

IMPROVING EDUCATOR PREPARATION PARTNERSHIPS IN PROVIDENCE

**Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce
Education Subgroup**

Winter 2023

Foreword

The Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce convened an Education Working Group to address questions about teacher retention and recruitment. Members of this group included leaders of Rhode Island Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs), leaders from the Providence Public School District (PPSD), researchers from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, and other members of the Chamber.

The Working Group sought to determine ways in which EPPs and PPSD might better partner to address the teacher shortage in PPSD while maintaining the quality mentoring experiences necessary for successful educator preparation.

Annenberg Institute researchers conducted interviews with leaders of all the Rhode Island EPPs and with the PPSD human resources team in fall 2022. These informal, semi-structured interviews were meant to identify both shared goals and key obstacles to stronger collaboration across individuals and groups. Researchers triangulated across interviews to identify key themes that emerged, highlighting barriers to developing and maintaining partnerships between EPPs and PPSD and offering recommendations to strengthen these partnerships. The enclosed report, *Building Strong Partnerships Between EPPs and PPSD*, summarizes these challenges and recommendations. The Working Group reviewed and revised this report.

As signatories of this letter, we support all of the recommendations presented in the report. We will work to build the recommendations into our collaborative practice and, as part of that, we commit to the following immediate steps as a Call to Action:

1. PPSD will convene representatives from RI EPPs in February to share a newly proposed process for coordinating student teaching across the district. The draft proposal will incorporate suggestions from RI EPPs and from the attached report and PPSD will seek additional feedback to incorporate into a final policy for 2023.
2. In June, at the conclusion of the academic year, PPSD will again convene RI EPPs to review progress on the student teaching process, gain additional insights, and continue to strengthen its relationships with partners. This will launch a regular cycle of full group meetings between all EPPs and PPSD that take place at least twice yearly to build stronger collaboration and coordination.
3. EPPs will continue to provide support and input for statewide partnership work currently underway under the auspices of the CEEDAR Center Rhode Island State Leadership Team, including the development of a statewide baseline training for clinical educators.
4. EPPs and PPSD will work together with the Annenberg Institute to better understand how to attract newer EPP graduates to jobs in PPSD. The group will collaborate on a survey to current teaching candidates and recent program completers to collect systematic information about perceptions of PPSD and post-graduation decision-making.

We thank both the members of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce and the Annenberg Institute for their support in this work. As leaders of Rhode Island EPPs and PPSD, we will carry the work forward based on these findings.

Sincerely,

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Building Strong Partnerships Between Rhode Island Education Preparation Providers and the Providence Public School Department

A Report from the Annenberg Institute
at Brown University



The evidence is clear: stronger partnerships between districts and Educator Preparation Providers (EPPs) can strengthen the teacher pipeline and improve teacher quality over time. Repeated studies have demonstrated the importance of student teaching experiences for teacher development and have mapped a pathway between placement processes, mentor effectiveness, and teachers’ initial success in the classroom (e.g., Ronfeldt et al., 2018, 2020, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). And there is growing evidence that stronger place-based partnerships can provide additional benefits that extend beyond student teachers and support the ongoing development of the broader educator workforce in a district.

However, the partnerships that link the Providence Public School District (PPSD) to Rhode Island’s EPPs have tended to be weak, according to all parties involved. This fact is borne out by the numbers; fewer than one in five new hires at PPSD are recent graduates from Rhode Island EPPs, excluding Teach For America.

This memo pulls together themes from meetings and interviews led by the Providence Chamber of Commerce Education Subgroup and the Annenberg Institute at Brown University to create a set of recommendations agreed upon by both the district and the EPPs as to what it might take to improve the work going forward. This work will likely need additional resources to carry out the recommendations in their entirety. These recommendations are put forth as foundational steps to ensure that we are collaboratively creating and implementing more equitable structures and processes to support a diverse and thriving teacher workforce in the Providence Public Schools.

We summarize the findings below and then describe each one in greater detail in the body of the memo.

 FINDINGS	 RECOMMENDATIONS
Providence Public School Department	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inconsistent processes and overly burdensome bureaucracy ■ Lack of individual connection ■ Little coordinated strategy across EPPs 	<div style="text-align: center;"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reintroduce a single PPSD staff member tasked with coordinating across EPPs. ■ Center principals in student teacher placements and school-based partnerships. ■ Build structures to encourage joint collaboration across EPPs and PPSD
Education Preparation Providers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Weak alignment to district needs ■ Not enough support for coaches and mentors 	<div style="text-align: center;"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Redouble efforts across EPPs to consider PPSD’s staffing needs when investing in programs and making clinical placements. ■ Develop cross-EPP training for clinical mentors. ■ Continue to think holistically about partnership and build stronger connections for local students and in-service teachers.
Rhode Island Department of Education and External Partners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Overlapping groups and task forces ■ Opportunities for an increasingly productive state role 	<div style="text-align: center;"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that ongoing work to improve district-EPP partnerships across the state receives sufficient support and recognition ■ Streamline state accreditation processes

Section 1: How PPSD works with EPPs

All EPPs agreed that the pipeline of EPP graduates into PPSD classrooms could be strengthened by better systems to place more student teachers into PPSD classrooms. A few specific concerns dominated the discussions:

Inconsistent processes and overly burdensome bureaucracy

Many interviewees noted the lack of standardization around clinical placement processes. Several distinguished between what exists on paper and what takes place in reality. As one EPP leader said: “Providence has policies that outline what their process is, but they don’t necessarily follow it.” This issue seems particularly acute when it comes to navigating the complex relationships between EPPs, school leaders, and PPSD central administration. Some EPPs noted that the strength and fit of clinical placements depends on individual school leaders, but it is difficult to know when to bring school leaders into the conversation. EPPs feel like they can “get in trouble” if they work with school leaders before submitting the right information centrally. But, if they start at a central level, the process takes so much time that they miss key deadlines unless they have school leaders on board first.

Lack of individual connection

EPPs noted their difficulty in reaching the right individuals both in general and particularly in moments where they encounter bureaucratic and logistical snafus. For many of our interview subjects, the recent issue around national background checks that interrupted student-teacher placement was top-of-mind. Interviewees largely acknowledged that the policy of using national background checks made sense – with many students coming from out-of-state, the state background check is of limited value – and they additionally noted that the policy had been on the books for several years. However, the policy had never been fully implemented and EPPs were taken aback by what felt like unexpected enforcement this year. Lack of clear communication that the policy would be enforced meant that EPPs had limited time to work through the issue, and many of our interview subjects reported that they found it very difficult to connect with the right individuals in the district when the issue surfaced, especially since EPPs felt paralyzed by the fact that the office of the attorney general refused to offer the type of background checks that PPSD was requiring. More broadly, interviewees noted that the current PPSD system groups EPPs together with all other PPSD community partners and a single PPSD staff member is tasked with serving all these needs. As a result, EPPs feel like they have trouble having their concerns heard and working through them in a timely manner.

Little coordinated strategy across EPPs

EPP leaders noted that the lack of coordination on the EPP side made it difficult for PPSD to manage relationships and placement concerns. As one EPP leader said: “It’s really challenging that there are nine ed prep programs all trying to vie for space and time in this small state and in Providence. We complain that every district has its own way of working, but we also each have our own way of working.” Interviewees reported that while EPPs in Providence sometimes behave as if they are competing for placement sites, all have different programs and different needs. Thus, PPSD encouraging greater collaboration across EPPs could help create more centralized systems and processes while serving all parties well.

Recommendations

1. Reintroduce a single PPSD staff member tasked with coordinating across EPPs.

Many EPPs requested a return to the approach briefly used several years ago where a single role at PPSD was designated to manage relationships with all EPPs in the district. This role had many benefits, but one important advantage was clearer and more consistent communication and improved responsiveness from the district office. It also provided opportunities for PPSD and EPPs to engage in more collaborative and authentic conversations about partnership, leading to stronger district-EPP connections.

2. Center principals in student teacher placements and school-based partnerships.

Many EPPs noted the importance of working directly with school principals in identifying, securing, and supporting site placements. Many EPPs noted that strong collaborations with individual schools provided mutual benefits - a strong pathway for clinical placements with opportunities to support teacher development and even job placement at the school site. A hybrid approach between the PPSD central administration and school sites that allows the district to (a) ensure all candidates were officially cleared to work in PPSD and (b) to monitor the distribution of student teachers across the district while placing ultimate responsibility for approving specific clinical placements with the school principal might prove effective.

3. Build structures to encourage joint collaboration across EPPs and PPSD.

All EPPs expressed interest in holding regular meetings as a group with PPSD to address issues jointly that were harder to address individually. This work has proven successful in other districts; for example, local EPPs in Philadelphia have worked together to create common guidelines for mentor teachers in the district and to create common professional learning experiences for these teachers. There is a strong foundation in RI with RIACTE and other networks bringing together EPPs to address similar concerns, but these networks are currently underleveraged.

Section 2: How EPPs Work with PPSD

Interview subjects highlighted a series of areas where EPPs might shift strategy in order to create partnerships that better served all parties.

Weak alignment to district needs

Many EPP leaders acknowledged ways that their programs could be more proactive in supporting PPSD. Some leaders spoke directly about their ability to focus on high-needs areas for the district. “We recognize that we are graduating way too many elementary students compared to other areas,” said one leader. “We can help with that if we take a short-term/long-term strategic approach.” A few leaders noted that they had revised their programs to shift student focus, investing financial aid resources specifically to recruit teacher of color and STEM teachers, for example, and were interested in working with the district to think about additional useful changes. There was also the general sense among interviewees that EPPs could be more responsive to district needs broadly and could structure investment (of time and resources) in areas that would prove mutually beneficial. While many EPPs have staff members who support student teaching placements and have worked to partner in more one-off ways, few had roles that thought about partnerships more broadly.

Not enough support for coaches and mentors

EPP leaders spoke of the obligation to provide their students with meaningful clinical mentoring experiences and suggested that stronger partnership with PPSD could lead to better student preparation. Several interview subjects noted the variation in mentoring across schools and the related concern that EPP placement offices needed to be involved at the school level in order to ensure that students had strong experiences. “Not every school in PPSD is the same,” said one leader. “I want my students to be in a place that will support them. I can’t send them to PPSD and say wherever they place you is fine.” Many interviewees also spoke about their excitement around figuring out how to better work with potential mentor teachers in PPSD. As one EPP leader noted, “we aren’t having a lot of conversations about the kinds of things we all need in terms of mentoring for our students...these conversations haven’t really gone anywhere.”

Recommendations

1. Redouble efforts across EPPs to consider PPSD’s staffing demands when investing in programs and making clinical placements.

Improved partnerships, including targeted recruitment efforts and policies designed to support hiring of exceptionally promising candidates, can lead to stronger talent pathways. PPSD is in the process (in partnership with the Annenberg Institute) of building out the capabilities to better forecast future hiring needs. Communicating these needs and building toward long-term alignment with EPPs has the potential to shape a more strategic process for filling PPSD classrooms. EPPs also acknowledged that, despite the bureaucratic challenges, PPSD has generally been open to accepting a wide range of teachers, while some other sites are much more demanding about the types of student teachers they will approve for clinical placements. EPPs and PPSD could consider efforts to concentrate placements among teachers of color and teachers in high-needs areas. Finally, there was a sense that PPSD has, out of necessity, attended more to staffing schools with teachers rather than focusing directly on the instructional effectiveness of teachers in schools. The Johns Hopkins report highlighted some important challenges with instructional quality in the district, and some EPPs acknowledged that they could do better in this regard, preparing teachers who were better prepared to enter the district and be successful. EPPs and the district may consider more consistent performance metrics – principal surveys of recent program completers, teacher observation ratings, and even contributions to student learning – designed to provide information to support EPP program improvement.

2. Develop cross-EPP training for clinical mentors.

Several EPPs noted that they would place more teachers in PPSD but struggled to find clinical mentors who were both excellent educators who exhibited equitable and culturally responsive instructional practices and who were excellent mentors. This challenge is not unique to Providence but is particularly troubling in a district with so many student teachers. As a result, most EPPs we interviewed noted the importance of providing better professional learning for clinical mentors. EPPs noted that there would be clear opportunities to do this in collaboration with the district – possibly during the professional development block at the beginning of the school year – developing a cadre of master mentors who would be better prepared to support the learning and development of both PPSD’s students and of teacher candidates. One promising step in this direction has recently been launched: Johnson & Wales, the University of Rhode Island, and Providence College received a small funding grant from the CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida to create a series of common, baseline training modules for those interested in becoming clinical educators for student teachers in Rhode Island with the eventual goal of building out an ongoing professional development sequence for mentors. Making this work increasingly visible to the district and finding ways for PPSD to directly support the training so that it advances district as well as EPP goals feels like an important next step in the process.

3. Continue to think holistically about partnership and build stronger connections for local students, and in-service teachers.

Conversations about partnerships should not be limited to student teaching placements. Many EPPs have developed programs to provide scholarships to PPSD students or to offer courses to PPSD teachers. However, these efforts are currently somewhat disconnected within the EPPs and across EPPs working in the district. EPPs and PPSD should consider how to connect ongoing work related to grow-your-own efforts, summer programs, recruitment of PPSD students to local universities (and local EPPs), opportunities for non-certified staff to earn BAs and teaching credentials (e.g., TA-to-BA pipelines), and coursework for current PPSD teachers (e.g., MLL certification). Moreover, these conversations should expand beyond traditional EPPs and the district. For example, while we do not include Teach For America (TFA) as a provider in this memo given they do not coordinate student-teaching placements which are a focus of this report, they are doing important work around identifying aspiring teachers early in the pipeline. Similarly, the Equity Institute provides a model for TA-to BA pipelines and is an important voice to have at the table. The Project Recruit model from the early 2000s is an example of how such collaborations can be productive. Connecting within and across EPPs around these efforts would lead to more holistic, stronger partnerships. Several programs described efforts to provide discounted tuition to local educators to support ongoing professional development and additional endorsements/certifications. Expanding these efforts, and investing institutional resources in them, can pay substantial dividends in building a stronger cohort of clinical mentors and providing stronger partnership with local schools.

Section 3: External Support and Collaboration

Our interview subjects also spoke to the ways that external partners outside of EPPs and PPSD could create the conditions for stronger, more mutually beneficial partnership.

Overlapping groups and task forces

Several EPPs noted that the conversations the PPSD Chamber of Commerce subgroup echo other conversations in other spaces. Many organizations and working groups are talking about the same things, but the groups have not been able to find ways to coordinate. All of the small pockets of work are one potential reason why there is limited momentum on this issue. One interviewee recommended bringing together individuals who are in many of these different spaces along with their leaders to talk about how to push this work forward in a more action-oriented way.

Opportunities for an increasingly productive state role

Several EPPs highlighted some of the exciting efforts going on through a partnership between EPP leadership, RIDE, and the CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida to build out a shared understanding of EPP-district partnership that can extend across all EPPs and all districts in the state. The set of resulting agreements suggests the possibility of genuine statewide collaboration accompanied by common goals and language – however success will require deep buy-in and supportive policymaking at all levels of RIDE leadership, and some EPP leaders expressed concern that the work wasn't necessarily understood at RIDE beyond the committed group of participating individuals. Separately, EPPs noted that, while RIDE structures the accreditation system and encourages residency models and partnerships within it, it serves no real role in providing support for developing these partnerships. And, at times, accreditation requirements stifle innovation in creating more robust and productive partnerships.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that ongoing work to improve district-EPP partnerships across the state receives sufficient support and recognition.

With its official position, RIDE has tremendous opportunity to support stronger partnerships between EPPs and PPSD as well as with other districts in the state. For example, EPPs noted that creating common partnership forms that all districts use would be more efficient and provide more flexibility in developing site placements. RIDE could work with EPPs and districts to coordinate such efforts.

2. Streamline state accreditation processes.

Several EPPs noted that the current accreditation process centered more on compliance than on continuous improvement, innovation, and growth. The process is very expensive and takes a tremendous amount of EPP time. But it provides very little information to inform program improvement. Current processes also set up barriers for EPPs in working with districts. A streamlined process, or one in which RIDE farmed out accreditation to other bodies, could enable more flexibility and attention to partnerships. At the same time, there needs to be some set of rigorous standards to ensure that EPPs are producing highly effective teachers who enter classrooms prepared to support the learning needs of Providence students.

¹ We do not include Teach For America (TFA) as a provider in this memo because most of the memo is focused on partnerships around student teaching experiences before students take teaching jobs and this type of student teaching is not a core component of the TFA program as it is for traditional providers.