

PATHWAYS THAT DELIVER

A Policy Framework
for Building Affordable,
High-Quality Pathways
into Teaching



Deans for
Impact 

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INTRODUCTION

The strength of our nation's workforce and economy begins in PK-12 classrooms. Teachers shape the future dreams of students by preparing them for academic success, civic engagement, meaningful careers, and purpose-driven lives. Every engineer, nurse, welder, and entrepreneur is shaped by the care and guidance of educators, and every thriving community relies on a steady supply of [well-prepared teachers](#).

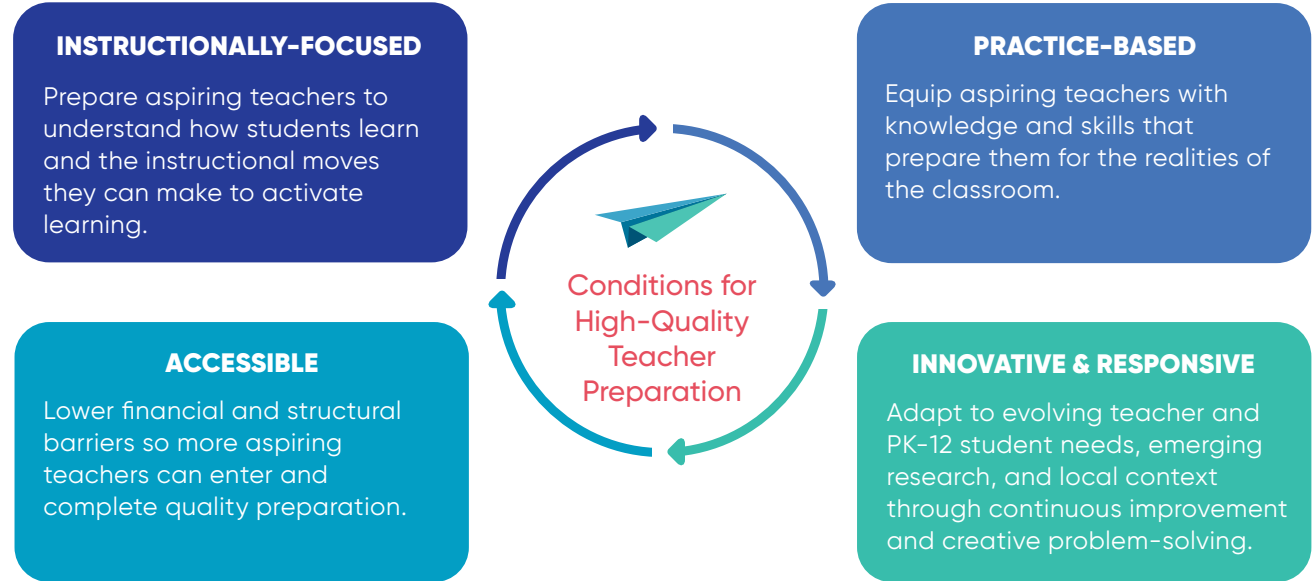
Unfortunately, a lack of affordable, high-quality pathways into teaching contributes to a revolving door of teachers entering and leaving the profession. Moreover, many federal and state policies are plagued by outdated assumptions, inconsistent standards, and misaligned incentives. Efforts to strengthen pathways into teaching remain fragmented, with siloed advocacy campaigns working on a narrow slice of the problem without considering a more holistic view of the entire system. The result is understaffed schools, overwhelmed educators, and disturbing declines in student learning.

At DFI, we believe that building accessible, high-quality pathways into teaching is vital and underleveraged. Teacher preparation is the starting point – the place where aspiring teachers develop the foundational knowledge, skills, and mindsets needed to succeed and stay in the profession.

Across the country, we've seen educator-preparation programs (EPPs) design pathways that are both accessible and uncompromising on quality. In visiting hundreds of communities and directly supporting 261 EPPs and PK-12 schools

to reimagine their local pathways over the past 10 years, we’ve witnessed innovative leaders embrace evidence-based practices, forge strong PK-12 partnerships, and prove what’s possible when preparation is done well.

The work to transform the systems in which we prepare teachers and serve students is generational; it requires bold, coordinated action that must be sustained over time. What leaders choose to fund, regulate, and prioritize shapes the conditions under which teachers are recruited, trained, and retained. Over time, we believe every pathway into teaching supported by federal, state, and local investments should be:



Policy and smart investments can help scale and sustain these conditions.

INSTRUCTIONALLY-FOCUSED	PRACTICE-BASED	ACCESSIBLE	INNOVATIVE & RESPONSIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Align instruction to learning science<input type="checkbox"/> Strengthen EPP and PK-12 partnerships<input type="checkbox"/> Cultivate continuous learning and improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Align coursework, feedback, and practice<input type="checkbox"/> Reduce the cost of clinically-Intensive pathways<input type="checkbox"/> Formalize high-quality feedback, mentoring and induction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Better align teacher preparation with workforce needs<input type="checkbox"/> Make pathways more affordable and supportive<input type="checkbox"/> Modernize entry points without lowering standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Create space, incentives, and resources that foster collaborative innovation and responsiveness

Recommendations contained within this document are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. For instance, a policy recommendation may be categorized as improving access but it also may make pathways more practice-based.

How to Use This Framework

This framework is designed to guide immediate action. It focuses on tangible steps that state, federal, and philanthropic leaders can take to create the conditions necessary for high-quality, sustainable pathways into teaching. It offers guidance to:

- **Diagnose system gaps:** Assess how teacher-preparation policies support these foundational conditions.
- **Generate ideas that guide reforms and investments:** Identify high-impact levers for reform and determine how new resources such as state funding, federal programs, or philanthropic capital can be deployed strategically.
- **Build consensus and coalitions:** Introduce shared language for what constitutes high-quality pathways into teaching as a means for bringing together actors across political, geographic, and institutional lines.

This framework is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, it invites adaptation, dialogue, and co-creation across contexts. At the same time, we urge leaders to maintain an openness to bold ideas and breakthrough innovations that could redefine the future of educator preparation.

Our recommendations are organized around strategic questions leaders can use to evaluate current practices and a set of five policy levers that leaders can draw on to build stronger, more coherent pathways into teaching including standards and licensure, program approval and renewal, data and accountability, funding, and convening power. These levers are not mutually exclusive, and successful reform efforts will likely use multiple levers to create lasting change. We highlight how these tools can be used to scale preparation pathways that are **instructionally-focused, practice-based, accessible, and innovative & responsive**.

Common Policy Levers to Strengthen Teacher Preparation



Standards & Licensure: Establish entry and exit requirements for EPPs and professional credentials that reflect the knowledge and skills great teaching requires.



Program Approval & Renewal: Shape the structure and expectations of EPPs through state approval, renewal, and oversight processes.



Data & Accountability: Collect, report, and use data to monitor program outcomes, improve transparency, and hold systems accountable for results.

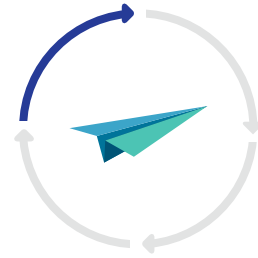


Funding: Streamline existing and invest new resources to expand access, incentivize innovation, and support aspiring teachers and EPPs.



Convening Power: Bring stakeholders together to share best practices, set a shared vision, and drive coordinated action across PK-12, higher education, and workforce systems.

For specific actions that policy leaders can take to activate the following recommendations, please review our [action guides for state and federal leaders](#).



INSTRUCTIONALLY-FOCUSED

Prepare aspiring teachers to understand how students learn and the instructional moves they can make to activate learning

Great teaching requires more than good intentions; it requires deep content knowledge, a strong grasp of how students learn, and the ability to translate that knowledge into specific teacher actions based on the individual needs of students. There have been promising reforms across the country to increase opportunities for aspiring teachers to get more practical experience. While these structural reforms are important, leaders must also prioritize what aspiring teachers are learning within these new structures.

Many EPPs are embracing opportunities to strengthen training in evidence-based instructional practices. Building on promising models, leaders are finding ways to balance essential classroom management skills with deep preparation for delivering rigorous instruction. Increasingly, aspiring teachers are gaining experience with the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) they will use on the job, ensuring they enter classrooms ready to help all students thrive.

We can build on these bright spots. When programs are grounded in the science of learning and train teachers how to use well-designed instructional materials, they can accelerate teacher readiness and student outcomes alike.

To assess whether your policies and practices are centering instructional quality, consider the following strategic questions.

Strategic Questions to Guide **Instructionally-Focused Pathways**

1. Do current policies and funding incentives for teacher preparation reflect what we know from the science of learning about how students acquire knowledge and skills?
2. How are policies bolstering EPPs and PK-12 schools to partner to ensure instructional coherence from pre-service preparation through classroom practice and ongoing professional development?
3. To what extent do current policies and practices demonstrate a commitment to building and using research and evidence to shape teacher development and instructional improvement?

1. Do current policies and funding incentives for teacher preparation reflect what we know from the science of learning about how students acquire knowledge and skills?

Decades of cognitive science research show how students learn and how teachers can best support that learning. This science should guide both how we prepare teachers and what we expect them to teach. Recent reforms, including the national push to align early reading instruction with the science of reading, are promising, but most states failed to include teacher preparation early in these efforts. As a result, many new teachers still enter the classroom underprepared, and schools are forced to “retrain” them on the job. Future reforms, especially those focused on improving math instruction and better supporting multilingual learners, should take a more comprehensive approach from the start by updating both in-service and pre-service training together.

POLICY ACTIONS

for Aligning Instruction to Learning Science



- Require pre-service and in-service teachers to receive training on learning science and how to translate it into teaching practice.
- Reform licensure, standards, assessments, and related materials to ensure aspiring teachers are engaging in learning and practice experiences that align with evidence, especially in efforts to improve literacy and math instruction and for teaching multilingual students and students with disabilities.



- Ensure opportunities exist throughout a teacher-candidate’s experience to develop content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge through the use of HQIM.

- Consistently review EPPs to ensure evidence-based practices are being taught, especially in literacy, mathematics, and for teaching multilingual students and students with disabilities.
- Eliminate redundancies in pre-service and in-service instructional training aimed at improving specific outcomes (e.g., science of reading requirements), by ensuring that EPP coursework and clinical experiences satisfy the goals of current in-service training.



- Invest in new and streamline existing education, workforce, and service funding to embed learning science into teacher preparation.



- Establish expert advisory groups to help translate the latest research on learning and instruction into actionable improvements in policy and practice.
- Convene cross-sector policy, education, workforce, technological, and research leaders to explore whether and how technological advancements, especially artificial intelligence, can be responsibly and effectively deployed to ensure teacher training is aligned to evidence-based practices.

Innovations in Practice

In Frederick County, Maryland, [student outcomes and teacher satisfaction increased](#) following local efforts to train teachers on learning science principles. In partnership with DFI, FCPS and Hood College revised coursework and delivered training on learning science principles for in-service teachers and teacher-educators to support instructional coherence.



Aligns to



Innovations in Policy

Texas reformed their EPP review process from a checklist to now be a holistic review aligned to the state's recently created [Effective Preparation Framework](#), including actions like course observations and reviews of course materials.



Aligns to



2. How are policies bolstering EPPs and PK-12 schools to partner to ensure instructional coherence from pre-service preparation through classroom practice and ongoing professional development?

When EPPs and PK-12 schools collaborate on instructional practices and priorities, novice teachers have more clarity on how to best support student success. Policy can better leverage the unique position of EPPs at the intersection of PK-12 and higher education so that theory and practice are better aligned to advance shared instructional priorities. Policymakers should create structures and incentives that encourage alignment and collaboration across these systems to promote instructional coherence.

POLICY ACTIONS

for Strengthening EPP and PK-12 Partnerships to Build Instructional Coherence



- Require teachers to be trained on how to access and effectively deploy HQIM, especially in efforts to improve literacy and mathematics instructions and instruction for multilingual students and students with disabilities.



- Invite teacher-educators to state-mandated professional development for in-service teachers.
- Require in-service professional development be available for aspiring teachers completing clinical experiences in the school/district.
- Establish formal MOUs between EPPs, PK-12 schools, community colleges that don't offer a four-year degree in teaching, and other community organizations (e.g., tutoring providers) to promote instructional coherence across all partners.



- Fund EPP-PK-12 partnerships to collaborate on shared instructional priorities (e.g., HQIM, literacy, math).
- Require and fund ongoing professional development on how to access and deploy HQIM for teacher-educators.
- Subsidize access to local HQIM for aspiring teachers and teacher-educators.



- Publish, either publicly or sent directly to EPPs, a list of HQIM and PK-12 screeners (e.g., literacy screeners) adopted by PK-12 schools and provide open access for all EPPs to the most widely used HQIM.
- Convene PK-12 schools, EPPs, and technical assistance providers to build a shared understanding of instructional priorities defined in policy, to align on evolving roles and competencies required of educators, and to build cultures and systems of continuous learning and improvement.

Innovations in Practice

DFI partnered with the Council of Chief State School Officers' [High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network](#)

to strengthen teacher preparation in the science of reading and the effective use of HQIM. DFI designed open-source literacy modules and worked with faculty to support aspiring teachers to develop the skills to deliver rigorous, affirming literacy instruction.



Aligns to >



Innovations in Policy

The [Tennessee Literacy Success Act \(2021\)](#) mandates that EPPs

provide literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading, including requiring teachers to be able to effectively use HQIM. The state built the capacity of the field by partnering with DFI to develop modularized content that can be [incorporated into existing EPP coursework](#).



Aligns to >



3. To what extent do current policies and practices demonstrate a commitment to building and using research and evidence to shape teacher development and instructional improvement?

Despite growing research into how students learn, state priorities, policies, and investments often fail to reflect or reinforce this knowledge. Policymakers and system leaders have a critical role to play in building the evidence base around how students learn best and translating that knowledge into clear instructional priorities for educators, preparation programs, and school systems. Doing so requires targeted funding, aligned policies, and deliberate structures to promote research-practice partnerships and continuous improvement.

POLICY ACTIONS for Cultivating Continuous Learning and Improvement



- Establish incentives for teacher-educators, teacher-candidates, and teachers to build their awareness and usage of vetted resources, including resources from approved technical assistance providers and resources that qualify for placement in specific knowledge centers such as the [What Works Clearinghouse \(WWC\)](#) and [Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#).



- Streamline and improve access for teacher-educators and researchers to relevant data systems (e.g., SLDS) to better align workforce supply and demand, evaluate shifts in instructional outcomes for teachers, understand clinical placement, hiring, and retention trends.



- Prioritize education research and development, specifically related to learning science, instructional practices, clinical experiences, and EPP practices that improve candidate retention and completion.



- Create positions and offices in relevant agencies responsible for learning science priorities.

Innovations in Practice

In South Bend, Indiana, The University of Notre Dame's Cognition, Learning, and Development Lab [trains high-impact tutors](#), many of whom are on track to become teachers, on principles of cognitive science and exposes them to resources such as WWC. The TutorND program is a driving force behind the state's recent announcement that students garnered "[unprecedented growth](#)" on the state's annual reading assessment.



Aligns to ▶



Innovations in Policy

The [Partnership for Educator Preparation \(PEP\)](#) accountability and data system in Illinois was built in partnership with EPPs, PK-12 leaders, and other partnering organizations, including DFI, to support continuous improvement. The system provides a holistic view of all EPPs in the state and offers formative reports to EPPs specifically designed to support improved teacher-candidate outcomes.



Aligns to ▶



How HQIM is Closing the Gap Between Preparation and Classroom Reality

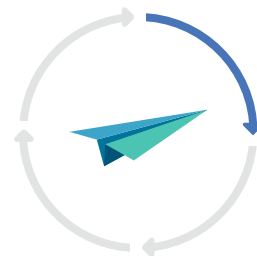
While PK-12 schools in many states have increasingly adopted HQIM, most new teachers still graduate without meaningful practice using them, creating a steep learning curve in their first classrooms. State policymakers are looking to change that as 33 states have recently passed legislation requiring or incentivizing HQIM. States like Louisiana, Tennessee, and Texas are showing promising early results. Louisiana, in part, credits HQIM for recent NAEP gains for students. In Tennessee, DFI supported EPPs to develop and integrate HQIM training into courses where [participating programs](#) saw a +32 percentage point jump in candidates who made instructional decisions that support access to rigorous, grade-level instruction. In Texas, faculty supported by DFI are also working to intentionally incorporate them into courses and clinical experiences in response to new legislation and funding incentives for teacher preparation. These stories show what's possible when states connect the dots between preparation and practice.

Read more at: <https://www.deansforimpact.org/pathways-that-deliver-HQIM>



You can't just pull something off Teachers Pay Teachers or Google. You have to study it and ask, "Is this truly aligning with standards? Is it helping my students?" I hadn't thought about it at this point in my career.

– Hayley Waller
Tennessee teacher



PRACTICE-BASED

Equip aspiring teachers with knowledge and skills that prepare them for the realities of the classroom

Too often, aspiring teachers graduate from preparation programs without ample opportunities leading and differentiating instruction in meaningful learning spaces – from rehearsing with peers prior to working with students and facilitating 1:1 and small-group tutoring to leading full group instruction during their culminating experiences. Clinical experiences may be too brief, disconnected from coursework, lack consistent feedback, or isolated to one point in time (e.g., student teaching). Without intentional, supported opportunities to practice teaching, candidates are more likely to enter the profession lacking the confidence needed to survive the first few years of teaching.

Well-structured, scaffolded practice that is paired with consistent, actionable, feedback enables aspiring teachers to develop the instructional and relational skills they need to thrive. When paired with strong mentorship and aligned coursework, clinical practice helps ensure new teachers are ready to manage classrooms, deliver effective instruction, and respond to students' individual needs. The challenge is not whether practice-based preparation works but whether systems are designed to support its implementation and scale.

To begin that work, we offer the following strategic questions to help leaders examine how their systems support or hinder meaningful, progressive clinical experiences for aspiring teachers.

Strategic Questions to Guide **Practice-Based Pathways**

1. Do clinical experience requirements ensure practice opportunities are intentionally woven throughout a teacher-candidate's experience and increase in complexity over time?
2. Are policies and funding structures enabling or limiting extended, high-quality practice opportunities for aspiring teachers?
3. Do policies support aspiring teachers to receive timely, actionable, and aligned feedback across practice opportunities?

1. Do clinical experience requirements ensure practice opportunities are intentionally woven throughout a teacher-candidate's experience and increase in complexity over time?

Clinical experiences are one of the most powerful tools for preparing aspiring teachers, but too often they are too few, too fragmented, or insufficiently scaffolded to help candidates steadily build their skills. When placements and practice opportunities are chosen primarily for convenience or availability – rather than quality, consistency, or coherence with program goals – aspiring teachers may miss the chance to connect theory to practice in a coherent way. Ensuring that practice opportunities are intentionally woven throughout a teacher-candidate's experience, and increase in complexity over time, requires strong partnerships between EPPs and PK-12 systems, more defined guidance on what constitutes a quality practice experience, and a commitment to fostering innovative ways to tap into the benefits aspiring teachers can afford PK-12 schools and students.

POLICY ACTIONS

for Aligning Coursework, Feedback and Practice



- Allow aspiring teachers to satisfy certification requirements through high-impact tutoring and other instructional services, even if receiving financial compensation.



- Incentivize EPPs and PK-12 schools to reconfigure their respective schedules to accommodate and align clinical practice with core instructional duties.
- Establish minimum standards for the length and setting of **culminating clinical experiences** that all programs are held accountable to.
- Establish minimum standards for the length and setting of **early field experiences**. Flexibilities should be created that allow for non-school-based instructional settings for reasonable activities such as [high-impact tutoring](#).



- Develop systems for understanding the impact of aspiring and early-career teachers on PK-12 student learning (e.g., student outcomes after being tutored by a teacher-candidate fulfilling field experience requirements).



- Align funding incentives for EPPs and PK-12 partners to prioritize practice-based preparation models.

Innovations in Practice

The New Jersey Tutoring Corps' (NJTC) [Tutor Apprenticeship Program](#), which partners with schools throughout the state, became the nation's first Registered Apprenticeship in tutoring in 2025. Apprentices receive training and ongoing coaching as they provide high-impact tutoring to K-8 students. They earn an hourly wage and up to nine college credits, at no additional cost, toward a teaching degree through New Jersey City University. NJTC's Registered Apprenticeship status also helps districts subsidize tutoring costs, creating a win-win-win for students, schools, and future teachers.



Aligns to



Innovations in Policy

Ohio statute formerly prohibited teacher-candidates from earning financial remuneration for service that satisfied course or certification requirements ([Sec. 3319.088\(D\)](#) of the Ohio Revised Code). In 2023, thanks to advocacy from leaders at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) with state legislators, Ohio repealed that prohibition via the state's [budget bill](#). This change has allowed BGSU to scale [a successful pilot](#) to mobilize aspiring teachers as high-impact tutors in *every local elementary school in their immediate community* to accelerate student learning.



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2. Are policies and funding structures enabling or limiting extended, high-quality practice opportunities for aspiring teachers?

High-quality clinical experiences, such as yearlong residencies and high-impact tutoring placements, can be costly to execute. EPPs and PK-12 schools face financial strain when funding mentor stipends, providing targeted coaching and supervision, and operationalizing these programs (e.g., data collection, coordinating calendars, and payroll). Although financial pressures may tempt partners to cut these supports, the resources required—mentor stipends, coaching, and operational coordination—are themselves hallmarks of high-quality clinical experiences. Meanwhile, aspiring teachers are often unpaid or receive stipends that fall far short of living expenses. These financial burdens reduce access to clinically-rich preparation, especially for the many aspiring teachers who cannot forgo other employment.

POLICY ACTIONS

for Reducing the Cost of Clinically-Intensive Pathways



- Create new workforce credentials that give aspiring teachers access to industry benefits while they complete preparation programs.



- Streamline funding to directly [compensate](#) teacher-candidates for their clinical experiences and reduce administrative barriers for schools and EPPs.

Innovations in Practice

At [Hutto Independent School District in Texas](#), PK-12 school leaders partnered with intermediaries and EPPs to co-design the region's first Registered Teacher Apprenticeship Program (RTAP). The partnership required EPPs to offer reduced tuition, the PK-12 school to provide compensation and benefits, and intermediaries to offset operational costs of running the program.



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Innovations in Policy

Since 2021, a bipartisan coalition of senators and representatives in the U.S. Congress has championed the [PATHS to Tutor Act](#), which would strengthen the pipeline and opportunities for future teachers by placing teacher-candidates in paid, high-impact tutoring roles, targeted toward high-needs schools.



Aligns to ▶



3. Do policies support aspiring teachers to receive timely, actionable, and aligned feedback across practice opportunities?

Aspiring and early-career teachers need consistent, high-quality feedback to grow in their practice. Unfortunately, those responsible for delivering this feedback often do not have time to collaborate to ensure feedback is timely, actionable, and aligned. Teacher-educators, clinical supervisors, and PK-12 mentor teachers may operate on different schedules, with different expectations, and without shared language or vision for what strong instruction looks like. Many also do not have requirements or incentives to support novice educators, including compensation for their time. When feedback is misaligned or inconsistent, it can undermine candidate confidence and lead to missed opportunities for growth. High-quality mentoring and induction programs, especially for teachers in their first two years, have a track record of [reducing turnover](#), improving confidence and skill, and promoting student learning.



POLICY ACTIONS

for Formalizing High-Quality Feedback, Mentoring, and Induction



- Incentivize a formal [induction period](#) whereby novice teachers are guaranteed ongoing support and training from their EPP and LEA and are paired with a high-quality mentor.
- Require planning time for PK-12 and EPP faculty and staff to build shared language and vision for instructional priorities and create feedback loops for aspiring teachers.
- Require joint professional development opportunities for PK-12 mentor teachers, clinical supervisors, and other relevant faculty and staff that builds their capacity to provide timely, actionable, and aligned feedback.



- Compensate and recognize mentors of aspiring and novice teachers.



- Host state or regional convenings to align state, PK-12, and EPP instructional priorities.

Innovations in Practice

DFI's Learning by Scientific Design Network is [developing the capacity of clinical supervisors](#) and PK-12 mentors as instructional coaches. By grounding feedback in the science of learning, these mentors help teacher-candidates translate research into classroom practice, accelerating their growth and impact. This approach strengthens the pipeline of well-prepared teachers and builds lasting instructional capacity in PK-12 schools nationwide.



Aligns to



Innovations in Policy

Delaware provides up to four years of [mentorship and induction support](#) to both new teachers and teachers new to the state. The state framework for mentorship and induction provides state-created resources, defines roles and responsibilities, and provides ongoing professional learning.



Aligns to



Mentorship That Keeps New Teachers in the Classroom

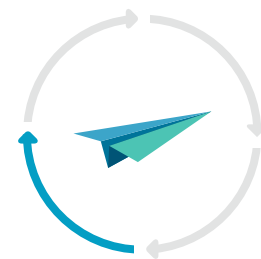
At Marian University in Indianapolis, IN, Francita McMichel, a former teacher and current teacher supervisor and mentor, knows mentoring is about more than reviewing lesson plans; it's about helping novice teachers shoulder the emotional weight of caring for students while learning the craft of teaching. Programs like Marian's post-graduate mentorship and National Louis University's New Teacher Induction in Chicago, IL show how ongoing, trust-based coaching boosts confidence, builds instructional skill, and keeps more teachers in the profession. In NLU's program, 94% of participants report feeling more prepared to teach effectively, and 100% plan to stay in the profession for at least five years. Yet, [19 states still](#) don't require mentoring and induction. And, even in states that do require these programs, funding and implementation are highly variable. Coordinated state policy and sustained investment can ensure every new teacher gets this kind of holistic support – turning early challenges into lasting careers.

Read more at: <https://www.deansforimpact.org/pathways-that-deliver-mentorship-induction>



Our students... they just came right out of undergrad, and now they're in a residency program, and they're not understanding, "Why am I tired? Why am I crying? Why am I frustrated?" Well, because you don't realize that subtly in your body, you're carrying 27 students on your heart and on your shoulders.

– **Francita McMichel**
Indiana teacher supervisor and mentor



ACCESSIBLE

Lower financial and structural barriers so more aspiring teachers can enter and complete quality preparation

Despite widespread teacher shortages, too many aspiring educators face steep barriers to entering and persisting in the profession. High tuition costs, unpaid work expectations, limited program availability in certain regions, insufficient wraparound support, and complex exit requirements that may not be indicators of future success all make it difficult to access and persist in the teaching profession. At the same time, some of the most affordable and fastest-growing pathways are under-regulated or low-quality, leaving candidates ill-equipped and more likely to leave the classroom.

This misalignment between cost, quality, and opportunity undermines both teacher success and student learning. The result is a system that often expands pathways without ensuring they are worth the investment. To build a stronger, more sustainable teacher workforce, leaders must address these structural challenges and design pathways that are both supportive and instructionally sound.

As a starting point, we invite policymakers, preparation leaders, and advocates to reflect on the following strategic questions to assess where their systems are creating – or constraining – access to high-quality preparation.

Strategic Questions to Guide **Accessible Pathways**

1. **To what extent are current pathways solving specific workforce needs?**
2. **Are policies making high-quality pathways more affordable and supportive?**
3. **Do policies support flexible entry points into teaching without compromising quality?**

1. **To what extent are current pathways solving specific workforce needs?**

When we think of aspiring teachers, many picture a lifelong dreamer – a student who’s wanted to teach since childhood and follows a traditional path from high school to college to the classroom. But that’s only part of the story. Today’s aspiring teachers also include paraprofessionals, long-term substitutes, AmeriCorps members, bus drivers, afterschool staff, career changers, and retirees. Many are already working in schools, eager to serve, but lack direction and clarity on how to afford and obtain a license in high-need content areas and geographies.

POLICY ACTIONS

to Better Align Teacher Preparation with Workforce Needs



- Define consistent and specific categories and characteristics for pathways into teaching. The current standard for classifying programs as “traditional” or “alternative,” even if distinguished by whether it’s run by an IHE, is opaque and hides important variation between program types.



- Hold all programs, regardless of pathway type, to the same set of high-quality standards.
- **Publish** standardized information about the quality of EPPs for accountability and improvement purposes.
- Publish information about teacher vacancies and current and projected workforce needs for each PK-12 school.



- Expand dedicated funding to EPPs that are working to address specific workforce needs and demonstrate strong completion rates (e.g., funding for dual credit and CTE courses that result in course credit with EPP partners and funding for RTAPs).

Innovations in Practice

DFI's National Registered Apprenticeship in Teaching [EPP Collaborative](#) brings together nearly 100 EPPs across 40 states and territories working to design and launch RTAPs that align to the U.S. Department of Labor-approved [National Guidelines Standards for RTAPs](#). This community works to build a shared understanding of [common challenges](#) to launching and scaling RTAPs and identify multiple solutions to overcoming them.



Aligns to ▶



Innovations in Policy

The statutorily-mandated [Louisiana Teacher Recruitment, Retention, and Recovery Task Force \(TRRR\)](#) brought together EPP, PK-12, legislative, administrative, and business leaders to study and address the state's most pressing challenges to recruiting and retaining quality educators. With DFI's strategic advising, the TRRR recommended changes to statute and rules that modernized entry into EPPs, bolstered support for mentor teachers, and created momentum for the state's first RTAP.



Aligns to ▶



2. Are policies making high-quality pathways more affordable and supportive?

The cost of becoming a teacher can be prohibitively high and, in many cases, the primary barrier to entry and persistence in a pathway. The average training program can cost tens of thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, and living expenses, with little or no paid compensation for required clinical work. These upfront costs often drive consumer behavior, disproportionately affecting those without personal or financial safety nets. As a result, many would-be educators opt out entirely, while others turn to less rigorous but more affordable routes, or enter classrooms without full certification.

POLICY ACTIONS

to Make Pathways More Affordable and Supportive



- Establish quality frameworks, review processes, and incentives that require EPPs, PK-12 schools, and other relevant community organizations to work together to make local pathways into teaching affordable (e.g., offer tuition assistance, reduce fees, subsidize living expenses).



- Streamline and make requirements for scholarships, loan forgiveness, and other financial assistance programs more transparent.
- Collect data that allows researchers to understand trade-offs in cost and quality. For example, how do teacher outcomes differ for those prepared via fully online vs. hybrid models?



- Invest in and/or expand evidence-based alternative funding models that reduce upfront costs for aspiring teachers.
- Establish and fund scholarship, grant, and loan forgiveness programs to increase the number of teachers from underrepresented backgrounds in the teacher workforce, as well as improve attainment rates and forgiveness amounts for public service loan forgiveness.

- Subsidize or remove fees (e.g., the cost of licensure assessments and background checks) for entry into the profession.
- Subsidize transportation, housing, and childcare for pre- and in-service teachers enrolled in high-quality pathways.
- Designate teaching and educator preparation as a “workforce development priority,” allowing students to access WIOA and Perkins V funding.



- Improve structures and quality of guidance provided to PK-12 schools and EPPs on shifts in funding opportunities and policy that intend to make teaching more affordable and supportive.
- Fund technical assistance and convenings for EPPs and PK-12 schools to effectively implement shifts in funding and policy, as well as incubate hubs of innovation that can inform future efforts to make pathways more affordable. For example, provide support for districts to reallocate personnel dollars from vacant teaching positions to fund stipends for teacher residents.

Innovations in Practice

The first union-led pathway, the Washington Education Association Apprenticeship Residency in Teaching (WEA-ART) seeks to remove barriers for talented individuals who represent the PK-12 population of Washington's schools. After their first 5 months in a paraeducator role, apprentices receive a minimum \$40,000 salary and benefits paid by their sponsoring school district.



Aligns to ▶



Innovations in Policy

Connecticut and Oklahoma have programs designed to help teachers afford housing. [Connecticut's program](#) provides teachers down payment assistance and interest rate reductions for those who graduate from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). An initiative in [Tulsa, Oklahoma](#) provides downpayment assistance.



Aligns to ▶



3. Do policies support flexible entry points into teaching without compromising quality?

As the teacher workforce evolves, so too must the systems designed to prepare and credential them. More aspiring teachers are entering the profession through nontraditional routes, including paraprofessional-to-teacher pipelines, mid-career transitions, and apprenticeship models. These shifts offer new opportunities to strengthen the profession. However, a lack of thoughtful guardrails and state policies that simply promote flexibility can inadvertently lower the bar, leading to a surge in underprepared educators and higher attrition rates. The challenge is not whether to open new entry points into teaching, but how to ensure each pathway reflects the expectations, available supports, and instructional demands of the profession.

POLICY ACTIONS

to Modernize Entry Points Without Lowering Standards



- Reevaluate licensure prerequisites to ensure they measure readiness to teach without creating unnecessary barriers, especially for candidates entering through non-traditional routes.
- Ensure policies creating flexibility for teacher-candidates to complete licensing exams, including entry exams, are matched with strong support for candidates and program accountability for in-classroom performance and the success of students they teach.
- Create high-quality, coherent pathways to full certification for uncertified teachers or teachers teaching outside their certification area without requiring them to leave their current roles. These pathways should prioritize practical skill development, content knowledge development, and immediate classroom support from a mentor teacher.



- Support aspiring teachers in exploring pathways into teaching through accessible and comprehensive digital resources, high school coursework, CTE programs, dual-enrollment programs, and community college partnerships.
- Ensure credit-bearing secondary coursework completed through CTE, dual-enrollment programs, and youth apprenticeship programs can seamlessly transfer to an aspiring teacher's chosen EPP and adequately address competencies EPPs are held accountable for in their approval process.
- Increase flexibility for EPPs, especially those within traditional IHEs, to ensure they can be responsive to changes in workforce needs.
- Incentivize EPPs to offer flexible, high-quality coursework options (e.g., evening/weekend coursework, coursework that takes place in PK-12 schools) for candidates, especially for those who are currently working in schools or career switchers.
- Reduce barriers to degree-granting pathways into education, rather than removing degree requirements to address vacancies.



- Report current and projected supply and demand for aspiring teachers, by specific demographics, geographies, and content areas.
- Establish research and innovation funds designed to support local programs to balance quality and access.



- Use state or regional-level convenings to identify and share promising practices for expanding access while maintaining quality across preparation pathways.
- Establish cross-sector task forces that include higher education, PK-12, and workforce leaders to address barriers and opportunities in building a more accessible, high-quality teacher pipeline.

Innovations in Practice

After Louisiana dropped its basic skills exam requirement, local EPPs, particularly at HBCUs, shifted resources from test prep to targeted academic and discipline-specific support. Faculty took greater responsibility for assessing and advising candidates, using professional dispositions, coursework, and classroom performance as measures of readiness. This approach contributed to a **33% enrollment increase** at Louisiana's HBCUs in the first admissions cycle since the policy shift, expanding opportunities for aspiring educators; many committed to serving in high-need schools.



Aligns to ▶



Innovations in Policy

Texas' 2025 House Bill 2 ends the ability for K-12 districts to **hire uncertified teachers** for foundational content courses; currently, **20% of uncertified teachers** in these courses do not hold a college degree. More broadly, **52% of new teachers** entering the Texas workforce are uncertified. As part of the allotment created for EPPs through HB2, **uncertified teachers can receive a one-time stipend** for earning certification.



Aligns to ▶



Mobilizing Aspiring Teachers as Tutors Enhances Learning and Makes Pathways More Affordable

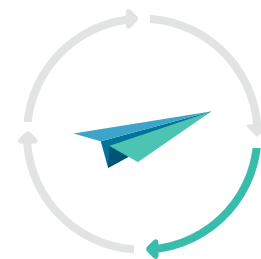
Mobilizing aspiring teachers as paid tutors is proving to be a win for everyone involved. Schools gain much-needed staffing support, PK-12 students receive individualized learning that accelerates recovery, and teacher-candidates earn both compensation and early, scaffolded practice opportunities that strengthen their preparation. As one aspiring teacher put it, "Tutoring gave me a chance to practice real skills with students while easing the financial stress of becoming a teacher." By embedding tutoring into preparation pathways, programs like those at American University and Step Up Tutoring show how financial relief and meaningful practice can go hand-in-hand to attract and sustain future teachers.

Read more at: <https://www.deansforimpact.org/pathways-that-deliver-accessible>



[Tutors] have the opportunity to work alongside our veteran teachers to learn best practices, to see active models of what best instruction looks like, to learn the culture and the pedagogy of the content that they're teaching. And just to be able to get feedback and rub shoulders with some of the great teachers that we have on staff.

– Christina Kellogg
D.C. Public Schools Principal



INNOVATIVE & RESPONSIVE

Adapt to evolving teacher and PK-12 student needs, emerging research, and local context through innovative and creative problem-solving

To meet the evolving needs of teachers, PK-12 students, schools, and communities, EPPs must be positioned not only as training grounds for teachers, but as hubs of ongoing experimentation and innovation. These programs are uniquely situated at the nexus of higher education and PK-12 policy and practice, giving them access to both the latest academic insights and the daily realities of classrooms. Yet, too often, policy and regulatory structures have reinforced compliance over creativity, leaving limited space for EPPs and PK-12 school partners to pilot new models, respond to emerging challenges, or integrate breakthrough approaches into teacher preparation.

Creating the conditions for innovation means unlocking the capacity of EPPs and their PK-12 partners to rapidly learn, adapt, and lead in areas like technology integration, strategic staffing, and new models of clinically-intensive preparation. It also means recognizing that innovation is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor – the most promising solutions often emerge when programs are empowered to design context-specific responses, test them, and scale what works.

Rather than prescribing a single path forward, we see an urgent need for policy leaders to utilize all the levers at their disposal to allow EPPs and their PK-12 partners to innovate and respond to emerging needs. Today, that means tackling field-shaping questions such as:

- **Technology & AI:** How might AI reinforce or degrade the building blocks of high-quality educator preparation?
- **Strategic Staffing:** How might rethinking the roles of teachers and the structure of the teams on which they sit (e.g., strategic staffing) shift how we need to prepare future teachers?
- **Rural & Hard-to-Staff Content Areas:** What innovations in clinical placement and program delivery can increase access to high-quality pathways and expand the pipeline of new teachers in communities with persistent shortages?
- **Reimagining Pathways:** How can we embed rapid-cycle learning into program design so EPPs are continuously evolving alongside the needs of schools?

Policy leaders should avoid being overly prescriptive in these emerging areas and instead use the levers available to them to create space, incentives, and resources that foster collaborative innovation and responsiveness.

POLICY ACTIONS to Foster Innovative and Responsive Pathways



- Create flexibility that allows EPPs to test new models without jeopardizing program approval or accreditation status and maintaining safeguards for teachers and PK-12 students.



- Elevate and scale bright spots by creating mechanisms for sharing results, lessons learned, and effective practices across the state and nation.



- Award innovation funds that support EPP-led research and pilot programs.



- Foster cross-sector partnerships so that EPPs, PK-12 schools, and other community partners are co-designing and evaluating new approaches together.



A NEW FOUNDATION FOR PATHWAYS INTO TEACHING

Our nation's long-term prosperity depends on how well we educate our next generation of teachers. In a time marked by persistent teacher shortages, unfinished and lost learning, and uncertainty about the future of the profession, we must act with urgency. The choices we make today about how we prepare teachers will shape the effectiveness of our schools for years to come.

When teacher preparation is coherent, focused, and well-supported, aspiring educators enter the profession with strong instructional knowledge, rich opportunities to practice, and the guidance needed to thrive in rigorous programs. By expanding these conditions more broadly, we can strengthen the profession's ability to attract and retain talented educators—ensuring all students benefit from high-quality instruction.

This framework offers a clear path forward. By focusing on four foundational conditions – **instructional quality, practice, access, and innovation and responsiveness** – we can build a system that prepares future teachers to create rigorous, engaging classrooms. We must ensure that every teacher develops a deep understanding of how students learn and how to teach their content well. We must design preparation experiences that provide ample, structured opportunities to practice teaching and receive feedback. We must remove unnecessary barriers and create new supports so that more aspiring teachers can enter and complete strong pathways into the profession. And we must ensure communities have the flexibility to innovate and ensure educator preparation is responsive to the needs of teachers and students.

DFI invites policymakers, preparation leaders, advocates, and funders to use this framework as a starting point to ask the hard questions and identify gaps in current policies and investments. The recommendations are meant to be adapted to fit local context, support leaders to move forward with purpose, and retain flexibility to respond to what's on the horizon.

Together, we can build a stronger, more responsive system of teacher preparation – so that all students are taught by well-prepared teachers.

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About Deans for Impact (DFI)

DFI is a national nonprofit organization with a mission to ensure every child is taught by well-prepared teachers. We support educator-preparation programs to bring the science of learning into teaching practice; partner with policymakers to ensure pathways into teaching are instructionally-focused, practice-based, accessible, and innovative & responsive; and equip leaders with the tools to address today's most pressing challenges in educator preparation. Guided by principles of cognitive science, we aim to help aspiring and early-career teachers create rigorous and affirming classrooms where all children thrive.

To learn more about how we support policymakers and advocates, visit:

[www.deansforimpact.org/programming/
for-policymakers-and-advocates](http://www.deansforimpact.org/programming/for-policymakers-and-advocates)





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