



Grow Your Own Illinois: **An Innovative Approach to Providing** **High-Quality Teaching in Low-Income Communities**

By Victor C. Young and Jonathan Berry
The Center for Collaboration and the Future of Schooling

Introduction

Amid concerns about the shortage of qualified teachers in the U.S. – especially in low-income schools – a growing number of states and school districts have instituted aggressive strategies to expand and improve the teaching pool. These efforts include increasing salaries, strengthening early outreach, streamlining the hiring process, and providing incentives for teachers to work in the areas of highest need.

One particularly promising development has been the emergence of “grow your own” initiatives. These programs have made it possible for schools and districts to create their own pipeline of qualified teachers by recruiting and training individuals from the communities that are to be served. Further, they have enabled school leaders to tailor preparation programs to the specific needs and resources in their communities and schools.

Grow Your Own Illinois (GYO Illinois) is an outstanding example of the “grow your own” approach. GYO Illinois was developed by a group of Chicago-based community organizations, working closely with university educators, in an effort to reduce teacher turnover and increase the number of teachers of color in low-income schools.¹ The program recruits individuals who do not have an undergraduate degree, *but* who do have deep ties to the low-income communities where they will eventually work, a track record of working in support of the children and schools in those communities, and the ability and desire to complete a rigorous teacher preparation program that ensures that they will meet or exceed state standards for the profession. As such, GYO Illinois represents a major development in teacher recruitment, preparation and retention that places the state of Illinois at the forefront of efforts to provide quality instruction for all children.²

¹ GYO Illinois has been spearheaded by Illinois ACORN. Support for the effort has been provided by the Ford Foundation and through a contract with the Illinois State Board of Education. Additional support has been provided by the Hazen Foundation.

² The state legislature passed a GYO law in 2004 and, to date, has appropriated \$4.5 million for statewide planning and implementation.

Why GYO Illinois Makes Sense

The conventional wisdom is that there is a serious teacher shortage in the U.S. But to quote a 2003 report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, "the conventional wisdom is wrong." The real problem is not the lack of teachers entering the profession, but the alarming rate at which they are leaving. While the nation graduates a sufficient number of teachers to meet its needs, more than a third leave the field after just three years, and almost half leave after five years (NCTAF, 2003).

The situation is particularly acute in "high-poverty" schools, where 20 percent of teachers leave their jobs annually – a rate that is 55 percent higher than in "low-poverty" schools (NCTAF, 2003). Many of these schools also face additional challenges related to the declining presence of African American and Latino teachers as well as the need to find teachers for hard-to-fill positions like bilingual and special education.

An analysis of 64 elementary schools in low-income Chicago neighborhoods provides a disturbing snapshot. The 2001 to 2002 turnover rate for the entire group of schools was 22.9 percent, which is considerably higher than the national rate of 15.7 percent for all schools, but somewhat consistent with the rate for high-poverty schools. However, when we look more closely, we find that 21 of the schools in the sample group had turnover rates exceeding 30 percent – well above the national rate *for high-poverty schools*. Further, eight of those schools had turnover rates of 50 percent or more (Chicago ACORN, 2003).

In response to this crisis, GYO Illinois is mounting a statewide, community-based effort to add 1,000 or more fully qualified teachers to low-income schools by 2016.

Community Matters

GYO Illinois was created by a group of community organizations that work in low-income neighborhoods and have first-hand knowledge of issues related to teaching quality. Their work is based on a vision of schools that are deeply grounded in their communities, where doors are open to families, where teachers and parents can collaborate, and where children feel secure in their extended home. These schools understand the broader needs of students and their families and provide the foundation for an entire community to learn and grow.

In order to realize this vision, GYO Illinois recruits and trains individuals who are rooted in their low-income communities, who have experience with children, and who have demonstrated their interest in the schools and students while serving as volunteer and active parents, as school paraprofessionals and as community leaders. As a result, GYO Illinois is :

- Creating a pipeline of teachers who are much more likely to teach long-term in their low-income communities, thus saving the school district money and creating stability for students, while leading over time to a more seasoned teaching force
- Addressing the shortage of teachers of color and teachers for hard-to-fill positions
- Bringing teachers into schools who know the history, culture and language of the community and can understand the needs and issues of students and families, as equals and neighbors

- Building a cadre of teachers who respect and can communicate and collaborate with parents (these community-people-turned-teachers can, in turn, involve parents in the schools and draw on the skills and knowledge of these particular parents to further strengthen the schools)

In addition, GYO Illinois is grounded in the belief that communities and community organizing are central to school improvement, especially in low-income communities. Accordingly, the initiative has worked to build strong partnerships among community organizations and neighborhood schools, with universities and school districts, and with community colleges, employee unions and other organizations likely to play key roles.

High-Quality Preparation

Some question “grow your own” and other innovative approaches to teacher preparation and wonder if these programs are merely an attempt to *manage* teacher shortages and ultimately sacrifice teacher quality. They worry about the possibility of placing “less qualified” teachers in schools and classrooms intended to serve the most “at risk” students. Such concerns appear unwarranted with respect to GYO Illinois.

- Each program under GYO Illinois is organized and run by a consortium of institutions that include at least one teacher preparation university or college, a community-based organization, and a school district.
- The programs are not “short cuts” to teacher certification – each university or college bases its program on their full undergraduate education curriculum. *All teacher candidates must meet or exceed Illinois State Standards.*

In addition, GYO Illinois incorporates what research (Berry & Hirsch, 2005) and experience suggest are key elements of an effective teacher certification for non-traditional students:

- High standards and proper screening of candidates for entry
- Solid academic instruction in pedagogy, subject matter, classroom management, and child development before the candidate begins to work in a school
- Cohorts of candidates going through the program together to give each other academic, social, and emotional support
- A full-time coordinator to help candidates negotiate the higher education bureaucracy and to support and encourage their individual academic progress
- Strong social supports, such as tutoring, child care and transportation
- Flexible class schedules at locations that are convenient for candidates and that recognize that many are working full time

Once GYO Illinois candidates become fully certified teachers, they receive additional guidance through an organized and comprehensive system of support from experienced, trained mentors that includes:

- Strong mentorship by an experienced teacher, providing observation and assistance in the classroom before they begin teaching solo
- Ongoing training, instruction, and reflection once they assume control of a classroom
- Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and feedback of individual and group performance to allow for adjustment and improvement in teaching and program management

In short, the GYO Illinois initiative is based on proven strategies for developing teachers who possess the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to succeed in the classroom.

The Power of GYO Cohorts

The use of cohort-based learning – where a group of students works together toward their degree – is well established in higher education. The approach is generally thought to contribute to a range of student benefits that include greater feelings of inclusiveness, more opportunities for collaborative learning, and even improved learning and academic performance (Brown-Ferrigno & Muth, 2001). However, simply putting students together in an administrative arrangement does not make for an effective cohort. Instead, they “must be purposefully formed and structured if they are to succeed as environments that foster learning and development” (Imel, 2002).

GYO Illinois programs carefully balance the needs of individual candidates with the goal of fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and togetherness within the cohort. As often as possible, candidates are enrolled in the same classes and progress through the program together, particularly during the first two years, when relationship building is most critical. In addition, great emphasis is placed on creating opportunities to bring all members together – for training, tutoring or social events – so that they get to know each other and evolve into a true cohort of people who know and support each other. At the same time, individual candidates are not held back in order to keep pace with the cohort, and group activities are sensitive to the needs and responsibilities of non-traditional students.

The strength of the GYO Illinois approach lies in its commitment to both individual and group development *and* the fact that the relationships formed through the cohorts can be purposefully sustained. Most GYO candidates will teach in their communities, once they are certified. In time, these candidates and those that follow will not only represent a much-needed pipeline of highly qualified teachers, but also a network of potential change agents – individuals with the skills, commitment and relationships necessary to effect meaningful improvements in their schools and communities.

What the Research Says

The research on non-traditional teacher recruitment and preparation programs is extremely thin, and much of what does exist focuses on “fast track” approaches to certification (Education Commission of the States, 2003). A forthcoming statewide evaluation of GYO Illinois will be a welcome addition to the field. However, there are already indications that the GYO approach is an effective strategy for:

- Reducing teacher turnover in low-income schools
- Finding teachers for hard-to-fill positions
- Recruiting and retaining teachers of color

Pathways to Teaching Careers provides a useful example. An initiative of the Wallace Foundation from 1989 to 2001, Pathways involved 40 colleges and 23 states in an effort to recruit and fully certify individuals from non-traditional pools and place them in high-need schools. Through 2000, Pathways had recruited and served nearly 2,600 candidates. Research published in 2001 by the Urban Institute found that 75 percent of program participants had completed teacher certification requirements, compared with 60 percent of traditional candidates. Further, 84 percent worked in high-need districts, and more than 81 percent remained in teaching for at least three years (Clewel & Villegas, 2001).

One particularly promising Pathways example is in Georgia. Through 2000, program graduates produced a collective grade-point average of 3.0, a 96 percent retention rate, and 24 were named Teacher of the Year for their schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

The California Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program (PTTP) is another promising GYO program. PTTP provides academic scholarships and other support services to paraprofessionals seeking a preliminary credential as a K-12 teacher, with a special emphasis on individuals seeking to become bilingual, special education, K-3 or other field identified by district need. In 2005-06, the PTTP enrolled 1,699 paraprofessionals. Sixty-eight percent of program participants were “minority” group members, including 783 Latino/Hispanic participants, 140 African Americans, and 30 Southeast Asians. Further, fifty-five percent of participants were fluent in another language (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing).

Project Alianza – an alliance of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), the Mexican and American Solidarity Foundation, and five universities in three states³ – targets bilingual teacher aides, traditional students in teacher-preparation programs in universities, and *normalistas* who were teachers in Mexico in an effort to strengthen the bilingual teaching force. In 2003, 70 Alianza graduates were “positively impacting more than 6,000 children in bilingual classrooms and reducing the shortage of bilingual education teachers in Texas alone by 10 percent” (Rodriguez, 2003).

In addition to presenting a promising strategy for addressing teacher turnover, hard-to-fill positions and the challenge of recruiting teachers of color, the GYO approach is also consistent with growing evidence of the centrality of meaningful family and community involvement to creating effective schools. According to a report by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), when schools, families and communities work together to support learning, students are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores
- Enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits

³ The five universities involved in Project Alianza are the University of Texas at San Antonio, California State University at Long Beach, the University of Texas-Pan American, Southwest Texas State University, and Arizona State University.

- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to postsecondary education

SEDL’s findings are echoed by the Coalition for Community Schools.⁴ A 2003 report by the Coalition examines the impact of 20 community school initiatives across the U.S. and presents compelling evidence that community schools not only improve student learning, but also promote family engagement with students and schools, help schools function more effectively, and add vitality to communities (Blank et al., 2003).

Moving Forward

GYO Illinois has made an impressive start toward the goal of adding 1,000 or more fully-qualified teachers to low-income schools by 2016. As of fall 2006, the initiative consists of 11 statewide consortia (five in Chicago, plus the Nueva Generación pilot; the South Suburbs; Springfield; East St. Louis; Rockford; and the Quad Cities).⁵ Each consortium has recruited a diverse cohort of non-traditional teacher candidates – parents, community leaders, and paraprofessionals – who will enter college in 2006-07. Of the 395 initial GYO candidates, 88% are people of color (51% African American and 37% Hispanic). In addition, all of the candidates are either parents of children in the schools, volunteer or work in the schools, or are a member of a partnering community organization.

The early cohort data confirm the great promise that GYO Illinois holds for increasing the number of teachers of color and for building strong, meaningful connections between schools and communities. The continuing rollout of the initiative will provide additional data that, we believe, will show that GYO Illinois represents a powerful strategy for improving teaching and learning in low-income communities. One thing is already clear. The national educational community will be watching with great interest.

*The Center for
Collaboration and the
Future of Schooling is a
non-profit organization
committed to helping
improve learning
opportunities for all
children, especially those
of low-income and
disenfranchised groups*

⁴ Building on the strengths of the community is one of the guiding principles of community schools. According to the Coalition, “community schools marshal the assets of the entire community – including the people who live and work there, local organizations, and the school.”

⁵ Each consortium is a partnership of a community organization, a 4-year higher education institution and a school district or group of schools.

REFERENCES

- Berry, B., & Hirsch, E. (2005). *Recruiting and retaining teachers for hard-to-staff schools*. Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices.
- Blank, M. J., Melaville, A., & Shah, B. P. (2003). *Making the difference: Research and practice in community schools*. Washington, DC: Coalition for Community Schools.
- Brown-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2001). *Issues related to the effects of cohorts on learners*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration in Cincinnati, OH (Nov 2-4).
- California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2006). *California Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program: Annual Report to the Legislature*. Sacramento, CA: California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.
- Chicago ACORN. (2003). *Where have all the teachers gone? The costs of teacher turnover in ACORN neighborhood schools in Chicago*.
- Clewell, B. C., & Villegas, A. M. (2001). *Absence unexcused: Ending the teacher shortages in high-need areas*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- Education Commission of the States. (2003). *Eight questions on teacher preparation: What does the research say?* Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
- Gold, E., Simon, E., Brown, C., Blanc, S., Pickron-Davis, M., Brown, J., & Navarez-La Torre, A. (2002). *Strong neighborhoods, strong schools: The indicators project on education organizing*. Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Imel, S. (2002). *Adult learning in cohort groups*. Practice Application Brief No. 24. ERIC Clearinghouse on adult, career and vocational education.
- National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (2003). *No dream denied: A pledge to America's children*. Washington, DC: NCTAF.
- Rodriguez, R. G. (2003). *The power of partnerships: How Alianza is reshaping bilingual teacher preparation* (IDRA Newsletter).
- Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Bryk, A. S., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2006). *The essential supports for school improvement*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- Seifert, K. (2005). *Learning about peers: A missed opportunity for educational psychology*. The Clearing House.

The Business Higher Education Forum. (2006). *Collaborating to address the math and science teacher shortage: A state-university-business partnership*. Washington, DC: BHEF.

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). *Eliminating barriers to improving teaching*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.