How Supercourses Are Used to Prepare Paraprofessionals to Become Teachers

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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 presents the design of the Arizona State University Teaching Fellows program, an accelerated pathway that enables paraeducators to earn a teaching degree and certification while continuing to work in schools. At the center of the model is the innovative Supercourse structure, which integrates multiple courses into a single, cohesive learning experience that reduces barriers and strengthens instructional relevance. This brief outlines the program's structure, the integration of coursework and clinical experiences, and lessons from early cohorts.

Introduction

Teacher shortages continue to strain schools across the country, particularly in communities where challenges in recruitment and retention make it difficult to maintain a stable, well-prepared teaching workforce. An underutilized resource in addressing the need for more well-prepared and fully certified teachers is paraeducators, individuals who already work in schools, understand the demands of the profession, and often more closely reflect the communities they serve. Many of these dedicated educators aspire to become lead classroom teachers, yet can face significant barriers that prevent them from advancing in the profession.

To better understand the factors that prevent paraeducators from becoming teachers, faculty at Arizona State University (ASU), a large public research university with a strong emphasis on innovation and access, surveyed more than 400 individuals working in support roles across schools, asking a key question: Why haven't you become a teacher? The responses revealed recurring obstacles—time, financial constraints, and a sense of being overwhelmed by university systems. These findings highlighted the need for a program designed specifically for paraeducators, one that would ease these pressures while building upon the experience and skills they already bring to the classroom.

Recognizing this need, ASU created the ASU Teaching Fellows (ASUTF) program to help paraeducators transition into fully credentialed teaching roles. Grounded in the science of learning and development (SoLD), the program offers a preparation experience that is developmentally responsive to adult learners,

closely connected to real-world practice, and intentionally designed to recognize and build upon the strengths paraeducators bring. By integrating SoLD principles into all aspects of the program—from course sequencing and mentoring to the use of authentic, job-embedded assignments—the ASUTF program models the kind of coherent, relational learning environments that prepare teachers to thrive. Through this structure, the program not only accelerates degree completion but also cultivates a confident, resilient teacher workforce that reflects and strengthens the communities it serves.

This brief examines how the ASUTF program was designed to remove barriers for paraeducators and to create a streamlined, well-structured route to teacher certification. In particular, it explores the program's innovative Supercourse model—including how faculty integrated coursework, aligned learning outcomes, and applied SoLD principles to create alignment across the curriculum—and documents lessons learned through implementation. Drawing on survey findings, program data, and feedback from both Teaching Fellows and faculty, the brief illustrates how thoughtful design and relationship-centered structures can expand access to high-quality preparation and help address persistent teacher shortages.

Teaching Fellows Program Design

The ASUTF program offers an accelerated pathway for paraeducators who hold an associate's degree or have completed at least 60 credits, including general studies requirements. Through this model, Teaching Fellows earn an undergraduate degree in elementary or special education with full certification in just 16 months, significantly reducing the traditional 2-year timeline. To meet this pace, Teaching Fellows complete 16 to 18 credit hours per semester, typically encompassing four or five courses.

To ensure strong support throughout the accelerated experience, Teaching Fellows are organized into cohorts of 15 to 20 participants who progress through the program together, forming a close-knit professional community. Site administrators pair each Fellow with a mentor who provides ongoing, job-embedded guidance and support that counts toward clinical and internship requirements. To address the barrier of time, Teaching Fellows participate in a 3-hour synchronous class via Zoom, instead of commuting to campus each week, complemented by monthly in-person professional learning community sessions on ASU campuses during the week. Many districts provide compensation for attendance at these sessions, underscoring their recognized value. To strengthen the bridge between coursework and classroom practice, ASUTF instructors conduct site visits, observing Teaching Fellows in their school settings and facilitating reflective conversations focused on teaching and learning.

When the coursework design began, ASU faculty first proposed compacting courses into 5-week rotations. However, this structure proved problematic; Teaching Fellows would spend roughly a week onboarding and another closing out each course, leaving only about 3 weeks for deep learning and application. To create a more coherent and meaningful experience, faculty reimagined the program's approach. They reviewed course requirements and candidate learning outcomes from the traditional preparation sequence, identifying areas of overlap and opportunities for integration. Drawing on their own classroom experiences and principles of interdisciplinary learning, faculty explored how multiple courses could be merged into a single, connected 15-week experience.

This integrated structure created space for deeper, more sustained learning while allowing Teaching Fellows to connect coursework directly to their classroom roles. Assignments were intentionally designed to align with daily responsibilities, enabling Fellows to apply theory through authentic, job-embedded practice. Consistent with SoLD principles, the program emphasizes coherent, sequenced preparation grounded in real-world, culturally responsive teaching. These redesigned interdisciplinary course bundles became known as ASU Teaching Fellows Supercourses and are the central focus of this brief.

Supercourse Structure and Curriculum Integration

While the Supercourse model created opportunities for deeper, more connected learning, it was also a direct response to the structural challenges paraeducators often encounter in higher education. Many survey respondents described feeling overwhelmed by university systems, particularly within a large institution, such as ASU. A number of paraprofessionals had not taken college courses in many years or came from rural areas where they had previously attended small community colleges. Traditional university formats can amplify these challenges, requiring candidates to juggle four or five separate courses each term, each with its own instructor, schedule, assignments, learning management system (LMS) shell, and textbooks.

The Supercourse model was intentionally designed to reduce this cognitive and logistical burden by consolidating all course content for the term into a single LMS shell, taught by one instructor and supported by one textbook, with assignments distributed at a consistent and manageable pace. This unified structure allows Teaching Fellows to focus their energy on meaningful learning rather than on navigating multiple, disconnected systems. Notably, although courses were reorganized under the Supercourse format, Teaching Fellows still receive credit for each individual course on their transcripts. This is achieved by aligning each assignment to its corresponding course, ensuring that academic credit and grades are accurately distributed while maintaining the integrity of the original degree requirements.

The development of each Supercourse began with a systematic mapping of learning outcomes from the required courses in the elementary and special education programs. Program faculty analyzed these outcomes to identify natural connections, reinforcing concepts and logical progressions that could be integrated to form course bundles (Table 1). Rather than encountering concepts in isolation, Teaching Fellows move through a coherent pathway where knowledge and skills are introduced, reinforced, applied, and extended across multiple contexts. This intentional structure mirrors what SoLD tells us about how adults learn most effectively: through meaningful, connected experiences that build on prior knowledge and translate directly into professional practice. Table 1 outlines the resulting Supercourse bundles and titles for the elementary and special education pathways.

Table 1. Supercourse Bundles

	First term	Second term	Third term
Elementary education degree	**Research-Based Practices for Teaching and Learning** **Integrated Courses** • Instructional Design and Planning • Assessment for Learning • Learning Environment and Management • Professional Educator Series and Experiences	**Literacy Foundations, Methods, and Integration** **Integrated Courses** • Foundations of Literacy: The Science of Reading • Elementary Methods for Literacy Instruction and Assessment • Social Studies Methods and the Arts • Professional Educator Series and Experience	**Research-Based Practices for Math, Science, and Writing** **Integrated Courses** • Science in Elementary Schools • Mathematics in Elementary Schools • Writing in the 21st Century • Families, Communities, and Cultures: Cultivating Networks of Culturally Responsive Relationships • Capstone: Professional Educator Series and Experience

	First term	Second term	Third term
Special education degree	**Research-Based Practices for Teaching and Learning** **Integrated Courses** • Instructional Design and Planning • Assessment for Learning • Learning Environment and Management • Professional Educator Series and Experiences	**Research-Based Practices for Literacy** **Integrated Courses** • Foundations of Literacy: The Science of Reading • Elementary Methods for Literacy Instruction and Assessment • Classroom and Special Education Assessment • Professional Educator Series and Experience	**Supporting All Students for Success** **Integrated Courses** • Mathematics in Elementary Schools • Families, Communities, and Cultures: Cultivating Networks of Culturally Responsive Relationships • Effective Practices and Behavior Interventions: Supports for Exceptional Students • Evidence-Based Practices for Students with Exceptional Needs • Capstone: Professional Educator Series and Experience

Note: The individual courses are the approved Arizona State University Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation courses used in all elementary and special education programs.

Source: Provided by author. (2025).

Learning Sequences Across Program Terms

The first term, Research-Based Practices for Teaching and Learning introduces foundational courses shared across both the elementary and special education programs. These courses address core topics such as instructional planning, assessment, and classroom management. Beginning with these foundational courses helps Teaching Fellows acclimate to the program while connecting theoretical concepts to real-world application. For example, when studying standards and objectives, Teaching Fellows examine the objectives used in their classroom settings and evaluate their alignment to instruction. Many Fellows have commented on the immediate relevance of this approach, explaining that it reveals the reasoning behind teachers' instructional decisions and demonstrates how research and standards inform everyday practice.

The second-term Supercourses, Literacy Foundations, Methods, and Integration (elementary) and Research-Based Practices for Literacy (special education), center on the theme of literacy and the science behind how students learn to read, write, and communicate. Both programs

begin with Foundations of Literacy: The Science of Reading, which establishes a shared conceptual base for subsequent coursework. This foundation extends into Elementary Methods for Literacy Instruction and Assessment, where Teaching Fellows apply research-based literacy practices to lesson design, instruction, and assessment through teaching multiple small-group and whole-group lessons. In the special education pathway, Classroom and Special Education Assessment emphasizes curriculum-based and norm-referenced assessments and tiered interventions, which overlap nicely with the literacy coursework, making it possible to compact coursework and assignments. The elementary program includes Social Studies Methods and the Arts, providing an avenue for Teaching Fellows to apply literacy strategies across disciplines and explore how reading, writing, listening, and speaking can deepen engagement and understanding in content-area instruction.

In the third term, the elementary education Supercourse, Research-Based Practices for Math, Science, and Writing, focuses on STEM integration and writing across the curriculum, creating a natural opportunity to apply Writing to Learn and Learning to Write strategies. This interdisciplinary focus is complemented by Families, Communities, and Cultures: Cultivating Networks of Culturally Responsive Relationships, which highlights the importance of culturally responsive instruction and its direct application to teaching math and science in diverse classrooms. For the special education pathway, the third-term Supercourse includes a math methods component that establishes a strong foundation for effective lesson planning and classroom instruction. This foundation is extended through Tier 3 strategies introduced in Effective Practices and Behavior Interventions: Supports for Exceptional Students and Evidence-Based Practices for Students with Exceptional Needs, ensuring that candidates are prepared to implement targeted supports alongside core instructional practices.

The Professional Educator Series and Experiences across all courses encompass clinical and internship requirements embedded within the Teaching Fellows' current job contexts, allowing them to integrate new learning directly into the daily classroom practice. Throughout the program, Teaching Fellows actively support classroom instruction for a minimum of 18 hours per week, allowing them to engage in ongoing practice-based learning. Expectations for instructional responsibility increase each term, with Fellows teaching lessons at progressively greater frequency and depth. In terms six and seven, Fellows complete full instructor observation cycles using a teacher observation instrument aligned to the Danielson Framework for Teaching, including a pre-conference, formal observation, and post-conference. Each term requires Fellows to submit video-recorded lessons that are reviewed by instructors to provide targeted feedback. This model provides consistent opportunities to connect coursework with real-world teaching while maintaining professional continuity in their school roles. Importantly, it also removes a significant financial barrier because Teaching Fellows can continue earning income without the need to take time away from work to complete a semester of student teaching.

Supercourse Curriculum Development

Once the course bundles were established, faculty turned their attention to developing the curriculum for each Supercourse. Generally, this process included the following steps:

1. **Reviewing learning outcomes** and grouping them by similarities or relevant connections.
2. **Assigning overarching themes** to each group of learning objectives.
3. **Organizing themes into a coherent storyline** to ensure the content is built logically across the term.
4. **Merging course content, assignments, and resources** under each theme, including required textbooks.
5. **Evaluating and synthesizing resources** to prioritize the most relevant and high-quality materials while identifying and addressing gaps.
6. **Creating a 15-week pacing guide and syllabus** to distribute major assignments at a manageable pace.
7. **Collaborating with instructional designers** to develop the overall format and content to be included in weekly modules.

The early stages of curriculum development were highly collaborative and concrete. For the first term's Supercourse, a team of three faculty literally cut apart printed copies of course learning outcomes from each syllabus and arranged them on large posters, grouping and regrouping them as clusters and natural connections emerged. Later integrations moved this process to digital platforms, but the underlying principle remained the same: making visible the connections and progressions of common goals across courses. This mapping process provided a foundation for both meaningful integration and intentional compaction of content within each Supercourse, ensuring that every learning experience contributed to a coherent and developmentally sequenced program design.

For example, the following learning outcomes, drawn from three different courses, revealed natural alignment:

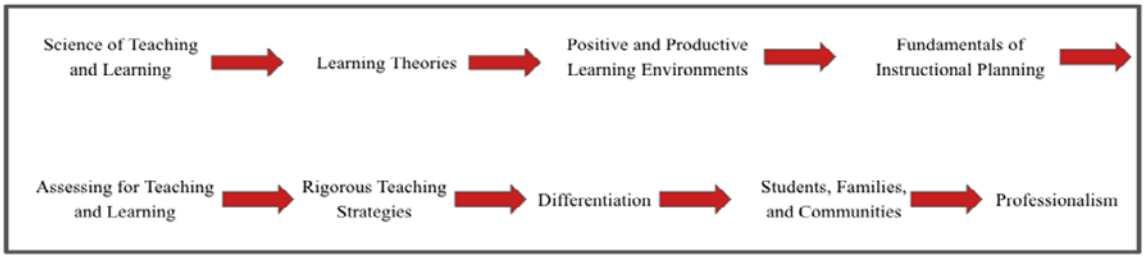
- Observe and apply effective teaching strategies that address the diverse needs of all students. Course: Instructional Design and Planning
- Identify multiple data sources, including observations, interviews, and student work, to make informed decisions (e.g., modifying instruction and/or assessments, or referring students for specialized programming). Course: Assessment for Learning

- Identify the purpose and function of tiered prevention models and practices that support students' social-emotional development at each tier. Course: Learning Environment and Management

Once grouped, clusters of outcomes were assigned overarching themes that represented the core concepts or practices to be developed. For instance, the three outcomes just mentioned were organized under the theme of Differentiated Instruction. This thematic structure created a cohesive and purposefully connected learning experience. In contrast, the originally proposed 5-week course model would have led to fragmented learning and produced unnecessary repetition of concepts.

The next stage involved organizing these themes into a logical and coherent sequence that formed the course's overall storyline. The aim was to ensure that content flowed in a way that naturally built upon itself, reinforcing foundational knowledge before introducing more complex concepts. Figure 1 shows the thematic sequence developed for the first-term Supercourse.

Figure 1. Course Storyline



Source: Provided by the author. (2025).

With the storyline in place, faculty then merged course content, assignments, and learning resources from the existing courses under each theme. In some cases, multiple resources addressed the same content or assignments overlapped in scope. Each resource and assignment was carefully reviewed for quality, relevance, and alignment with the intended learning outcomes. High-value materials were retained for inclusion in the Supercourse, while gaps were identified and filled through the curation of additional materials to ensure comprehensive coverage. To maximize relevance for paraeducators, practitioner-focused resources from vetted sources were prioritized over research articles (e.g., Reading Rockets, STEM Teaching Tools, and CAST UDL Guidelines). If needed, assignments were revised to emphasize authentic, job-embedded application so that Fellows could implement course concepts with mentor support.

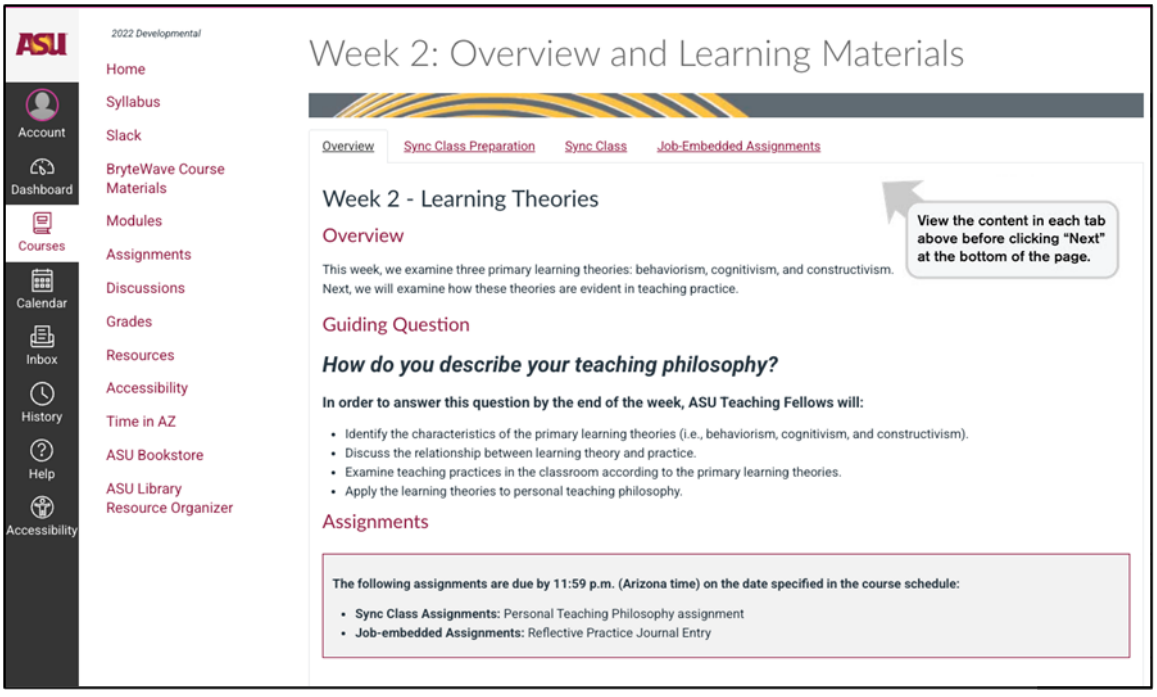
Next, faculty developed a 15-week syllabus that distributed major assignments evenly throughout the term for a balanced workload. Each week was organized around a guiding question and targeted learning objectives, intentionally sequenced to scaffold understanding.

The curriculum was delivered through the Supercourse model; however, careful planning preserved the integrity of each individual course. Grades and point values were proportionally assigned to specific courses, balancing assignments equitably and ensuring that Fellows' academic transcripts reflected their performance in each course.

Finally, the Supercourse model introduced an innovative rethinking of curriculum design that broke away from traditional course structures. Unlike anything previously implemented at ASU, it required faculty to reimagine how integrated content could be organized and delivered within the constraints of the LMS while preserving separate credit for individual courses. Close collaboration with the college's instructional design team was crucial in bringing this vision to life. Together, they developed a creative structure for each module with integrated resources, assignments, and job-embedded learning components (Figure 2).

A home page guided Teaching Fellows through the Supercourse, providing clear navigation and reducing confusion across modules and assignments. The instructional design team's expertise transformed the curriculum into a dynamic, student-centered online experience—featuring logically organized weekly modules enriched with multimedia content, interactive elements, and clearly communicated assignments. This design not only enhanced accessibility and usability but also reflected the program's broader goal of modeling effective, learner-centered instructional practices.

Figure 2. Example Weekly Learning Management System Module Page



Source: Provided by author. (2025).

Successes and Challenges

In fall 2024, the program celebrated the graduation of its first cohort of Teaching Fellows, a milestone that reflected both the promise and effectiveness of the ASUTF model. Program data showed success: 94% of participants completed the program, and by graduation, 60% were already serving as teachers of record or in emergency substitute positions within their districts. These results highlighted the program's dual impact—expanding the teacher pipeline while advancing career mobility for paraeducators.

Feedback from the end-of-program survey further affirmed the program's success, illustrating the value of the Supercourse design, the strong sense of community within cohorts, and the immediate applicability of coursework to classroom practice. Teaching Fellows consistently noted that the program strengthened their instructional confidence, deepened their understanding of teaching and learning, and provided the structure and support necessary to balance work, study, and personal commitments.

Teaching Fellows' comments included:

- "I feel I honestly learned and gained so many strategies and tools. As I have started teaching this fall, I have already recalled and utilized so many tools and strategies I have learned through this program."
- "I feel more confident in writing out lesson plans, understanding state standards, and writing objectives when teaching the students. I also think the assessments we performed throughout the program were very helpful in exposing us to what we should expect during the year."
- "I would just like to express how thankful I am for the ASU Teaching Fellows program. It has truly been a transformative experience, and the combination of real-world classroom experience, strong mentorship, and academic support has been invaluable."
- "That the courses are combined in one Supercourse, which made it very practical for someone who is working full-time as a paraprofessional. The job-embedded assignments that have us reflect have been most valuable."

Faculty also voiced strong support for the Supercourse model. Because each Supercourse carries 16-18 credit hours, it constitutes a full course load for instructors, allowing them to provide focused feedback and support for Fellows. Instructors appreciated the variety of teaching experiences, including opportunities to observe Fellows in their classrooms to

inform instruction. The one-instructor-per-Supercourse and cohort model fostered strong relationships between faculty and Teaching Fellows, contributing to the program's high retention and engagement rates.

Despite these successes, a few challenges remain. Although the Supercourse model streamlines coursework and supports timely degree completion, Teaching Fellows who transition into full-time teaching roles during the program often experience additional time constraints. While the program encourages participants to remain in their paraeducator positions, Arizona's teacher shortage, coupled with higher salaries and benefits, makes early entry into teaching positions both appealing and common. This reality requires faculty to maintain consistent communication, provide flexible deadlines, and offer individualized support to ensure Teaching Fellows can balance professional and academic responsibilities without compromising learning quality.

Another ongoing challenge involves curriculum maintenance. Because course schedules, requirements, and common assessments evolve, Supercourses require continual review and regular updates. This ongoing work requires a dedicated program lead to monitor changes, adapt materials, and revise the curriculum as needed. While essential to program integrity, this level of oversight is time-intensive and underscores the need for sustained institutional investment in faculty coordination and instructional design support.

Conclusion

The ASUTF program was developed to reduce barriers and provide a clear route for paraprofessionals aspiring to become certified teachers. Although the model continues to evolve, it has already demonstrated significant impact—enabling Teaching Fellows to earn their degrees and certification while remaining active contributors in their school communities. Grounded in SoLD, the program exemplifies how teacher preparation can be reimagined to reflect what is known about how adults learn most effectively.

By organizing coursework into coherent, developmentally sequenced learning experiences, embedding learning in authentic classroom practice, and reducing structural barriers to higher education, ASUTF has created an innovative model for preparing a diverse, well-prepared, and resilient teacher workforce. Ultimately, the ASUTF program ensures that those already dedicated to supporting students can advance to certification without sacrificing their livelihood, strengthening both the teaching profession and the communities they serve.

About the Author

April Holton is a Clinical Assistant Professor at Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation at Arizona State University. She began teaching middle school science in Arizona schools in 1994 and has taught all core content areas in middle school, 4th grade, and gifted programs. Holton has served as an instructional coach, new teacher mentor, science curriculum specialist, and technology integration specialist. Holton is passionate about bridging the gap between research and practice and enjoys working alongside teachers and preservice teachers to support student-centered teaching and learning. She completed her PhD in Learning, Literacies, and Technologies in 2021 at Arizona State University. She has a master's degree in Educational Leadership from Northern Arizona University and an undergraduate degree in Education from University of Nevada, Reno.

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