

CAUSES AND STATE RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHER ATTRITION

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Abstract

Teacher shortages across the nation have challenged schools to educate their students. Precise calculations of the shortage are lacking, but the need for school personnel and teachers can reach three-hundred thousand. The article focuses on an area most impacted: English Learner (EL) education. However, this shortage is not new because history proves the ongoing demands for EL teachers, especially in states like Texas where ELs exceed 1.1 million. This article also relates the federal and state programmatic efforts to retain, recruit, and train EL teachers through programs like Alternative Certifications, Grow Your Own, and Paraeducator Career Ladders. An overlooked but tested response to the shortage crisis consists of certifying paraeducators, which is promising and challenging because paraeducators require training to improve skills to teach. Arguably, the benefits of training paraeducators outweigh the challenges. Drawing from databases and online sources, the article's focus is on these issues pertaining ELs and teachers: a) The trends of ELs, b) Trends and causes for teacher shortages, c) How do states prepare future teachers to earn their teaching licenses, and d) The viability of preparing paraeducators to address teacher shortage.

Key Words: Alternative Certification, Career Ladder, English Learners, Grow Your Own, Paraeducators, Paraprofessionals, Retention, Teacher Attrition, Teacher Shortage

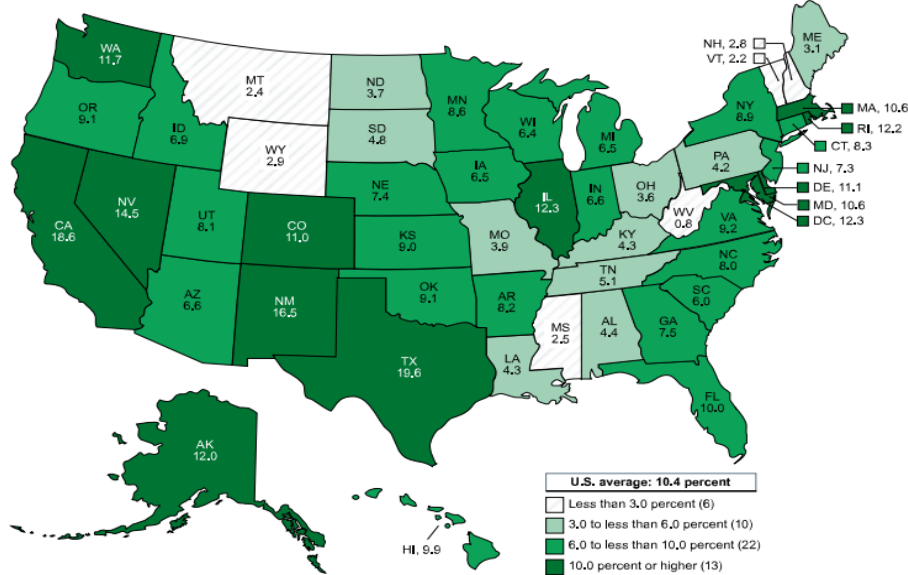
Student Trends: English Learners

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2021, the nation's population reached 331,893,745, of which 18.9% (62,727,918) were classified as Hispanic/Latino, thousands for whom Spanish is their first or home-based language. In Texas, enrollment reports from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in the last two academic school years indicate that Hispanics are the majority of the over 5.4 million students in the state's elementary and secondary public schools, and the state's total number of English Learners (ELs) is 1,175,333, who comprise 22% of the total state's student population; and of these, 131,703 ELs were classified in need of special education programs across all grades. From these figures it can be determined that of every five students in Texas one is an EL (20%), and that the teacher-to-student ratio is 1:47 compared to the national teacher-to-student ratio of 1:16. (TEA, 2021; US Census Bureau, 2021). When reporting ELs in the nation's schools, the Census Bureau (2021) mentions that,

The percentage of public-school students in the United States who were English learners (ELs) was higher in AY2019 (10.4 percent, or 5.1 million students) than in AY2010 (9.2 percent, or 4.5 million students). In fall 2019, the percentage of public-school students who were ELs ranged from 0.8 percent in West Virginia to 19.6 percent in Texas.

Figure 1 below illustrates the percentages of ELs in the nation’s public schools in each state according to the U.S. Department of Education’s Center for Education Statistics. It shows the how in 2021 Texas (19.6%) has the nation’s highest percentage rate of ELs in its public schools.

Figure 1
Percentage of ELs in the Public Schools by state



Source: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, EDF File 141. 2021

In 2019, in the United States there were over 67.80 million five-year old or older who spoke a language other than English at home. Although English leads all other languages in the nation, at 41.75 million speakers, Spanish is the nation’s second most spoken language. Following at a significant distance are French and Chinese (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). Table 1 illustrates the top ten languages most spoken by ELs in the nation’s public schools for AY206-17, and consistent with the national trend, Spanish also is the most used language among ELs, followed by Arabic and Chinese.

Table 1

The Top 10 Languages Spoken by K–12 ELs in the US: 2016–17 School Year

Rank	Top 10 Languages:	Speakers Reported	Percent of US EL Students
1	Spanish; Castilian	3,790,949	76.44%
2	Arabic	122,227	2.46%
3	Chinese	94,711	1.91%
4	Vietnamese	63,078	1.27%
5	Somali	29,460	0.59%
6	Haitian; Haitian Creole	26,032	0.52%
7	Hmong	19,616	0.40%
8	Tagalog	19,169	0.39%

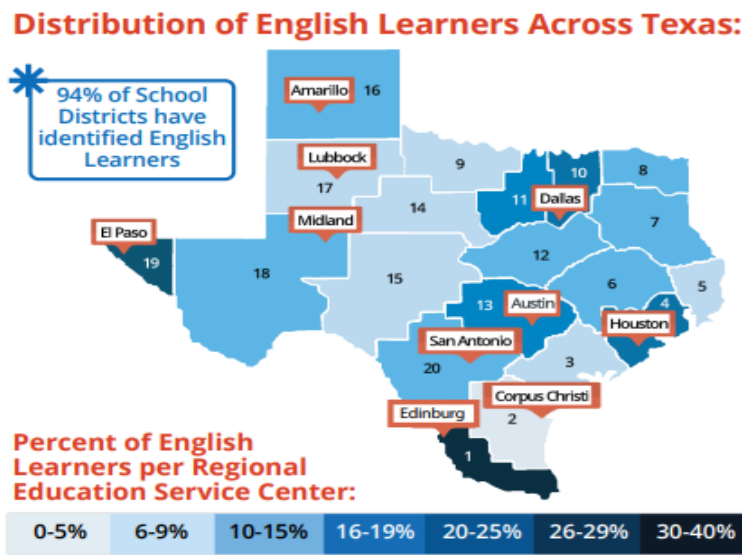
9	Portuguese	18,305	0.37%
10	Russian	12,619	0.25%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Consolidated State Performance Report (CSPR): Part I: SY 2016-17 (OMB #1810-0724).

Clearly, the diversity of languages spoken by ELs is reflected in the public schools nationwide, and consequently they reflect the need for teachers who are prepared to address their academic and developmental needs.

In Texas, the presence of ELs across all grades is pervasive throughout the state, and according to reports by the TEA, 964 (94%) of the state’s 1,026 (100%) school districts have ELs. The highest EL presence are in two of the state’s Educational Service Centers (ESC) on the Texas-Mexico border areas, in ESC 1 Edinburg, and ESC 19 EL Paso. However, major urban areas such as Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, and San Antonio also report significant numbers of ELs in their respective school districts. Figure 2 below shows the status of the distribution of ELs in the State of Texas as of 2021.

Figure 2
Percentage Distribution of ELs per Texas Educational Service Centers



Source: Adapted from TEXL Fact Sheet: <https://www.txel.org/media/jvehnvgp/fact-sheet-1-7-15-20-final.pdf>

The presence of ELs statewide is a significant challenge that need to be continuously addressed to meet their academic needs and achievement, and to reduce the digital divide. Quality teacher preparation and the increase of EL teachers are avenues that the state should implement to deal with these ongoing challenges. Teacher preparation and retention across all grade levels is a critical concern for the state.

The Teacher Shortages Trends

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) projected that for AY2022 there would be 3.1 million full-time teachers to teach the 49.9 million students in nation’s public and elementary schools (NCES, 2021). At the beginning of AY2022, reports mention that throughout the nation there were an

estimated 300,000 elementary school teacher and staff position openings, including over 36,000 vacant elementary school teacher positions (ABC News, 2022; Ward, 2022). Despite not being completely accurate due insufficient state reporting and accounting mechanisms, these accounts do mirror the nation’s demands for educators (Nguyen, Chanh, & Paul, 2022).

In Texas, in 2021, there were 336,626 state certified teachers teaching the state’s 5,427,370 students. All academic areas in the public schools are affected by teacher shortages and teacher attrition, but bilingual/ESL education and special education and are the two fields in most need for teachers. Moreover, bilingual/ESL has the highest rate of substitute teachers in the state, and to worsen matters, minority teachers, who can relate to ELs because they share a common background, are lacking as well. When discussing teacher shortages, The Charles Butt Foundation (2021) mentioned that in Texas, “Teacher shortage areas and a lack of racial diversity are remarkably consistent, and policy interventions have not seemed to address these needs. For example, bilingual/ESL and special education have been identified as shortage areas every academic year since 1990-1991.”

The Charles Butt Foundation survey also revealed that after the COVID-19 pandemic 77% of the surveyed teachers had given much consideration to leaving the profession in 2022, a 19% increase from 2020. Most worrisome is that in Texas, 93% of the teachers surveyed the Charles Butt Foundation had already started to take decisive steps to leave the profession by 2021. Nationwide, these matters do not look any better because there are reports showing that up to 55% of teachers have considered leaving teaching (Walker, 2022). Table 2 below is TEA’s tracking of the teacher attrition rate between AY2015-16 and AY2021-22. Overall, the data suggests a steady increase of teacher attrition over the years, which the COVID-19 pandemic worsened in AY2020 – 2021, and that continue to be concerns for the public schools across the state and the nation.

Table 2

State of Texas Teacher Attrition between AY 2015-16 and 2021-22

Academic Year	Number of Active Teachers	Attrition from Previous Years	Percent Attrition
2021-22	370,431	42,839	11.57
2020-21	370,297	33,949	9.34
2019-20	363,526	36,473	10.16
2018-19	358,913	37,300	10.43
2017-18	357,515	36,909	10.44
2016-17	353,449	35,962	10.34
2015-16	347,682	35,745	10.43

Source: TEA PEIMS and SBEC ECOS. Jeremy B. Landa, Ph.D. August 2022

Reasons Teachers Abandon Teaching

There are many reasons that cause teachers to leave the profession. Among these, according to Marshall et al. (2022), prevalent -and worrisome- are mental health issues which are affected by excessive workloads, lack of job resources, burnout related to the COVID pandemic, lack of support by school administrators, and a sense of being devalued and disregarded. Teachers also leave the profession because they are incapable of making meaningful connections with their students when teaching remotely (Marshall, et al., 2022; Pressley, et al., 2022). Added causes for the shortages include an increase in the

number of retiring teachers and early teacher attrition and comprise a “function of local [state] policies, compensation, working conditions, and more” (Carver-Thomas, 2022). In a report published in *The Texas Tribune* Lopez (2022) described that in Texas teachers are trapped in the prevailing “state’s culture wars” between local school boards that are more interested in political issues such as banning textbooks or on modifying more inclusive curricula rather than paying attention to what can be done for schools to reduce academic gaps, treating all students fairly, and abate teacher attrition. Table 2 below is TEA’s tracking of the teacher attrition rate between AY2015-16 and AY2021-22. Overall, the data suggests a steady increase of teacher attrition over the years, which the COVID-19 pandemic worsened in AY2020 – 2021, and that continue to be concerns for the public schools across the state and the nation.

In sum, these statistics and trends reflect gloomy conditions of the public schools because of the teacher shortages, and there does not seem to be a short term or easy fix. Nonetheless, the states have invested time and expert opinion to address this concern. There are several initiatives that tackle the teacher shortage and attrition, TEA taking the lead in Texas.

Teacher Shortage Implications for ELs in Texas

The movement of bilingual teacher shortages in the nation and in Texas does not offer much hope for the education of ELs, but historical interpretations differ due to the lack of systematic and official accounts. For instance, Macías (1989) estimated the need to be for about 100,000 bilingual teachers by the year 2000 based on a student-teacher ratio of 35:1, or of 200,000 teachers based on a student-teacher ratio of 25:1. In 1991, the data indicated a need for approximately 97,000 bilingual teachers (Honig, 1991), and three years later the National Education Association (NEA) estimated the need to be for about 175,000 teachers (US General Accounting Office, 1994). Statistics that account for the needs for bilingual teachers in 2022 are unavailable; despite long database searches, there are no traceable accounts. Currently, however, the USDE only reported needs for teachers in high-needs areas by state without mentioning statistics. However, the current numbers of ELs, -over five million nationwide, and over 1.1 million in Texas- do suggest the need for many more qualified bilingual teachers than in the past.

The implications of teacher shortages are even more significant for vulnerable students like the state’s ELs because some school practices to fill the teacher gaps can weaken student academic achievement because “... schools often cancel courses due to vacancies or staff classes with substitutes and underprepared teachers who are not certified to teach their subject matter” (Carver-Thomas, 2022). This too can cause poor teacher-student relationships and contribute to poor staff morale. These data imply that countless ELs in Texas are delegitimized, are in the fringes of receiving a fair education, and do not receive the services accorded to them by law due to them. This contributes to making them a high-risk population and will lead to having high numbers of EL dropouts, mostly Spanish speakers, before completing high school. The issue to address concerns the viable practical solutions the State of Texas has outlined to meet that challenge of the shortages, especially as they relate to EL education.

Local and State Responses to the Teacher Shortage in Critical Areas

How the states and schools across the nation have responded to the teacher shortage crisis varies, but there are some commonalities among states. Carver-Thomas (2022) list how California, Connecticut, and Oregon have responded to the shortage crisis. She mentions that states have planned the following with some results but not without their shortcomings:

- Reduce teacher qualifications

- Allow teacher certificates in new academic areas
- Remove requirements for substitute teachers
- Mobilize local and federal funds to address the crisis
- Develop funding for teacher residency programs
- Build teacher workforces
- Increase teacher compensations
- Improve work conditions

Although the recommendations reflect work conditions and compensation, areas that require the schools' in-depth attention are the teachers' mental health, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, school safety considering violence and shootings in schools, and staff morale. That is, schools would benefit their teachers by building in mechanisms and programs for the welfare of their school personnel, and in the process affect their job dissatisfaction and staff morale, and eventually student success.

Local Education Agencies

To respond to the challenges of the teacher shortage crisis incentivizing teachers with higher pay, rehiring retired teachers, and recruiting candidates from other careers offering high paid salaries and signing bonuses. In school districts with large numbers of ELs such as Dallas ISD recruitment efforts have reached out potential teachers Mexico who can teach in bilingual. In rural school districts in Texas, some have resorted to converting to 4-day school weeks (Harris, 2022; Miles, 2022; Quillen, 2022).

The Texas Education Agency

At the State level, TEA created a statewide Teacher Vacancy Task Force (TVTF) represented by “teachers and school system leaders in public education hailing from a variety of districts and geographies and serving student populations that are representative of the diversity of Texas” (TEA, 2022a). Its mission is stated in the following terms,

From urban and suburban school systems with large student populations to those districts serving rural communities, public school systems across Texas are faced with growing staffing challenges that have been worsened by both population growth and the wide-ranging disruptions of a two-year-long pandemic. The Teacher Vacancy Task Force is working to find teacher-shaped solutions to these challenges - blending a variety of perspectives and experiences from current classroom teachers and school administrators into thoughtful policy recommendations and an innovative way forward that supports the needs of our teachers. (“Teacher Vacancy Task Force Overview | Texas Education Agency”)

The areas the TVTF are designed to address in the state's urban, suburban, and rural school systems include:

- Understand the challenges districts are currently facing related to teacher vacancies
- Share best practices for addressing critical teacher vacancy and shortage areas, including exploring opportunities for certification, placement, and hiring flexibilities
- Develop recommendations for regulatory or other policy changes for TEA and the state
- Provide feedback on TEA initiatives designed to help impact vacancies

Beginning in March 2022, the TVTF sustained monthly meetings to discuss: Teacher compensation, Improving teacher preparation, Talent pipeline, and Teacher Experiences. Full agendas and lengthy meeting notes with commentaries are available on the TEA website. An added possibility available by TEA to earn a state teacher certificate for qualified national and international candidates consists of directly applying through TEA’s “Certification based on credentials from Another Country” (TEA, 2022b).

TEA Approved Alternative Educator Preparation Programs

Designed to prepare future educators training to teach ELs, TEA has listed 104 state-approved Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) each of which offers an Alternative Certification Program (ACP) (TEA, 2022c). TEA’s list includes public and private IHEs, including community colleges, and for-profit agencies. Two ACPS are offered in Bilingual Supplemental- Mandarin Chinese, and 102 ACPs are offered in Bilingual Supplemental- Spanish. In some cases, applicants can complete their program in one year through for-profit agencies such as Inspire Texas and Texas Teachers for Tomorrow, offers training that include the possibility of being able to teach as a salaried supervised intern, or a clinical experience similar to student teaching without pay. Their services also provide guidance for international aspirants to become a teacher and include transcription and evaluation of documentation necessary to meet state requirements to teach.

A Viable Response to Teacher Shortage: Paraeducators

With its focus on EL education, this section presents EL paraeducators as a group who teacher aides who can meet the demand for EL teachers. The terms paraeducator and paraprofessional are used interchangeably and refer to the same educational personnel. “Paraprofessionals are teaching assistants who provide instructional services to students under the general supervision of a certified teacher” (NYC Department of Education, 2022).

In addition to the state’s conventional remedies to teacher shortages outlined above, i.e., rehiring retired faculty, hiring aspirants from other professions, and offering ACPs through public and private IHEs and ESCs, targeting the country’s pool of paraeducators and advancing them to full teacher positions has been a practical solution some states have implemented. Texas has implemented programs that encourage the promotion of paraeducators to full-time teachers.

Grow Your Own

A Grow Your Own (GYO) program is designed to recruit, develop, and retain teachers who are members of the local community. An online study report presents the details of how Texas implemented the advanced federal grant which supported the teacher certification pathway GYO. The successful program met the TEA’s “goal of providing opportunities to rural students and to participate in its programmatic activities” (Wan, et al., 2022). Launched by TEA in 2018, the GYO program had as its goal:

“...to encourage districts to develop or expand existing high-quality education and training courses for high school students and to support district-employed paraprofessionals (including instructional aides and long-term substitute teachers) to pursue certifications that would allow them to enter full-time teaching roles.”

According to the GYO's underpinnings, teachers, mainly paraeducators, who earn their educator certificates through the programs are more likely to remain the field when compared with teachers trained in college educator preparation programs. The state's GYO programs also mention the guiding principle of targeting local personnel to teach in the communities of residence, which translates to influential employees that match the demographics of their future students. Eventually, students taught by GYO faculty will most likely demonstrate higher levels of academics and aspire to better careers if they are taught by GYO teachers from their language, race, and ethnic backgrounds. The report discusses with more details how the GYO program met the TEA's "goal of providing opportunities to rural students and to participate in its programmatic activities" (Wan, et al., 2022). Although results about the effects of the GYO show variance between participating districts and that more time is needed to assess the GYO's impact on the state's teacher shortages, they do reveal the state's ongoing efforts to resort to paraeducators to address teacher shortage crisis. In AY 2022 – 23, the GYO started its fourth cycle in Texas.

Paraeducator Career Ladder Programs

State Educational Agencies (SEAs) and Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) in California and Colorado formed partnerships that provide preservice and inservice training programs for paraeducators wanting to earn their teaching credentials. Programs such as these may focus on offering bilingual and monolingual paraeducators opportunities to increase their skills to teach elementary EL school-age students. Ideally, they can target paraeducators who are from underrepresented groups and who are speakers of at least two languages, which contrasts with university-based teacher training programs where most candidates are monolingual Anglo females.

In their seminal text, Haselkorn and Fideler (1996) documented the results of a comprehensive study of paraeducator training programs. Their study identified paraprofessional teacher preparation programs throughout the nation and outlined several advantages that they have for education. According to the authors, a clear-cut characterization of these paraeducator-to-teacher training programs in the nation was difficult to establish because they differ. However, a common characteristic is the adoption of a nontraditional teacher education model where enrollees can choose between part-time and full-time education and a host of alternatives defined by local needs and preferences. For instance, some models have consisted of coursework leading from an Associate of Arts degree to a Bachelor's degree, or from a Bachelor's degree to a Master's degree; other programs have emphasized addressing specific educational areas like cross-cultural, and bilingual education (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996).

The University of Colorado – Denver, a stronghold of paraeducator advancement, has established Career Ladder programs for the type of populations similar to those targeted by programs in Texas: paraprofessionals, non-traditional students, mid-career changers, and professionals new to public education. Their program's success is attributed to partnerships between school districts, community colleges, teacher education programs, and IHEs. Noteworthy is that Career Ladder programs are often funded by external grants and other funding sources that provide support to paraeducators earning their teaching certificates to work in high-need areas such as EL education (CU – Denver, 2021). In their website, they explain that "The PAR²A Center" is a

"national research and development center to explore training and supervision systems for paraprofessionals and their impact on paraprofessional employment conditions and student achievement. The PAR²A Center, a national leader in supporting paraprofessionals, is

involved in numerous initiatives such as transition-to-teaching programs, supervision academies...”

The success of the joint work conducted in Colorado evidence how why career ladder programs for paraeducators are feasible avenues to address the teacher shortages. For instance, the Center has transitioned over three hundred paraeducators to teachers in high-need areas in Colorado, EL education included. Colorado’s PAR²A Center serves as a model for other states to follow, but with the caveat that local and state needs should guide the development of local action plans.

Advantages of Paraeducator Inclusion

Haselkorn and Fideler (1996) and Penelle, et al (2021) list advantages of the inclusion of paraeducators into quality teacher certification programs. They mention the following about paraeducators inclusion:

1. They are an experienced work force that can help fill the need for teachers from underrepresented groups, including women and minorities.
2. Many of them are second language learners, which gives them a unique perspective into the second language experience of their students.
3. They are experienced individuals who have been in classrooms for long periods, and therefore have the educational capital and maturity that can be used in specialized areas like EL education.
4. Their personal experience with racial inequities also affords them insight into the struggles ELs have in schools and society.
5. This cohort may foster high expectations for their EL students who have been cast as incapable of exceeding in school. Thus, paraeducators offer a much-needed alternative perception of ELs as academically capable.
6. Paraeducators are motivated initiative-taking individuals in education. Their motivation transfers from their experiences as students to their professional lives as teachers to their students in the classrooms.
7. They are role models of success for students, parents, and their communities.
8. Because they know bilingual and bicultural, they can serve as cultural liaison for ELs and their families.

The advantages mentioned above are encouraging for education in general and are principally relevant for ELs. By incorporating paraeducators from underrepresented groups, some of which are bilingual or have Spanish as their first language, Spanish speaking ELs find the potential for receiving a fair and promising education in their primary language while learning English -their specific needs are met (Zalk, 1975). A reasonable conclusion is that if paraeducators were trained through GYO’s or career ladder programs, the state’s teacher shortage in critical areas may be reduced.

Closing Remarks

The purposes of this article were to discuss trends of national and state ELs and causes for teacher shortages in high-needs areas. It also explored ways to address the alarming national and state teacher shortages with potential national and state programmatic initiatives. Schools throughout the nation, including Texas, are scrambling to retain and recruit teachers by offering higher salaries, reduced class weekdays, and through other incentives, and have implemented ACPs for personnel outside of education.

In states like Texas, where ELs abound, a common practice has been to recruit potential international teacher candidates, especially Spanish speakers who can work with EL students.

With the support of federal and state grants, community colleges, universities, and school districts have developed working partnerships to implement practical and proven solutions targeting paraeducators such as Grow Your Own and Career Ladder programs, which break away from the traditional college campus-based teacher education programs and are designed to attract candidates from underrepresented groups. Scholars list the advantages of transitioning paraeducators to teaching, especially candidates from minorities who are ELs. Schools and students benefit from the paraeducator's linguistic and sociocultural capital because they are able to sustain meaningful interpersonal contact with EL and minority students, better understand the struggles of ELs in public schools and while learning English, and relate with their students because of their common culture, ethnicity, and language. Earning a teacher certificate through such programs may have the effect of motivating paraeducators to continue in the profession because their degree represents a personal and professional accomplishment that moves away from their former type of intervention that was most likely routinized and tedious. From the several efforts states have used to attract personnel to fill the teacher shortage crisis, GYO and Career Ladders are stronger options because they provide formal education and tap into experienced candidates. Despite the GYO's and Career Ladders' effectiveness, schools that hire former paraeducators would need to adopt a philosophy and systemic approach that avoids their job dissatisfaction, improves school safety and morale, and retains them.

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