EdPrepLab

From Paraprofessional to Teacher: A Streamlined Path to Certification at Alverno College

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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 highlights Alverno College's Paraprofessional to Teacher Licensure program, which enables paraprofessionals to build on their classroom experience while completing focused coursework to earn a bachelor's degree and teacher certification. It examines core design features, including how faculty draw on the practical expertise paraprofessionals bring from their school roles. The brief also presents key program outcomes and offers faculty perspectives on cultivating supportive developmental relationships and designing meaningful learning experiences grounded in the science of learning and development.

Introduction

Recruiting and retaining excellent teachers remains a pressing challenge for schools across the country,[1] as traditional pipelines are not producing enough educators to meet current demands.[2] This has created an urgent need for high-quality preparation programs to design innovative certification pathways that address workforce shortages without compromising standards. One promising approach is the Grow Your Own (GYO) model, which recruits future educators from within local communities to expand a diverse and community-connected teacher pipeline.[3] A key variation of this model focuses on paraprofessionals—individuals who work closely with students and teachers but lack formal certification.

GYO pathways for paraprofessionals enable aspiring teachers to complete licensure requirements while continuing in their school-based roles.[4] This model reimagines traditional teacher preparation by incorporating lived experience and culturally responsive, place-based learning.[5] Not only does it address staffing needs, but it also supports paraprofessionals and strengthens school communities by elevating trusted, locally rooted educators into fully certified teaching positions.

Paraprofessionals are uniquely positioned to transition into lead teacher roles due to their direct experience working with students, their deep understanding of school dynamics, and their established community connections.[6] This familiarity with classroom practices and the relationships they have built with students and staff often makes them well suited to thrive as teachers. However, the traditional teacher certification route can pose significant

barriers for working adults, limiting access to this opportunity. To support paraprofessionals aspiring to become teachers, preparation programs must "structurally adapt to them and their situations"[7] by offering flexible, accessible pathways that recognize their existing commitments and leverage their school-based experience.

Research shows that nontraditional pathways to teaching are especially attractive to paraprofessionals because these routes reduce financial barriers, allowing candidates to earn certification while maintaining their income—an option rarely available through conventional teacher preparation.[8] However, choosing an alternative pathway does not have to mean sacrificing quality. These programs must still offer rigorous, comprehensive preparation that builds strong pedagogical knowledge, effective instructional practices, and the skills to support diverse learners. Maintaining high standards ensures that paraprofessionals are not only well prepared but also positioned to thrive as effective teachers who reflect and understand the communities they serve.

Alverno College in Milwaukee, WI, has embraced this comprehensive approach through its Paraprofessional to Teacher Licensure program (Para-to-Teacher program). It has created a streamlined path to licensure for practicing paraprofessionals who have an associate's degree, or at least 48 college credits, but who have not yet earned a bachelor's degree. Since its launch in 2017, the Para-to-Teacher program has successfully graduated 119 candidates, demonstrating its effectiveness in contributing to a sustainable pipeline of high-quality educators committed to their communities. The pathway is grounded in the science of learning and development (SoLD), an interdisciplinary body of research that draws from neuroscience, psychology, education, and related fields to explain how people learn, grow, and thrive.[9] Using SoLD principles, Alverno's Para-to-Teacher pathway exemplifies a practical and effective model for preparing local teacher candidates. This brief describes Alverno's approach, which enables paraprofessionals to build on their on-the-job experience and complete focused coursework to earn a bachelor's degree and teacher certification.

Designing a Para-to-Teacher Pathway

Alverno College is a small, distinguished Catholic liberal arts institution, with more than 50 years of expertise in an abilities-based educational framework that prioritizes outcomes over traditional grading systems. All students, including teacher candidates, are required to demonstrate their learning through evidence-based assessments that emphasize the practical application of knowledge and skills. This model is especially valuable for paraprofessionals aspiring to become teachers, as it acknowledges their prior experience and focuses on

demonstrating their readiness to teach, rather than simply meeting traditional grading benchmarks. This method promotes deeper learning and encourages reflection, making it an effective approach to teacher preparation that aligns with SoLD principles.

Alverno's Para-to-Teacher program enables paraprofessionals to earn a Bachelor of Science in Education and obtain licensure for either Education-Birth to 3rd Grade (EBT) or Education-Kindergarten to 9th Grade (KMS) within 18-30 months, depending on the transfer credits they bring. Additionally, candidates have the option to pursue minors that lead to secondary licensure in high-shortage areas, such as English as a Second Language (ESL), ESL with a bilingual endorsement, and Special Education Cross-Categorical licensure.

Alverno's program also addresses the need for a more diverse and fully licensed teaching workforce by reflecting the demographics of the local student population. Notably, 47% of program alumni teach in Milwaukee Public Schools, where 91% of students are children of color and 82% face economic challenges. Among currently enrolled candidates, 47% of Alverno program participants identify as people of color, and 33% are multilingual, reflecting the program's commitment to cultivating educators who bring cultural and linguistic assets to their classrooms.

Since all candidates must be employed in a school setting to qualify for admission, Alverno's Para-to-Teacher program is offered in both hybrid and fully online formats, with a blend of synchronous and asynchronous components. Courses follow an 8-week schedule and are held in the evenings to ensure accessibility. Grounded in research-based practices, curriculum emphasizes instructional effectiveness, equity-focused teaching strategies, and mentorship from experienced faculty. The program runs year-round, intentionally providing a continuous and seamless preparation experience.

Required fieldwork is integrated into candidates' existing paraprofessional roles, allowing them to fulfill clinical requirements without leaving their positions or sacrificing income. During the student teaching semester, candidates take on full teaching responsibilities and temporarily step away from their paraprofessional duties. To support this transition, school districts—often in collaboration with Alverno—offer a range of resources to help candidates successfully complete certification requirements. Mentor teachers, selected by school administrators in alignment with Alverno's guidelines, provide essential guidance and support during fieldwork and student teaching. Alongside this mentorship, candidates receive personalized advising, regular feedback, and ongoing opportunities to apply their learning in real classroom settings, creating a strong foundation for their transition into lead teaching roles.

Program Outcomes

Alverno's Para-to-Teacher model effectively prepares highly qualified, adaptable educators who are well equipped to meet classroom demands and contribute to improved student outcomes across the state. Including Milwaukee Public Schools, program alumni serve in 21 school districts across Wisconsin, representing diverse educational settings: 83% in public schools, 11% in private institutions, and 6% in charter schools. These placements span rural, suburban, and urban contexts, reflecting the program's reach and impact. While many graduates are hired as teachers in the same districts where they served as paraprofessionals, others accept positions elsewhere based on personal, professional, or logistical needs. Regardless of where they teach, graduates consistently report feeling well prepared for their roles as lead teachers, a testament to the program's success in supporting paraprofessionals transitioning into the teaching profession.

One program alum noted:

> I felt incredibly prepared for my current teaching position. Being able to work as a para in the classroom gave me real-life teaching experience prior to actual student teaching, which prepared me even more. I was able to work at a school and learn the ins and outs of things, develop meaningful relationships with students and families, and be a part of my school community on a deeper level than just a regular student teacher. I felt very prepared and that I had a lot of experience and understanding for what teaching would be like.

Another participant echoed this sentiment, sharing what she gained from the combination of coursework and on-the-job experiences:

> I felt well prepared for my current teaching position due to my extensive training and previous teaching experience. My education provided a solid foundation in pedagogical theory and classroom management techniques. Additionally, hands-on experience through student teaching and professional development workshops equipped me with practical skills and confidence to handle diverse classroom situations effectively.

In addition to gathering feedback from alumni, Alverno faculty actively sought input from principals at schools where program graduates were currently teaching. With the graduates' permission, principals were invited to complete an Alverno-designed survey that assessed seven key teaching competencies. Responses from 13 principals provided important insights into the program's influence. Overall, the responses were overwhelmingly positive, with principals affirming the effective preparation paraprofessionals received. Nearly all respondents gave high ratings in key areas: relationship building (12 out of 13), lesson

planning (11), content knowledge (11), collaboration (11), and professionalism (11). Additionally, nine principals highly rated graduates' ability to create engaging lessons and cultivate a positive classroom community. These findings further validate the program's effectiveness in equipping paraprofessionals with the critical skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to succeed as classroom teachers.

Comments from hiring principals highlight the program's ability to prepare new teachers to create welcoming, engaging, and inclusive learning environments. One principal remarked, "If I could duplicate what she has been able to do from her transition as para to educator, I would!" Another noted, "[This teacher] has built one of the most inclusive, kind, caring classrooms I have seen in 25 years! Her students *want* to come to school!" These testimonials reflect the program's ability to prepare paraprofessionals not only to excel in instruction but also to build student-centered classroom cultures. Instances of lower ratings were rare and generally related to the broader transition into a lead teaching role—particularly in areas such as managing time demands outside of school hours, maintaining consistent attendance, and initiating direct communication with families.

Building on Professional Experience

Alverno faculty credit much of the program's success to the deep experience paraprofessionals bring with them. Survey data from approximately 120 program graduates show that participants had worked anywhere from 2 to 25 years as paraprofessionals before becoming certified teachers, with most transitioning after 2 to 5 years. These educators are not starting from scratch—they know what it is like to be in a school, and they see what teachers do every day.

This familiarity allows faculty to link course content to candidates' daily classroom practice, offering a practical and relevant learning experience that supports paraprofessionals in developing the skills and confidence needed to succeed as lead teachers. One faculty member shared:

> I love teaching the paras because they already understand what it's like to work in a school all day, every day. I don't have to spend time preparing them for that, so we can really focus on the content. Traditional weekday undergrads need time practicing leading a classroom, figuring out routines and procedures, learning how to collaborate with colleagues, and forming relationships with students. Paras already have experience with those aspects of teaching, so it's more about elevating and refining those skills instead of developing them for the first time.

The Para-to-Teacher pathway builds on candidates' existing classroom knowledge and experience, helping them to draw from their paraprofessional responsibilities and connect their insights to course content. This connection is reinforced through collaborative activities in which candidates work with peers, Alverno instructors, and on-site colleagues to develop lesson plans, analyze curriculum materials, review student work, and evaluate assessments. These course experiences are designed to deepen candidates' understanding of teaching and learning while aligning with their ongoing work in PreK-12 classrooms. By integrating their lived experience with new pedagogical knowledge and immediately applying what they learn, candidates gain the instructional tools needed to teach and support children well.

The job-embedded structure of the program supports a deep understanding of learning, learners, and development by allowing paraprofessionals to apply course concepts in their daily work. The continuous integration of theory and practice supports authentic learning and enables rich collaboration among candidates, faculty, school mentors, and Alverno clinical supervisors. Regular discussions grounded in real classroom experiences enhance the relevance of coursework and reinforce practical skill development. One candidate reflected, "I had a meaningful experience at Alverno. I think working as a para and working on my degree in Alverno really made a difference for me." The continuous connection between their daily work and academic learning allows paraprofessionals to gain the skills necessary to become teachers through an accelerated route that honors their years of service.

Leveraging Diverse Experiences

Alverno instructors take a personalized approach to teacher preparation, recognizing the wide range of experiences paraprofessionals bring to the program. Because paraprofessionals serve in many different roles, their backgrounds are rich but varied. One candidate might work exclusively with high school students ages 16-21 with intellectual disabilities, another might support a single 1st-grade classroom all day, while a third might assist across multiple grades, from 1st through 6th. Although these roles draw on common teaching competencies, each requires distinct skills tailored to specific classroom contexts. To address this variability, Alverno has intentionally designed its program to create space for candidates to share their expertise with one another.

For example, the program includes two literacy courses in which candidates with experience in primary classrooms learn alongside those who have worked in middle or upper grades. In the first course, focused on phonological awareness and decoding, candidates with experience teaching kindergarten often take the lead in analyzing early writing samples and modeling foundational literacy instruction. In the second course, which addresses more advanced topics, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency, those with experience in upper grades lead projects that integrate literacy across content areas. This intentional blend

of expertise creates a collaborative environment where paraprofessionals learn from one another and expand their instructional knowledge beyond their current roles, preparing them to teach a broader range of learners.

Candidates also supplement their on-the-job experience with fieldwork across multiple grade levels to ensure they meet the full scope of licensure requirements. For example, in the Early Childhood Methods and Field course, all candidates are expected to design and deliver developmentally appropriate lessons in kindergarten classrooms, gaining essential hands-on experience with younger learners. For those whose current paraprofessional roles do not include kindergarten, program faculty collaborate with school administrators to adjust schedules and arrange placements that meet course expectations. Additionally, when learning to implement instructional strategies, such as interactive read-alouds, all candidates practice the technique with their students and are also encouraged to work with teachers at their schools to use the strategy in other grade levels. These kinds of intentional adjustments require close coordination among faculty, school leaders, and cooperating teachers to align field experiences with the specific requirements of the program.

Enacting SoLD Principles

SoLD principles are woven throughout the design of Alverno's program, serving both as a guiding framework and a practical tool to help candidates build the skills needed to apply deeper learning strategies in PreK-12 classrooms. One synthesis of these principles lists the following components as critical for teacher preparation:

- curriculum rooted in a deep understanding of learning, learners, and development;

- development of skills, habits, and mindsets of an equitable educator;

- rich, developmental learning opportunities;

- pedagogical alignment and modeling; and

- supportive developmental relationships in communities of practice.[10]

By engaging with these principles as adult learners, candidates gain both the theoretical insight and practical foundation required to implement SoLD practices in their own classrooms, promoting more equitable and student-centered learning environments.

Supportive Developmental Relationships

SoLD design principles for teacher preparation emphasize the importance of supportive developmental relationships in creating environments where individuals feel respected, valued, and encouraged to grow. Alverno's Para-to-Teacher program exemplifies this approach by cultivating a culture of support that starts with the relationships between instructors and candidates. Faculty structure interactions to be meaningful and responsive, engaging with candidates in the classroom and during field experiences. Many instructors teach several courses within the program, allowing them to develop sustained relationships with candidates over time. This continuity adds to the sense of community for paraprofessionals and provides ongoing opportunities for faculty to develop strong connections with candidates. One faculty member reflected:

> Teaching multiple courses throughout the para-to-teacher licensure program
> has not only allowed me to build deeper relationships with the candidates
> but has also allowed me to observe their progress and growth over time.
> This allowed me to tailor my feedback to each individual student's needs and
> development throughout the program.

Because most courses require paraprofessionals to apply what they are learning directly to their on-the-job roles, faculty gain a deep understanding of each candidate's classroom context and instructional practices. This insight allows instructors to offer specific support, helping candidates address real-world challenges and refine their skills in practical ways. Through this sustained, practice-based mentorship, paraprofessionals receive the personalized guidance needed to navigate the transition to a lead teaching role with greater confidence and competence. One candidate shared:

> I had a great [faculty] mentor. Any time I had questions during the day, I would
> bring them to class and ask for guidance. It was easier to apply because it was
> specific for me. I think that itself was big. My education was specific for me
> and what I need in my classroom.

Faculty understand the unique circumstances of working adult learners, whose responsibilities usually differ significantly from those of traditional college students. They recognize that most of these candidates juggle significant personal and professional responsibilities, and they seek to support paraprofessionals in meeting their goals while navigating these demands. One faculty member noted:

> It's common for students in this program to work multiple jobs. Many of
> them are single parents and have to earn more than their para job pays in
> order to provide for their families. This certification will allow them to earn a

more livable teacher salary, but it's very challenging to balance work, school, and family responsibilities while they're in the program. These are motivated students—if a traditional program worked for them, they would have already done it.

Instructors demonstrate deep respect for each candidate's individual circumstances, ensuring that all students receive the support they need to succeed. For example, in Differentiated Instruction and Assessment—the final course before student teaching—candidates meet individually with the instructor to review lesson plans and assessment designs. These meetings provide personalized feedback, helping candidates refine their instructional approaches and align their goals with course outcomes. Acknowledging the demands that candidates face, faculty schedule these meetings at times and in formats that accommodate candidates' availability. As one instructor shared:

I've often had quick virtual meetings with a student while her baby is in the highchair next to her or her older child is across the table doing homework. So often, a quick conversation can give the student the clarity they need to get their work done efficiently.

This flexibility makes learning more accessible and also reinforces a culture of support, enabling paraprofessionals to stay engaged and meet high academic expectations.

Alverno's Para-to-Teacher program uses a cohort model to build supportive developmental relationships and establish communities of practice among candidates. Faculty have observed that this structure encourages a strong sense of collaboration that extends beyond scheduled class time. For example, while many courses include synchronous meetings every other week, candidates often choose to connect during the off weeks to share ideas, work on assignments, and support one another. These informal, peer-led interactions reinforce a sense of community and collective purpose. One candidate reflected, "I felt thoroughly equipped for what was ahead, thanks to the comprehensive preparation provided by the cohort program and the invaluable support of my co-teachers." Through cohort-based learning, candidates develop lasting professional relationships, exchange insights from their diverse school settings, and rely on each other as they navigate the complexities of becoming lead teachers.

Paraprofessionals also develop the teamwork and collaboration skills that are essential to thriving in the professional learning communities found in effective schools. Through course activities, they strengthen their ability to build professional relationships and contribute to a culture of shared learning. Across the program, candidates are encouraged to exchange resources—such as assessments, instructional texts, and technology tools—with their cohort peers and school colleagues. In the Teaching, Learning, and Assessment course, for instance,

candidates research strategies for promoting positive classroom communities and then present their findings in class and within their school settings. This practice reinforces course concepts and also allows candidates to expand their professional networks and engage in collaborative work with special education teachers, content specialists, and other school staff. One candidate reflected on the benefits of this exchange, sharing, "I have a strong grasp of my own teaching philosophy as well as knowledge of different strategies to use when teaching." By centering teamwork and resource-sharing, the program prepares paraprofessionals to be active contributors to the continuous improvement and collective success of their school communities.

Rich Learning Experiences

By providing candidates with rich learning experiences, Alverno faculty help paraprofessionals learn to design and implement similar opportunities for their own students. Throughout the program, candidates engage in project-based activities and authentic tasks, such as critically evaluating classroom practices and leveraging school resources. Tasks such as creating lesson plans, analyzing student data, and making instructional decisions deepen candidates' connection to their learning and enhance their ability to teach effectively. As one faculty member explained:

> Incorporating authentic course activities and assessments that are aligned with current classroom teaching practices allows candidates to gain experience in real time with their current students. Coupled with course conversation, feedback, and collaboration, students have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of effective classroom practices.

This personalized, contextualized, and applied approach ensures that paraprofessionals are equipped with the knowledge and skills to make an immediate impact in the classroom.

To evaluate candidates' learning, faculty use performance assessments and structured self-reflection. These assessments, guided by clear achievement criteria, require candidates to apply their knowledge in authentic ways. For example, just before student teaching, candidates complete an instructional design task using a specific grade level, content area, and standards to develop a lesson plan within a set timeframe. They then present their plan to faculty, receiving feedback on developmental appropriateness, inclusivity, and standards alignment. While many paraprofessionals have experience delivering instruction, they often have fewer opportunities to intentionally design lessons and reflect on their instructional choices. This assessment gauges readiness for student teaching and showcases candidates'

growth in planning. Candidates consistently excel in this assessment and report feeling confident, crediting both the curriculum and their classroom experience. One faculty member shared:

> I've noticed students from the para program tend to do particularly well in the on-demand task before student teaching. Students from across all programs have strong instructional ideas and can articulate specific assessments and connections to the content standards, but the paras stand out because they're so relaxed. They're used to jumping in when needed at their jobs, often being asked to take over a task or sub with no prior notice. When they have to think quickly to explain what they would do and why, it's not a big deal because they already have so much practice doing it.

This observation illustrates the impact of hands-on experience in strengthening instructional confidence and adaptability. Candidates draw on their paraprofessional classroom backgrounds to demonstrate strong pedagogical knowledge and clearly explain their instructional choices, even under pressure. Their performance on these assessments reflects the program's intentional connection between coursework and practical application, ensuring they are well equipped for the complex responsibilities of lead teaching.

Conclusion

Alverno's Para-to-Teacher pathway addresses the urgent need for a diverse, fully licensed teaching workforce by offering paraprofessionals a clear and supportive route to earning a degree and certification. Building on their classroom experience, the pathway equips candidates with the knowledge and credentials to move into lead teaching roles while removing many of the obstacles found in traditional preparation models. Grounded in SoLD, Alverno's program offers personalized, contextualized, and applied learning that prepares candidates to create student-centered classrooms. Through collaborative learning, authentic tasks, and performance-based assessments, paraprofessionals strengthen the skills needed to engage students in deeper learning. As a model program, Alverno's pathway prepares well-qualified local educators who are deeply connected to their students, schools, and communities.

About the Authors

Mindy M. Kramer is an Associate Professor of Education and the Director of the Paraprofessional to Teacher Licensure program at Alverno College. Her passion for education is evident in her commitment to creating innovative and accessible pathways for aspiring educators. Kramer's expertise spans both undergraduate and graduate levels, where she has developed and taught a wide range of courses. Her curriculum design work is particularly noted for its emphasis on flexible learning environments, recognizing the diverse needs of today's students. She is a strong advocate for alternative pathways to teacher licensure, believing that nontraditional routes can bring valuable perspectives and experiences to the teaching profession. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, a Master of Arts in Education with an Early Childhood-Middle Childhood Teaching License from Alverno College, and an EdD in Leadership in Higher Education from Alverno College.

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