



Washington State Policy Spotlight

A Multifaceted Approach to Grow Your Own Pathways

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Abstract

English learners (ELs) make up 10% of the U.S. student population and are increasingly enrolling in school districts that have little experience with educating these students. A majority of states report shortages in teachers prepared to work with ELs, particularly in the area of bilingual education. Grow Your Own (GYO) programs that recruit and prepare future educators from the community have the potential to increase the supply of bilingual educators who can provide ELs with instruction in their home languages and support their mastery of academic content. Policy makers in Washington State are taking an intentional approach toward remediating educator shortages in the state through alternative routes to certification, expanded pathways for paraeducators, and targeted course work for high school students. Alternative routes are positioned as a driver of local innovation that places emphasis on GYO approaches and the recruitment of teacher candidates from underserved populations. State grants support the development of

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university–school district partnerships to recruit and prepare a teacher workforce to meet local needs. The Woodring Highline Bilingual Fellows program is a partnership aimed at preparing bilingual paraeducators to become licensed teachers in order to meet the school district’s growing need for bilingual educators. Key lessons from Washington’s myriad initiatives point to the need for collaboration between multiple stakeholders to ensure a common vision and mission for these programs.

Introduction

English learners (ELs) are a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. student population. Nearly 10% of K–12 students are ELs (McFarland et al., 2017), as are 23% of preschool-age children nationwide (Friedman-Krauss Barnett, Weisenfeld, Kasmin, DiCrecchio, & Horowitz, 2018). Recent studies have suggested that ELs’ long-term academic and language development are enhanced in bilingual programs that facilitate the acquisition of English and continued development of the students’ home languages (Steele et al., 2017; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Umansky, Valentino, & Reardon, 2016; Valentino & Reardon, 2015). However, leveraging bilingual programs for the academic success of ELs requires a stable supply of multilingual educators that does not currently exist. Policy makers, researchers, and advocates have a renewed focus on increasing the diversity of the educator workforce, yet few of these conversations are explicitly focused on increasing the linguistic diversity of educators to better meet the needs of EL students.

Just as the educator workforce is predominantly White—with 82% of teachers identifying as White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)—it is also predominantly monolingual. Williams, Garcia, Connally, Cook, and Dancy (2016) found that only one in eight preK–12 teachers speaks a language other than English at home.¹ By comparison, close to one in four U.S. children between the ages of 5 and 17 years speaks a language other than English at home (Kids Count Data Center, n.d.). Spanish is the predominant home language of ELs, but there is considerable linguistic diversity among these children, with growing numbers speaking languages such as Arabic, Somali, and Nepali (Park, Zong, & Batalova, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Developing a pipeline of multilingual educators will require deliberate investments and policies from school districts and state leaders.

This commentary highlights the work of Washington State to develop a bilingual educator workforce through policy and programs designed to remove barriers to entering the profession for linguistically diverse candidates.

A Multifaceted Policy Approach to Growing Your Own

Thirty-two states have current shortages in bilingual, English as a second language (ESL), and dual-language immersion teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Washington State has reported shortages in bilingual teachers for the past 20 years, as

the EL student population has steadily grown. These staffing gaps are part of a larger teacher shortage in the state. Between 2011 and 2016, teacher hiring increased 250% because of high levels of attrition and transfer among veteran teachers (Adams & Manuel, 2016; State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, 2016). Other factors contributing to the shortage include decreased enrollment in teacher preparation programs, attrition of beginning teachers, policies such as class size reduction and full-day kindergarten, and growth in student enrollment (Morrison & Lightner, 2017; Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction, 2016).

At the same time, Washington has made a commitment to diversifying its educator workforce to align with the changing demographics of the K–12 student body. Goldhaber, Theobald, and Tien (2015) found that Washington public schools have over three times as many students of color as non-White teachers. Moreover, the modest gains the state has made in diversifying its educator workforce have failed to keep pace with the rapid diversification of the school-age population.

Alternative-Route Programs as a Driver of Innovation

These staffing gaps and the desire to increase educator diversity have converged to propel the development and implementation of policies to create multiple pathways into the teaching profession through Grow Your Own (GYO) and other locally driven approaches. Specifically, the state has opted to expand alternative routes to teacher certification to help ameliorate current shortages and as a strategy to diversify the educator workforce. These programs offer career-connected learning that allows participants to learn how to teach while teaching. Candidates work either as resident interns under the guidance of a mentor teacher or as the teacher of record and concurrently take course work to earn their teaching certification.

Alternative-route programs are controversial in the field of teacher preparation. Programs such as Teach for America, which recruits high-achieving college graduates and provides them with an initial 6 weeks of training before placing them in a classroom, have been criticized for offering inadequate preparation and promoting a short, 2-year experience in the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Xu, Hannaway, & Taylor, 2011). However, Gist (2017) asserted that alternative routes to teaching can play a strong role in the recruitment and preparation of teachers of color. Moreover, she suggested that the education field should “closely analyze the motives and outcomes associated with [alternative routes to teaching] to understand how they address teacher shortages as well as their philosophical and justice commitments related to the mission and design of educator preparation and teacher development” (p. 2). These are important considerations when examining Washington’s utilization of alternative pathways to strengthen and diversify the teacher workforce.

The state has offered alternative routes since 2001 with the aim of creating multiple pathways into teaching. Program data indicate that 35% of teacher candidates in Washington’s alternative programs are non-White, compared to only 10% of

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those in traditional teacher preparation programs. The state’s four alternative routes to teacher certification (see Figure 1) are designed to target specific candidates, such as paraeducators, classified staff who already have a bachelor’s degree, and career changers with relevant subject-matter expertise. Policy makers in Washington view alternative routes as an attractive approach to growing the educator workforce because they increase access to teacher education programs; develop strong recruitment pipelines in local communities, including for paraeducators; and offer opportunities for community partnerships to develop GYO programs (Adams & Manuel, 2016). An important distinction is that all teacher preparation programs, whether traditional or alternative, meet the same state standards and lead to the same certification.

In 2015, the State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), a licensure board focused on educator quality, workforce development, and policy innovation, convened a working group to reimagine the “next generation” of alternative-route programs to promote local innovation and exemplary program design. The result was a set of six absolute priorities that undergird the state’s approach to alternative-route program development (see Figure 2).

In 2017, Washington lawmakers made changes to the rules governing alternative-route programs, which included a mandate for biannual reporting of program outcomes. Specifically, PESB is required to track and report (a) the number and percentage of alternative-route completers hired, (b) the percentage of alternative-route completers from underrepresented populations, (c) 3-year and 5-year retention rates of alternative-route completers, (d) the average hiring dates of alternative-route completers, and (e) the percentage of alternative-route completers hired in districts where their programs were completed (Alternative Route Teacher Certification, 2017). These data will be used to share the impact of alternative-route programs on the larger state system and will demonstrate critical data points in connecting preparation data with workforce data and, eventually, data on teacher retention.

Alternate Block Grants for GYO Program Development

The Alternate Route Block Grant competitive grant program supports university–school district partnerships to develop programs to recruit and prepare educators in key shortage areas. In 2015, the Washington legislature approved a \$5 million state investment to fund school district–teacher education program

Figure 1
Alternate Routes in Washington

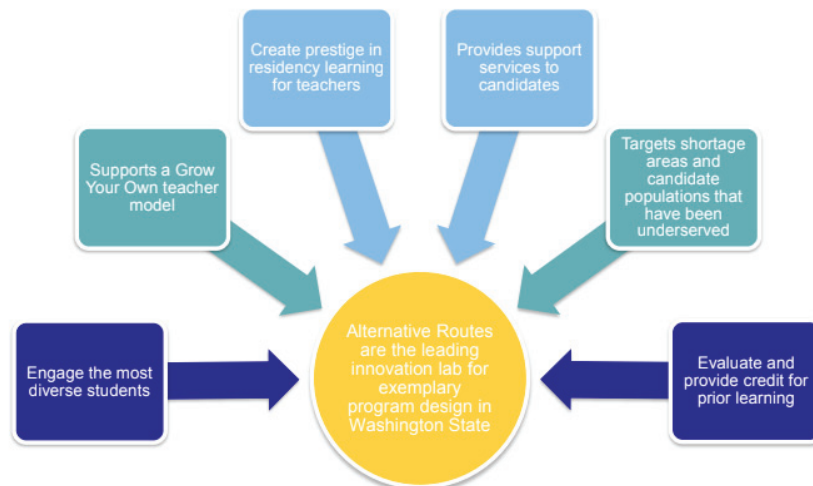
<i>Route 1</i>	<i>Route 2</i>	<i>Route 3</i>	<i>Route 4</i>
For classified staff, paraeducators	For classified staff who hold a minimum of a bachelor’s degree	For individuals with subject-matter expertise in shortage areas	For individuals teaching with conditional certificates

partnerships. Grant recipients were awarded up to \$420,000 per year for a period of 2 years. Funds were primarily used for student scholarships and financial support to universities and school districts to administer the program. Teacher candidates were eligible to receive scholarships of \$8,000 per year on the condition that they maintain enrollment, make progress in the program, and agree to teach in a public school in the state for 2 years for each year of grant funding.

The PESB encouraged proposals focused on preferred candidates, such as paraeducators, individuals pursuing endorsements in bilingual education or ESL, and candidates underrepresented in the teaching profession (State of Washington Professional Educator Standards Board, 2017). Program partners adhered to five design requirements: collaborative recruitment and candidate selection, flexible program design to meet districts' needs, provision of extensive support services to candidates, commitment by candidates to teach for 2 years in a high-need area in the state, and job-embedded learning (e.g., through a residency model). These features were actualized in varying ways among the grant recipients. The Woodring Highline Future Bilingual Teacher Fellows Program provides a strong example of a university–school district partnership that leveraged the grant funding to support the preparation of a cohort of bilingual educators through close collaboration and a shared planning process.

In 2016, Western Washington University's Woodring College of Education joined with Highline Public Schools to develop and implement a GYO program to

Figure 2
Next-generation alternative routes. From “Alternative Route Block Grant Information Session,” by A. Manuel and B. Geiger, Webinar presentation, Olympia, WA: Professional Educator Standards Board, 2017. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8ftb0HIUT9SOFJRSnhyelpDZFU/view>



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prepare a small group of paraeducators to earn their teaching certification with the goal of easing the district's current shortage of bilingual teachers (Garcia, 2017). Highline Public Schools is a medium-sized district that spans across several communities in Northwest Washington and serves approximately 20,000 students. A full 25% of students are ELs, who represent 101 distinct languages. The school board has set the goal of having every Highline student graduate as bilingual and biliterate by 2026, which places strong pressure on the district to recruit and hire bilingual teachers. The market for multilingual teachers is very competitive, and finding these specialized educators has proven difficult for the district. In recent years, teachers from abroad (who work on 3-year visas) have been brought in to help staff current dual-language programs—an expensive and temporary strategy.

The 16 bilingual fellows who participated in the inaugural cohort of the 2-year program earned a bachelor's degree and K–8 teaching credential and optional reading, EL, or bilingual endorsement. The program, which began in summer 2016, was structured so that the fellows worked as full-time paraeducators and attended classes in the evening and on weekends. Fellows were provided with scholarships, assistance with the enrollment and acceptance process at Western Washington University, faculty and district mentors to help navigate challenges, and a cohort structure that allowed them to take courses with the same group of peers.

Woodring Highline program partners were in constant contact and viewed their roles as complementary. Together they were able to provide the fellows with wrap-around support. Garcia (2017) shared the perspective of one program fellow to highlight the strength of the district–university partnership:

[They] have been very supportive. . . . Everywhere you go, and just here in my school, I have the psychologist to help me, the principal. . . . I have three mentors that always are either calling . . . or e-mailing . . . or we see them and meet them and express our concerns, what was going well, where it's not. (p. 18)

Program fellows split their workdays between traditional paraeducator duties, such as running small groups, providing translation/interpretation and other support, and working with a mentor teacher to gain practice in leading instruction. These on-the-job learning experiences were central to the program's goal of preparing the next generation of bilingual educators. Connally, Garcia, Cook, and Williams (2017) argued that bilingual paraeducators represent an untapped pool of potential teacher talent that has been held behind by rigid policies and financial, academic, and linguistic barriers. The nation's paraeducators more closely match the demographics of the U.S. population on a variety of measures, including race, immigration status, and linguistic diversity (Williams, Garcia, Connally, Cook, & Dancy, 2016). Consider that 17% of the U.S. population is Latinx, as are 16% of paraeducators, but only 8% of teachers identify as Latinx.

In addition to their linguistic and cultural competencies, research has suggested that multilingual paraeducators often have strong connections to the communities

where they work and significant experience providing ELs with targeted instruction and home language supports (Ernst-Slavit & Wenger, 2006; Wenger et al., 2004). The Woodring Highline program has been designed to address these challenges and enabled the school district to “grow its own” by providing bilingual paraeducators with the necessary financial, academic, and logistical supports to become certified teachers. It is also the expression of a state-level commitment to address current teacher shortages through robust policies aimed at helping more paraeducators become licensed teachers.

Expanded Pathways for Paraeducators

Paraeducators are directly targeted in two of the state’s alternative pathways. The Woodring Highline program is a Route 1 program that, by state law, is available for current classified instructional employees (e.g., noncertified instructional staff) with associate’s degrees who are interested in obtaining teacher certification in special education, bilingual education, or ESL. These programs are expected to take a maximum of 2 years and require prospective candidates to meet a set of basic entry requirements.

A recently launched paraeducator board is helping place a strong focus on paraeducators’ training, professional development, and growth. The board has rule-making authority and is responsible for setting governing priorities for the profession, including defining standards of practice and a baseline level of professional development, and for developing a career ladder for paraeducators. Board members are appointed by the governor and include current paraeducators, school principals, and other individuals working in education.

One early initiative of the Paraeducator Board is the administration of the Pipeline for Paraeducator Conditional Loan Scholarship, which provides financial support to help paraeducators earn their associate’s degrees on their way to enrolling in a Route 1 alternative certification program. Recipients are eligible to receive up to \$4,000 and must agree to teach in the state for a period of 2 years after earning their teaching certificates in a subject-matter shortage area, including bilingual education.

Recruiting Bilingual High School Students

In 2017, the PESB was charged with developing a program to recruit, mentor, and prepare bilingual high school students to become educators and school counselors as part of legislation to increase the number of dual-language programs in the state. The Recruiting Washington Teachers–Bilingual Educators Initiative was piloted in nine school districts during the 2017–2018 school year, two of which were given additional funding to continue the program in the 2018–2019 school year. These program models provide bilingual high school students with the opportunity to earn college credit through teacher academies that provide targeted course work and experiences working with younger bilingual students in the district.

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The initiative builds on the existing Recruiting Washington Teachers (RWT) high school teacher academy program, which supports the recruitment and preparation of high school students for future careers as educators. State law specifies that RWT programs must place emphasis on recruiting and training students from underrepresented groups and who are multilingual (Recruiting Washington Teachers Program, 2007). With support from the state legislature since 2007, RWT functions through partnerships between high schools, teacher preparation programs, institutions of higher education, parents/guardians, and community-based organizations, who design and deliver innovative programs that support students who are underrepresented in the teaching profession in exploring and preparing for careers as educators.

Lessons Learned and Implications

The first cohort of Woodring Highline bilingual teacher fellows will be taking their place at the front of classrooms in fall 2018. As of the writing of this commentary, 13 fellows had been offered and accepted contracts to work as teachers in Highline Public Schools. The program had a completion rate of 94%—a noteworthy accomplishment, given its rigor. One of the key lessons learned from the Woodring Highline partnership was the development of a unique job description for the bilingual fellows, which allowed the district to elevate and sustain the visibility of the program. Bilingual fellows have distinct job responsibilities from other paraeducators in the district, such as instructing students under the guidance of a mentor teacher and preparing lesson plans to meet state objectives, and are paid at a slightly higher rate.

Washington lawmakers reaffirmed their commitment to addressing the teacher shortage during the 2017 legislative session by providing \$5 million toward a second round of alternative-route block grants. As Washington moves forward in this work, there are several key lessons for other states to consider when implementing similar policies and approaches. First, use a systems approach that engages a range of stakeholders working at all levels of the system. These stakeholders should be brought into the conversation at the start of the process with the goal of developing a universal understanding of the target candidates and desired outcomes. This type of consensus building can help create a common language of why alternate routes and GYO are essential strategies and insulate programs from changes in leadership at the state level. Second, take advantage of the initiatives already happening in the state, such as the growing interest in apprenticeships and career-connected learning, to help get others moving in the same direction. Third, identify bureaucratic hurdles (e.g., required exams, prerequisite course work) up front to ensure that program candidates receive the necessary accommodations and flexibility from both district and university partners. It can be helpful for all partners to have a sense of what falls under the scope of local control and what is regulated at the state level. Finally, pilot new programs to identify unexpected challenges and make necessary course corrections before implementing them systemwide—a process that Washington policy makers are still working to master.

When the variety of GYO initiatives are taken together, the state is emerging as a leader in creating pathways to support the preparation of bilingual educators. Policy makers across the country should take note of Washington's multifaceted approach to diversifying its educator workforce and addressing current shortages. The policies and programs described in our commentary reflect the promise of alternative routes that are designed to promote quality and meet local needs.

Note

¹ This statistic was derived from an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS asks about whether individuals speak a language other than English at home, the language spoken, and how well they speak English. Williams et al. assumed that most individuals who report that their home language is only English are not bilingual.

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