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Key Successes and Challenges in the Planning and Design of Strategic Staffing for Paid Teacher Residencies

Danielle J. Allen, Simona Goldin, Kevin C. Bastian, Julie T. Marks, Jenny Sawada, Kai Petry, Rohan Tapiawala, Rhea Brown, Pragya Upreti, Cintia Bortot, Elizabeth D'Amico

Abstract

This brief presents findings from the second year of an evaluation of strategic staffing for paid teacher residencies (SSPTR). We discuss district, educator preparation program (EPP), and technical assistance providers' perceptions of key successes and challenges of the planning, design, and implementation of SSPTR, as well as the core components of the planning year, teacher/resident matching processes, development of teacher candidates, and implications for equitable access of residents and K–12 students to high-quality education and training. Findings indicate that deeper partnerships and better-prepared candidates are among the greatest perceived successes, while sustainability and candidate/mentor teacher availability remain the most consistent challenges in the design year. The brief concludes with implications for policymakers and practitioners interested in implementing paid teacher residencies.

Introduction

The primary goal of the overall strategic staffing for paid teacher residencies (SSPTR) evaluation is to better understand the accomplishments, challenges, and possibilities of SSPTR, namely: What are the impacts of SSPTR on EPPs, teacher candidates, K–12 districts, and K–12 students? What has worked, what has not, and why? What has facilitated partnerships with districts and EPPs? What have been features and challenges in this? and (How) Does strategic staffing address historic inequities in K–12 students' access to high quality teaching and learning opportunities?

The first year of the evaluation explored contextual factors influencing partnerships between technical assistance providers, districts, and EPPs. This second year builds upon the findings of the first year and explores the work of the SSPTR planning year. Table 1 (below) summarizes evaluation findings across these two years, especially noting on-going and recurrent themes within features and challenges, as well as new and divergent themes which emerged in our second year analyses.

Table 1. Cross-Phase Thematic Comparisons

On-going challenges in SSPTR planning, designing, and implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges of reconciling short- and long-term goals; Worries about ongoing fiscal sustainability; Questions about which characteristics of placement sites support teacher candidate learning (e.g. Should candidates be placed in under-resourced schools? Where will their learning be most supported?)
On-going features in SSPTR planning, designing, and implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technical assistance providers, EPPs, and districts continued to speak about their belief that SSPTR will cultivate residents' confidence and knowledge, making them more successful in their first year as teachers of record.
New/Divergent themes from the second year of evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Findings show that partnerships between EPPs and districts grew and were strengthened; Greater shared attention paid to the efficacy of the teacher candidate residency experience across EPPs and districts.

Specifically, the evaluation of the SSPTR planning year asks:

1. What are the core components of the planning year?
2. How are SSPTR programs funded?
3. What additional supports are needed by partners for effective implementation of SSPTR?
4. What are the criteria and processes for recruitment, selection, and placement of teacher candidates and mentors?
5. How is development of teacher candidates and mentors taken into consideration within SSPTR models?
6. What are the implications of SSPTR for teacher candidates' access to high quality preparation? In what ways do SSPTR models consider issues of access to high quality preparation, related especially to recruitment, selection and placement?

The second year of this evaluation revealed several key takeaways. Technical assistance providers, ESCs, and their district and EPP partners continued to reaffirm their belief in SSPTR, lauding especially the importance of the combination of paid residencies that are adapted to local contexts and that benefit from collaborative EPP and district support. Survey data showed that paid residents were more likely than non-paid residents and traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they were well prepared by their EPP and more likely than traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they feel confident in their ability to teach. Interview data pointed to the possibilities of strengthened teacher candidate practice and learning. Partners also reported facing challenges related to the mentor teacher pipeline and support, school selection, resident matching and placement, and sustainability of funding. Our evaluation brings attention to the myriad challenges related to the planning, design, and implementation of SSPTR as well as the conditions under which technical assistance providers and their partners perceive the greatest success. We hope these findings are of benefit to implementers and those supporting them as well as funders and policymakers.

Background

This mixed methods evaluation included surveys with districts and teacher candidates and interviews with technical assistance providers, districts, and EPPs. EPIC developed both surveys. The district survey was developed in the spring of 2023 and the teacher candidate survey was developed in partnership with a technical assistance center in 2019 for an evaluation of technical assistance to EPPs.

Overall, 30 districts engaging in SSPTR responded to our spring 2023 district survey. Data from our teacher candidate survey come from candidates at Texas-based EPPs and from survey administrations in spring 2022 and winter 2022. Over 920 teacher candidates responded to this survey, with approximately 150 of those candidates being paid teacher residents.

We conducted interviews with six technical assistance providers, seven districts, and seven EPPs in fall 2021 and spring 2022. We analyzed the district and teacher candidate survey data by reporting descriptive statistics (mean responses, distribution of responses) for key respondent groups (e.g. paid residents, regular student teachers). For interview data, we revised the codebook used for the first year of the evaluation, inductively refining the codebook iteratively until it captured all relevant themes in the 2023 data. At least two coders coded each transcript and reconciled the codes for accuracy. The evaluation team then divided into sub-teams with each member creating an analysis for their assigned interviews. Sub-teams met to discuss and reconcile findings across individual documents. Finally, the evaluation team worked in pairs to create cross-partner analyses and draw conclusions across the data.

Findings

In this section, we outline the key findings arising from our evaluation of the SSPTR planning year. We begin by outlining the major components of the planning year, as described by technical assistance providers, EPPs, and districts. Next, we outline the key successes and challenges of planning and design.

Main Components of Planning Year

Interviews with technical assistance providers revealed five general steps involved in planning and designing SSPTR models for implementation. Those steps are as follows:

1. Technical assistance providers described the first step in planning as data gathering, examining administrative data around the teacher workforce and district budgets to inform their approach.
2. Next, technical assistance providers worked with districts to assess their needs and understand the grade levels and subject areas with the most critical need. They then liaised with the partner EPP to identify opportunities for collaboration and synergy.
3. After partner priorities had been solidified, the technical assistance provider brought each of the partners together to gain and deepen each of their understandings of local contexts. Technical assistance providers, districts, and EPPs all emphasized the importance of having a willingness to “unlearn” or deprogram their initial conceptions of one another and re-learn them in the context of SSPTR planning.
4. Next, technical assistance providers facilitated the co-creation and co-construction of agreed upon roles and responsibilities for each partner.
5. Finally, the technical assistance providers ensured alignment within the district, expanding the scope of the work beyond core SSPTR staff to all departments.

Key Successes in Planning and Design

District survey data indicated that the top two perceived successes in SSPTR planning were **deeper partnerships with EPPs and better prepared residents**. Effective technical assistance from technical assistance providers during the planning year followed closely behind and is interwoven throughout the discussion of deeper partnerships and better prepared residents.

Deeper partnerships with EPPs

The planning year emerged as a key stage in SSPTR models that, when attention is paid to core elements, leads to stronger partnerships between districts, EPPs, and technical assistance providers. These elements include an understanding of local contexts and shared goals/alignment across partners. The next section of the brief provides additional findings related to these two elements.

Understanding local contexts

A deep understanding of local context emerged as a central component of the planning year and one that participants perceived led to stronger partnerships and models that were suitable

for highly complex contexts. Districts described the importance of technical assistance providers understanding their local contexts in order to tailor the model appropriately, and EPPs described needing to increase their own understanding of district contexts to level set expectations as teacher candidates prepared to move into residencies. Finally, technical assistance providers described understanding local contexts as a key facilitator for district buy-in – and some districts noted that a lack of contextual understanding was a barrier to partnership. One key implication that we drew in this phase of analysis is the importance of continuing to invest human capital to understand the unique context of each partner.

Promoting alignment between districts and educator preparation programs during planning year.

Another critical aspect of the planning year and a key success noted in district survey responses is helping districts and partner EPPs come to an agreement on core aspects of planning. This includes shared governance, mutual understandings of each partners’ distinct role and responsibilities, conceptualizations of the paid resident role, the purpose of the paid residency itself, and what EPIC has termed “enacted partnership.” Collaborating to establish shared definitions, agreements, and understandings during the planning year ultimately resulted in stronger partnerships, particularly for technical assistance providers and partners that were further along in planning and had been working together for a sustained period. One technical assistance provider described how they facilitated alignment between a district and EPP:

“...we developed a tool called ‘thinking through the curriculum’ that takes our EPPs through some thoughts about how to...integrate the K–12 experience into their program, and it’s not specifically for residencies. But we’re going to try to use that tool to push towards other conversations with residencies about how to navigate that thought process and surface a little bit more of the ‘why’ with institutions (EPPs).”

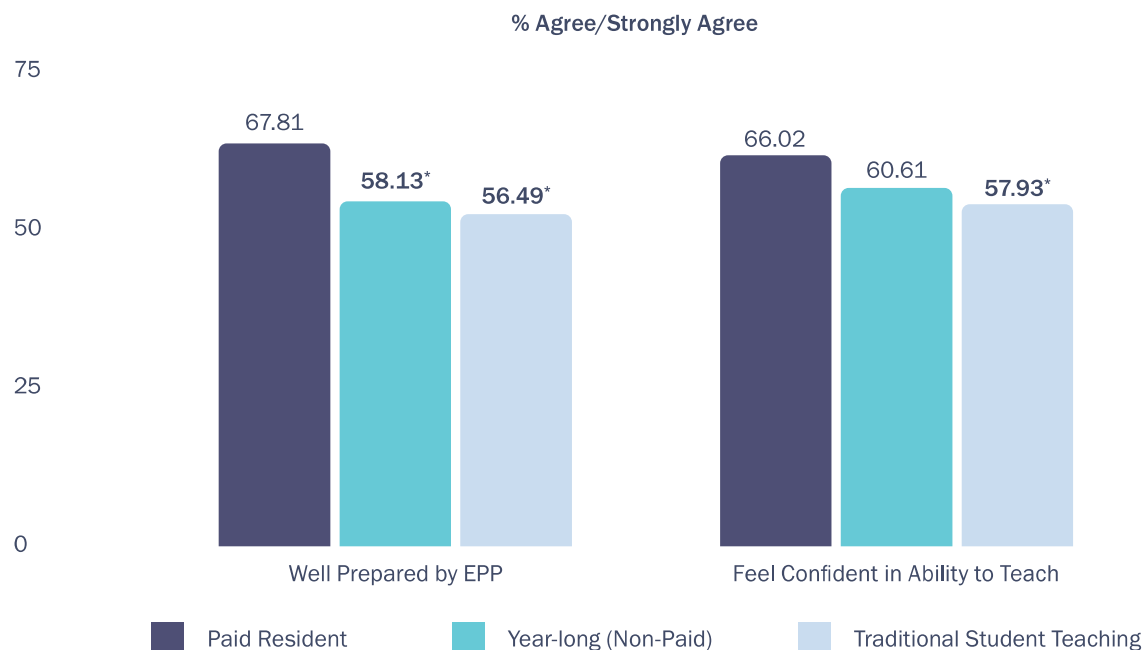
In the instances where interview data indicated that misalignment was perceived as a barrier to planning, participants often attributed this misalignment to a couple of factors: in EPPs, participants perceived that there was apprehension or concern (from EPPs) around significant shifts or changes in candidate preparation structures because program administrators felt confident in their prior success in training teacher candidates. In districts, the lack of alignment was ascribed to a lack of awareness and shared knowledge across multiple departments within district central offices. In these cases, technical assistance providers remained an important facilitator of the planning year, as they often used their position, approach, and expertise to bring districts and EPPs into greater understanding and conversation around key elements.

Emerging Successes in Implementation

Better prepared residents

District survey data indicated that better prepared residents were a key success of SSPTR. Although student level achievement data are not yet available, paid residents were more likely than year-long non-paid residents and traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they were well prepared by their EPP and they were more likely than traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they feel confident in their ability to teach. In particular, Figure 1 shows that nearly 68 percent of paid residents strongly agreed that they were well prepared by their EPP; 66 percent of paid residents strongly agreed that they feel confident in their ability to teach.

Figure 1. Teacher candidate perceptions of preparation quality and confidence



Note: This figure presents data from teacher candidate surveys regarding perceptions of EPP quality and candidates' confidence in their ability to teach. * indicates statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level between the specified group (e.g. yearlong non-paid residents or traditional student teachers) and paid residents.

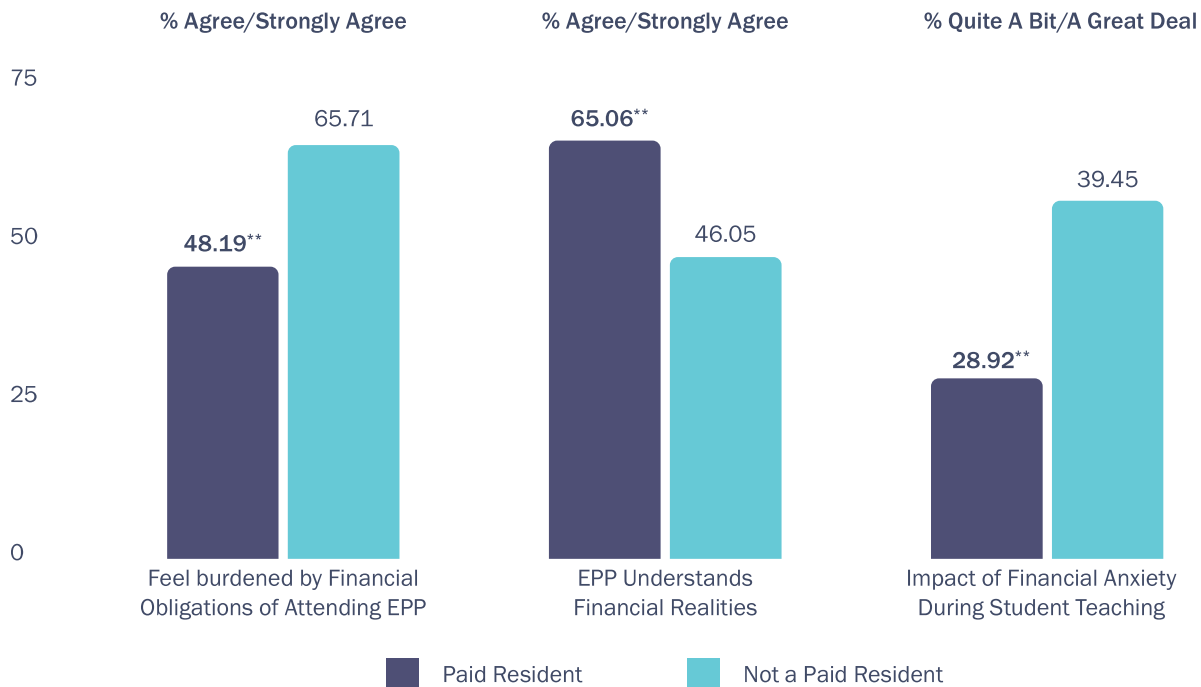
Interview data extended these survey findings, with participants seeing increased access to high quality teacher preparation as a key success of SSPTR. This increased access was attributed to the following key components of SSPTR planning work:

1. Intentional recruitment with regard to historically marginalized candidates;
2. Removal of barriers to entry for teacher candidates;
3. Community-based recruitment;
4. Enriching the resident experience and managing challenges of teacher preparation;
5. Wraparound supports that improve inclusivity, such as professional dress allowances.

Alleviating financial barriers

As shown in Figure 2, teacher candidate survey responses indicated that paid residents (relative to other student teachers) felt less burdened by financial obligations and less financial anxiety during student teaching. For example, nearly 66 percent of non-paid residents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt burdened by the financial obligations of attending their program. Only 48 percent of paid residents agreed or strongly agreed with that survey item. Likewise, 66 percent of paid resident survey respondents reported that their financial stipend allowed them to spend more time on learning to teach. Nearly 70 percent of paid residents indicated that they did not need another paid position because of their financial stipend.

Figure 2: Teacher candidate perceptions of financial burdens and anxiety



Note: This figure presents data from teacher candidate surveys regarding perceptions of financial burden, realities, and anxiety. ** indicates statistically significant differences at the 0.01 level between paid residents and non-paid residents.

Key Challenges in Planning and Design

District surveys revealed that **sustainability of funding** and **insufficient numbers of teacher candidates and high-quality mentors** were the greatest challenges with SSPTR.

Sustainability of funding

Interview and survey data revealed that the primary funding sources of SSPTR were federal dollars (often tied to pandemic relief), local district funds (which were often a reallocation of budgeted funds from vacant positions), local and national philanthropic foundations, and braided funding, which integrated funding from multiple sources. In Texas, all district partners received TCLAS funding, and in California, most paid residencies were funded by California Residency Grants to districts or EPPs. One technical assistance provider noted that the short-term nature of pandemic relief funding remained in tension with their model of sustainable SSPTR funding through districts' regular operating budgets.

These varied sources of funding were used for central aspects of SSPTR design, such as increasing the number of paid residency slots, increasing the size of resident stipends, and piloting different SSPTR models.

Technical assistance providers named a focus on sustainability as a critical element of the planning year and took varied approaches to planning for sustainability with district partners.

Some focused on creating sustainable funding structures within districts for candidate stipends, while others focused on ensuring

that adequate human capital would remain in EPPs to support SSPTR implementation over time. However, even with this focus, participants described concerns about the scale and sustainability of initiatives that primarily or fully relied on non-recurring funding, particularly in Texas. One participant stated:

"I can speak for [TX district]...They were like, we want to make sure that even with this TCLAS that we've already gotten the funding to be able to secure for sustainable funding for our residents. We want to make sure that we are still using our sustainable funds. We've heard loud and clear from some of the district leaders there - 'We know that there's an end date to this, so we want to make sure that we're putting things in place now and we're not just undoing all the hard work that we've already done with the sustainable funding.'"

District participants held the expectation that their districts would find a way to continue paid residencies after TCLAS funding expired, but they expressed uncertainty around how much the program scope and scale would need to be reduced to operate with less funding. EPPs were concerned about their ability to provide staff to operate the program without financial support. One EPP administrator in Texas stated:

“We’ve got a small grant from [x] to get our program started... once we spend out this year, we’ve spent out the funds from that source, so I’m very busily working to find ways to replace money. TEA has come up with some funds to help school districts do residencies, but none of that money comes to the higher ed institution. It all goes directly to the district, either for their cost or for pay to the residents, which is fabulous. We’re glad that money is there and a lot of the districts have reached out to us that want to work with us, but I’ve got to be concerned about the cost of running a program, typically one like this that’s a very involved program.”

Insufficient numbers of candidates and high-quality mentors

Both the district surveys and district/EPP interviews indicated that smaller than expected pipelines of teacher candidates and high-quality mentor teachers were a consistent challenge in SSPTR planning and design. Lower EPP enrollments complicated the successful matching of candidates to district vacancies; moreover, participants felt the high number of vacancies across Texas resulted in a lesser likelihood that candidates would accept residency placements in less desirable districts/schools.

In California, competing state policies with residency options (such as the California Internship Program) paid more than SSPTR, drawing potential candidates to other fast-track/alternative preparation pathways. One California partner stated:

“California has an intern option... So you can start an educator prep program to get your certificate and start a teaching job the same year. [...] They make first year teacher salary. And so for this one institution, they had several vacancies that they filled with interns because they didn’t have candidates and actually during the first residency year, they offered the residents an intern position because the need was so acute. And so it’s hard also for them to put efforts to recruiting residents when they don’t have teachers of record in classrooms now and it’s gonna take a resident a full year to get through and be certified.”

EPPs requested additional support from districts in recruiting teacher candidates for residency programs. One EPP participant expressed a desire for districts to take a more active role in candidate recruitment.

“The biggest issue there is how much support can the LEA give in recruitment of students? If their anticipation is that the university is going to magically provide residents, we don’t have a secret stash of teachers, so they have to get out and start helping with whoever we recruit, sending people the LEA needs to send their HR, their ed services, their principal into the bachelor or the undergraduate coursework to talk about, hey and graduation, you can take this route to become a teacher, but they’ve got to give that support too.”

Mentor teacher recruitment emerged as yet another challenge in a subset of schools, particularly in schools with higher percentages of novice in-service teachers where the state or district policy required that mentor teachers have three years of experience.

Given that SSPTR was created, at least in part, as a solution to continued teacher pipeline challenges, the difficulty some school sites have experienced in locating qualified veteran teachers to mentor candidates is not entirely unexpected. However, strong development, guidance, and feedback from mentor teachers benefits both teacher candidates and the K-12 students those candidates will go on to teach. EPPs and districts should continue working collaboratively to find a solution for this continued challenge.

Emerging Considerations

Data collected during the second year of the evaluation revealed two areas ripe for further investigation. One is the type of K-12 school most suited for teacher candidate training, the other is the impact of SSPTR on K-12 student outcomes. Below, we describe the emerging findings and additional questions we hope to answer about site selection and student outcomes in future years of the evaluation.

School Site Selection

Participant interviews revealed some concern that the school type(s) being selected for placements may not be ideal for training residents. This concern appears to be related to tensions that exist between district goals and those of the EPP, wherein districts have critical, immediate needs to fill vacancies, particularly in high needs schools that are often challenging to staff. These may be school environments in which it is challenging for residents to get the high quality mentor teacher feedback and guidance they need.

Data from one technical assistance provider allowed us to compare the characteristics of schools chosen for SSPTR implementation relative to other schools within the same district that were not chosen for SSPTR implementation. These analyses showed that districts selected schools for SSPTR implementation that had more economically disadvantaged and educationally at-risk students, a higher percentage of early-career teachers, a higher percentage of teachers with sub-standard credentials, and lower teacher retention rates. We intend to further explore how districts and EPPs reconcile this tension—the need for high quality preparation experiences and placements in high-needs schools—through future surveys and interviews.

Impact of Paid Year-long Residencies

Although survey and interview data revealed that candidates and districts perceive paid residents as better prepared, we plan to gather additional data (such as student administrative/achievement data and candidate observation instrument data) over upcoming evaluation phases to determine whether paid residents are performing better than their non-paid resident counterparts. Future data collection will also gather data on whether and how candidate stipends alleviate financial strain and the impacts of those reductions. More specifically, qualitative data collection efforts will include interviews with teacher candidates to learn more about the impact of paid residencies on their practice and their financial standing.

Discussion/Policy Implications

Our findings indicate that deeper partnerships and better prepared candidates are among the greatest perceived successes of SSPTR, while sustainability and candidate/mentor teacher availability remain the most consistent challenges in the design year. We conclude with the following key takeaways:

Key Takeaways: Successes

1. Technical assistance providers and their partners continue to reaffirm their belief in SSPTR, lauding especially the importance of the combination of local paid residencies that benefit from collaborative EPP/district support.
2. Survey data shows that paid residents are more likely than non-paid residents and traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they were well prepared by their EPP, and more likely than traditional student teachers to strongly agree that they feel confident in their ability to teach. Interview data points to the possibilities of strengthened teacher candidate practice and learning.
3. Relative to the first year of the evaluation, we found greater shared attention to the efficacy of the teacher candidate residency experience across EPPs and districts.
4. Survey data shows that receiving the financial stipend lessens candidate financial burden and anxiety.
5. There are pockets of innovation related to holistic and wrap-around candidate support and candidates' access to information and understanding of available resources. In these and other cases, SSPTR includes resources in addition to financial supports.

Key Takeaways: Challenges

1. Fiscal considerations and constraints: (1) Continued concerns about the fiscal sustainability of SSPTR, (2) Funding was named across CA data as a consistent barrier, especially related to the high cost of living.

2. Continued challenges recruiting paid, year-long teacher candidates to fill district needs.
3. Partners reported challenges in the recruitment and training of mentor teachers, with some districts asking for more EPP-led mentor teacher training.
4. There is some concern that school type(s) selected for placements may not be ideal for training residents. Quantitative data, for districts partnering with one technical assistance provider, may support this concern.
5. Tension between goals: (1) mentor teacher feedback and guidance were named as critical to teacher candidate development, (2) many seek to place teacher candidates in hard to staff, high-need schools, yet (3) these schools tend to have fewer veteran teachers, more sub-standard credentialed teachers and higher turnover rates.

Given these key takeaways we offer the following implications for next steps in the work of building, supporting, and sustaining SSPTR:

Communication: The importance of frequent and continued communication cannot be overstated. EPPs and districts should continue to engage in ongoing, inclusive governance and planning meetings. They should also consider ways to ensure bi-directional information sharing between governance meetings so as to capitalize on opportunities for synergistic support of residents across districts and EPPs.

Importance of additional supports for teacher candidates: Technical assistance providers and their EPP and district partners should collaborate to design additional supports – financial, holistic, and wrap-around – for teacher candidates.

Human resource-intensive model: The building and sustenance of SSPTR is human resource-intensive. Thus, EPPs and districts will need to continue to invest human capital to understand the unique context of each partner, to liaise and partner with each other, and to maintain organizational knowledge pertaining to SSPTR. This has implications for fiscal sustainability.

Continued challenges of recruitment: Recruitment of teacher candidates continues to be of primary concern to both EPPs and districts. Some have built innovative “grow your own” models that have yielded success, as the provision of a livable stipend, while important for many of the goals of SSPTR, does not seem sufficient on its own to recruit more teacher candidates.

Appraising and responding to the policy environment: Given the ongoing teacher shortage, there are multiple ways in which states are seeking to build pathways into K-12 classrooms. Policy-makers should consider strategizing around how to mitigate the impacts of competing policies that draw teacher candidates to alternate pathways outside of SSPTR, especially if those pathways do not focus on the provision of high quality teacher preparation.



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