework towards teacher certification.

TABLE 3: Recommendations for Building and Scaling Educator Apprenticeships

Program Area	Recommendation
Cross-Sector Planning	Establish multi-stakeholder advisory boards including university faculty, district leaders, and workforce development representatives to guide design and implementation.
University Infrastructure	Designate and train staff in financial aid, academic advising, and student services to specialize in apprenticeship models and compliance.
Curriculum and Instruction	Redesign coursework using Competency-Based Education aligned with industry standards; embed practicum within apprentices' current roles.
Mentorship Models	Co-develop structured mentorship frameworks with clear criteria, role definitions, and training for mentors and university supervisors.
Credit for Prior Learning	Implement formal PLA systems that recognize district-provided instruction and prior professional experience as eligible for university credit.
Workforce Collaboration	Leverage funding streams like WIOA and Fast Track; integrate case management and wraparound services into apprenticeship programs.
Communication Systems	Create continuous feedback loops between IHEs and districts to adjust curriculum and supports in real-time.
Scalability and Replication	Document tools, systems, and outcomes to support adoption by other institutions; prioritize adaptable, context-responsive program design.

Although this is similar to financial aid, financial aid is typically student-driven and based on distinctive characteristics of the participant. Workforce funding, however, is typically broader in scope, not requiring a specific financial need, but acquired and developed to fulfill a workforce and economic need for the community. For eligible programs and participants, two of the largest funding streams available are through WIOA and the FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant. FastTrack supports apprentices by offering grants that cover tuition, general course fees, and essential apprenticeship-related expenses, including textbooks. The FastTrack Workforce Incentive Grant works to create highly trained individuals to fulfill high-need areas within the economic landscape.

This grant provides specific provisions for apprenticeships, which go beyond the scope of Financial Aid by ensuring that apprenticeships and certifications are covered, not just college degrees.

Through intentional alignment of workforce funding, supportive services, and case management infrastructure, the teacher apprenticeship model can advance state and national priorities to address the special education teacher shortage, demonstrating how cross-sector collaboration can produce sustainable, equity-focused solutions in educator workforce development.

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE TEACHER APPRENTICESHIP MODELS

Initial implementation efforts have

demonstrated that collaborative frameworks that include IHEs, K–12 districts, and workforce development agencies can effectively reshape traditional teacher preparation pathways. At the higher education level, outcomes include the creation of dedicated advising teams, flexible payment structures tailored to apprentices' financial realities, expanded student services for remote learners, and shared tools to support registration, course selection, and compliance. These efforts reflect a systems-level approach to addressing barriers faced by nontraditional candidates. IHEs should designate and train personnel in departments such as financial aid, academic advising, and student services to understand the distinct requirements of educator apprenticeships, including compliance

with DOL standards and state licensure regulations (Garcia & Warner, 2021; Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, 2019).

At the K–12 district level, these collaborations have led to increased numbers of structured mentorship programs, advisory boards, and the development of district-delivered PLA coursework—allowing apprentices to complete tuition-free, competency-based training aligned with certification goals. Ensuring a robust mentorship model is a key component of successful apprenticeship programs, whereby universities and districts should co-develop structured mentorship frameworks with clear criteria, defined roles, and expectations. Embedding practicum experiences within apprentices' current school-based roles further enhances relevance and contextual learning (Learning Policy Institute [LPI], 2022).

The competencies required of the teacher apprentices can be co-constructed between the IHE and district; while honoring existing knowledge, institutions should implement formal PLA systems. These systems recognize relevant district-provided professional development and work experience for academic credit, accelerating degree completion and reducing costs (Arabandi et al., 2021; Garcia & Warner, 2021). Curriculum and instruction should be redesigned using CBE, allowing apprentices to progress based on demonstrated mastery of clearly defined competencies aligned with licensure and district needs.

Developing communication systems between IHEs and school districts is also important. Continuous feedback loops enable real-time adjustments to curriculum, mentorship, and student support based on program data and stakeholder input (Arabandi et al., 2021).

Finally, partnerships with DOL and OWD have expanded access to funding, wraparound supports, and case man-

agement, while also offering apprentices a nationally recognized credential alongside their teaching certification. Workforce collaboration should include the strategic use of funding sources such as the WIOA and state FastTrack initiatives. Furthermore, integrating case management and wraparound services ensures apprentices receive the holistic supports necessary to persist and thrive in their programs (Employment and Training Administration, 2023; LPI, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The growing implementation of registered teacher apprenticeship programs offers a transformative approach that addresses the persistent special education teacher shortages, particularly in underserved communities. As demonstrated in the models examined, intentional and strategic collaboration within universities, with K–12 school districts, and with the DOL and OWD agencies is essential for building sustainable pathways to teacher certification. By leveraging shared resources and knowledge, aligning experiences, and removing systemic barriers through policy and support services, these partnerships can reinvent how educators are prepared. As registered educator apprenticeships continue to evolve, further research will be critical to refining the models, ensuring equity for participants, and scaling efforts to meet the needs of diverse learners and communities.

REFERENCES

- American Institutes for Research. (2019, February 15). *Mentoring and induction toolkit: Mentor selection criteria tally*. Center on Great Teachers and Leaders. <https://www.air.org/resource/mentoring-induction-toolkit-20-supporting-teachers-underserved-contexts>
- Arabandi, B., Boren, Z., & Campbell, A. (2021, February 4). *Building sustainable apprenticeships: The case of apprenticeship in 2000*. <https://www.urban.org/research/>

- [publication/building-sustainable-apprenticeships-case-apprenticeship-2000](https://www.urban.org/research/publication/building-sustainable-apprenticeships-case-apprenticeship-2000)
- Billingsley, B. S., Bettini, E., & Jones, N. D. (2019). Supporting special education teacher induction through high-leverage practices. *Remedial and Special Education, 40*(6), 369–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932518816826>
- Brown, T. S., & Riden, B. S. (2023). Increasing enrollment and diversity in special education preparation through grow your own programs. *Journal of Special Education Preparation, 3*(2), 26–36. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JOSEP.3.2.26-36>
- Brown, V. S., Strigle, J., & Toussaint, M. (2020). A statewide study of perceptions of directors on the availability of online student support services at postsecondary institutions. *Online Learning, 24*(4), 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i4.2147>
- Carver-Thomas, D. (2018, April 19). *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/559.310>
- Chang, Y. C., & Drescher, T. (2023). Addressing attrition: Multilevel mentorship model. *Journal of Special Education Preparation, 3*(1), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JOSEP.3.1.68-75>
- Employment and Training Administration. (2023). *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>
- Espinoza, D., Saunders, R., Kini, T., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2018, August 29). *Taking the long view: State efforts to solve teacher shortages by strengthening the profession*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/long-view-report>
- Fallona, C., & Johnson, A. (2019). Approaches to grow your own and dual general and special education certification. *School Improvement, 42*. https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare_improvement/42
- Garcia, A., & Warner, J. (2021). *Strengthening teacher preparation: The role of prior learning assessment in educator apprenticeships*. Urban Institute.
- Garcia, E., & Weiss, E. (2020). *Examining the factors that play a role in the teacher shortage crisis*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/key-findings-from-the-perfect-storm-in-the-teacher-labor-market-series/>
- Gardner, M., Melnick, H., Meloy, B., & Barajas, J. (2019). *Promising models for preparing a diverse, high-quality early childhood workforce*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Early_Educator_Preparation_REPORT.pdf
- Grossman, P. (2010). *Policy brief: Learning to practice: The design of clinical experience*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kaleigh Pickett, Ed.S.

Kaleigh Pickett is an Instructor and Assistant School Director at Missouri State University, where she also coordinates Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Programs for the College of Education. With an EdS in Special Education and Assessment and a background as a K–12 special educator, process coordinator, and department head, her work focuses on competency-based preparation, assessment systems, and paraeducator apprenticeships. A published author and national presenter, she serves as secretary of the Missouri Council for Exceptional Children and is a peer-nominated member of the MSLBD Master Teacher Group.

Jennifer Malone, Ed.D.

Dr. Jennifer Malone is an Assistant Professor of Education at Missouri Western State University with over 30 years of experience in K–12 leadership and special education. She has served as a principal, special education director, and student services administrator in Missouri, Kansas, and Florida. Holding an EdD in Educational Leadership from Saint Louis University, her work centers on teacher preparation, educational equity, and high-leverage practices. She also serves on advisory boards supporting teacher pipelines in both urban and rural communities.

Reesha Adamson, Ph.D.

Dr. Reesha Adamson is Associate Dean of the College of Education and a Professor at Missouri State University, where she co-directs Pathways for Paras, a Registered Special Education Teacher Apprenticeship program. Her work focuses on systems-level interventions, teacher preparation, and interdisciplinary collaboration. She has secured state and federal funding to support educator apprenticeships and is widely published on behavior interventions, classroom management, and teacher retention. Dr. Adamson also serves as a consultant and policy advisor on special education and workforce development issues.

- in teacher preparation. AACTE and NEA Partnership for Teacher Quality.
- Heath, K. (2024). Pathway to teaching: Bringing an alternate path to the teaching career. *About Campus*, 29(6), 19–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10864822241300171>
- Hedin, L., Gerzel-Short, L., Liberty, L., & Pope, J. (2024). Taking the LEAP: A district-university partnership to address shortages in special education. *PDS Partners: Bridging Research to Practice*, 19(1), 50–67. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PDSP-11-2023-0039>
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201–233. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311403323>
- Jobs for the Future. (2020, April 2). What to know about competency based apprenticeship programs. *JFF Blog*. <https://www.jff.org/blog/what-know-about-competency-based-apprenticeship-programs/>
- Katz, P. M. (2015). *Competency-based education: An innovative approach to teacher preparation*. (Issue Brief No. 1). The Council of Independent Colleges.
- Kutsyuruba, B., Godden, L., & Bosica, J. (2019). The impact of mentoring on the Canadian early career teachers' well-being. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 8(4), 285–309. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-02-2019-0035>
- Larios, R., Zetlin, A., & Ricci, L. (2022). “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger!” Alternative certification programs: Interns perspectives about mentorship. *The Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship*, 11(1). <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=E-J1329926&id=EJ1329926>
- Learning Policy Institute. (2022). *Educator apprenticeships: A promising grow-your-own strategy to strengthen and diversify the educator workforce*.
- Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2025). *Teacher workforce data*. <https://dese.mo.gov/media/pdf/teacher-workforce-data-2025>
- Missouri State University. (2023). *Op3.04-14 Credit for Prior Learning*. Office of the Provost. https://www.missouristate.edu/Policy/Chapter3/Op3_04_14_PriorLearningAssessment.htm
- Muniz, J. (2020). *Investing in grow your own programs: Leveraging state-level competitive grants to promote quality*. New America. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609158.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Difficulty hiring teachers in rural areas. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved May 2025, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lc>
- Office of Apprenticeship. (2021). *Our history*. <https://www.apprenticeship.gov/about-us/our-history>
- Office of Workforce Development. (2024). *Supportive services policy*. <https://jobs.mo.gov/media/pdf/owd-policy-03-2024-supportive-services-policy-0>
- Orland-Barak, L., & Wang, J. (2020). Teacher mentoring in service of preservice teachers' learning to teach conceptual bases, characteristics, and challenges for teacher education reform. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 72(1), 86–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487119894230>
- Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship. (2019). *Principles for high-quality youth apprenticeship*. New America.
- Pickett, K., & Adamson, R. (2025). *Pathways for Paraprofessionals Program exit survey* [Unpublished raw data].
- Raaper, R., & Brown, C. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and the dissolution of the university campus: Implications for student support practice. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 5(3/4), 343–349. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpcc-06-2020-0032>
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016, September 15). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.* Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/coming-crisis-teaching>
- Tompkins, A. (2023). Breaking the cycle of teacher attrition: suggested policies and practice for retention. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 8(1), 24–35. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jsard.v8i1>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2023). *Raise the bar: Lead the world - new national strategy to support teacher apprenticeship*.
- Varney, J. (2012, September 1). Proactive (intrusive) advising! *Academic Advising Today*, 35(3). Retrieved from <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Proactive-Intrusive-Advising.aspx>