

The Denver Teaching Residency Program: One example of a special education personnel preparation program partnership

By: Leila Richey
Personnel Improvement Center

Background

Personnel preparation program partnerships encourage the effective and efficient use of resources from both local education agencies (LEAs) and institutions of higher education (IHEs) to address the immediate personnel needs of the LEAs. According to Rosenburg, McCray, deBettencourt, and Long's (2009) review of the literature on personnel preparation program partnerships, two key elements of effective partnerships include (1) intensive field opportunities integrated with coursework through the use of strategies, such as weekly seminars and research-to-practice projects and (2) preparing in-service teachers to work more closely with pre-service teachers as mentors.

The Denver Teacher Residency (DTR) Program has incorporated both of these essential components into their preparation program partnership to improve the recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers in the local Denver, Colorado district. A unique and intriguing element of this program is the emphasis on special education and English language acquisition. Denver Public Schools (DPS) forged a partnership with the University of Denver to meet this critical need by developing the Denver Teacher Residency. The program was supported by Janus, a private investment firm, during the planning phase. DTR is now supported by an \$8.2 million federal grant under the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Quality Partnership Grant program.

Residents earn a Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education to prepare them for Colorado's professional teaching license in elementary education with endorsements in special education and English language acquisition. Following an initial intensive year of coursework that includes placement in a model teacher's classroom, residents are hired as a full time teacher in their second year and continue work toward a professional teaching certificate over the next three years.

Program supports include:

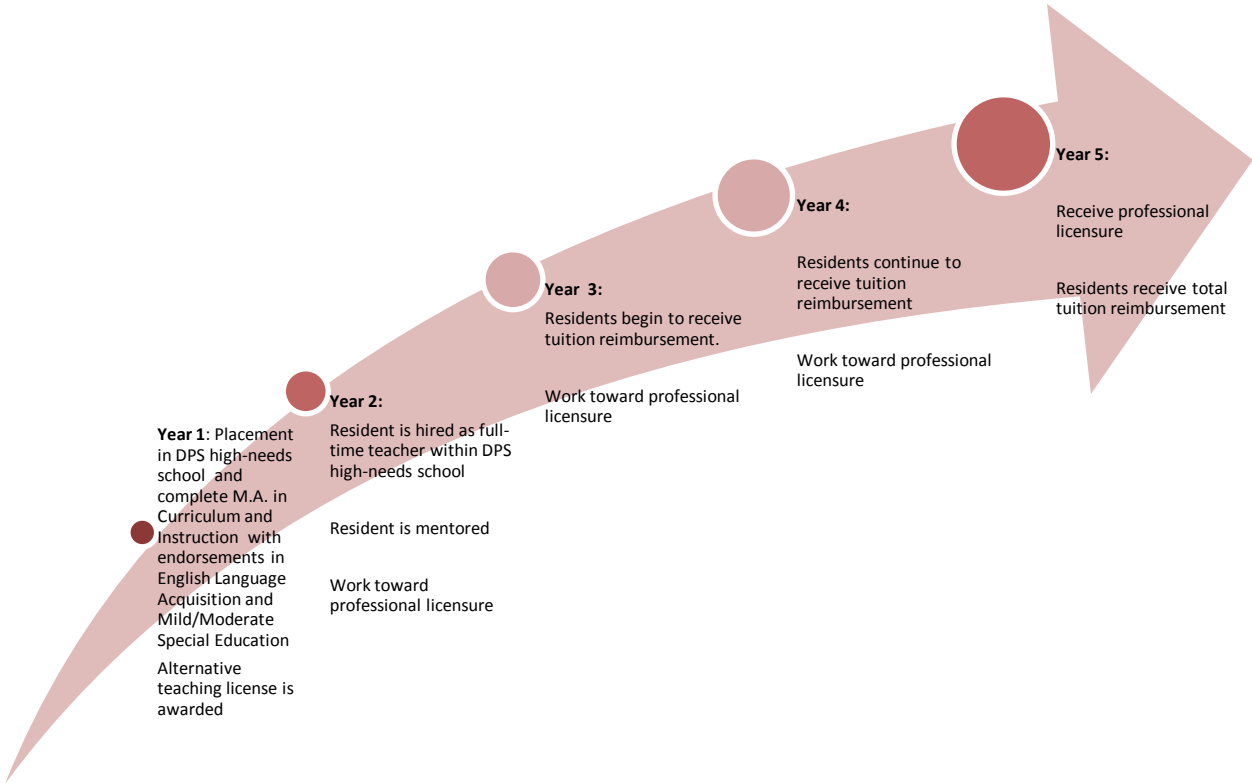
- \$10,000 stipend during the first year of the residency program and access to health care benefits through the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education.
- Access to financial aid advice through the University of Denver's Morgridge College of Education.
- Tuition reimbursement upon fulfillment of 5-year commitment to Denver Teacher Residency program and DPS (includes residency year).
- A teaching position at a DPS high-needs school.
- Supportive, constructive environment created by residency cohort model.
- Extensive resources to develop and improve teaching skills.

The screening process for both potential residents and model teachers is selective, ensuring the best pre-service candidates are matched with the most appropriate in-service teachers. The program is in its second year and growing rapidly, as the selection process continues.

Thalia Nawi, Director of the Denver Teacher Residency (DTR) program presented a workshop at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs 2010 Project Directors' Conference in July, 2010, to share the model and successes of the program.

The Personnel Improvement Center conducted a series of interviews with the residents and model teachers to provide a more in-depth look at what this program has to offer. The sections below reflect the results of those interviews.

The DTR Model



Voices from the Field

Why DTR?

When asked about their selection of the DTR over other preparation programs, all of the interviewed teacher candidates identified the intensity of the program as the most appealing. The intensive nature of the partnership allows pre-service teachers to learn the practical applications of the theories discussed in their classes. Resident (a participant in their first year—see model above) Craig Menzel, believes this is one of the most beneficial components of the experience. Model teacher Dawn Crist believes DTR addresses many of the struggles beginning teachers encounter. Dawn shared that, “By having a model teacher in the classroom, providing feedback and guiding reflection, DTR beginning teachers are able to implement better strategies and practices than teachers who have gone through traditional preparation programs.” Dawn also pointed out the benefits to students when she said, “The students do not suffer because it is someone’s first year of teaching.”

Who are the Residents?

The residents in this year’s cohort bring a wealth of varied experience to their classrooms. One resident, Shannon Good, returned to Denver after working on education policy in Washington, D. C. When asked about her choice, she said, “My heart is in Denver. I’m a DPS graduate.” Shannon discovered her desire to teach after seeing a DTR ad in a newspaper. She reflected on her favorite elements of her previous position and realized the mentoring and training of new staff were the highlights of the program. Resident Craig Menzel relocated to Denver from Kansas for family reasons and decided to take a position as a paraeducator to explore the possibility of special education teaching. He knew that DTR was a serious commitment and wanted to make sure the special education classroom was the appropriate place for him. Model teacher Dawn Crist noted the invaluable expertise paraeducators can bring to the role of classroom teacher and hopes to see more paraeducators make the same choice as Craig. She also emphasized that the life experiences that residents bring to the program enrich their capacity in the classroom.

Why Choose Special Education?

When model teachers and residents were asked about their choice to work in the special education classroom, they all discussed the rewarding experiences. These residents believe that classroom experience is invaluable. Special education classrooms require the continuous assessment of student needs in order to design appropriate instruction. Resident Shannon Good is learning how to differentiate her instruction particular to individual student needs and enjoying building individual relationships in the small classroom setting. Resident Craig Menzel believes the greatest breakthroughs happen in the special education classroom setting. “I am building towards victory every day,” he said. The residents believe the qualities required of effective special education teachers are qualities any high quality teacher should possess. Model teacher Valecia Hopper noted, “the unbelievable feeling of success...the smile that happens often in my classroom” as the most gratifying aspect of her day.

These are just a few stories from the DTR cohort. You can learn more about the residents at <http://www.denverteacherresidency.org/residents>. If you are interested in learning more about the program in general, go to the website <http://www.denverteacherresidency.org/>.

References

Rosenberg, M. S., Brownell, M., McCray, E. D., deBettencourt, L. U., Leko, M., Long, S. (2009). Development and sustainability of school-university partnerships in special education teacher preparation: A critical review of the literature. (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-3). Retrieved from University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development Website: http://education.ufl.edu/grants/ncipp/files_6/NCIPP_Partner_010310.pdf

Acknowledgements:

The PIC gratefully acknowledges the following people for participating in interviews and/or reviewing an earlier version of this document: Dr. Thalia Nawi, Valencia Hopper, Craig Menzel, Shannon Good, Dawn Crist and Juan Pablo Parodi.

The National Center to Improve the Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities (Personnel Improvement Center). A Cooperative Agreement, H325C080001, between the US Department of Education and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Project Officer: Maryann McDermott



NASDSE | 1800 Diagonal Road Suite 320 | Alexandria, VA 22314



www.personnelcenter.org