



Candidate Recruitment and Retention Strategies for Grow Your Own Educator Programs

By Kevin Entrekin

Mississippi State University Teacher Residency Program

One of the most important and time-consuming processes for a Grow Your Own (GYO) educator program can be finding and selecting candidates who will meet the program admission requirements, which can include prerequisite coursework, GPA requirements, and minimum score on standardized tests. Furthermore, GYO candidates must be a good fit for the school or district they will be working with and be willing and able to meet the shortage needs of the school or district.

Planning

Before outreach begins in the recruiting process for a GYO program, create a recruitment plan. Identify who will serve in what roles, the target audience, and the steps interested candidates will take to join the program. Plan to know the financial obligations a person will have, any financial aid that may be available (grants, scholarships, etc.), and the kind of commitment a candidate is expected to make once certification is complete.

When creating the recruitment plan, solicit input from key program players such as academic advisors, teachers and professors, mentors, high school guidance counselors, federal programs managers, HR departments, and K-12 administrators. These people can provide useful information on program expectations and help to identify target audiences for recruiting.

When selecting GYO recruiters, it is important to choose someone who fully understands the needs and requirements of the program so that they can provide accurate information and answer detailed questions. It is important to select a recruiter with charisma and the ability to motivate and inspire potential candidates with fun anecdotes and success stories. This person can talk with passion about the benefits of being a teacher, working with the school or district, and helping shape the lives of children.

Finally, identify the point person who will answer questions and be available to help interested candidates through the application and admissions process. In organizations such as school districts or college and university departments, it is easy for an inquiry to get lost or passed around without ever getting handled appropriately. Identifying a single point person whose contact information can be included in marketing and recruitment materials will help streamline the recruiting and onboarding process. This person may serve as a recruiter or in another role, as long as they are knowledgeable about all aspects of the program and can guide interested candidates through the application and selection process.

Who and Where to Recruit

The best strategies for recruiting often start from within the school, district, or community being served by the GYO program. Assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and others working in the school or community are usually the most interested candidates, as they are usually already invested in the success of the community being served.

Other groups to consider are high school and college students who are in teacher preparation programs. Speaking with high school and college students inside classrooms, or clubs and organizations geared toward teacher preparation, can help spread the word about the mission of the GYO program.

By the time recruitment begins, a needs assessment has probably been completed to determine discipline and content area shortages of the school or district being served, so connecting with the corresponding departments (such as foreign language, mathematics, or science) at the local college or university is another great place to focus recruiting efforts. Students in these academic departments may not have considered becoming a teacher or may not know what steps are required to obtain certification.

Recruitment Materials

Multiple forms of media should be used for recruiting purposes, including flyers, websites, emails, and social media platforms. When creating recruiting materials, use clear, consistent, and concise communication. All forms of media should lead to one final source of information, usually a website, that explains the goal of the GYO program.

Media Type	Considerations
Flyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generate interest but be concise about goal or purpose of the program• Create a call to action that includes next steps, dates for information session(s), how to apply, etc.• Use visuals: photos, partner logos (school, college/university, community, etc.)• Include contact information and/or link to website (QR codes are good)
Social media	<p><i>Same considerations as flyers, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use multiple platforms to reach audience (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn)• Hyperlink the website in posts and/or pictures• Coordinate with partners so information and posts are shared across multiple pages and platforms
Email blasts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use email lists to spread information• Give information that is a little more detailed than given on flyers• Include hyperlink(s) to the website
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Point people here, from all forms of outreach• House the most information in this space• Include detailed overview of the program, partner information, admissions criteria, academic information, course or credentialing rotations, and how to become part of the program

Interest Meetings

An effective way to spread the word about GYO programs is to host interest meetings. These can be in person, virtual using video conferencing software, or recorded and distributed digitally via GYO website, email, and social media. Use all forms of media to advertise the meeting at least two weeks in advance and, if possible, send reminders in the days and hours leading up to the meeting.

Interest meetings should allow enough time to explain the GYO program in detail. Potential candidates will have many questions and reservations, and the interest meeting is an opportunity to provide answers and ease concerns about the program's requirements.

Provide supporting documents and media—handouts, slideshows, and other supplemental materials—to highlight key points during the meeting as you present the program to those gathered. Build a designated question and answer segment into the meeting. Provide a sign-in sheet for attendees' names and contact information so communications can be sent following the meeting.

After the information session, regardless of the modality, send follow-up communications to everyone who attended within 72 hours of the event. Follow-ups, which can be done by email, postcard, phone, or text, make sure there are no unanswered questions, provide a brief summary about what was discussed, and outline next steps for those who are interested in the program.

Recruiting the “Unqualified”

A recruitment strategy that often gets overlooked is appealing to the “unqualified”—those who are interested in teaching, but do not meet the qualifications or credentials needed to start the certification process. Work with these potential candidates on an individual basis to create a pathway that will help qualify them in the future. Recruitment efforts should look toward the future in order to secure long-term success for the GYO program.

Program Retention

Retention is one of the most important aspects of a GYO program and has two aspects: (1) retention through the credentialing process, and (2) retention post-credential. Many programs that do a great job with recruitment do not fare so well with talent retention. Turnover can be detrimental to GYO programs, not just for a school, but to the community and students being served.

During the recruitment process, it is important to consider the potential permanency of a candidate within the school or geographic area. Often, people who are already invested in a community's success are likely to put in the work for teacher credentialing and to stay within that community.

Some GYO programs use contracts to ensure participants are retained once they have been credentialed. For example, a contract could state that part or all the participant's tuition and fees are paid throughout credentialing, as long as that person works within a particular school or district for a predetermined number of years. Other programs may offer a stipend or some sort of incentive for each year of service during or after the credentialing process.

Mentors

Some successful GYO programs have found that pairing participants with well-qualified mentors is a great way to retain qualified participants who turn into long-term teachers. Mentors provide the GYO participant with an extra layer of support, motivation, guidance, and accountability. Effective mentors are often practitioners who support and monitor participants' progress through certification, provide professional support or guidance, and help them navigate the start of their teaching careers. Mentors often collaborate with school administration, colleges, universities, or credentialing bodies to create success plans and set goals or benchmarks. Mentors can also provide resources, like remediation or access to counseling or financial services, to struggling participants.

Mentors can be anyone, from teachers or administrators within the school or district, college or university faculty and staff, parents and leaders within the community, who provide support and guidance. Ideally, mentors and program participants have a standing meeting time, such as weekly or monthly, with mentors providing ongoing coaching through check-ins while GYO participants develop their teaching competence. Even after GYO participants have completed their credentialing, mentors can be assigned to provide support to new or returning teachers.

Check-Ins and Reporting

GYO programs should have embedded systems to help monitor participants' progress and provide supports where necessary. This can be done through routine check-ins with participants or progress reporting, in partnership with the appropriate credentialing body, to catch potential problems as they emerge, rather than after it is too late. When it comes to retention, the best practice is to be proactive instead of reactive. For example, if the GYO program is in partnership with a college or university, use midterm grades and progress reports to monitor progression. If a potential issue is identified, employ academic advisors, professors, school administration, or mentors (within FERPA limitations)¹ to intervene early and often. Provide any guardrails available to steer the participant back on track.

Other Support

Many colleges, universities, and communities have a plethora of built-in support services that can help GYO participants with program success. Financial issues, failure to meet credentialing or coursework standards, mental health issues, and the regular stress and burnout of becoming a teacher can all lead to lowered retention rates.

To combat program dropout, be proactive and create an easily accessible and comprehensive guide of all the resources or “what to do if...” scenarios relevant to GYO participants. This list might include, for example, centers or resources that help with writing, mathematics, public speaking, interviewing, testing, general tutoring, counseling, and financial aid services. Schools and districts can also provide support through professional development, workshops, and continued education.

Retention is a group effort and GYO programs should be created with retention in mind, designed around providing supports for success. When GYO programs have recruited well-qualified candidates and provided targeted supports, the outcome should be highly qualified teachers who are invested in the community and ready to teach for years to come.

¹ For more about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) see explanation on the U.S. Department of Education website at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>