Not Another Brick in the Wall: Transforming Rural Early Childhood Teacher Education with Registered Apprenticeships and Cultural Competencies

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Teacher Preparation

The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) launched a groundbreaking registered apprenticeship program in Fall 2024 to address Alaska's teacher shortage and prepare educators for diverse early childhood settings. This program segments a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood (BAEC) into three phases: an Occupational Endorsement Certificate (OEC), an Associate of Applied Science (AAS), and a Bachelor of Arts (BA). Each phase aligns with specific career milestones, supporting accessibility for candidates with diverse educational backgrounds. Integrating Alaska's Cultural Standards for Culturally Responsive Teaching, the program emphasizes cultural competency and authentic assessment, preparing educators to honor and

reflect local traditions. Strong partnerships with community stakeholders and innovative admissions processes further enhance accessibility and responsiveness. UAA plans to expand the apprenticeship model to special education and leadership roles while conducting research on program effectiveness and student impact. This initiative exemplifies a collaborative, community-driven approach to reimagining teacher preparation.

Introduction

Teacher education is amidst a paradigm shift and ongoing evolution towards practical, hands-on training. The U.S. Department of Education ([ED], 2022) and the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL) released a call to action to address the teacher shortage in August 2022 which included registered apprenticeships. This exciting announcement made it possible for education employers and education preparation providers (EPPs) to register apprenticeship programs with the USDOL for the first time in history, thereby making the employers and apprentice educators eligible for funding through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to cover salary, tuition, childcare, and other related costs to recruiting and retaining high-quality educators.

With new funding sources and renewed support to bolster the education workforce, U.S. teacher education programs have quickly adapted their approaches to adopt ongoing nationwide initiatives. For example, a coalition dedicated to diversifying an inclusive educator preparation pipeline has produced “National Guidelines for Apprenticeship Standards for K-12 Teacher Apprenticeships” and “A Compendium of Apprenticeship Programs” containing strategies and approaches adopted by member institutions (Pathways Alliance, 2023). To further aid in disseminating this new knowledge and practice, the National Center for Grow Your Own (NCGYO; n.d.) created a national network of state and education preparation leaders actively implementing registered apprenticeships for educators, including practical considerations and policy implications.

In Alaska, EPPs collaborated through monthly meetings during the academic year, examining Pathways Alliance and NCGYO resources to reimagine teacher preparation programs. The University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) reconceptualized its licensure program as three separate related technical instruction (RTIs) by segmenting the degree into manageable phases, making it accessible to diverse candidates while meeting stakeholder demand, partner and employer needs, and federal agency expectations.

Background

Other U.S. states have successfully modified traditional programs, providing confidence in the potential of apprenticeship models for educators. A closer review of Tennessee’s registered apprenticeships and Pathways Alliance resources highlighted both strengths and weaknesses, including how many states adopted components of these plans, fostering a strong network of partners and peers. Knowing others had successfully modified traditional programs provided confidence. However, many resembled post-baccalaureate or Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs requiring candidates to begin preparation with most of a bachelor’s degree already completed. With a high school graduation rate of only 75% (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development [AK DEED], 2022) and a go-on rate of 46% (University of Alaska System, 2016), few Alaskans meet these entry requirements.

Recognizing this gap, UAA faculty and leaders reimagined their Early Childhood Education (ECE) program from the ground up to serve apprentice educators with diverse educational backgrounds but few prior academic credits. As the only program of its kind in the state, the ECE program supports professional early childhood educators in childcare, PK-3 teachers in schools, and child life specialists in healthcare. Its Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood (BAEC) requires 120 credits, which include general education requirements like writing, communications, and social sciences, alongside career-specific coursework in early childhood education. Field learning is integrated, with students completing practicums and internships under licensed professionals.

Program Design and Rationale

Conceptually, the credits required for the BAEC degree are split into three phases. Phase 1 correlates to the first 18 credits of ECE coursework, including 25 hours of context-appropriate field experiences. Upon completing these courses, candidates earn an Occupational Endorsement Certificate (OEC) in Infant and Toddler Development. While not required for employment, the OEC is widely recognized among childcare facilities in the state as a high-quality preparation for working in the industry. Phase 2 correlates to the next 32 credits of ECE coursework and general education requirements to earn an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) in Early Childhood Development. This coursework includes 207 hours of context-appropriate field experience. In the Alaskan healthcare and education workforce, the AAS allows an educator to serve as the lead teacher in a Head Start classroom or qualify for a paraprofessional license from AK DEED. Lastly, Phase 3 correlates to the remaining 60 credits required for the BAEC.

For PK-3 licensure candidates, this phase includes a 150-hour advanced practicum and a 500-hour internship, and completion qualifies candidates for PK-3 licensure by AK DEED. Professional candidates complete a 500-hour internship, and child life specialist candidates complete a 600-hour internship. The child life specialist track is not eligible for an apprenticeship, as it follows distinct credentialing requirements outside the scope of workforce development. The tailored internship requirements ensure that each track aligns with the specific professional standards and competencies required for success in diverse early childhood settings.

Segmenting for Accessibility

When designing the program, the faculty incorporated stakeholder feedback, emphasizing the importance of segmenting the degree into three sequential phases to enhance accessibility. Each segment builds upon the previous one, creating a linear progression which supports knowledge and skill acquisition in manageable increments. This structure ensures candidates achieve meaningful milestones along their educational journey, each aligned with specific professional roles and credentials. Additionally, this design allows candidates to exit the preparation pipeline at their preferred destination or career point—whether as an OEC holder qualified to work in childcare settings, an AAS graduate eligible to lead Head Start classrooms, or a BA graduate prepared for PK-3 licensure or a facility director role. By scaffolding the degree in this way, the program accommodates diverse educational backgrounds and provides a clear and flexible pathway for candidates to advance in early childhood education.

Cultural Competency in Design

One of the most innovative aspects of this program design is its integration of cultural competency into every aspect of the coursework and field experience. By incorporating Alaska's Cultural Standards for Culturally Responsive Teaching (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 2015), the program ensures prospective educators are not only prepared to meet diverse classroom needs but also reflect the values, traditions, and knowledge systems of the communities they serve. These

standards emphasize the importance of validating traditional knowledge systems, engaging Elders as cultural experts, and providing opportunities for students to learn through observation, hands-on activities, and experiential projects rooted in local significance.

Authentic assessment practices have been emphasized, requiring apprentices to demonstrate their understanding of cultural competencies through real-world applications in the classroom. For example, apprentices might design lesson plans which incorporate traditional storytelling or align classroom activities with subsistence practices, fostering a deeper connection between the curriculum and students' lived experiences. This emphasis on culture addresses the longstanding challenges created when teachers are recruited from outside local communities and lack the cultural understanding or competency necessary to succeed in Alaska Native communities and villages. Instances like the banishment of a school principal in Kipnuk due to allegations of cultural disrespect and poor communication underscore the importance of equipping educators with the skills to integrate and honor local traditions (Hughes, 2022). By grounding the program in cultural competency, UAA ensures that educators are not only effective in their roles but also respected and valued members of the communities they serve.

Partnerships and Collaboration

The program's success hinges on robust partnerships with local Head Start programs, childcare facilities, school districts, and campus offices. These partnerships inform program design and priorities, ensuring the program remains responsive to the needs of employers and communities. To address barriers commonly encountered in admissions, UAA has devised a flexible process by enrolling students as non-degree seeking during their first semester. This allows candidates to begin their studies while their program readiness is fully assessed through introductory courses. This approach removes unnecessary deadlines and ensures accessibility for a wide range of applicants.

Additionally, the program includes processes to ensure FERPA compliance and effective information sharing among all parties involved. These measures are critical for meeting accreditation requirements and, more importantly, for supporting student success. A key innovation is the creation of a network of registered sponsors who collaborate to address challenges and shared needs. This network fosters regular communication and joint problem-solving among employers, program leaders, and faculty, ensuring that the program evolves in alignment with workforce demands and community priorities.

Accreditation and Fidelity

Maintaining fidelity to accreditation standards was a key consideration throughout the program redesign. UAA ensured alignment with both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards. This alignment guarantees that graduates of the program are not only eligible for licensure but also meet the highest standards of quality in early childhood education.

To ensure consistent assessment across all candidates, UAA requires apprentices to complete the same key assessments, even if they transfer in equivalent course credits. This approach maintains the integrity of the program's accreditation while allowing flexibility in recognizing prior learning. Faculty also carefully cooperate with employers to identify overlaps between in-service professional development and pre-service coursework. Through rigorous academic review and/or credit by portfolio, the program streamlines the learning experience for apprentices while upholding rigorous academic standards.

A significant enhancement to support these efforts was hiring an Apprenticeships & Accreditation Coordinator. This individual serves as the primary point of contact for all apprenticeships, assisting partners and apprentices in navigating program requirements, ensuring compliance, and addressing challenges. Additionally, the segmented design of the program supports

accreditation fidelity by scaffolding learning to align with developmental benchmarks for both educators and young learners, ensuring a consistent and rigorous preparation process.

Anticipated Impact and Future Directions

The registered apprenticeship program launched in Fall 2024 with an inaugural cohort of 48 apprentice educators. An additional five apprentices are scheduled to join this cohort in Spring 2025, and more employers and sponsors are expected to participate in the second cohort in Fall 2025. This early success marks a significant milestone in rural teacher preparation, demonstrating the potential of apprenticeship models to address the unique needs of Alaska's diverse communities.

Looking ahead, UAA plans to expand the apprenticeship model to other areas of teacher preparation, including special education endorsements and principal preparation programs. These initiatives will eventually pave the way for apprenticeships in other licensure areas, broadening the scope of community-driven teacher preparation pathways.

Future research will focus on analyzing data collected from teacher preparation programs to compare the quality of preparation between traditionally prepared and apprenticeship-trained teachers. Additionally, studies will explore the impact of apprentice-prepared educators on PK-3 student outcomes. This research will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of apprenticeship models and inform future program improvements.

By reimagining teacher preparation as a collaborative, community-centered, and culturally responsive endeavor, UAA is not only addressing the teacher shortage but also transforming the field of education. This innovative approach rejects one-size-fits-all solutions in favor of a nuanced, adaptable model which meets the specific needs of diverse learners and communities.

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