

The grow-your-own approach to teacher preparation

A conversation with Amaya Garcia

By Rafael Heller

PHI DELTA KAPPAN: Let's start with the big picture: What, exactly, is a grow-your-own (GYO) program, and when and why did GYOs emerge?

AMAYA GARCIA: GYOs are partnerships among school districts, educator-preparation programs, and in some cases community-based organizations, and their goal is to recruit and prepare community members to teach in their local schools — and to continue teaching there for many years.

Some GYOs focus on identifying high school students who have an interest in teaching, giving

them an early introduction to the profession and helping them get started on the path toward becoming certified. Some focus on paraeducators or other school staff who have an interest in becoming lead teachers. But they all have a strong emphasis on recruiting and preparing educators who are connected to the local schools and who mirror the racial, ethnic, and linguistic composition of students and their families.

GYO programs have become much better-known in the last several years, but they actually go back quite a while. The first large-scale GYO program



AMAYA GARCIA is deputy director of PreK-12 education with the Education Policy program at New America, in Washington, D.C. She provides research and analysis on policies and programs related to English learners, including dual language and bilingual education, bilingual teacher preparation and career pathways, English language proficiency, and early education. Also, she leads New America's Grow Your Own National Network and conducts research on grow-your-own teacher-preparation programs and related policies. In this area, her publications include a *50-State Scan of Grow Your Own Programs and Policies*; profiles of GYO programs in Washington, Oregon, Illinois, and Mississippi; and a report on GYO programs for bilingual educators. Most recently, she served as co-editor of a special issue of the *Journal of Career Development* focused on the career development of paraeducators.

Prior to joining New America, Garcia was a policy analyst at the District of Columbia State Board of Education and a research associate at the American Institutes of Research. She holds a master's degree in public policy from the University of Maryland–College Park, a master's degree in cognitive studies in education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and a bachelor's degree in English and psychology from the University of Iowa.

RAFAEL HELLER is the editor-in-chief of *Kappan* magazine.

was launched in 1989, when the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund (which is now the Wallace Foundation) donated \$50 million to create the Pathways to Teaching Careers initiative, which was meant to address teacher shortages and diversify the teaching force. It funded 41 university-based programs to recruit and prepare thousands of returning Peace Corps volunteers, military veterans, paraeducators, and other nontraditional teaching candidates, requiring them to make a three-year commitment to work in rural and low-income schools. And it introduced some of the strategies that GYO programs still rely on today. For instance, it provided wraparound supports to teacher candidates, including financial assistance, academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, help with preparing for licensure tests, and so on. The goal has never been just to *recruit* people to teach, but also to make sure they move through the pipeline, become successful teachers, and stay in the classroom.

KAPPAN: You said the Pathways initiative was meant to address teacher shortages and diversify the profession in general. So, when and why did GYOs come to focus specifically on recruiting educators from within local communities?

GARCIA: The emphasis on local recruitment was always there, though it wasn't quite so explicit in the Pathways work. It really became prominent in the 2000s. The key moment was in 2005, when the Illinois legislature funded a competitive grant to expand GYO programs across the state. Specifically, the goal was to build on the success of locally designed GYOs — like the one created by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, which was a truly grassroots effort to recruit and prepare teachers (bilingual teachers, especially) for the local schools.

So, in Illinois — and pretty soon across the whole GYO movement — the priority was to develop educators from within local communities to serve local needs. And, of course, it makes sense that if your goal is to recruit teachers who have a strong connection to their students, then you should look to the people who already live near them. And whether the priority is to find more bilingual teachers, special educators, math teachers, or whatever, you can probably find and develop that talent in your own neighborhood.

KAPPAN: Does the research show whether GYOs have actually been successful in producing teachers who stay in the local schools over the long term?



GARCIA: Yes and no. The evidence base in this area is still pretty thin, and that's mostly because states have only just begun to keep good data on teachers who've gone through these programs. To date, Washington state has done the most to track outcomes and generate accurate data, but they've only gotten started, and it will be a while before we

Retention rates tend to be higher for teachers who've been recruited to work in their own community.

know much about the effect of particular GYOs.

That said, there's some encouraging data — highlighted in Conra Gist, Margarita Bianco, and Marvin Lynn's recent review of GYO research (2019) — showing that retention rates tend to be higher for teachers who've been recruited to work in their own community. But the strongest evidence is still the evaluation data from the Pathways initiative, from 20 years ago. Of the teachers who went through those programs, 81% were still teaching three years later, compared to 71% of beginning teachers overall. And for paraeducators who went through the program, the three-year retention rate was 88%. That's what we hope to see with today's GYO programs, but it will be at least a few years before we have solid data.

KAPPAN: To get a clear picture of the GYO movement as it currently stands, you recently conducted a 50-state scan of GYO policies and programs. What did you learn?

GARCIA: What really stands out is the extent to which the meaning of the term GYO varies from place to place. As I said a minute ago, there's a lot of consensus on a few things — GYOs aim to recruit teachers from within local communities, and they tend to involve partnerships among school districts, universities, and local organizations. But when it comes to the *details* of how those programs are designed and implemented, we see a lot of variation. For instance, do they aim to recruit high school students, college students, paraeducators, or other adults? What kinds of support structures do they provide to help teaching candidates move through the pipeline? How do they assess candidates' progress? What kinds of funding mechanisms do they rely on?

Of course, it makes sense that we see a lot of variation in the field, given that most GYO programs are locally driven and designed to meet local needs. But that makes it really complicated to compare the effectiveness of different models, identify best practices, and define clear standards, all of which become important when it comes to securing funding and political support. If federal and state officials are going to invest in GYOs, they're going to want to

know that these programs are operating efficiently, that they're well-designed and implemented, and that they actually help teaching candidates make it through the pipeline, become certified, get jobs, be effective in the classroom, and stay in the profession over time. On one hand, there's a lot of value in having the GYO movement encourage flexible, localized strategies and models. But on the other hand, there's a clear need for more consistent definitions and standards. For me and my colleagues at New America, that has been probably the main takeaway from our 50-state scan. In response, we have done some work to try and name the essential elements of a high-quality GYO program, while keeping in mind that programs should meet local needs and therefore won't look exactly the same from one place to another. The question we need to answer is, what core features should every GYO program have in place?

KAPPAN: What else stands out from the 50-state scan?

GARCIA: We also found that there's a lot of attention, right now, on helping paraeducators earn their teaching certificates and become lead teachers. Around 35 states have created scholarships or resources to encourage paraeducators to take that step. And it certainly makes sense to target this population. Paraeducators already have experience working in schools (often a lot of experience), and they're much more diverse than the teachers currently in the system. Plus, they have a big incentive to take advantage of the opportunity to get certified — by becoming lead teachers they'll get a huge pay increase, often doubling their salary. So when states and GYO programs focus on paraeducators, that tends to be a win-win situation: If you invest up front in helping them become certified (by giving them scholarships, tutoring support, mentoring, and even childcare), you can be pretty sure that they'll return the favor by going back to the classroom and teaching for more than just a few years.

KAPPAN: What did you learn about GYO programs that focus on high school and college students? (And, full disclosure: PDK's Educators Rising program is one of the leaders in this area.)

GARCIA: Currently, programs for 11th and 12th graders make up the largest part of the GYO sector. In nearly every state, we found at least one program that targets high school students, either through a career and technical education sequence or as part of a dual-enrollment program, usually through a

local community college. Some of them (for example, the University of Colorado's Pathways2Teaching program) have been very intentional about recruiting students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, giving them early exposure to the field of education and then continuing to work with them in college to prepare for a teaching career. Others, including Teacher Cadet, which is one of the big national programs, have said that their focus is really on the first part of the process: giving students that initial exposure to the field. And Educators Rising seems to provide a third model, kind of a hybrid of the other two: On one hand, it's a big, national program that tries to introduce high school students to the field, like Teacher Cadet. But on the other hand, it's also working with colleges and states to actually move those students through the preparation pipeline and into teaching positions. To my mind, that's a promising approach, trying to provide national resources that can be adapted to fit the needs of local GYO programs. But for all of these high school-to-college models, the challenge, as I mentioned earlier, is that we just don't yet have much data showing how many of these students actually go on to become teachers, or for how long.

KAPPAN: Which states have been doing particularly interesting work in this area?

GARCIA: We found that nearly 30 states have language on the books that supports GYOs and describes them as an important strategy for teacher development, and that's encouraging. But not a lot of states have been intentional about creating programs or expanding existing ones. They might offer some scholarship money for individual teaching candidates, for example, but they don't provide much funding for GYOs.

Currently, nine states fund competitive grant programs that are designed to incentivize GYO partnerships among school districts and universities — which, in addition to providing funding, also create a basic framework for GYOs to follow, defining some essential features that they need to have in place to be effective. Most of those states are offering at least a few million dollars in grant support. The Minnesota Legislature just agreed to boost spending on its grants to \$6.5 million. Tennessee is spending \$6.5 million of its federal COVID recovery funds. And Oregon's investment is the largest by far — they're spending \$14 million on GYO grants, which is a significant amount of money in that state.

Washington state deserves special mention because they've wholeheartedly embraced GYO as a strategy that can help them fill the big gaps they

have in their teacher workforce. For instance, they made a major investment in Recruiting Washington Teachers, which is their program for high school students, and they've been able to move some of those students into the postsecondary teacher-prep pipeline. There's a great program in the Burlington-Edison school district, which is in an agricultural area of the state and serves a lot of Latinx students whose families have moved there for work. The district has recruited Latinx high schoolers who are interested in becoming teachers, and they've partnered with Skagit Valley College — the local community college — to help those students earn an associate degree and then go on to Western Washington University for a teaching degree. At the same time, Washington also created a block grant program to support new approaches to alternative certification, with an emphasis on offering high-quality preparation to non-traditional teaching candidates. The important thing here is that the state makes it affordable by providing conditional loans to help cover the cost of attendance, and partner districts pay candidates to work as paraeducators while they take classes and pursue their teaching certificates. And another key part of Washington's strategy is its decision to create community college bachelor's programs, so students can get a four-year teaching degree at an accessible,



"So I think I'll do my college essay on 'Overcoming Adversity'."

My hope is that some of the practices we see in GYO programs will be adopted throughout the broader world of teacher education.

affordable institution, rather than having to transfer to a university that may not be as accommodating to nontraditional students.

I've also been impressed by a program in Nebraska, the Indigenous Roots Teacher Education Program, which is a 20-year-old partnership of the Little Priest Tribal College, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, six Native communities, and the state, funded by federal dollars from the Office of Indian Education. What I find especially interesting about the program is that a panel of community members meets to decide which applicants will attend. That is, there's a strong emphasis on ensuring that the teacher candidates have a real commitment to the local cultures, languages, and traditions, and to a long-term career in education. It's not a huge program — about 50 or 60 of its graduates now work in the state's schools — but it's had a significant local impact, and it really epitomizes the GYO movement's emphasis on recruiting from within, with a focus on meeting community needs.

KAPPAN: When I read about GYO programs, the issue of scale comes up as a frequent point of concern. For a small program in Nebraska, 50 or 60 teachers may be a significant number. But what should we make of the fact that the Pathways to Teaching Careers initiative — which was a major, \$50 million investment — only prepared a few thousand teachers? In a country with a teaching force of roughly 3.5 million, can GYO programs have a real effect on teacher shortages or on teacher diversity?

GARCIA: I think it's a mistake to expect the GYO movement to be the main solution to the country's teacher shortages and the lack of diversity in the teaching profession. It's not the biggest solution, but it's a very promising targeted approach to meeting the needs of a particular community and its schools. So, it's true that GYO programs don't operate on a huge scale. Cumulatively, we're probably talking about thousands of new teachers per year, not hundreds of thousands. But to a community that desperately needs more bilingual teachers, or more

special educators, or more science teachers who have a long-term attachment to local students, this sort of program can make a big difference.

Plus, it's not the fault of the GYO movement that it doesn't have the resources to educate much larger cohorts of teacher candidates. These programs provide a ton of individualized supports and services, not to mention scholarships and tuition breaks, and scaling them up into the tens or hundreds of thousands of teachers would take a lot more than the \$50 million spent on the Pathways initiative. But my hope is that some of the practices we see in GYO programs will be adopted throughout the broader world of teacher education. Every university-based program should think more carefully about affordability, wraparound services, community engagement, and ways to pay candidates while they pursue certification. And every state should be willing to make serious investments in recruiting and preparing local community members, who are much more likely to stay in the profession and keep serving their local schools over many years.

KAPPAN: Looking toward the future of the GYO movement, what challenges concern you the most?

GARCIA: What worries me the most is the money side of it, obviously. Will policy makers be willing to find ways to lower the cost of earning a teaching credential — starting with making community college free — so that talented low-income and nontraditional candidates have an easier route into the career? Will they step up and find ways to make becoming a teacher virtually cost-free?

Another big challenge is the one that faces the teaching profession in general: How will we get more people interested in becoming a teacher at a time when teachers are so demoralized and stressed, and when schools have become such hostile and politicized environments?

And then I also worry that, sooner or later, the lack of a strong research base on GYO programs will come back to bite us. Once we prepare teachers, how long do they stay in the profession? What kinds of teachers do they become? What kinds of outcomes do their students have? I think we'll have to start generating more data and showing people more evidence that these programs are effective, or we'll lose the support we've worked so hard to gain.

KAPPAN: And what makes you most hopeful about the future of the GYO movement?

GARCIA: One thing I haven't mentioned yet, but which makes me hopeful, is that a lot of people have

started thinking about GYO programs as offering a kind of apprenticeship model. Among a lot of people in education and workforce development, apprenticeships have become a very hot topic in recent years, and if we view teacher preparation through this lens then maybe that will open up new sources of funding. For instance, why not ask the U.S. Department of Labor to help support apprenticeships in teaching? They seem to be more willing to entertain this possibility — for example, the recently reinstated Secretary's Advisory Committee on Apprenticeship includes at least one representative with expertise in developing apprenticeships in the field of early education, and several who have expertise bringing apprenticeship models to industries where they haven't existed previously.

I'm very optimistic also when I look at President Biden's American Families Plan, which specifically calls for a \$2.8 billion federal investment in GYO programs and paid yearlong residencies for teachers. I never expected to see that in a federal proposal at all, let alone an ask for \$2.8 billion dollars. I know we're not going to get that money, of course (and right now, in early October, the president's whole spending plan is looking precarious), but the fact

that it was requested at all sends a powerful signal to the education world. It's exciting that something that started out as a grassroots, community-based movement has been highlighted this way.

So this gives me hope that GYO will become a regular part of the larger landscape of teacher prep. And while we might not get billions of dollars, maybe we'll end up with a hundred million dollars in federal funding, if not this year then next year, or in five years. And that will be money we can use to help a lot of communities recruit local talent to go into education — and maybe to prepare more teachers of color and immigrant teachers and bilingual educators. Personally, that's what keeps me motivated to keep doing this work. ■

Reference

Gist, C.D., Bianco, M., & Lynn, M. (2019). Examining grow your own programs across the teacher development continuum: Mining research on teachers of color and nontraditional educator pipelines. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70 (1), 13-25.



GIVE THE GIFT OF EDUCATION

You can help PDK International shape the future of education by joining the movement on this Giving Tuesday.

All donations made to PDK International for Giving Tuesday, **November 30, 2021**, will go toward awarding scholarships to support Educators Rising members' attendance at our National Leadership Conference.

Visit educatorsrising.org/giving-tuesday to learn more.

GIVINGTUESDAY

