Using Grow Your Own Programs to Promote Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Special Education Personnel: Three State Approaches

by Eve Müller, Ph.D.

Recruitment and retention of qualified special education personnel remains an ongoing challenge for most states and local education agencies (LEAs) throughout the nation. According to the most recent report from the American Association for Employment in Education (AAEE, 2010), almost all areas of special education—including related services such as occupational, physical, and speech language therapy—were ranked “some shortage.” Furthermore, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.org, 2010) indicates that the need for qualified special education teachers will continue to rise 17% per year through 2020.

One way that states and LEAs have sought to address this persistent problem is by developing Grow Your Own programs. Grow Your Own programs enable LEAs to recruit and train special education personnel from their own communities. Programs often target high school students with an expressed interest in education careers, paraprofessionals with experience in the classroom and/or rural general educators seeking a career change. This document highlights three states’ innovative approaches to Grow Your Own programs: Arizona, South Carolina, and Utah.

Data Collection

Based on recent studies conducted by the National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children with Disabilities (PIC) at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) (Müller, 2010; Müller, 2011), as well as PIC work with states and knowledge of state practices, three states were selected to participate in in-depth interviews about their use of Grow Your Own programs to recruit and retain qualified special education personnel. These interviews were designed to obtain detailed information about the:

- background and impetus for developing programs;
- roles and responsibilities of collaborative partners;
- program eligibility and participant characteristics;
- program components;
- fiscal and human resources; and
- program evaluation and outcomes.

In November and December 2011, the PIC conducted interviews with key state and/or LEA staff in each of the three states. Overviews of one
or more of each state’s Grow Your Own programs are provided in the following section.

State Stories

Arizona

Arizona Future Educators Association

The Arizona Future Educators Association (FEA) was initially developed in 2005 to create a student organization in conjunction with a two-year program for Arizona high school juniors and seniors interested in becoming teachers. The primary purpose of Arizona FEA is to recruit young people to the field of education and to improve retention rates by providing additional hours of classroom teaching experience while still in high school. The current Director of Arizona FEA developed the program, established partnerships with institutions of higher education (IHEs), and recruited an advisory board. Although the vast majority of Arizona FEA chapters are at the high school level, the program recently expanded to include two chapters at participating IHEs in order to provide ongoing support for program alumni and others interested in a teaching career. The program is not specific to special education, but because the program is funded as part of Arizona’s State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), an emphasis on special education is infused throughout.

Collaborative partners include the Arizona Department of Education, LEAs and public high schools throughout the state, and all major IHEs in the state as well as Maricopa County community colleges. The Advisory Board includes representatives from state universities and community colleges, student leaders, LEA and building-level representatives, FEA advisors and board members of education nonprofits. Participating high schools, community colleges and universities sign intergovernmental agreements ensuring that students completing high school education courses will receive between six and 12 hours of college credit. Articulation agreements ensure the transfer of credits from community colleges to universities. Stakeholder collaboration resulted in the standardization of course requirements across institutions. The State Supervisor for Education Professions approves building-level FEA programs and curricula, as well as reviewing articulation agreements.

Any junior or senior in a participating public high school or charter school is eligible to participate in Arizona FEA. Currently there are 85 programs statewide with more than 3,000 participants. The program continues to expand its reach, and 10 new programs were added this year, although budget cuts have resulted in the recent elimination of three programs.

Program components include leadership development and training in the field of education (including special education), as well as support for successful transition from high school to college, professional development and networking opportunities and exposure to a variety of different education settings. During the first year of the program, participants enroll in an introductory course and during the second year are given opportunities to apply what they have learned through teaching internships. Participants are required to develop lesson plans and teach in a classroom for 40-60 hours. The average length of the program is two years, although this varies. Arizona FEA has also developed 16 teaching modules for use with IHE-based program chapters.

Participants are encouraged to attend FEA conferences that include chapter officer training, leadership conferences held on IHE campuses throughout the state, and state- and national-level conferences. More than 630 participants (up from 550 last year) attended...
this year’s state leadership conference. Many LEAs subsidize students’ conference registration and/or travel expenses.

Although Arizona FEA does not focus exclusively on special education, several features of the program specifically promote careers in special education. For example, Arizona FEA offers special sessions at the state conference and Honeycutt Academy at ASU highlighting careers in special education, guest lectures at participating high schools by local special education directors, online information about special education careers, support for Career and Technical Education (CTE) directors in strengthening the special education component of their FEA programs, and partnerships with Special Olympics Arizona. Each year a $4,000 Spotlight on Special Education scholarship is also awarded to a qualified high school graduate enrolling in a university-based special education program.

The Arizona FEA director’s position is funded through the SPDG, and the CTE program receives funding through a Perkins Grant. Schools receive funding on a per-student basis through the Perkins Grant and state-level funding. Money is dispersed to each LEA, and local CTE directors oversee distribution of funds to eligible building-level programs. Funds can be used to pay for conference registrations, training, transportation and equipment such as SMART boards or lap tops. Some grants pay for LEA staff to teach courses, but grant money cannot be used to supplement or supplant funding for staff already paid for by the LEA.

As part of ongoing program evaluation, Arizona FEA staff completes an annual program summary, conducts senior exit surveys, gathers evaluation feedback on effectiveness of FEA conferences and shares results with the Advisory Board. In terms of program outcomes, 84.7% of Arizona FEA participants enroll in college, the highest rates for any CTE program in the nation. Assessment results indicate that early exposure to education professions, including special education professions, leads to higher levels of recruitment. For example, participants reported a 62% increase in the desire to be a teacher in response to attending Arizona’s statewide FEA conference. The program also seeks to recruit students in high need areas such as Indian reservations, and on one reservation alone, teaching staff currently includes five graduates of the Arizona FEA. Further evidence of program success is the fact that Arizona FEA serves as a model for other states’ programs. Arizona FEA staff has consulted with 12 states developing their own programs. The program is in the process of developing a database to enable more precise tracking of outcomes. Currently, the only way of tracking participant outcomes is through the Arizona FEA Alumni Association.

Paraprofessional Tuition Assistance Grant

In 2007, Arizona developed the Paraprofessional Tuition Assistance Grant (PTAG) to support paraprofessionals already residing in high needs districts to become highly qualified speech language pathology assistants (SLPAs) or special education teachers. The purpose of PTAG is to increase retention of highly qualified special education personnel, especially those serving rural schools.

Collaborative partners in implementing PTAG include the Arizona Department of Education’s Exceptional Student Services Unit and LEAs throughout the state (varying each year depending on need), and IHEs as.

IHEs are winning because they’re getting more applicants; individuals are winning because they’re getting educated and the promise of a job; and LEAs are winning because they’re getting jobs filled.”

Lisa Andrew, Paraprofessional Tuition Assistance Grant, Arizona Department of Education

Student Services Unit and LEAs throughout the state
(varying each year depending on need), and IHEs as.

In terms of roles and responsibilities, the Department of Education administers PTAG, communicates regularly with LEAs to promote the program (e.g., distributing a
set of guidelines to LEAs for how to advertise the PTAG, provides guidance to LEAs in completing needs assessments and follows up with LEAs to ensure that program completers are being hired and evaluates program outcomes. LEAs must demonstrate need, provide evidence of how they will sponsor participants throughout the duration of their programs (up to five years per participant), provide mentors for participants, submit annual progress reports and document intent to hire participants upon their completion of the program.

In order to be eligible for PTAG, participants must have already completed two years of service as special education paraprofessionals in a high need LEA. Program components vary depending on participants’ individual goals. Some participants complete their Associate of Arts (AA) to become highly qualified SLPAs and others go on to complete their Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees to become certified special education teachers. Each participant has an LEA-assigned mentor, ideally matched according to grade level and disability category, who provides face-to-face support and job shadowing. The program serves approximately 15-20 participants each year, for a total of more than 60 since 2008.

In terms of fiscal resources, PTAG is funded at the state level through IDEA discretionary funds. Over the past five years, tuition reimbursements have cost the SEA a total of $461,000. LEAs use Title II-A funds to support paraprofessionals participating in the program. At the end of each semester, LEAs can “draw down” funds and reimburse participants for tuition costs after grades are received.

In terms of evaluation of program outcomes, LEAs are required to submit annual progress reports to the SEA for each participant that include sections completed by the local grant coordinator, mentor and participant. The SEA conducts an informal program evaluation each year, and makes changes to ensure greater program accountability. For example, the SEA recently clarified program eligibility requirements to ensure that only eligible paraprofessionals applied. Since 2008, 29 participants have graduated with AA and/or BA degrees. In the future, the SEA plans to conduct follow-up studies of how many PTAG graduates are still teaching in Arizona.3

Additional Programs

In addition to the Arizona FEA and PTAG, the Arizona Department of Education sponsors the following Grow Your Own programs:

- **Teacher of Visually Impaired (TVI) Certificate**: provides tuition assistance to teachers seeking certification to work with visually impaired students;
- **Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Certificate**: provides tuition assistance to teachers of the visually impaired seeking O&M certification;
- **ASU Professional Enhancement Program (PEP)**: recruits SLTs and BA-level SLPAs to complete their Masters’ level coursework to increase the number of highly qualified SLPs working in Arizona schools;
- **NAU**: recruits SLTs and BA-level SLPAs to complete their Masters’ level coursework to increase the number of highly qualified SLPs working in Arizona schools; and
- **Central Arizona College (PEP-C)**: recruits, prepares and provides tuition assistance for qualified special education paraprofessionals in rural Pinal County schools.

IHEs play a critical role in recruiting potential participants to these programs. In order to ensure participants’ seamless transitions from AA to BA programs, and from BA programs to Master of Arts programs, Arizona community colleges and universities sign intergovernmental agreements. The need for these programs and their availability are promoted through the collaborative efforts of the Effective Teachers and Leaders Unit and Exceptional Children Services.
South Carolina

Teacher Cadet Program

The Teacher Cadet Program originated in 1975 as one program at a single South Carolina high school. The purpose of this original program was to provide high achieving students with opportunities to explore careers in education. In 1984, the Dean of Winthrop University’s College of Education heard about the program and worked to expand it. He established a taskforce on teacher recruitment that included representatives from South Carolina IHEs’ schools of education as well as high school principals, and in 1985 the Teacher Cadet Program was piloted in four South Carolina high schools. By 1986, the program had grown to 24 high schools, and 25 years later the Teacher Cadet Program now serves 2,700 students in more than 150 high schools. The program encourages juniors and seniors with leadership skills to consider teaching as a career.

The organization responsible for administering the Teacher Cadet Program and training LEA personnel is the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement (CERRA) (formerly known as the South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment). Collaborative partners include 23 IHEs and 157 high schools. The IHEs serve as credit-granting institutions, offering from 3.0-6.0 hours of dual (high school/college) credit to program participants upon completion of Teacher Cadet Program coursework. Partnering IHEs and LEAs sign a universal program commitment form. LEA roles and responsibilities include paying the salaries of Teacher Cadet (TC) instructors. TC instructors are “master teachers” who have completed a state-supported three-day training in the approved curriculum, Experiencing Education (10th Ed.), and met IHE qualifications for adjunct instructors. TC instructors and IHE partners also receive periodic professional development in addition to attending a yearly fall conference. Three teachers-in-residence serve as regional representatives who support local programs and ensure fidelity of program implementation by meeting with TC instructors, ensuring that the TC curriculum is being followed and assisting with recruitment of new program sites and participants.

Individuals eligible for participation in the Teacher Cadet Program include juniors and seniors with a 3.0 grade point average or above who are enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum. Applicants must provide five letters of recommendation signed by instructors, as well as submit a written essay. TC instructors are responsible for conducting outreach to males and ethnic minorities, thus targeting the state’s shortage of teachers in underrepresented populations and critical subject areas.

The Teacher Cadet Program’s curriculum was revised in 2010 and the three-credit course includes four major components: 1) Experiencing the Learner which focuses on identifying participants’ individual learning profiles; 2) Experiencing the Profession which focuses on the history of education, structure of school systems and steps to certification; 3) Experiencing the Classroom which focuses on characteristics of learners as well as including the field study; and 4) Experiencing Education which requires participants to identify their personal teaching philosophy. The program’s curriculum is supplemented by its new interactive technology hub that provides demonstration lessons, instructional videos and technology interfaces that allow for communication and collaboration among participants and TC instructors. Several opportunities for observation are embedded into the course, including preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school and special education observations. South Carolina offers both one- and two-year versions of the

“We realized we need to start early to turn students on to a career in teaching.”

Marcella Wine-Snyder, Teacher Cadet Program, CERRA
Teacher Cadet Program, the latter of which includes more field experience and a wider range of special education observations.

Although the program is not special education-specific, mandatory curriculum modules address special education trends, challenges and strategies. All participants are required to observe a special education classroom and many opt to work with special education students as part of the program’s required field experience. Participating schools also have the option of partnering with Project UNIFY (a Special Olympics initiative). Family Connections awards site grants to participating schools so that they can teach elementary school children about the challenges of learning and physical disabilities. TC instructors and partnering IHE faculty are also encouraged to participate in the specialized training developed by CERRA’s Special Education Advanced Mentor Training. This one-day workshop is specifically designed to equip veteran teachers, college partners, and administrators with the needed skills to successfully mentor beginning special education teachers across South Carolina.

Education Improvement Act (EIA) funds are made available each year through a legislative appropriation to support the statewide Teacher Cadet Program. CERRA receives the EIA funds and awards site grants to participating high schools and their college partners based on enrollment numbers. Site grants are funds used to support the Teacher Cadet Program (i.e. class supplies and other resources). CERRA also pays for the program director and administrative assistant housed at CERRA, the coordinator of research and development who works with program development and tracks program outcomes, the coordinator of communications and technology who supports the online “hub” and three part-time teachers in residence. LEAs are responsible for covering the costs of TC instructors’ salaries and benefits. The annual cost per student is $95.

The Teacher Cadet Program is evaluated yearly. Outcomes for the 2010-11 year include:

- 2,457 students participated, including 529 males and 799 students from ethnic minorities.
- After completion of the Teacher Cadet course, 41% of participants chose teaching as the career they plan to pursue after college (18% of whom were undecided prior to participation in the program).
- 71% of South Carolina public high schools participated in the Teacher Cadet Program and 39% of participating schools were identified as high needs schools.

Since its inception, more than 50,000 students have participated in South Carolina’s Teacher Cadet Program. Data during the 2008-2009 school year indicated that 4,043 former Teacher Cadets were employed in South Carolina public schools and one out of every five students (20%) who have participated in the Teacher Cadet Program since its inception has gone on to earn South Carolina teacher certification.

In order to ensure program quality and rigor, 44 program standards have been “cross walked” with national teacher preparation organizations such as the National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education. In February 2010, those standards were adopted as the “national” standards for the Future Educators Association (FEA) in collaboration with the state’s extensive network of FEA clubs. Although program curriculum is still written and revised by South Carolina educators, the Teacher Cadet Program has now been adopted in 34 states.

**Project CREATE**

Project CREATE (Centers for the Re-Education and Advancement of Teachers in Special Education) was originally developed in 2003 by the South Carolina Department of Education’s Office of Exceptional Children in response to the high number of individuals teaching with emergency permits. During its first year, CREATE focused exclusively on supporting 100 teachers with emergency permits to complete the
“Grow Your Own keeps people rooted. I don’t know if our state could do without CREATE anymore. We’re producing what we promised in the mission, and the data proved that we’re successful.” And “The weak link in CREATE machinery is figuring out how to support high-risk LEAs that need more high quality special education teachers.”

Joe Sutton, Project CREATE

All participants in CREATE must be employed full-time in a South Carolina public school at the time of program admission and throughout the program. Eligibility is automatic for special education teachers teaching with a restricted alternative certificate, as well as for South Carolina’s Program of Alternative Certification for Educators candidates who are already teaching. All other program candidates pursuing add-on or initial certification must sign an employment agreement committing to three years of teaching special education in a South Carolina public school upon completion of special education certification. These include general education teachers and long-term substitute teachers, as well as teacher assistants, paraprofessionals and other noninstructional staff requiring initial teacher certification such as librarians, bus drivers and guidance counselors. CREATE also supports Board Certified Behavior Analysts to complete their Masters of Arts (MA) in Severe Disabilities and these candidates are also required to sign employment agreements. CREATE program staff are responsible for verifying candidates’ employment status and classifying them within the appropriate target groups, as well as working with LEAs, especially high needs LEAs in rural and/or remote areas, to recruit candidates.

Program components vary depending on participant needs. The Department of Education awards course scholarships that cover the costs of tuition and textbooks and LEAs pay for PRAXIS II exams. The length of the program ranges from one semester to four years. CREATE provides participants with highly individualized attention and the CREATE staff credits much of the program’s success to frequent communication with participants regarding their progress, as well as the staff’s close working relationships with local special education and human
resources (HR) directors. CREATE also sponsors a comprehensive research program which helps evaluate program effectiveness. For example, in response to research findings, the curriculum will be modified to include more coursework on behavior management. A long-term goal of CREATE is to develop one or more video conference degree programs for qualified participants in remote, high-need areas of the state lacking proximity to one of the consortium IHEs.

CREATE is primarily funded by the South Carolina Department of Education’s Office of Exceptional Children, which provides $550,000 in IDEA Part B funds each year. Supplemental Title II funding in the amount of $50,000 is also available through the Division of Educator Quality and Leadership. Approximately 90% percent of funds are distributed to IHEs in order to underwrite participant tuition and textbooks costs. The remaining 10% covers the cost of program administration as well as the CREATE website and related research efforts. IHEs have different policies regarding disbursement of funds. In most cases, CREATE preapproves participants and advance arrangements are made with IHE business offices so that participants do not need to pay out of pocket. Other IHEs reimburse following successful completion of coursework. Each participating IHE identifies a CREATE college center director who receives a stipend proportionate to how many course scholarships are awarded each semester. Key program staff is all part-time and includes the director, administrative assistant, webmaster and 12 college center directors.

CREATE conducts ongoing program evaluation and publishes an annual report which is posted on its website. Cumulative program outcomes from 2003-10 include:

- a total of 855 program participants;
- 2,124 courses paid for via CREATE;
- 562 program participants completing teacher certification; and
- 80 out of 85 LEAs participating in the program.

Utah

Para-to-Teacher District/University Partnership

The Para-to-Teacher District/University Partnership was first developed in 2009, in response to Utah’s critical shortage of highly qualified special education personnel. Aware of the data showing high retention rates for paraprofessionals becoming special education teachers, representatives from the Utah State Office of Education (USOE), State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) and the National Resource Center for Paraeducators (NRCP) requested support from the Personnel Improvement Center (PIC) at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) in facilitating recruitment of paraprofessionals to special education teacher programs at participating Utah IHEs. The PIC helped convene a state leadership team made up of representatives from NRCP, the Utah Personnel Development Center (UPDC), USOE, and the SPDG, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

The state leadership team met regularly using statewide data to identify LEAs with the greatest need. Although budgetary constraints prohibited some LEAs from getting involved, five LEAs agreed to participate. The leadership team then invited IHEs with proximity to these LEAs and/or with nearby extension sites to participate, including Utah State University (USU), University of Utah (U of U), Weber State University, Brigham Young University and Salt Lake City Community College. A majority of LEAs have partnered with more than one participating IHE.
The goal of the Para-to-Teacher District/University Partnership is to build seamless para-to-teacher career pathways for interested paraprofessionals. The role of the PIC has been to facilitate the process of developing the Para-to-Teacher program, but LEAs and IHEs are responsible for program design and implementation. The PIC assisted LEAs and partnering IHEs to set goals and deadlines for implementation and organized regular meetings with key stakeholders. LEAs initially conducted surveys to determine paraprofessional needs. Granite School District, for example, conducted one survey to measure interest in teacher certification and a second survey to determine respondents’ level of education and support needs. LEAs then facilitated events where paraprofessionals could find out more about special education teacher preparation programs and ask questions about the application process. For example, Granite School District held a joint Paraprofessional Appreciation and Career Opportunity Night which included prizes and recognition of achievement, as well as presentations by U of U and USU. A follow-up event allowed interested paraprofessionals to review their transcripts with a university guidance counselor and find out more about financial aid opportunities. In preparation for these events, both IHEs attempted to demystify the process by creating step-by-step guidelines for applying, as well as user-friendly handouts listing available grants and loans. USU and U of U are also developing articulation agreements to ensure that the transition between community colleges and universities is as seamless as possible.

All paraprofessionals from participating LEAs who are interested in learning more about careers in special education are welcome to attend Para-to-Teacher program events. Although statewide data are incomplete, numbers so far suggest that at least 40 paraprofessionals who participated in the Para-to-Teacher program have been accepted into special education teacher preparation programs throughout the state. In terms of LEA-level involvement, Granite School District reported that more than 37 paraprofessionals responded to its paraprofessional needs survey, 135 attended its career night and 19 paraprofessionals were admitted into special education teacher education programs for the 2011 academic year. The Para-to-Teacher District/University Partnership program is unfunded, and operates exclusively based on support from the PIC and in-kind donations of time and resources from USOE, NRCP, UPDC, and participating IHEs and LEAs including the Granite School District.

Because this program is so new, outcome data are limited. However, USOE, NRCP and participating IHEs are tracking data on increases in paraprofessional application/admission rates resulting from program outreach efforts. In contrast to previous years, Utah’s IHEs are finding that numbers of program applicants are exceeding caps on program enrollment, but it is still unclear how much of this is a direct result of the Para-to-Teacher program. Another outcome from the Partnership work is the addition of a paraprofessional webpage to UDOE’s website.

Common Themes

Several themes emerged across interviews with states. For example, interviewees identified the following factors as key to the success of Grow Your Own programs:

- providing leadership at the state, LEA and IHE levels;
- developing program infrastructure that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of collaborative partners;
- establishing personal relationships with local special education and HR directors in order to
promote states’ Grow Your Own programs more effectively;

- involving universities and/or community colleges in all stages of the development and implementation of Grow Your Own programs;
- securing LEA support for Grow Your Own program participants (in the form of mentoring, release time, and/or funding for textbooks and laptops), especially for paraprofessionals who may lack a strong educational background, financial resources, and/or support from their families; and
- tracking and disseminating program outcome data in order to promote Grow Your Own programs’ success.

Challenges

- budget cuts as a result of the current recession that have led to reduced amounts of fiscal support available at the state level and/or the number of LEAs able to participate in states’ Grow Your Own programs;
- lack of tools at the LEA level for tracking outcomes and/or enforcing Grow Your Own program participants’ agreements to serve the LEA for a minimum number of years in exchange for tuition support.

ENDNOTES

1 For more information on Project UNIFY/Special Olympics, go to: http://www.specialolympics.org/project_unify.aspx.

2 For more information on the Arizona Future Educators Association, go to: http://www.azed.gov/career-technical-education/fea/.

3 For more information on Arizona’s Paraprofessional Tuition Assistance Grant, go to: http://www.ade.az.gov/gme/FundingProfileView/FundingProfileSummary.asp?ID=593.

4 The Teacher Cadet Program is part of a continuum of CERRA programs which includes pre-collegiate programs, pre-service programs and service programs for veteran teachers. For more information on CERRA, go to: http://www.cerra.org/home.html.

5 To access the interactive technology hub, go to: www.teachercadets.com.

6 For more information on Awareness: The Key to Friendships, go to: www.familyconnectionsc.org/programs/awareness_the_key_to_friendships/.

7 For more information on South Carolina’s Teacher Cadet Program, go to: http://www.teachercadets.com/.

8 For more information on CERRA’s Teacher Cadet Program, go to: http://www.teachercadets.com/.
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