



# Case Study: Innovations in Teacher Preparation at Dallas College

Ramia Dawes, featured above, completed her residency with Richardson Independent School District, and earned her bachelor's degree in education from Dallas College in May 2023. She is now 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at a Richardson ISD elementary school.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD) was established in 1965 to offer Dallas County residents affordable, accessible, and high-quality education. Starting with one downtown campus, known as El Centro College, DCCCD expanded and established campuses throughout the city, including Eastfield, Richland, Cedar Valley, Mountain View, North Lake, and Brookhaven, along with two specialized centers, the Bill J. Priest Economic Development Campus and the R. Jan LeCroy Center for Educational Telecommunications.

In 2020, DCCCD became Dallas College, a singly accredited institution with multiple campuses that currently serves more than 100,000 learners through for-credit and continuing education programs. Dallas College is also designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Dallas College is regularly recognized as a leading community college in Texas and nationally.

## INNOVATING in TEACHER PREPARATION

One area where Dallas College shines is in its teacher preparation programs, recognized for innovation and excellence by the State Board for Educator Certification, D CEO and Dallas Innovates, and the US Department of Education.

In 2019, Dallas College (then DCCCD) gained approval from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to offer a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and teaching and gained accreditation for the program later that year. While so-called "applied baccalaureate degrees" offered by community colleges are a growing trend, they are still relatively rare. In 2020, Dallas College became the first Texas community college to offer a bachelor's degree in education - the first cohort enrolled the following year.

Like programs at universities, the Dallas College degree in early childhood education consists of 120 credit hours and includes a pathway for graduates to gain their teaching certification. But outside of these broad parameters, similarities end.

In many ways, Dallas College seeks to engage students and potential teachers who have not been well-served by four-year colleges and universities, including students from lower-earning backgrounds and students who must work to support their families. More than 80% of Dallas College School of Education students are learners of color, multi-lingual, or the first in their families to attend college. Dallas College also enables students to gain a quality education at a low cost – just \$79 per credit hour, including books. Even without financial aid, a student can expect to spend less than \$10,000 for a bachelor's degree from Dallas College.

## COMPETENCY IS KEY

Beyond cost, Dallas College's teacher preparation program represents a dramatic shift away from traditional models, which typically require students to complete a full-time courseload, with clinical experiences and student teaching occurring toward the end of the degree program.

Sara DeLano, Dean of Educator Pathways with Dallas College, commented, “When I first came to Dallas College in June of 2021, we had syllabi outlined on paper that were similar to what you would typically see in a teacher preparation program, with many different objectives per course and many reflection-based essays or poster assignments. And that is not what the research tells us about best practice in terms of effectively preparing teachers. So, where we started in this process was asking, what do the building blocks of this program need to be so all students are successful?”

Competency-based education (CBE) is the core of the Dallas College approach. Broadly, CBE is an educational model that focuses on mastery of identified competencies, which are knowledge, skills, and abilities applied to a task or responsibility, rather than seat time, supported by skills-based assessments. In a CBE model, the goal is mastery rather than completion of a semester or course - students move forward only when they have demonstrated competencies. For DeLano, this was a clear choice. “Research shows that what really matters in preparing teachers is that they get effective, in-the-moment coaching and feedback. We built our program so candidates are getting the very best verbal and written feedback before they become teachers. That can only happen if they’re in a classroom setting. They must have sheltered experiences working with kids as soon as possible.”

To transition the program toward CBE, Dallas College first worked through a research and curriculum design process that ultimately resulted in the identification of five core competencies that all teachers graduating from the program would master. Teacher candidates:

- Know themselves and are equipped to respond (vs. react) in diverse settings.
- Prioritize learning about their students, families, and communities, and are equipped to use this knowledge in service of effectively meeting students’ needs.
- Identify, contextualize, and use high-quality instructional materials.
- Elicit and interpret student thinking.
- Effectively differentiate instruction.

During their practical training, students are supported both by mentor teachers, who are present for day-to-day coaching and guidance, and by faculty members. Because students are in the classroom full-time, Dallas College created a unique model that would enable students to build strong relationships with faculty and sustain a connection to fellow students. Through a cohort model, candidate teachers work exclusively with one faculty member for the entire year.

This model was a big shift for faculty members whose role at Dallas College was previously focused solely on teaching coursework, and which did not have the expectation for faculty members to regularly go out into the field to coach candidates. Dallas College approached this shift by inviting a small group of faculty members to pilot the new model. Faculty members received training on coaching and building effective relationships, as well as on practice-based teacher preparation, and engaged in monthly meetings to discuss what was going well with the role, and how the approach could be shifted to better support faculty

members and resident teachers. Dallas faculty members, the vast majority of whom have deep roots in the community, embraced this role with courage and are viewed by College leadership as the lynchpin in the residency model. Their deep expertise and ability to develop strong relationships with residents during the weekly residency coursework has played a critical role in residents persisting and earning their bachelor's degrees.

To break out of the traditional course model, Dallas translated senior-year coursework into microcredentials, where learning objectives and skills are learned, practiced, and demonstrated in the classroom. Microcredentials focus on key competencies in areas such as:

- Evaluating Assessments for Quality
- Integrating Technology to Enhance Learning
- Supporting Students in English Language Art
- Creating and Equitable and Inclusive Classroom

Coursework is asynchronous, so students can complete during their open time, and faculty facilitate a weekly in-person residency class that focuses on core skills. Faculty are also regularly out in the field observing and providing feedback to students.

The Dallas College team also shifted assignments away from typical deliverables like essays and posters toward demonstrations of specific skills. Focusing on the final year of college, when all students would be in in a full-time yearlong residency, all assignments became "performance based," where students would first learn a skill through asynchronous and mentor-supported learning, rehearse that skill in the residency course, and then practice demonstrate that skill in the residency classroom, collecting a recording to be shared with a reviewer.

Third-party reviewers, who are typically board-certified teachers, use a double-blind process to review and assess student assignments. Assessors provide feedback to students, and students use that feedback to adapt and adjust their submissions until they meet the competency indicators required and demonstrate mastery of the key teaching skill. If so, students gain credit via a microcredential that applies toward the bachelor's degree.

"If the reviewer says no, students have to do it again," said DeLano. "This is the hardest part of the program for students. What they're used to is turning in an assignment, and if they get a B or a C, they're done. But in this model, they must demonstrate the skill to proceed. In the first semester, students hate it, but by the end of the program, students appreciate how connected their assignments are to on-the-job learning."

Students themselves underscored the impact of the competency-based programming:

- "I value the learning-by-doing style. I thought the Learn activities really helped prepare me to plan my own lesson with probing questions, and I love being able to discuss my plans and get feedback from [faculty member]."
- "I think recording my teachings has been a good reflective tool for myself."
- "I am actually analyzing students' work, and it is helping me to prepare for many things I will apply in the classroom."

During the residency year, the senior year of college, teacher candidates take on specific roles with increasing responsibility and autonomy. In the first semester, candidates will grow from taking partial responsibility for establishing classroom culture and leading classroom routines at the outset to leading whole group planning and facilitation and conducting lessons, with particular focus on math instruction. In the second semester, the candidate continues their active role in math and science instruction, while shifting into increasing responsibilities in English and Language Arts. By the end of the semester, the resident will plan and lead full days of instruction activities and conduct all the other responsibilities of teachers.



Over the course of the year, students work through coursework and are consistently evaluated and assessed and demonstrate skills to progress through the program. DeLano added, “This aspect is critical, and is one of the reasons why I wanted to pursue an apprenticeship. In teacher preparation, possibly since inception, we have been so focused on one part of the puzzle and that is coursework. We haven’t strategically and intentionally laid out side-by-side how what you’re doing on the job is an equally critical component to becoming a teacher, and how we must integrate learning on-the-job with learning happening through coursework.”

## APPRENTICESHIP FOR EQUITY AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Dallas College received approval from the US Department of Labor in [March 2022](#), becoming Texas’ first registered teaching apprenticeship program. Apprentices earn a bachelor’s degree and complete requirements to earn their certification to serve as in early childhood through 6<sup>th</sup> grade education teaching roles.

Built on the strong foundations of the Dallas College education program, which all learners go through regardless of their status as an apprentice, the Registered Apprenticeship program supports teacher candidates to work in paid residencies with progressively increasing wages, while gaining the academic and on-the-job learning they need to meet degree requirements, prepare for certification, and become highly-prepared in their roles.

The program supports different types of apprentices, with programming designed to meet their specific needs, including the Residency Apprenticeship, the Paraprofessional Apprenticeship, and the Early Childhood Apprenticeship.

To determine where a teacher candidate is on their journey to earning a bachelor's degree and becoming a teacher, Dallas College conducts an assessment and develops a timeline and degree plan for each apprentice. The model includes at least two full years of clinical experience, the first supporting the completion of the bachelor's degree and the second focused on preparing candidates for certification.

The Residency Apprenticeship supports current Dallas College students who are completing their final year of college and training for certification.

Over the course of two years, students can simultaneously earn their remaining college credits, which are assessed and granted through Dallas College's competency-based education model and prepare for certification. Apprentices work as resident teachers, and occasionally as substitute teachers, and are paid an average wage of \$30,000 by partner districts – this amount increases across each year of the program as skills increase.

Resident apprentices do not pay out of pocket for tuition costs. Instead, Dallas College braids funds, including Pell Grants, state financial aid, and state and federal workforce dollars to cover tuition and certification exam fees for apprentices.

The paraprofessional apprenticeship focuses on current district employees, particularly instructional aides who are already supporting teachers and students in the classroom. These apprentices, already employees of the district, will continue to work and earn a salary that, once the individual is an apprentice, will increase on a regular schedule. Apprentices take courses through Dallas College, completing their academic learning at no-cost, and gain college credit through demonstrating competencies, which typically takes two to three years.

Once they reach the final year of their degree program, this group of apprentices shifts into "Residency Apprentices."

For paraprofessionals specifically, Dallas College requires that partner districts enable one leave day per month for an in-person cohort meeting, with apprentices in the same school and district coming together in a cohort. This is particularly important for paraprofessionals, who are all at various stages of their learning—they cannot come together based on a class, so a school-based model works well. DeLano commented, "During the cohort meeting is when we're doing relationship building, along with academic support. For many paraprofessionals, this will be the second or third time they've tried college and there is a lot of nervousness. One student sent a thank you note to the facilitator saying that this was her third time coming back to college, but she was making straight As and that she knew she could do it this time."

To date, only one apprentice has stopped-out of the paraprofessional apprenticeship program after beginning.

# APPRENTICE PROFILE – PRICILA CANO-PADRON

With the goal of being a teacher, Pricila Cano-Padron was a Dallas College student earning her associate degree when the apprenticeship program launched. Rather than transferring, Pricila leapt at the chance of being able to continue at Dallas College. Pricila earned her bachelor's degree through the program and completed her student teaching at Richardson ISD, where she completed her first year as a teacher-of-record in spring 2024.

## How did you learn about the apprenticeship program?

I was finishing up my sophomore year at Dallas College, and I started to hear rumors about a bachelor's program in education. I proceeded to ask around, and at the time, I was close to a professor of mine – he was a great professor. I asked him about the program, and it turned out that he was one of the leaders. I applied, and next thing you know, I was in. I had been planning to go into education and I was going to transfer to a four-year university, but once they offered that program, I moved as quickly to secure my place.

## What was appealing to you about the apprenticeship program?

I always wanted to stay close to home, and I always had the mindset that when I became a teacher, I wanted to teach in the same district that I grew up in. When I found out that the program was working with Richardson ISD, which is where I grew up and wanted to work, I knew it was a sign to stick with Dallas College.

Having the income that came along with the program was very helpful. You're student teaching from 7:00 AM to sometimes 5:00 PM, depending on what you have to do with your mentor teacher, and you have college classes, so it doesn't give the opportunity to have a second job. Receiving that pay was super helpful. This program is also so different. It is very structured. They have a schedule for you as an apprentice, and you have certain dates you had to get observed by, certain activities and discussions based on your work that you had to complete. They had a schedule for everything, but it's not only your responsibility. Everyone is working to help you keep that schedule intact.

## What were your student teaching experiences like?

I will say, being in the classroom vs. being IN a classroom are two totally different things! We get told one thing as students and we experience an entirely different thing as teachers. Being in the classroom prepares you for the scenario of being a teacher and doing this job. The program did a good job in preparing us how to teach, how to build a lesson plan, but the student teaching experience prepares you for actually being a teacher.

## You just completed your first year—what are you thinking about now?

Going from student teaching to getting to teach was a pretty easy transition. What shocked me the most was that I was on my own. It was kind of relieving knowing that I could do so much in my own classroom and teach how I wanted to teach.

The apprenticeship program was an amazing experience. I loved my team, my campus, the support, the relationships. I loved the students, their families, and the neighborhood I was involved in. Everyone was working together to help me. My first-year teaching was actually an easy year, and I was so grateful for that. Being a first-year teacher is stressful and it's a lot. I had a couple moments where I questioned whether I really was built to be a teacher. But in those moments, I had so much support from my campus, from my neighborhood, and from Dallas College. I really enjoyed my first year of teaching.



## ENSURING PREPARATION

The process to earn both a bachelor's degree and certification through Dallas College takes five years. While this may challenge some students' timelines, DeLano describes the rationale. "There is no other profession in the US that requires you to pass certification exams before you finish training. The model is, you go through school and then you take the exams. In an undergraduate teacher preparation program in Texas, certification exams typically happen before you even start a yearlong residency, halfway through the training. If a student doesn't pass, they will be channeled into another degree program. We've said that everyone will do a residency and get a degree first, and then we will prepare them to certify, but we're not doing certification requirements until after the bachelor's is complete."

She added, "Our job is to make sure that our students have as many opportunities as possible. Students will have the most opportunities across Texas and the US if they are certified. That's what we tell students: this is the best way for you to have as many opportunities as you can."

Dallas College, as both the registered entity and the "Educator Preparation Program" (EPP), partners with school districts, charter schools, and Head Start, who serve as the employers in the apprenticeship solution. The College is currently partnering with Richard ISD, Crandall ISD, Lewisville ISD, Uplift Education, and Head Start. Apprentice wages are paid by schools, which are often sourced through reallocated dollars (for example, funds for substitute teachers) and through state and federal resources.

The apprenticeship requires multiple points of engagement with the district or organization: academics, finance, and especially human resources, whose staff must review applications and make hiring decisions. Partner districts support apprentices with compensation, mentor training and advising, professional development, and release time to attend course and required meetings, alongside Dallas College academic training and coaching.

## MEASURING IMPACT

Upon completion of their apprenticeship program, ideally, completers will be hired as full-time employees by their districts, creating positive ROI for the district's investment in the apprentice's training and growth.

Dallas College graduated its first cohort of 100 bachelor's degree students in summer 2023. Approximately 85% of students who completed a residency with a school partner during the 2022-23 academic year were hired by that partner for the following school year. The College graduated its cohort of almost 160 bachelor's degree students in spring 2024.

Principals whose schools are partnering with Dallas College are pleased with the program's results. In 2023-24, Dallas College participated in a national residency survey conducted by the National Center for Teacher Residencies. 100% of responding hiring principals agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The Dallas College “program graduates positively impact school culture.”
- “The program prepares residents to be effective teachers.”

One principal responding to the survey commented, “I believe that the flexibility of the program will help us bring more teachers into the field because it is possible to progress through the program while continuing to work. In addition to my current resident teacher candidate, I have several teacher’s aides who are also enrolled in this program. Providing our paraprofessionals an affordable and flexible college option will bring us the best teachers, because they have so much more experience than those in a traditional teacher preparation program.”

Interest in Dallas College’s bachelor’s degree in education is also growing. In fall 2021, 248 students chose this credential as their program of study. By fall 2022, this number grew to 981, and in fall 2023, 1,258 students enrolled in the program—a 400% increase over two years.

More broadly, Dallas College indicates that 70% of its teacher education program students, including apprentices, are graduating on-time, exceeding the completion rate of both community colleges and public 4-year institutions in Texas.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Teacher apprenticeships will not address every single factor impacting the teacher talent pipeline, but they do represent a significant leap forward in making the preparation required for the role more accessible, affordable, equitable, and effective. And more broadly, the innovations in the overall Dallas College teacher education program offer huge opportunities for many more students to gain high-quality education and experience at an affordable cost, even outside the apprenticeship model.

Just six short months passed between the date when Dallas College received approval for its registered apprenticeship program and when the first apprentice enrolled. Program leaders moved quickly and iterated, addressing problems in real time without the benefit of past experiences. As others consider developing teacher apprenticeship programs, especially with EPP leadership at the helm, the following considerations may be useful.

### Shared Responsibility

DeLano notes that the Dallas College model of competency-based education “requires every partner to look at this differently.” To create true transformation for apprenticeships, education preparation programs should change to meet the needs of districts and of apprentices. “The power of this model is, if it’s built in partnership with EPPs and systems, it can become a shared responsibility.”

For colleges, this means that both the content and the delivery of educator training programs will need to change to accommodate working learners—to deliver on the goals of the apprenticeship, the priorities must shift to enable apprentices’ timely, efficient, and equitable program completion.

## Change Management

For colleges who are considering teacher apprenticeship programs, and especially those adapting existing teacher preparation programs, change management will be an important factor in success. In Dallas College's case, there were positive shifts for faculty because of the apprenticeship program, particularly, moving to a cohort model enabled faculty to work with 25 students for a year instead of hundreds of students across multiple courses. Many faculty are thrilled to work closely with apprentices in their practice, developing the future teaching force in practical, tactical ways. But for others, the required shifts for apprenticeship mean significant changes in how they have worked in the past and may require different skill sets. Paying attention to how apprenticeship will shift the needs of a college's faculty and staff is a worthy investment of time from the outset.

## Context Matters

While many apprenticeship programs are led by employers, who then partner with education providers, the Dallas College model works because the College serves its region and can work specifically to meet the needs of north Texas. For other colleges and organizations seeking to develop teacher apprenticeship programs, starting first with the needs of the employers (districts and schools) to drive programming and priorities is key.

## Affordability at the Center

Absent a truly affordable EPP, the Dallas College model is nearly impossible. Even fully leveraging Pell, state aid, workforce funding, and philanthropic dollars, no apprenticeship model could reach any sort of scale at a typical public university (\$8,600 for tuition per year for in-state students).

Because Dallas College is a truly affordable institution, available at no-cost to many lower earning students, a significant barrier to scale is removed. Leaders can focus on running the program, and raising resources to supplement wages and wraparound supports, rather than focusing primarily on meeting tuition costs.

## Prioritize Sustainability

While Dallas College's teacher apprenticeship program is undoubtedly enabled by the very low-cost education available through the College, there are always concerns about districts' ability to support wages for apprentices, as well as the ongoing availability of state and federal resources to supplement wages, training, and wraparound services. Program leaders are constantly negotiating and identifying funds to support the program and determining the limits of scale.

## Beyond Apprenticeship

Dallas College received approval for a bachelor's degree in education at the same time as the broader teacher apprenticeship movement was starting. While operating a registered apprenticeship program has opened up resources, the underlying aspects of apprenticeship programs—paid work, supported on-the-job and academic training, and national credential

attainment—are all core aspects of the College’s broader education program, and are available to anyone, whether they are an apprentice or not.

Many organizations, including colleges and universities, are inclined to work at the project level, creating specialized and specific interventions for targeted groups, even when those interventions are proven effective. Dallas College worked in the opposite direction, making effective practice available for all students in the education program, and creating opportunities for apprentices to thrive. Building the broader program based on best practices, which align with apprenticeship parameters, the College created scale and improved outcomes and experiences for everyone. With almost 160 new teachers graduating in Spring 2024, with demonstrated mastery of their skills and thousands of hours of supported practice, the College is contributing to the region’s talent in significant ways.

## CONCLUSION

With two years of implementation and results, Dallas College is just starting to transform the teacher talent pipeline for the region. Dallas College is going deeper than simply offering a paid student teaching/residency experience - the College is tackling several root causes of challenges in the teacher talent pipeline, and creating enabling conditions for more learners, especially from groups who have been marginalized, to enter this most important of professions.

- Dallas Colleges addresses affordability head on, enabling teacher candidates to enroll in college at low- or no-cost and earn a wage to support their families. As a result, more candidates from lower earning and minoritized backgrounds will be able to gain the education and training they need to become teachers, debt-free, building more representative teacher workforces and better serving diverse students.
- Dallas College is creating a bigger, broader teacher talent pipeline, especially among bilingual candidates, directly addressing teacher shortages in area districts and creating new capacity in hard-to-fill specializations.
- Dallas College is developing teachers with significant high-quality experiences and practice, which, over time, will lead to fewer teachers leaving the field early in their careers and lower churn in the profession. In districts, HR leaders will spend less time and money recruiting new teachers, freeing up their energy and resources to support incumbent teachers.
- Dallas College provides flexible learn-and-work options for adult students, or for students with adult responsibilities. By enabling students to gain credit for their work-based learning through competency-based education, and by building asynchronous and other flexible modalities, Dallas College is supporting apprentices progress through their programs at speed and study when they have time.

With continued efforts to support apprentices, and the districts and schools where they work, Dallas College is improving opportunities and outcomes for teacher candidates, and for the thousands of students who will learn from these highly prepared educators in the future.