

Grow Your Own: Preparing Teacher Candidates to Teach and Stay in Local Schools

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About EdPrepLab

EdPrepLab, an initiative of the Learning Policy Institute and Bank Street Graduate School of Education, aims to strengthen educator preparation by supporting learning and sharing research and practices among programs, school districts, and policymakers. EdPrepLab supports programs and informs policies that incorporate the science of learning and development to enable deeper learning and equity, working to expand these approaches nationally and internationally.

About This Brief

This brief describes how the University of the District of Columbia prepares teacher candidates to be ready and willing to teach and stay in the local school system. Their strategies include recruiting local candidates; preparing teachers to implement research-based, instructional practices; centering race, class, and culture in preparation courses; and empowering candidates to address the needs of students and communities in DC through advocacy.

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Schools across the United States are facing a teacher shortage. As reported by the Learning Policy Institute, workforce reports and state agency documents covering the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years indicate that more than 300,000 teaching positions were either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments, representing about 1 in 10 of all teaching positions nationally.¹ This has left many districts scrambling not only to recruit additional teachers but also to determine ways to retain existing teachers. This can be especially difficult in urban areas, where schools often must address poverty, homelessness, and large populations of students who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In Washington, DC, although these realities make it difficult to retain teachers, there are some bright spots. Recent data from The New Teacher Project reveals that, in comparison to candidates prepared in other programs in DC, teachers who graduated from the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) feel a stronger desire to teach in DC Public Schools and feel more prepared to do so. As one 2022 graduate remarked:

Even though I lacked the courage to start this years ago, I am so appreciative of everything that I have learned this year and all of the great educators that I met. I feel more prepared now to lead, teach, and make an impact on my profession with the tools that I received in this program.

This brief describes how UDC prepares teacher candidates so that they are ready and willing to teach and stay in the local school system. UDC offers three undergraduate programs in education (in elementary education, early childhood education, and special education) and seven graduate programs (an MA in

Early Childhood Education; MA in Teaching in Elementary Concentration; and MA in Teaching in Secondary English, Secondary Math, Music, Secondary Science, and Secondary Social Studies concentrations).

Each of UDC's programs accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation leads to initial licensure in the District of Columbia. UDC's approach to preparing teachers includes:

- recruiting local candidates who are native Washingtonians;
- preparing teachers to use research-based instructional practices that promote student learning and development;
- centering race, class, and culture as indicators that affect teaching and learning in introductory, methods, and clinical courses; and
- empowering candidates to advocate for the needs of students and communities.

Recruiting Local Candidates

The University of the District of Columbia is an urban, public, land-grant, historically Black university located in the nation's capital. It is the only public institution of higher education in DC and was established specifically to serve the needs of the citizens of the District of Columbia. From its inception, the education program at the University of the District of Columbia has sought to attract DC residents who possess a desire to teach. Forty percent of the graduate candidates and 80% of the undergraduate candidates of the past 3 years were born, raised, and educated in DC. When asked during their initial interview why they would want to teach in DC public schools, candidates often expressed a desire to "give back" to their communities. As one graduate student stated in the initial admissions interview: "I am the product of a high-needs school. Lots of the students in my high school needed a lot of extra love. I want to give back in the subject that I love."

The education faculty see this demographic as an asset and welcome this insider perspective in the program, honoring teacher candidates' lived experiences and the unique funds of knowledge they bring to their studies. Some teacher candidates have requested clinical internship placements inside schools that have perennially struggled to meet student achievement targets, describing a familiarity with the socioeconomic conditions that impede student achievement that are specific to those schools. Furthermore, cooperating teachers and university supervisors have noted that some candidates enter the clinical internship with instant rapport with students and parents, leaning into these funds of knowledge as tangible enhancements to classroom management practices and instructional delivery.

To increase efforts to recruit “homegrown” teacher candidates, in 2022 UDC started a Grow Your Own scholarship program. This scholarship is designed specifically to recruit candidates who graduated from DC public high schools and currently live in DC.

Using Research-Based Instructional Practices

Both undergraduate and graduate candidates enrolled in the UDC teacher prep program engage in rigorous coursework designed to strengthen their knowledge about effective teaching practices. The cornerstone of this work is based in teaching candidates to implement developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant instruction that acknowledges their students’ knowledge and skills, while setting clear and specific goals for their students’ growth. UDC achieves this through a combination of relevant research, instructor modeling, and clinical practice.

In developing coursework, all UDC faculty seek to expose students to best practices grounded in research. Candidates are expected to read, analyze, critique, and apply concepts from their class readings. Students are invited to examine ideas they may have never considered and determine how these theories shape their own thinking about teaching and learning in urban contexts. UDC students routinely synthesize concepts and skills developed within coursework with experiences culled from clinical fieldwork assignments. Because clinical observations in diverse school settings are aligned with method courses, students often make reflective connections that triangulate published scholarship, methods, and materials with direct observation of instructional excellence in every corner of DC. A graduate student in elementary education responded to an exam question analyzing professional literature by noting:

Deep and caring relationships cost! They require an investment of money, time, effort, emotions, painful self-assessments, reflection, self-sacrifice, and hard work. However, without that investment there is no appreciation of the honor we have been given as educators to make a difference in the lives of the most vulnerable members of our society, thereby making a difference in the world. Can teachers who have not committed to make this great investment still teach in our urban schools? They can, but they often do not last very long. They become a part of a statistic known as chronic teacher turnover. It is said that teaching is a calling. Teaching in urban schools is a calling on steroids. As I read this article, I am reminded ... to connect with students on a personal level and believe in them because it is also true that students exceed even their own perceived limitations with teachers they love. Yes, caring costs, but with great investment comes great reward.

A graduate student in the Secondary Social Studies program used an academic research poster program assessment to visually depict the components and complications required to effectively teach sensitive recent history topics. The student constructed a mind map to capture the complexity of such an imperative in the teaching of social studies, combining attention to state standards, effective lesson planning, and inquiry-based pedagogies with the construction of a respectful, caring classroom in which students feel supported in sharing their views. (See [Figure 1](#).)

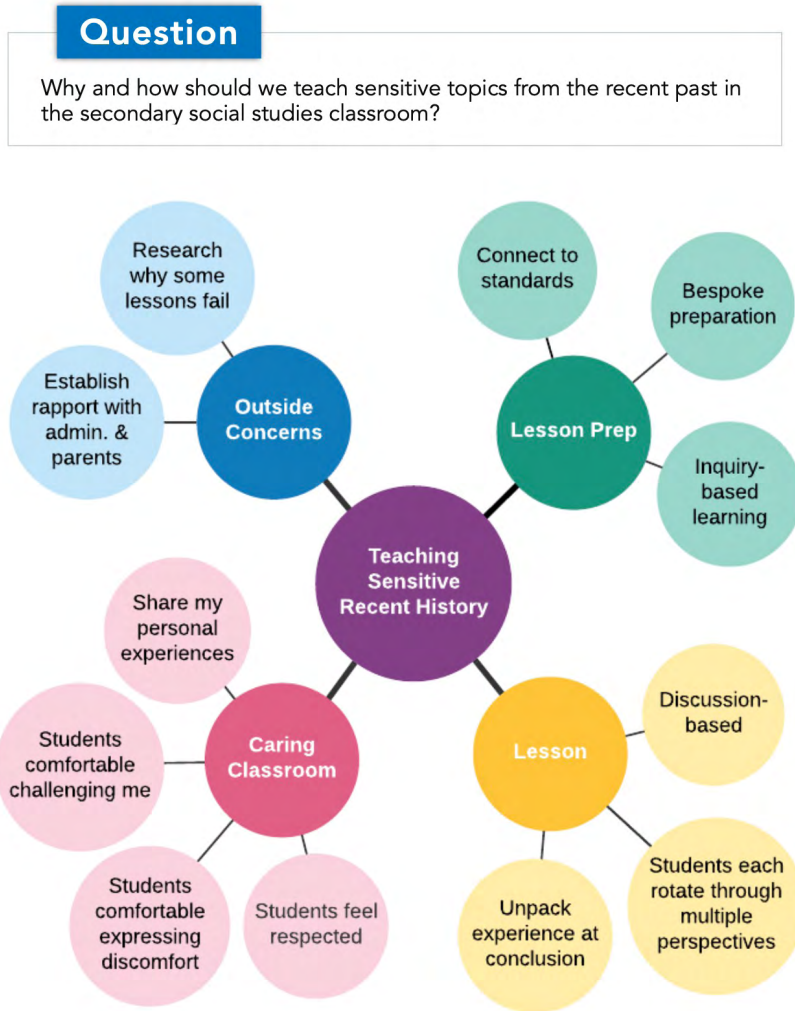
After a clinical observation experience, a student applied insights from visiting schools to compose a response to a journal article discussing the importance of safe spaces for students:

The chapter focused on creating a safe environment for students inside the classroom. It is my belief that this is vital to students' success. Students should feel safe when working with others, sharing their opinions, and not feeling judged amongst their peers for their differences. If students aren't able to do so, the environment created is not suitable for them and modifications are needed.

Additionally, all students in the UDC education program are taught by instructors who model excellent teaching. Every full-time faculty member and all adjuncts have taught for many years in public school systems. Most have taught in the same DC, Maryland, and Virginia school systems in which candidates are placed. The majority of the adjuncts are still working professionals in the public school system. Those who are not still working are recently retired from the school system. Faculty members are intentional about modeling instructional practices that students can then use in their own classrooms. Students and faculty also spend time debriefing the "instructional moves" and thought behind the practices that faculty members select for various aspects of the lesson. Knowing that faculty are or have been public school teachers makes students more likely to try out these same strategies when they are teaching.

Finally, during the clinical teaching phase of the program, students are placed in partner schools throughout the eight wards of the District of Columbia. The first 60 hours of placement require candidates to rotate through various schools and wards. This affords candidates the opportunity to see excellent teaching across the city, not just in privileged socioeconomic settings. This helps to debunk myths that candidates might have about what kids across the city—and their well-prepared teachers—can and cannot do. When candidates take over classrooms to earn clinical hours, they are paired with cooperating teachers who principals have identified as having effective instructional practices, top evaluation reviews, and the coaching skills necessary to mentor emerging teachers. These practicing teachers serve as mentors and guides, helping candidates to develop their own teaching practices.

Figure 1. Mind Map for Teaching Sensitive History Topics



Source: Provided by a teacher candidate at the University of District of Columbia. (2024).

Centering Race, Class, and Culture

The UDC faculty have branded the university’s education program as an “urban education” program. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, candidates grapple with what it means to teach in an urban school system. To best prepare candidates for the realities of teaching in these systems, UDC’s courses put conversations about race, class, and culture at the forefront of the curriculum. These conversations begin in the introductory courses students take when they enter the major during their junior year or during their first courses upon entering the graduate program. These courses address how race, class, and culture

affect schools and learning in urban contexts. Assignments are designed to help students dismantle their biases through an examination of their own internalized beliefs around “urban contexts” and then facilitate hard conversations about these beliefs.

At the undergraduate level, one such introductory course is Children, Youth, and Urban Schools. In this course, candidates explore contemporary and historical notions of urban education. The course emphasizes the study of urban children, which encompasses sociology, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and economics, and the ways those children experience the education landscape in the United States. The course explores how urban education has been represented in media and culture, how those representations affect students’ expectations and biases, and how perceptions and stereotypes of urban children often dictate the experiences urban children have in classrooms.

At the graduate level, students take Introduction to Urban Teaching and Learning. This course is designed to orient aspiring teachers to basic premises, recent controversies, and unspoken assumptions in the local, national, and global discourses on urban education, as well as survey research and scholarship on urban education. It also provides an opportunity for participants to articulate their personal stance on teaching and learning in urban, underresourced schools.

These courses immerse students in interactive experiences that encourage dialogue and difficult conversations about race, culture, and education in U.S. urban public schools. Some of this immersion is recursive, providing discourse in which students can situate themselves within common—and problematic—narratives about urban education. Students may grapple with questions such as: How did you react to reading an article describing a highly successful STEM program in the poorest ward of the city? In what ways does your personal philosophy of education imagine yourself to be some kind of savior for troubled youth? Why does the media tend to name schools that are geographically located adjacent to a violent incident if there are no indications the incident was in any way related to school operations? Through these kinds of discussions, candidates can interrogate whether narratives of the urban education landscape have affected their expectations of the capabilities of urban children.

At the midterm point of the Children, Youth, and Urban Schools course, students were asked to “apply course readings, other course materials, and in-class discussions to their personal beliefs, politics, priorities, and paradigms about urban youth, urban education, and urban educators.” Many students crafted reflective texts that allowed various intersectional identities and lived experiences to serve as the lens through which they formed an assessment of urban education as a concept circulated in society.

For example, students noted that *Clueless*, a film about affluent high school kids in Los Angeles, doesn’t trigger an urban education label, while *Cooley High*, a film about poor high school

students in Detroit, seemed to demonstrate typical negative urban markers. One student noted that they did not consider the school they were working in to be a stereotypical urban school because the student population included families without financial need. Describing a school within the DC city limits, the student noted that the parents in the school provided supplemental financial resources that prevented teachers from struggling with classroom resources based on a lack of funding. In this way, students were invited to make discrete observations and form ideas about differences in the educational experiences of urban youth based on class variations, racial identities, language backgrounds, and cultural traditions.

In the graduate-level course Introduction to Urban Teaching and Learning, students are given case-based scenarios to help them think through complex situations that might arise in urban schools. In the fall of 2022, students regularly responded to vignettes created by [BranchEd](#). At the end of the course, students were asked to describe the evolution of their thinking about the impact of race and culture in the classroom and how this might influence their instructional practices. One candidate noted: “While I’ve always thought that race/culture can impact learning, I didn’t really understand how or what I should do with that knowledge. I think I now have some very specific methods and tools that I can use.”

Another candidate highlighted the importance of self-reflection when they stated: “In my instructional practices, this had an important role in rethinking my implicit and explicit biases and helped me prioritize time for reflection on my actions and the way I perceive my reality and my students’ reality.”

These comments and reflections are particularly noteworthy because most of the candidates in the class are Black or brown. The reflections have demonstrated the necessity of these conversations even within racial groups that mirror the surrounding K-12 student population. In education circles it is often assumed that conversations about race and culture are necessary only with those whose race and culture differ from those of their students. It is imperative that all teachers take the time to reflect and understand the beliefs they have internalized about race and culture and how those beliefs impact the ways in which they show up as teachers in the classroom. This can be eye-opening for students at times, as evidenced by one candidate’s reflective comments:

This course has charged me to be more aware of my own implicit biases and to be intentional about creating classroom environments that support equity in access to learning opportunity.... I can admit at times I would be so focused on my Black children that I would not provide as much support to non-Black students because it was my bias that they were always receiving more, so that I needed to overcompensate for the Black children. ... It is my responsibility and charge to create safe cultural spaces for all of my students.

These moments can be transformative for candidates who have assumed they would “naturally” exhibit equitable practices in their classrooms simply because they look like their students. This faulty assumption discounts the inherent biases that many of us develop over time simply by being members of a shared society and that society’s shared values. Candidates discover that a commitment to equity is a commitment to reflective action. In turn, without these reflective moments, teachers of all racial backgrounds may unintentionally respond to their students based on these unexamined biases.

Advocating for Student and Community Needs

A crucial element of being an effective teacher in urban schools is partnering with families and communities.² This includes seeking solutions to identified problems and serving as an advocate for students and the community. UDC’s program is committed to developing well-informed professionals who contribute to the field both inside and outside the classroom. The introductory education courses assist students in developing these skills by implementing projects that encourage them to closely examine the needs of the surrounding Washington, DC, community.

Undergraduate students are assigned a group project that requires them to “identify a ‘problem’ or ‘project’ that the group deems urgent in the positive development of the DC-area urban landscape, conduct first-person research, and develop a multimedia presentation.” The emphasis in this work is for students to focus on the *positive development* of the community in which they teach. This moves candidates away from deficit thinking and instead empowers them to be advocates and change agents.

Some of the undergraduate students constructed projects to affirm their reflective understanding of the experiences they had as youth in DC schools, including a Latino student who participated in a group that surveyed teacher opinions about instructing English learners. The survey suggested that teachers are highly unprepared to meet the unique teaching challenges of ESL students but that the same respondents were eager and interested in professional development that introduces them to the strategies, content knowledge, and other methods needed. The student noted:

Stand and Deliver ... does not represent ESL students or Hispanic students because we do not need a superhero teacher.... Our survey results surprised me. As an ESL student, I was happy to know that there are teachers who want to communicate with my people and learn about my culture.

A different group of students created a podcast titled *Why We Must Disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. The podcast included excerpts from ethnographic interviews with members of the community who discussed the disciplinary procedures they experienced as

K-12 students in DC and Prince George's County, MD, schools. In the podcast, an interviewee described his high school days:

Speaking from personal experience, depending on what the mistake was, you definitely could be criminalized. It's all about perception. It's all about what the teacher or whoever, the authority at the time, what they think of you. If you were from a certain neighborhood, you would automatically be [labeled] a troublemaker, you would automatically be criminalized. They were just basically waiting for you to do something to confirm their theory of you.

A member of the group noted in class that the project began with discussing with a friend how the course readings were offering language to describe frustrations the student remembered from high school. Indeed, many of the projects brought back memories. Students used classroom engagement around the group projects to posit solutions and interventions. Students' various recommendations for classroom teachers, school administrators, and professors in educator preparation programs suggested solutions across the education policy spectrum.

The culminating project for graduate students requires them to identify a current issue in the field of education that is of significance to them. Students are encouraged to consider things they have observed during clinical classroom observations and topics discussed in their courses. They then conduct research on the topic and ultimately propose solutions. As of 2024, students are required to have one of their solutions align with the [Family Engagement Core Competencies](#) released by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement in 2022. They present their ideas in an academic research poster and submit a 1-page reflection discussing the ways the project informed their thinking and how it might impact their future instructional practices.

Research topics have covered a wide range of issues, including increasing the number of Black male educators in early-grade education, pay inequities for early childhood education teachers, integrating arts in math instruction, and closing the achievement gap for English learners. Regardless of the focus area, UDC faculty emphasize the importance of using research to strengthen and legitimize teachers' voices. In addition, students learn that research is a powerful tool for advocating for themselves, their students, and families. Students' reflective comments after completing the research assignment highlight how the project shaped their thinking. For example, one student remarked:

My research has confirmed that culturally responsive teaching is the only way to support the needs of every student. That means implementing socially just concepts into the lesson can impact students personally and educationally. Students develop a civic responsibility and begin to take informed action in their community with things that interest them.

Other students acknowledged that their project provided them with the skills to advocate for specific programs to benefit their student population and make specific improvements to their instructional practices. One music education student stated:

Collecting information for this project provided me with a thorough approach to advocate for the revival of music programs in urban schools to allow students an outlet that may impact their lives during and beyond high school. Understanding the culture of the city will guide me to effectively instruct the adolescents who absorb their environment, whether harmonious or hectic.

Finally, many students believed that the research project renewed their sense of commitment to their students' communities:

I will be more invested in ensuring that I am a part of my students' communities so that I not only talk the talk but walk the walk about being a true change in the lives of my students and their community.

After graduating from the program, some candidates have shared how their research projects led them to advocate for change in their schools. One graduate remarked:

During my research, I saw the importance of integrating the arts in my instruction, especially for my kindergarten students to make connection to the learning. Now that I am kindergarten grade level chair this year, I advocate for arts integration across the classes. I also meet with the ESOL team, and they share feedback to make my arts integration stronger and sometimes implement it themselves when they're pulling their small groups with them.

Another recent graduate met with current students and shared how they used knowledge from their research project to advocate for professional learning opportunities for teachers. The former student shared the following:

My research project was about the impact Black educators have on Black male students. After my research project, I went to my principal and shared some of the resources I discovered and asked if they could be shared broadly. With the support of my admin team, we have done two book studies. The goal is that we become Black educators that create a community where all students, especially our Black boys, feel safe, loved, and empowered to become the best versions of themselves.

These candidate reflections demonstrate how UDC graduates are having a strong impact not only in their own classrooms but also in their schools and communities as teacher leaders compelled by their commitment to advocacy.

Conclusion

The concepts of race, class, and culture are woven throughout the fabric of the educational system. Though at times we try to act as if they don't matter, race, class, and culture sit as the ever-present elephants in the room and threaten to undermine the best efforts of educator preparation programs (EPPs) that are not intentional about acknowledging their effect on classrooms and student learning. EPPs that hope to prepare teachers who are fully equipped and confident about teaching must consider the people who are recruited into the profession and the ways these individuals are instructed, mentored, and developed. Selecting candidates who are from the same communities where they will eventually teach makes the candidates' cultural identities, experiences, and other funds of knowledge rich lenses through which teaching becomes the fulfillment of personal paradigms. The opportunity to serve one's home community, one's neighbors, and the children of the children with whom one was raised creates student-to-teacher and parent-to-teacher connections that offer no real instructional equal in the educator preparation scope and sequence.

Once these candidates enter EPPs, discussions cannot center on content exclusively. Teacher candidates must be given opportunities to consider the challenges posed by race, class, and culture while simultaneously examining their own race, class, and culture biases. Indeed, among the most powerful of reflective assignments and classroom conversations are those that concern the need to examine all potential spaces where bias might live, including those one may harbor and hold about one's home communities. It is clear that the benefit of embracing a Grow Your Own student base does not negate the need for reflective analysis about preconceived notions of the classrooms that preservice teachers might enter and the children they might serve, even when those teachers are from the communities in which they will educate. This is the only way these future educators can be genuinely prepared to handle the challenges of today's diverse classrooms.

When teachers feel prepared to face these challenges, they are more inclined to remain in the classroom, thus improving retention rates. When educators are given the tools to examine all aspects of their teaching, including their underlying belief systems, they can develop into more effective educators. As one of the UDC students asked at the end of class, "If an educator doesn't acknowledge societal disparities informed by race, can they be considered effective?"

About the Authors

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Endnotes

- 1 Franco, M., & Patrick, S. K. (2023). *State teacher shortages: Teaching positions left vacant or filled by teachers without full certification*. Learning Policy Institute.
- 2 Daniel, J., Quartz, K. H., & Oakes, J. (2019). Teaching in community schools: Creating conditions for deeper learning. *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 453-480.