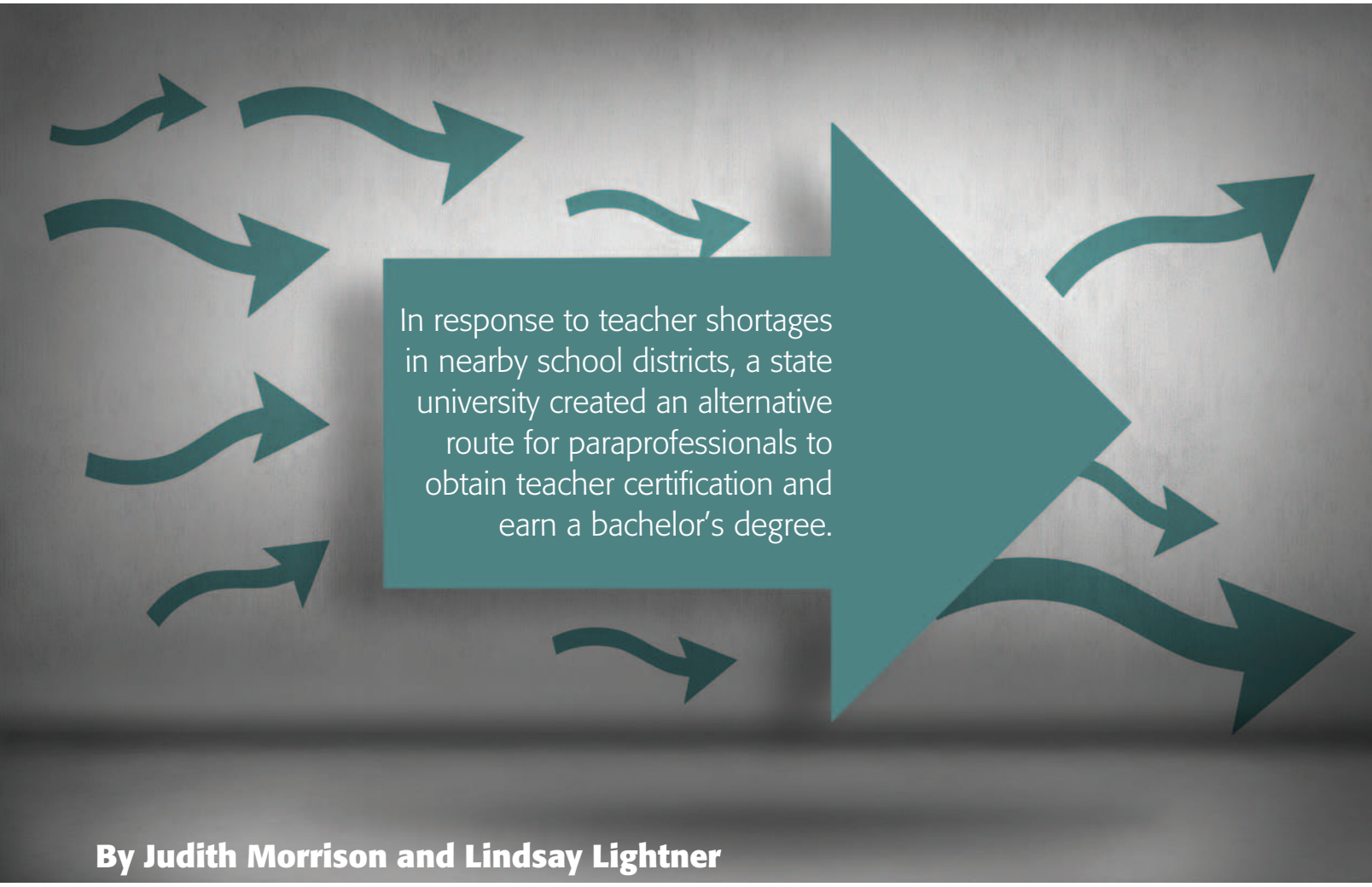
Putting paraeducators on the path to teacher certification



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By Judith Morrison and Lindsay Lightner

Established teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities continue to produce the majority of the nation's teachers. However, alternative routes to teacher certification — which tend to be faster and less expensive than traditional programs — have gained prominence in recent years and become an important part of the teacher education landscape in many states and districts. Paraprofessional educators are particularly well-positioned to take advantage of such pathways into teaching. Given access to high-quality certification programs tailored to their specific experiences and needs, they can make a significant contribution to local efforts to address teacher shortages.

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> The paraprofessionals have brought extremely valuable insights with them to their classroom discussions, sharing a real-world perspective with traditional students who have yet to work full time in a classroom.

Further, experienced paraprofessionals have some distinct advantages over other teaching candidates. They tend to have deep roots in their communities, giving them strong connections to the students and families they serve (Ernst-Slavit & Wenger, 2006). Local roots also mean that most paraprofessionals are committed to staying in their local schools over the long term — unlike teachers who are recruited from outside the community and often move on after fulfilling their initial teaching commitment (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney, 2012). Since paraprofessionals have already spent time immersed in the everyday life of teaching and in the community of teachers (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they are more likely to succeed as beginning teachers and to remain in the job over time (Bonner, Pacino, & Stanford, 2011; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014).

In the state of Washington, where we work, legislation was passed recently to limit the size of K-3 classrooms. As a result, we now face a particularly high demand for elementary teachers, over and above the urgent demand for teachers in general (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Shortages are even more severe in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, such as our own tri-cities region of southeastern Washington, that have lost many teachers to jobs in more prosperous districts (Cowan et al., 2016). Today, our local schools are unable to fill numerous teaching positions, and they are often forced to rely on unprepared instructors holding emergency certification. However, if more local residents were to become certified, the teaching force would be more stable, with fewer teachers tempted to move elsewhere.

It became clear to us that if we could offer an alternative route into teaching, we could recruit many more teachers from the region. However, as a branch campus of a large research university, we had neither the capacity nor the autonomy needed to create a new stand-alone certification program. But we realized we could take advantage of the program we already had in place, using our existing resources to provide a rigorous course of study for paraprofessionals who hoped to become regular classroom teachers.

We devised a program, launched in spring 2016, that includes both campus-based instruction and courses offered in the schools where our candidates work, while also giving them opportunities to earn academic credit by demonstrating the knowledge and skills they have mastered in their jobs. This combination of approaches gives paraprofessionals a foundation that is as strong as that which traditional students develop while also encouraging more candidates to enroll and enhancing our partnerships with local school districts. Currently, the program includes 28 candidates who work as paraprofessionals in 19 schools across five districts.

Building the program

Our motivation in developing this alternative route to certification was to respond to local districts' strongly voiced need for qualified teachers, particularly for those endorsed to teach elementary students, English language learners, and students receiving special education services. At first, though, we hesitated to take on this challenge. As one of our state's main teacher preparation institutions, we offer traditional bachelor's and master's degree programs, and at a time of declining state support for higher education, it is hard enough to keep those existing programs solvent, much less to create a new one. Moreover, because we are a research university, our faculty are evaluated primarily on their ability to produce research and gain external funding; they have neither time nor incentives to develop and coordinate new programs.

However, thanks to a state-sponsored start-up grant, we were able to fund a program coordinator to develop a curriculum and reach out to potential students and school districts. With this additional support, we took on the challenge of developing a new alternative route to certification for paraprofessionals.

From the outset, we had strong district buy-in. The five districts that surround our university agreed to participate in designing the course of study and selecting paraprofessionals to become certified. Also, they agreed to support those candidates throughout

the two-year program, often by making adjustments to their schedules and responsibilities. In some cases, for example, human resources departments have agreed to move paraprofessionals into entirely new positions to give them more time to observe and practice instruction. In other cases, principals and district administrators have given candidates permission to leave their jobs for several hours each week to fulfill program requirements. Participating districts also must promise that they will consider hiring the candidates at the end of the program (which is an easy promise for district leaders to make since they're the ones who nominated those candidates in the first place). Finally, districts are asked to identify strong teacher leaders to serve as mentors, who receive financial support through our grant funding. Having such district and cohort support is a critical piece of the program. As one candidate put it, "The school is very supportive. That's one of the things that I really liked when I took this position . . . It's good to have a cohort of other students in our program, too, because we can share ideas and support each other."

When we looked at other alternative certification programs around the country, we discovered that many of them offer a shortened or primarily online curriculum with little academic rigor or theoretical grounding. One of our main goals, though, was to provide our candidates with training that is every bit as comprehensive and rigorous as students receive in our traditional undergraduate program, including coursework taught by the university's regular faculty. To do this while also permitting the paraprofessionals to continue their full-time employment in their current district jobs, we had to be creative about how the courses were offered: Candidates take many of their classes on campus in the evenings with other aspiring teachers in our traditional program, as well as taking two or three courses online and receiving instruction at their workplaces.

Challenges

Securing district support and designing the curriculum was relatively easy. Much more complicated was recruiting candidates who met university entrance requirements — among the exemplary paraprofessionals that the districts nominated, many had GPAs that were too low for admission, or they hadn't taken necessary prerequisite courses. Another challenge was that a number of candidates had trouble passing the state's basic skills test for aspiring teachers. We hadn't anticipated these problems, and they slowed us down for a time, but we were able to find good work-arounds. For example, we offered tutoring and test preparation for candidates who were struggling to pass entrance exams; we enrolled candidates in summer courses at the university or the

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nearby community college so they could complete their prerequisites and boost their GPAs; and we arranged with the university to allow promising candidates to enter the program with several prerequisites outstanding.

Many of the paraprofessionals who were admitted to the program adapted easily to the challenges of working and attending school full-time while juggling family responsibilities. Others had been out of school for 12 to 15 years and struggled to meet the same standards as our traditional candidates. For some, we had to provide guidance about college-level norms — such as the expectation that they attend class regularly, that they obtain copies of required textbooks, and that they complete assignments by the due date. We also had to help candidates cope with family health crises, find child care, arrange for second jobs to supplement their income, and so on.

At the root of these early challenges was a simple misperception: The program coordinator and the university faculty assumed that a plethora of well-prepared candidates would show up on campus, ready to start the program; in reality, these paraprofessionals varied widely in their academic backgrounds and needs, and their districts hadn't fully briefed all of them about the number of hours that the program would require on top of their daily work schedules.

Finally, the innovative nature of the program itself posed challenges. The idea that one could receive academic credit for prior learning experiences was new to both the paraprofessionals and to our university colleagues. In the early months, we spent a great deal of time explaining how candidates could document the ways in which they had already attained some of the state's teacher competencies.

Successes

In spite of these challenges, the program has met with many successes, too. One of the most exciting has to do with the candidates' participation in their university courses. These courses, held on campus and serving both traditional and alternative route students, include ample time for discussion of teaching strategies, curriculum, classroom management, and other topics. According to faculty members, the paraprofessionals have brought extremely valuable insights with them to these discussions, sharing a real-world perspective with students who have yet to work full time in a classroom, while also giving faculty a window into life in the local schools. Traditional undergraduate teacher candidates rarely have such an ability to link theory and practice — or to "learn backwards," as some of the paraprofessionals put it, describing what it feels like to learn the theory behind practices that they have already been implementing in schools. As one candidate remarked, after writing a lesson plan in response to an assignment for her university class, "I hope I get a good grade, because I actually did it! I'm not making it up, I did it. It's pretty good that I get to type up a lesson plan that connects to what I actually taught, because then I feel like I'm giving an insight into how I'm doing in the classroom, and I can get some feedback about what I can try next time."

The candidates also bring ideas and teaching strategies from their university courses back to the classroom to share with their mentor teachers. Several of the mentors have told us that while they expected to play a strictly supervisory role, they've been pleasantly surprised to find themselves learning a great deal from the paraprofessionals.

Another strength of this program is the use of the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) process to allow candidates to earn course credit by showing that their work experience has allowed them to master specific competencies listed in the state standards for new teachers. The process is straightforward: Guided by their mentor teachers and the program coordinator, they identify courses that focus on knowledge and skills that they've already developed; they write detailed descriptions of their relevant work experience and what they learned from it; they revise, based on feedback from the course instructor and program coordinator; and if they show sufficient evidence of mastery, then the instructor awards them a passing grade for the course. This allows strong candidates to bypass unnecessary hurdles and make faster progress toward a degree. At the same time, it has proven to be a valuable learning experience in its own right. By going through a systematic process

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of documenting their experiences, discussing them with their mentors, and writing revisions, candidates come to a much greater understanding of the teaching standards and how theory connects to practice.

The implementation of school-situated courses has been a success as well. As long as the course emphasizes practice, rather than focusing mainly on educational theory, teaching it on site allows candidates to apply what they're learning immediately to their work as paraprofessionals, with support from their mentor teachers. In particular, we've found this is an effective way to teach methods courses in fields such as fine arts, health and fitness, special education, and bilingual education. Instead of sitting in a university classroom and listening to an instructor describe, for example, how to integrate the arts into subject-area instruction or how to practice adaptive physical education, candidates have the chance to observe exemplary teachers conducting lessons, reflect on and analyze what they have seen, and try those practices themselves. Having observed a lesson that uses music to teach vocabulary, say, a candidate specializing in bilingual education might rework an upcoming science unit to include songs that support the acquisition of scientific terminology.

Further, our model doesn't sacrifice any of the rigor or requirements of traditional methods classes. These courses require the same reading and writing assignments that all candidates must complete, and just like the traditional teaching candidates, the paraprofessionals must design lesson plans and teach them, with feedback from their mentors; they just have to be much quicker to incorporate what they learn into their everyday work.

Moving forward

At a time when teacher shortages are looming, we believe that our efforts to implement an alternative route into teaching, based upon and embedded in a traditional program, can serve as a model for others attempting to create new avenues for teacher preparation. As faculty at a land-grant research university, we are called upon not only to conduct research that shapes our fields but also to spread the fruits of that research to our local communities. And as we know — supported by a wealth of evidence (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014) — teachers are more likely to succeed at and continue in teaching if their certification programs provide them with both a strong theoretical grounding in pedagogy and with many opportunities to observe, reflect on, and practice effective instruction.

In response to the call to help more local residents become certified teachers, we created an alternative route program that empowers paraprofessionals to build on their experiences, their knowledge of students, and their commitment to the region. We believe that universities and school districts have much to gain from this approach. Paraprofessionals know our schools intimately, they are already meeting pressing challenges and needs, and they offer an important source of teaching talent.

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