

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District

Introduction

School districts nationwide have embraced teacher residency programs as potential solutions for pressing teacher shortages. Residency programs are “district-serving teacher education programs that pair a full year residency teaching alongside an expert mentor teacher with coursework about teaching and learning that is tightly integrated with clinical practice.”¹ Paid teacher residencies hold the promise of developing a more diverse and effective teaching workforce, in part because they provide financial support and deep on-the-job training to teacher candidates.² This is significant for candidates of color and candidates from nontraditional backgrounds who often face barriers such as economic constraints and insufficient training when entering the teaching profession.

As teacher residency programs expand throughout the country, strong Local Education Agency (LEA) and educator preparation program (EPP) partnerships result in innovative and effective residencies that provide robust preparation experiences for teacher candidates. Education First created the *Partnering on Paid Residencies Toolkit* as a resource to support LEAs and EPPs interested in building successful residency programs. This case study complements the toolkit by showcasing the *Yearlong Clinical Teaching Residency at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV)*, a partnership with the Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (Harlingen CISD). This partnership not only underscores several key recommendations from the toolkit but also serves as a powerful example of how local collaboration can drive educational outcomes.



1 Education First (2024)

2 Learning Policy Institute (2024)

Recommendations for Strong Partnerships

The *Partnering on Paid Residencies Toolkit* outlines three stages for establishing effective paid teacher residencies: initiation, implementation and continuous improvement. The toolkit provides targeted recommendations for LEAs and EPPs to follow at

each stage. This case study spotlights how the UTRGV and Harlingen CISD collaboration exemplifies the best practices highlighted in the graphic below, bringing the toolkit’s guidance to life.

INITIATION STAGE		
1. Partners should establish a trusting partnership, collaboratively setting the residency model’s vision and goals and ensuring a shared understanding of equity across both the EPP program and LEA.	2. Districts should recognize their talent pipeline and discuss the needs with their EPP partner.	3. Partners should identify a diverse design team composed of LEA and EPP representatives that will co-design the residency model.
4. Partners should retain a shared understanding of the LEA’s instructional priorities to inform the design of the residency model.	5. Partners should develop a financially sustainable residency model.	
IMPLEMENTATION STAGE		
6. Partners should implement a residency model that engages residents in a year-long, paid clinical teaching experience alongside an accomplished mentor teacher who reflects the diversity of the LEA’s student population. Partners should maintain a shared responsibility in selecting, placing and training mentor teachers and residents.	7. Partners should use a co-developed recruitment approach that aligns to the district’s hiring strategy and reflects the demographics and background of the community.	8. Partners should ensure residents have access to professional development beyond their EPP coursework aligned with district priorities.
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT STAGE		
9. Partners should engage in continuous improvement cycles to assess progress, identify needed improvements and make necessary adjustments.		

Program Background

RECOMMENDATION

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Partners should establish a trusting partnership, collaboratively setting the residency model’s vision and goals and ensuring a shared understanding of equity across both the EPP program and LEA.

Located in the central region of the Rio Grande Valley, Harlingen CISD is a school district that serves 17,034 students across 31 schools. While Harlingen CISD and UTRGV began designing their paid residency program in 2022, their partnership began in 2016 when they collaborated to develop a year-long student teaching experience for candidates called the Student Teacher Education Preparation: University Partnership, or STEP UP. The purpose of the STEP UP program was to train and recruit local teachers who would be prepared to successfully take on the challenges of the classroom from their first day of teaching. The STEP UP program, though unpaid, provided candidates with invaluable hands-on teaching experience under the mentorship of an experienced teacher. According to school leaders, candidates who participate in the program often demonstrate the skills and confidence of second- or third-year teachers in their first year of teaching.

Incubated at one school in the district, the STEP UP program was the precursor to the current paid residency program and continues today as one component of Harlingen CISD’s **robust teacher preparation pipeline strategy**. The partnership then introduced the paid residency program to the district’s educator pipeline strategies to elevate the teaching profession and support individuals facing financial barriers. As part of their planning for the paid residency, leaders at UTRGV and Harlingen CISD worked with University-School Partnerships for the Renewal of Educator Preparation (**US PREP**), a technical assistance and consultation provider, to set goals for the residency program based on the needs of the district. During one of the design sessions with US PREP, the partnership identified six primary objectives for the residency program:

1. Residents will fulfill the instructional needs of schools and impact PK-12 students who have been historically underserved.
2. Increase access to high quality resident pathways to build and sustain a strong teacher pipeline.
3. Recruit, prepare and retain a more culturally diverse teacher candidate pipeline.
4. Intentionally scaffold, plan and develop residents to ensure long-term teacher effectiveness.
5. Select, develop and incentivize highly effective mentor teachers.
6. Reallocate existing budgets and roles to sustainably fund paid residents and mentors.

“This particular partnership has been... successful because there is a shared vision among leadership in both [UTRGV & Harlingen CISD] to ensure that we are preparing high-quality educators, and that strong, common vision has led to collaborative work in innovative ways that are only possible when leadership is forward-thinking, open minded and willing to innovate and take good risks together for the improvement of teacher education.”

Dr. Alma Rodriguez , UTRGV

Districts should recognize their talent pipeline and discuss the needs with their EPP partners.

In collaboration with US PREP, the partnership recognized a critical need for more bilingual and special education teachers. To address this, they focused on recruiting teacher residents who could fill these high-demand roles within Harlingen CISD. This strategic move aligns with the partnership's broader goal of cultivating a more culturally diverse teacher candidate pipeline, ensuring both the recruitment and retention of educators equipped to serve the district's diverse student population.

When the decision was made to establish a paid residency program, the partnership already had strong backing from district and school leaders, thanks to the proven success of the STEP UP program. The partners capitalized on the training infrastructure built through STEP UP: the first school to host the STEP UP program became the launch site for the paid residency initiative, incorporating former STEP UP cooperating teachers already trained and ready to serve as mentor teachers for the residency program.

Partners should implement a residency model that engages residents in a year-long, paid clinical teaching experience alongside an accomplished mentor teacher who reflects the diversity of the LEA's student population. Partners should maintain a shared responsibility in selecting, placing and training mentor teachers and residents.

The residency program offers an immersive experience where teacher residents co-teach alongside mentor teachers in P-6 classrooms while concurrently completing coursework at UTRGV. The residents receive mentorship from both their mentor teachers and university faculty, providing them with multiple guided opportunities to practice teaching. For their participation, residents receive a stipend of \$12,000. As one of the most affordable schools in the state, UTRGV offers free tuition for families with incomes of \$150,000 or less. This financial support significantly reduces barriers for residents.

The residency program is structured to gradually increase residents' classroom responsibilities throughout the school year. In the first semester, residents spend three full days a week in their assigned classrooms, dedicating the remaining two days to UTRGV coursework. In the second semester, their classroom commitment increases to four full days a week, with one day still reserved for coursework. This release-time model allows residents to feel more comfortable in their roles over the course of the year, and when it's time for them to lead instruction, mentor teachers can focus on

coaching other teachers. This approach also supports the development of model classrooms where other teachers can observe and participate in learning walks.



Partners should develop a financially sustainable residency model.

US PREP played a key role in helping the partnership design a sustainable residency program by identifying opportunities to reallocate existing resources rather than relying solely on grants. One result is that Harlingen CISD is now using Title II funds and redirecting its substitute teacher budget to provide compensation for both residents and mentor teachers, ensuring long-term financial viability for the program.



Partners should identify a diverse design team composed of LEA and EPP representatives that will co-design the residency model.

UTRGV and Harlingen CISD have developed a shared governance structure that includes key stakeholders from both institutions, with meetings that take place multiple times a year. From the district, attendees include the Deputy Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent for Human Services, the Director of Professional Learning and Teacher Pipelines, the Director of Accounting, a Data Fellow and the campus

principal. On UTRGV's side, the meetings are attended by the program's site coordinator, along with the Dean of the College of Education and the Director of the Office of Field Experiences. This diverse participation provides the program with valuable academic insight, ensures alignment between UTRGV's educational goals and Harlingen CISD's practical needs and allows for shared problem-solving.

Partners should engage in continuous improvement cycles to assess progress, identify needed improvements and make necessary adjustments.

The sense of shared ownership between UTRGV and Harlingen CISD has empowered the partnership to engage in continuous improvement from the outset. By the time the residency program began, partners had already established open lines of communication, enabling them to effectively address unexpected issues during the program's inaugural year. Site coordinators from UTRGV maintain continuous communication with Harlingen CISD leadership, which allows them to quickly address any issues, provide updates and ensure alignment as the "face in the field" for UTRGV.

For example, in the fall, the group worked together to address the fact that residents needed more time to plan with their mentors. The team felt it was a critical piece of a quality residency experience, so the campus principal made modifications to the schedule to ensure residents had the opportunity to not only be a part of one-to-one planning with their mentor but grade-level planning as well. The team is also discussing additional planning opportunities for the 2024-2025 school year through the utilization of the release time model, which offers residents and their mentors protected planning time.

The shared governance meetings also ensure that all stakeholders are kept abreast of any new developments in the residency and informed about residents' work in the district. Governance meetings often feature data about how the residency program impacts the district, and principals can relay their observations about the residents back to UTRGV, enabling the university to support residents in making any necessary adjustments. These practices have significantly strengthened trust, transparency and vision alignment within the partnership.



Harlingen CISD leaders also have opportunities to learn with and from UTRGV's other partner districts. UTRGV and US PREP established regional sessions for all seven of UTRGV's district partners engaged in designing paid residencies to attend. This offered an opportunity for collaboration in which each partnership shared their successful systems and processes and developed a shared vision for what effective residencies could look like in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). These sessions also offered time for each district to set the goals for their paid residency, determine strategic staffing models and stipend amounts, identify school selection criteria, develop a shared resident job description and create communication structures and residency parameters. This structure has helped to foster a spirit of collaboration rather than competition between districts in the RGV around teacher preparation and recruitment.

Partnership Impact

Preliminary data from Harlingen CISD indicates positive impacts from the residency program. An analysis of Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) growth and benchmark data revealed that students in classrooms with teacher residents outperformed their district grade-level peers in all areas tracked. UTRGV and Harlingen CISD leaders believe that the co-teaching model, which allows for more small-group instruction and individualized support, has contributed to this outcome. Harlingen CISD plans to continue tracking the residents and their students' performance and evaluate the residents as first-year teachers to further assess the residency program's impact. The program has also positively impacted students' social and emotional well-being. Surveys and focus groups have revealed that students feel more supported and cared for with an additional teacher (the resident) in their classrooms.

Furthermore, Harlingen CISD hired all teacher residents for the subsequent school year. Anecdotal evidence from learning walks, conversations with school leaders and resident panels indicate that

residents are well-prepared for their roles as classroom teachers. Residents have expressed confidence in their classroom management skills and have become integral members of their school communities, demonstrating leadership by participating in data chats with parents, attending optional after-school events and incorporating fine arts into their teaching. This preparedness reflects the program's success in equipping residents with the skills and confidence needed to be effective teachers.

In the future, the partnership hopes to scale the residency program to make an even greater impact. While Harlingen CISD initially hosted seven teacher residents, they aim to increase this number to 15 by the 2025-2026 school year, with the goal of hiring 100% of the residents as teachers of record. The partnership is also exploring expanding the residency program into secondary courses for grades 7-12. With these plans in motion, UTRGV and Harlingen CISD are well-positioned to continue contributing to the vision of strong teacher preparation in the RGV.

US PREP's Partnership Role

University-School Partnerships for the Renewal of Educator Preparation (US PREP) is a national technical assistance center that supports educator preparation programs and their school district partners to ensure quality preparation for all teacher candidates.

US PREP provided technical assistance to facilitate the design and implementation of paid residencies via strategic staffing to UTRGV and seven LEAs (six school districts and one charter school). This facilitation offered opportunities for the regional partners to come together in a collaborative space and to develop systems and processes that would foster high-quality preparation while focusing on sustainable practices across the RGV.

During the two-year process, US PREP facilitated multiple sessions where the organizations worked to develop resources, codify communication structures, land on key decisions and identify cadences for site visits and governance meetings. These regional sessions fostered a deep analysis of data and current practices with a focus on continuous improvement.

US PREP served as a thought-partner to explore the possibilities of how mutually beneficial partnerships could serve both yearlong residents and PK-12 students. Identifying opportunities for residents to be sustainably compensated for supporting the instructional needs of the school district, while co-teaching alongside a highly qualified mentor teacher was a shared vision. The technical assistance offered a roadmap that LEA and EPP leaders could reference to make their vision a reality.

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