

# We're In This TOGETHER

How Schools, Districts, and Preparation Programs Must Collaborate to Prepare New Teachers



## TEACHING POLICY FELLOWS

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# INTRODUCTION

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In Indiana's districts and schools, a constant search for high-quality teaching candidates remains a major obstacle for ensuring all Hoosier children have access to a great education. Many rural and high-poverty urban districts struggle to fill teacher vacancies, especially in harder-to-staff specialized roles like special education and English-as-a-new language positions. Throughout the state, many principals and district leaders are constantly re-staffing their buildings with new, less experienced teachers. Some districts, like Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), have seen a turnover rate as high as nearly 40%<sup>1</sup>.

In the effort to continually develop and improve meaningful learning between teacher preparation programs and school districts, it is critical for teachers to bring their actual experiences to bear. While quantitative data may give us insight into the magnitude of critical issues such as teacher retention, in this case, qualitative data from teachers holds the promise of surfacing real solutions. Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellows are concerned with building and maintaining a high-quality teaching profession and are trained in education policy. We hope to partner with decision makers to both bring our experiences to bear on policy decisions and where possible, offer potential solutions.

As Teach Plus Indianapolis Teaching Policy Fellows and educators in Indiana, we wanted to better understand how well local teacher programs were doing in preparing the next generation of teachers. We remember our first years in the classroom well. Many of the teachers we started our careers with are no longer in the classroom. What could our preparation programs have done to better prepare teachers for their first day in the classroom? What could schools and districts have done to ensure we were properly supported to ensure our students received the best education possible?

- 1 What specific areas of teacher preparation programs in Indiana do novice teachers and teacher candidates identify as those where further or deeper growth would improve their readiness for teaching on day one?
- 2 In what ways do teachers believe preparation programs can and should be held accountable for the training they provide their graduates?
- 3 How can the link between preparation programs and the school districts that hire their graduates be improved to allow for a stronger transition?

# METHODOLOGY

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To answer these questions, we held four focus groups with new teachers and university and college students (juniors and seniors) currently in preparation programs. We also conducted interviews with stakeholders involved in the teacher preparation process, including professors and school and district administrators. For clarity, we will refer to first and second year teachers as 'new teachers' and juniors and seniors in preparation programs as 'teacher candidates.'

The data we pulled came from the following demographics and focus groups:<sup>2</sup>

**1. Four total focus groups:**

**a. Two focus groups of new teachers**

i. 10 Participants

**b. Two focus groups of teacher candidates**

i. 10 Participants



**2. Interviews:**

**a. 11 principals, assistant principals, professors, instructors, and hiring managers**

For both focus groups and interviews, we asked the same sets of questions. We were interested in preparation program content, accountability for teacher support and success, experiences regarding new teacher hiring, and support of new teachers.

## FINDINGS

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**1. Teachers and district personnel want increased practical application of teaching skills in the preparation process. Specifically, they look for:**

- a. Increased time in a diversity of field experiences**
- b. Increased practice with planning and execution**
- c. Increased practice improving the “soft skills” of relationship building within a school context**

**2. All stakeholders want increased communication between preparation programs and hiring districts. Many expressed a desire for increased accountability for prep program outcomes.**

**3. Teachers want better preparation to teach students with special needs.**

**4. Teachers and district personnel want more consistent and effective onboarding and ongoing professional development for new teachers.**

Teach Plus Fellows have examined the policy area of teacher preparation before. In *Ready for Day One*,<sup>3</sup> teachers in Massachusetts were surveyed on their experiences with teacher preparation programs. In *Great Teachers are Made*,<sup>4</sup> over 1,000 teachers in 34 states and the District of Columbia weighed in on their preparation program experience.

While the results in this brief align with previous Teach Plus findings, we wanted to dig deeper, building on the surveys and flash polls conducted by our colleagues. Through our focus groups and interviews, we were able to delve further into where the preparation process could be improved.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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**I: Dramatically expand opportunities for teaching candidates' field experience.** Every participant in our study agreed that teaching candidates need more 'hands-on' field experience before they're ready to step into a classroom.

**1. Leverage federal funds to bring a model teacher residency program to Indiana.**

The federal Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to use a portion of their funding to bring in a teacher residency program. In a residency model, candidates in classrooms are overseen by master teachers. Indiana can leverage already existing federal funds to showcase the viability of such an approach.

**2. Create a substitute teaching partnership between prep programs and districts.**

Districts and schools are in constant need of qualified guest educators so that instruction is not lost when a teacher is absent. Teaching candidates want more experience. Prep programs and districts should partner to provide teaching candidates with hands-on experiences

managing a wide variety of classrooms. This program could be created at minimal cost and minimal disruption to the current structure of schools of education.

**3. Promising practice: Expand the lab school approach into more schools in Indianapolis.**

The Butler Lab School (IPS School 60) is a fantastic example of what a partnership between an excellent university (Butler) and a school district (IPS) should look like. With many different schools of education around Indianapolis, there are many opportunities to embed teaching candidates in a long-term, structured way. Indianapolis districts should work with schools of education to partner and create lab schools in close proximity to the university campuses.

**II: Strengthen data-sharing relationships between preparation programs and school districts.**

Both districts and teacher prep programs benefit from a trusting relationship where aggregate information is shared.

**1. Districts: Share workforce data to forecast the future teaching job market.**

A freshman starting at a school of education should know what teaching positions might be open when they graduate. Districts can provide prep programs with a clearer understanding of this and a good analysis of their teacher workforce. Prep programs could help teaching candidates know what jobs might be available after graduation.

**2. Districts: Share teacher feedback metadata with prep programs.**

Districts could share with prep programs how teachers, in

aggregate, are performing in their first five years of teaching.

**3. Partner with state workforce agencies to develop data infrastructure.**

Data management systems of the scale needed for districts, schools, and prep programs do not need to be re-invented. State entities dedicated to workforce development have expertise that could be leveraged in developing the data sharing structure that works well for both schools and prep programs.



**III: Improve the quality of special population (Special Education, Gifted and Talented, English language students) training for non-special population educators.** All teachers, regardless of subject, should leave their preparation program ready to work with all students, regardless of their designations.

**1. Prep Programs: Require more robust coursework for all teachers related to special populations.** Participants in our research agreed that all prep programs, both traditional and alternative, must improve the quality of their instruction around support for students in special populations.

**2. Districts: Pay special population teachers to deliver professional development.** Too often, the burden of teaching teachers how to practically work with special education and English language (EL) students falls on special education and EL teachers. Districts should leverage the knowledge of these teachers, but they should be paid to design formal professional development for their colleagues.

**IV: Build a support network for first year teachers that includes intentional onboarding and ongoing support.** Many times, onboarding is haphazard or insufficient to introduce new teachers into the culture of their school. Similarly, without adequate support, first year teachers can feel isolated and helpless in their classrooms as the year progresses.

**1. Districts: Re-design onboarding with a focus on what novice teachers need.** Schools and districts need to create a long-term onboarding process designed around the needs of the recently hired teacher.

**2. Districts: Use funding from ESSA to create mentor teacher roles, characterized by**

**increased pay and classroom release time.** Mentor teaching, in many districts, is an add-on responsibility. Using Title II dollars in ESSA, districts could create real mentor teaching roles. Excellent veterans would be given classroom release time to observe and mentor novice teachers, and be compensated at a higher level.

## FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

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**Finding 1:** Teachers and district personnel want increased practical application of teaching skills in the preparation process.

Candidates and teachers want more practical classroom experience before leading their own classrooms. In fact, practical application was the most commonly cited area of growth for preparation programs. In *Great Teachers are Made*, 77% of teachers responding to a flash poll indicated that their preparation program left them unprepared to meet the demands of the classroom and the needs of all or many of their students.<sup>5</sup>

**Increased time in a diversity of field experiences.** Different teacher prep programs have diverse expectations and opportunities for field hours. One 4th year teaching candidate noted these inconsistencies, saying, "Early time in the classroom is very important and some say they've had it and others haven't." Teaching candidates lacking varied and frequent field experiences expressed frustration and fear as they anticipated managing their own classrooms.

*I haven't been in the classroom yet. It makes me worried and scared because you have to get in your program before you even get to see any of that.* – 3rd year teaching candidate

Many administrators we spoke to felt increased field experience hours were essential for first year teacher success. They stated that more classroom hours better prepared teachers for the nuances of teaching.

*The real application of what teaching is actually like. It can't be held to a text book. You actually have to get into the role. Something is always changing, new students, teaching cannot be categorized. There are always new experiences to be had. So the more they are in the environment the more they will see the scope of what teaching is actually like.* – assistant principal

### **Increased practice with classroom planning.**

Consistently, teachers and candidates desired to not just observe, but to apply their learning in real classrooms. Most commonly, new teachers and teaching candidates felt their preparation programs should better prepare teachers for lesson planning, curriculum mapping standards, and aligning lesson plans to assessments. Candidates in particular felt unsupported in these areas.

*I don't even know how to make a lesson plan yet and I'm a junior. I feel like that needs to be taught earlier in my freshman year, so by now I'm on it and I can jump in the classroom.* – 3rd year teaching candidate

*When writing a lesson, knowing what we're doing is important. So we need more practice aligning lessons to the standards and learning how to design an entire unit instead of one or two lessons.* – 4th year teaching candidate

Administrators shared these concerns. One assistant principal said that while new teachers are better prepared than when she entered the field, they still tend to under plan.

*I think they need to be effective lesson planners. I find that a lot of first year teachers under plan. They are much more effective than when I came out of a teaching program with objectives and setting goals, but I find that they have a hard time managing time and planning on how long things will*

*take. It's hit or miss with classroom management. Some programs do a very nice job teaching new teachers how to find their management style and how to set their tone and carry it consistently. There are others where it's very weak and I see the teachers falter and they lean on their mentor teachers and then it's a two or three year process to get them back on track.* – assistant principal

Administrators also expressed concern about new teachers' ability to utilize data, among other skills, to inform instruction.

*Things that would be nice for new teachers to know: Understanding how to establish positive classroom culture, understanding how to backward plan and utilize student data, and experience working with and involving families in students' education.* – principal

Lesson planning and utilizing data are essential for classroom success, but execution is just as important. Many new teachers believed they lacked strategies, interventions, or organization techniques to lead a truly effective classroom in year one. According to a 2015 Teach Plus survey cited in *Great Teachers are Made*,<sup>6</sup> 55% of teacher respondents said their prep programs would have been stronger with more instruction on classroom management. Teacher candidates echoed this concern.

Repeatedly, participants said that basic tenets of good teaching are unrehearsed. As a 2nd year teacher said, "You had to take these classes that give you good information to know but they don't tell you how to [do it]. You know what scaffolding is but not how to do it. I liked the classes while I was in them but I haven't taken that information and used it."

### **Increased practice improving the "soft skills" of relationship building necessary for teaching.**

In addition to more practice with the technical skills, focus group participants urged more development in the "soft skills" of teaching. New teachers weren't prepared for all of the hats—counselor, advocate, etc.—they had to wear.

*I think teaching should be more well-rounded. What I've seen and heard is that teacher prep programs only teach teachers to teach and not to be the counselor or something*

*else. When you have a kid come into your room crying, how do you react? No one ever told you that sometimes your students will want to come into your room and vent. Sometimes you need to just be a listener. You're much more than a teacher. We need to make new teachers more well-rounded as professionals.* – 2nd year teacher

Not only were participants worried about individual student interactions, additional concerns were raised over ability of novice teachers to create nurturing classrooms.

*I think teachers need to get experience creating classroom culture—this should include experience making and implementing management and investment plans.* – principal

Administrators also expressed concern about how prepared young teachers were to navigate the complexities of parent relationships.

*I feel like teacher prep programs could do a better job with teaching teachers how to better maneuver parent engagement. I've seen first year teachers concerned about their age and then not engage with parents because of that. I've also seen first year teachers know and believe that it is important and then not have the skill set to do it or not know what to tell parents how to support the learning at home.* – coach for early career teachers

Above all else, participants believed teaching candidates need more classroom experience to build these relationship-based skills. Substitute teaching was a commonly identified method to bridge the gap between education classes and practice. New teachers with substitute experience felt this “on-the-job” training had been essential to their success as a teacher.

*After I graduated I didn't teach right away, I substitute-taught for six months to figure out what schools I liked and what I didn't like. Until you're in the situation you don't know how you'll handle it. Substitute teaching made me resilient and gave me on-the-job training I didn't get in my teacher prep at school. I would advocate for making that a requirement for graduating. Substitute teaching would be required before you think about applying to the program to see if you even like it.* – 2nd year teacher

Whether through substitute teaching, or increasing the amount of time and experiences in classrooms, almost all participants believed new teachers needed better preparation to be successful in a diverse, 21st-century classroom. Almost all participants believed teaching candidates should engage in diverse field experiences, plan, implement, and receive feedback on lessons, and build authentic relationships with students and families before leading their own classrooms.

**Finding 2:** All stakeholders want increased communication between preparation programs and hiring districts. Many expressed a desire for increased accountability for prep program outcomes.

Teachers are asked to be reflective practitioners. Teachers feel preparation programs and districts should do the same. Focus group participants almost universally stated that both districts and prep programs would benefit from increased communication and transparency. Many of the new teachers and administrators suggested that increased communication could help prep programs meet the current and future needs of schools and districts.

*Districts need to be communicating with those universities and deans of colleges. Telling them, 'These are the kinds of teachers I'm looking for' and then going from*

*there. 'Here's what we're looking for, who meets those qualifications?'* – 4th year teacher

In addition to meeting specific hiring needs, participants expressed a desire for more communication around teacher prep program effectiveness. First, teachers and district personnel expressed concern about unshared data between hiring districts and programs. Teachers and administrators knew that the data existed, but it was not being shared or utilized. As one assistant principal said, “Maybe it's not what new things can be collected. Maybe it's



what are you doing with the things you already collect? And who is looking at it?"

Administrators believed transparent data sharing could lead to better outcomes for teacher prep programs, new teachers, and students. One principal repeatedly noted that teacher evaluation data, student achievement data, and classroom culture observations could be shared to measure the success of prep programs. Similarly, a professor said, "The outcome of the new teacher's first year should help teacher preparation programs understand what is needed for improvements. Surveys are used in tracking the success of the first year teachers. The data is used to help make appropriate changes in the programs."

Opinions varied when discussing accountability and what it should look like. However, one clear finding was that teachers and candidates felt preparation programs need to ensure their graduates perform at a high standard on par with actual teaching prior to graduation. If not, many participants believed teacher prep programs and districts should use data and accountability measures to counsel unqualified teaching candidates and teachers out of the profession.

*I think if prep programs were held accountable to evaluations, there might be more vested in their selection process. Their sorting process and their interventions would be more rigorous. It's ugly to say but teaching is not for everyone and there are some folks who should be counseled into other areas. There are some people who can become wonderful teachers, but they just need some more interventions. Everybody's got to do more.* – assistant principal

While accountability in the classroom is essential, some new teachers and teaching candidates suggested earlier accountability measures. Many believed this would decrease poor teacher quality and improve public perception of teaching as a highly selective career.

Focus group participants believed teacher prep programs should hold higher expectations for teaching candidates and graduates. In order to measure the efficacy of preparation programs, participants felt graduate follow-up and continued support were essential.

*I think prep programs need to go out in the schools, see what their graduates are doing and how they might assist, evidence is not just student achievement, more than that – quality of effective teaching. Look at big headers and slowly take students through it – it is not just the first year, but the first three years – time to talk about the work should be built into the indicators of how they are doing.* – professor

*The [non-traditional] transition programs do this. They send out someone to check on the new teacher. They would check in with me and find out if there is anything they needed to work on with the new teacher. There was another layer of support the first two years of teaching for the teachers in transition programs.* – assistant principal

Administrators and professors valued preparation programs' follow-up because this provided additional support for new teachers and accountability for teacher preparation programs. While accountability can be complex, many participants desired increased communication via data sharing and post-graduate support.

### Finding 3: Teachers want to be prepared to teach students with special needs

According to the 2015 Teach Plus publication survey *Ready for Day One*<sup>7</sup>, "Forty-three percent of teachers reported feeling that their preparation program was inadequate in preparing them to work with children with

special needs and children who are English language learners, and forty-six percent of teachers felt they were not prepared to effectively use classroom management strategies that would develop children socially

and emotionally, especially children who have experienced trauma." Similarly, many of the new teachers we spoke with stated they had minimal experience meeting the legal requirements around Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), English as a Second Language (ESL) students, and other special student populations. In many cases, teachers had taught themselves how to accommodate special needs as they gained more experience.

*I think we should be prepared for knowing IEPs and if they could cover other legal issues. Before you start teaching, you should be going in with that knowledge. You're responsible the day you get in.* – 1st year teacher

Teachers and teaching candidates were not only concerned about their ability to implement IEPs, they also felt unprepared to differentiate for all students appropriately.

*I would say I'm not sure I know what to do with that top 25% and the bottom 25%. I don't know what to do. I could go into the average classes and teach the middle portion of*

*students, but not address the needs of the SPED or high and gifted students.* – 4th year teaching candidate

Although new teachers and candidates prioritized legal requirements, differentiation, and IEPs, administrators only mentioned them briefly. However, college professors and instructors shared teachers' opinions that specific populations and legal requirements don't receive enough attention in teacher prep courses.

*One of the things we do the most poorly is prepare teachers to work with students with special needs, ELL, and diversity of what they'll find in the classroom. Students have no idea what an IEP is or how to make an accommodation.* – professor

The misalignment between the priority level new teachers gave IEPs and how administrators looked at the need for more training in this area suggests a need for preparation programs and districts to reassess their training specific to IEPs' legal requirements in the classroom.

## **Finding 4:** Teachers and district personnel desired more consistent and effective onboarding and ongoing professional development for new teachers.

Leading and managing a classroom is an intimidating prospect for many new teachers. Some of the new teachers we spoke with had experienced little to no onboarding at their hiring institution to support them through this transition. Focus group participants wanted quality onboarding and ongoing teacher development to be top priorities for districts and schools.

Administrators overwhelmingly supported quality onboarding. They believed onboarding provided structures for teacher success and introduced teachers to the culture of the school and district.

*You get the 'this is how we do our culturally responsive interventions, this is how we do communication, this is*

*how we do expectations, this is how we interact with our teachers association, this is who you go to when you don't want to ask the official question, and even down to our evaluation system.'* – assistant principal

*They would ensure that the novice teachers have ongoing training and are not left alone to fend for themselves. Schools should have systems in place for their teachers, and have mentors, even at different skill levels.* – assistant principal

While onboarding was seen as a critical first step in welcoming new teachers, ongoing professional development was also consistently recommended by many participants in this study. Administrators in particular noted that new teachers frequently request feedback and help. Teachers and administrators believed

that purposeful, differentiated professional development was critical for supporting all teachers.

*Rookie teachers either come out of the gate and feel confident or they don't—that can bleed into instruction. Most teachers are doing a good job at seeking out interaction from administrators. They feel much more comfortable than when I was a rookie teacher at asking for help and being okay with evaluation and constructive criticism. They welcome that; they don't freak out when people come in their rooms whereas that was not the norm when I first had a classroom.* – assistant principal

In a 2015 Teach Plus flash poll cited in *Great Teachers are Made*,<sup>8</sup> over 500 teachers stated that mentor teachers were more impactful on their professional growth than their prep program since their entry into the classroom. Focus group teachers enthusiastically supported mentor programs. However, participants firmly

believed mentor selection and implementation were critical components for success.

Administrators and professors supported mentor teacher programs as a best practice. They also emphasized deliberate mentor selection.

*They [prospective teachers] need to be with [mentor] teachers who are professionally engaged.* –professor

*The district needs to do a better job of selecting mentors who are based on area discipline and they need to have people who are active teachers; someone to connect with in the building.* – department chair

New teachers need the most support within any school system. Focus group participants believed new teachers were best supported through intentional, purposeful onboarding, professional development, and mentor-teacher relationships.

# Conclusion

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Teachers are the school's greatest asset. We routinely lose promising novice teachers because they enter the classroom underprepared. As a state, we cannot continue this trend. Teacher recommendations to improve the preparation process must be foremost in policymakers' minds, as they are on the front lines using their training to support each and every student. Increasing the quality and quantity of field experiences for teaching candidates, strengthening data sharing between prep programs and districts, improving the quality of special population instruction in prep programs and districts, and better developing first year teachers will go a long way towards supporting and retaining new teachers. In order for all students to receive a quality education, we must first ensure that all teachers entering the profession are prepared to effectively lead their classrooms.

# Endnotes

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**1** <http://in.chalkbeat.org/2015/12/21/the-basics-of-indianas-teacher-shortage-debate-what-comes-next/#.VohRwvk4HIV>

**2** Focus group participants came from six teacher preparation programs. Interview participants include 4 professors, 2 principals, 2 assistant principals, 1 retired principal, 1 grade chair, and 1 teacher coach.

**3** Massachusetts Teaching Policy Fellows, "Ready for Day One: Teachers Weigh in on Teacher Preparation." pg. 3, (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/ready-day-one-teachers-weigh-teacher-preparation>

**4** Teaching Policy Fellows, "Great Teachers are Made: Teacher Views on the Need for Teacher Preparation Reform." (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/great-teachers-are-made-teacher-views-need-teacher-preparation-reform>

**5** Teaching Policy Fellows, "Great Teachers are Made: Teacher Views on the Need for Teacher Preparation Reform." pg. 1, (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/great-teachers-are-made-teacher-views-need-teacher-preparation-reform>

**6** Teaching Policy Fellows, "Great Teachers are Made: Teacher Views on the Need for Teacher Preparation Reform." pg. 2, (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/great-teachers-are-made-teacher-views-need-teacher-preparation-reform>

**7** Massachusetts Teaching Policy Fellows, "Ready for Day One: Teachers Weigh in on Teacher Preparation." pg. 3, (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/ready-day-one-teachers-weigh-teacher-preparation>

**8** Teaching Policy Fellows, "Great Teachers are Made: Teacher Views on the Need for Teacher Preparation Reform." pg. 6, (2015) <http://teachplus.org/news-events/publications/great-teachers-are-made-teacher-views-need-teacher-preparation-reform>