

District Spotlight: Tackling the Teacher Shortage Through Apprenticeship in Illinois

How an Illinois Superintendent in Evanston/Skokie D65 took action to address the teacher shortage and invested in uplifting his community

The Challenge

Recent data from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) shows that nearly half of school districts nationwide are experiencing mounting unfilled teaching vacancies.

Like other education leaders, Illinois District 65 Superintendent Dr. Devon Horton saw the impact of the teacher shortage crisis on his schools in Evanston and Skokie and worried about attracting and keeping talented and experienced educators in his district. Dr. Horton had previous experience supporting urban teacher residency programs and saw the opportunity to think outside of the box for a solution to staffing and retention in his district.

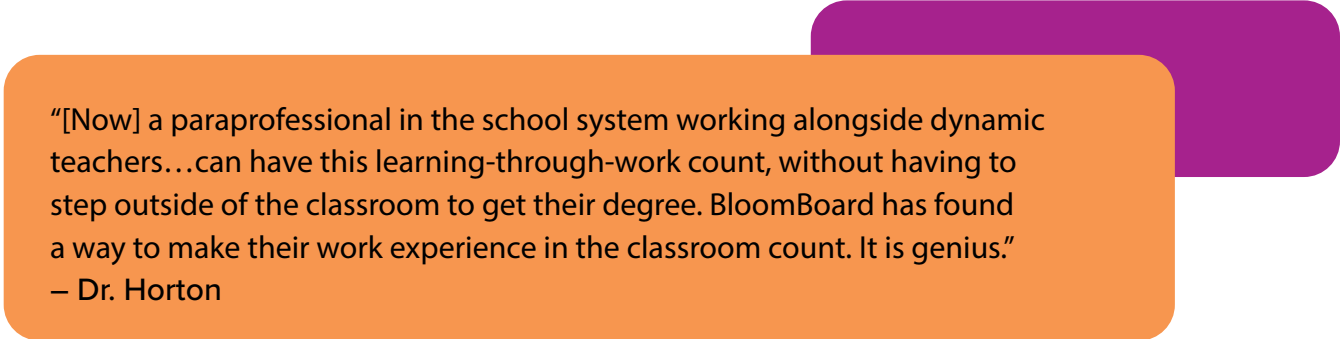
District 65 in Evanston / Skokie, Illinois is a suburban district with over 7,000 students, more than half of whom are students of color and a third receiving free or reduced lunch.



The Solution

BloomBoard's teacher apprenticeship program provided Dr. Horton with just such an innovative solution. This groundbreaking pathway to nurturing talent from within a district to effectively fill teaching positions in his classrooms had advantages for D65 and its students beyond even the staffing of vacant positions.

The design of BloomBoard's teacher apprenticeship program model is intended to solve two distinct challenges facing schools - teacher vacancies and sustainable career pathways that prepare, promote, and advance educators. A traditional education degree with an unpaid student teaching requirement is an insurmountable hurdle for many potential teachers. However, in partnership with a local higher education institution network, BloomBoard offers an unprecedented on-the-job instructional model. School districts are allowed the unique opportunity to upskill dedicated paraprofessionals already serving in their schools and offer them the preparation and certification necessary to earn a teaching degree without leaving their jobs behind.



"[Now] a paraprofessional in the school system working alongside dynamic teachers...can have this learning-through-work count, without having to step outside of the classroom to get their degree. BloomBoard has found a way to make their work experience in the classroom count. It is genius."
– Dr. Horton

Dr. Horton recognized that BloomBoard's program allowed him to leverage the resources right in front of him - his talented and committed paraprofessionals - to create a win-win solution to the district's staffing and pipeline challenges. The apprenticeship program presented a smart, supportive pathway to get paraprofessionals within his district into teaching positions. The program also allowed the district to make a significant investment in the local community, providing career advancement to community members who were already embedded in the local fabric of the schools.

In the fall of 2022, District 65 contacted all employees holding an associates degree to let them know about the apprenticeship opportunity. Immediately there was strong interest in the program, and the district began reviewing applications and conducting interviews to select candidates for the initial cohort. The applicants were paraprofessionals who aspired to become teachers and showed a commitment to both completing the program and to the district upon graduation: participants are guaranteed a teaching position and asked to remain in D65 for no less than five (5) years.

The program launched in November with an outpouring of support and a kick-off ceremony that reflected top-down dedication. The district wanted to make sure these professionals felt valued, supported and respected, and that the dedication they had shown their schools was coming full circle. Participants were promised a range of support, from tangible resources like district issued laptops to

technical and moral support from BloomBoard coaches and district mentors, all designed to ensure the cohort's success.

The program now functions as fully job-embedded, where adult learners are able to use their on-the-job experiences to complete coursework and begin shifting from support roles to full classroom leaders. This learn-by-doing model allows aspiring teachers to apply what they learn immediately and grow their practice in action. By their third course, apprentices will submit lesson plans, deliver instruction, and reflect on best practices, all while submitting real artifacts of their work like lesson plans, teaching videos, student work samples.

"By providing accessible, professional growth opportunities for your staff, you're not only elevating and advancing your existing educators, you're becoming an employer of choice to attract more high-quality, dedicated teachers."

– Dr. Horton

Outcomes

In the first eight months of the program, the apprenticeship cohort has seen tremendous success. Dr. Horton trusts that the program will continue to impact D65 in positive ways as it grows and noted that it has already sparked a "grow your own" mentality in other departments, such as special education and social work. With a 100 percent retention rate and all participants on track to graduate in the fall of 2024, the commitment of the participants and the district has not wavered.

Much of that dedication came directly from leadership: Dr. Horton's enthusiasm and innovative mindset has become a key component to the success of this program. From the onset of learning what this program could bring to his school and community, he responded with an enthusiastic, "Let's Go!" and championed the first cohort, ensuring the program had the support and resources it needed to flourish.

The Evanston Teacher Assistants Association (ETAA) recognized Dr. Horton's efforts specifically, asserting that he had shown himself to be a person of vision and equity, and that "the training for paraprofessionals [allowed them to] fulfill their lifelong dream of becoming a teacher through BloomBoard".

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