

Capital IDEA—Teacher Pipeline Project¹

Austin, Texas

This profile describes the Teacher Pipeline Project – a teacher education program conceived of and supported by Austin Interfaith in collaboration with Austin Independent School District (AISD), Education Austin (the district’s principal union), Austin Community College and St. Edward’s University, and involving Capital IDEA and Huston-Tillotson University. Like many communities across the U.S., the Austin, Texas area has a shortage of teachers. In particular, the district critically needs bilingual and special education teachers willing to work in schools in low-income communities.

These schools have the most difficulty attracting new teachers and have the highest turnover among experienced teachers.

Austin Interfaith, through house meetings and other information-gathering activities, learned that many of its working-parent members already were employed by the district as paraprofessionals in inner-city schools working in food service, as teachers’ assistants, janitors, performing clerical work and serving in a range of other capacities. These jobs are low-wage (average \$19,000 annually) and offer little promotion potential. Most who hold them have never attended college, but they have experience working in low-income schools, understand the inner-city school environment, and many are bilingual and have hands-on experience working with non-English or limited-English speaking children. They tend to live in the neighborhoods where the schools are located, and in many cases they and their children attend or attended them. They have solid working experience with the Austin Independent School District.

To identify potential interest among paraprofessionals in obtaining higher education credentials and teacher certification (average annual salary \$39,000), Education Austin, the district’s paraprofessional workers’ association, surveyed more than 700 teaching assistants; 155 responded affirmatively, and of these 40 percent indicated an interest in bilingual education and 68 percent indicated an interest in special education. In response, the district, Austin Community College, St. Edward’s University and Huston-Tillotson University (which provides special education instruction) worked together to design a new program, administered by Capital IDEA, to provide the desired opportunity.

Distinguishing features

- School district, community college, universities, Capital IDEA collaboration to design new teacher education program for paraprofessionals
- Cohort-based model
- Paid work-release time for education
- Critical need for Bilingual and special education teachers

Industries

- Education – teachers

¹ For additional information illustrating the range of Capital IDEA’s activities, challenges and outcomes, please see separate profiles – Program Overview, which details its core activities, and brief profiles that detail its work with the electric utility and health care industries. These profiles are based on research conducted in July 2005 in Austin, Texas, where a large number of Capital IDEA staff and representatives of organizations, institutions and public agencies with which the program collaborates were interviewed in-person. It is highly notable that public officials such as the mayor of Austin and a county commissioner as well as the president and a number of vice presidents of Austin Community College, the deputy director of WorkSource, the public workforce agency, the chair of the Chamber of Commerce, a number of human resources directors and other business representatives all made themselves available to describe their experiences with and impressions of Capital IDEA. For a complete list of interviewees, please see the appendix at the end of the Program Overview profile.

Education Provider Flexibility

The Teacher Pipeline Project is designed to allow paraprofessionals working full time in the Austin Independent School District to complete general educational preparation and the first 39 hours of college credits at Austin Community College and then matriculate into St. Edward's University to complete the additional 81 credits needed for a Bachelor of Arts degree. A high level of flexibility and accommodation was required by all parties to design this program. For example, the community college re-scheduled required basic coursework to fit students' work schedules. The district provides employees paid release time once a week. Every Thursday, participating teacher assistants are released from work to attend classes and the district pays for the classroom substitutes. A new curriculum was developed that flows directly from an associates degree at the community college into the Bachelor of Arts program at St. Edward's. This streamlined curriculum is likely to benefit many other students who wish to begin their studies at the more affordable and accessible community college prior to transferring to a four-year institution. St. Edward's is working to transfer its extensive experiences working with non-traditional adult students who are enrolled in its New College to its College of Education – including considering awarding credit for relevant work experience. This same concept will be implemented by Huston-Tillotson University, as it prepares to train a cohort in Special Education.

Capital IDEA Provides Support

Although most of the first students who enrolled were not income-eligible according to Capital IDEA's guidelines (200 percent of federal poverty guidelines), Capital IDEA provides case management and support for the Teacher Pipeline. Capital IDEA holds weekly Vision, Initiative, Perseverance (VIP) sessions with the group and provides the Capital IDEA-eligible participants with the full range of supports offered all of its participants. In the beginning, the partnership hosted a reception for students and their spouses and children. The event included a special break-out session entitled "What can you do to support her?" to help family members understand the level of commitment required of students and how family can help. The goal of all parties is for the cohort to move through coursework together – providing a mutually supportive environment.

As of September 2006, one participant from the first cohort had already received an alternative certification and was teaching; most students were enrolled in college-level coursework, including three who had matriculated into St. Edward's University.