

# **Recruiting and Retaining Teachers for Richmond Public Schools: Partnership Efforts**

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## **Abstract**

*Virginia Commonwealth University and the Richmond Public Schools have been frequent partners in education projects and initiatives over the past 30 years. Recent partnership efforts have focused on four issues specific to the needs of an urban school system: preparing teachers for work with students in high-needs urban classrooms, recruiting teachers, mentoring beginning teachers, and retaining successful, experienced teachers in these same classrooms. This paper describes school-university efforts around these issues and identifies the challenges still to be met.*

Located in the heart of Richmond, the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has a history of service to and partnership with the Richmond Public Schools (RPS). Over the past 35 years, VCU School of Education has shared faculty with RPS in joint appointments and collaborated in federally funded projects such as *Cooperative Urban Teacher Education*. Collaborative research projects have examined teacher roles and student learning, and together VCU and RPS educators have participated in training on school reform and consensus building.

In 1990, VCU recommitted itself to involvement with and service to metropolitan Richmond by stating its goal to “use the urban environment as a laboratory for studying and developing new approaches to problems pertaining to the public and private sector” (VCU Mission and Goals Statement 1990). Within the School of Education, specifically the Division of Teacher Education, this mission focuses on the preparation of teachers for work in urban classrooms. This paper describes programs through which the VCU School of Education and RPS have collaborated, often joined by other partners in the university and community to recruit and retain teachers for urban classrooms.

## **Recruiting Future Teachers**

The National Center for Education Statistics (1998) predicts that during the next eight years approximately 2.4 million teachers will be needed in the United States. This figure represents a national teacher shortage. Fideler and Haselkorn (1999) predict that it will be increasingly difficult for low-wealth urban and rural school districts to find and hire qualified teachers. Distribution difficulties will likely be most severe in southern and western regions of the United States, where the population is growing, and particularly acute in central-city public schools (Darling-Hammond 1999).

Richmond Public Schools, a southern, urban, central-city public school division, has already begun to experience a shortage of teachers and is working collaboratively with various partners to establish teacher recruitment pipelines.

In the pages that follow, the authors briefly discuss efforts to help recruit, prepare, and retain teachers for urban schools: recruiting and mentoring through Project BEST (Basic Educational Skills and Training). The Project is a collaborative pre-practicum apprentice program; a transition program from an urban community college to teacher education; an “urban education” general education requirement; and a service learning component in a foundations course. Project components include: visiting and observing in urban classrooms; tutoring; Mentor Teacher/First Year Teacher Support program; professional development school partnerships; MERC; a fast-track program in Special Education for RPS paraprofessionals; and participation in the Great Cities’ Universities Urban Educator Corps initiative.

## ***Project BEST Provides Three-Tiered Model***

A joint initiative between VCU and the Richmond Public Schools (RPS) provides a three-tiered model of teacher recruitment through extended mentoring. *Project BEST* began in 1989 as a partnership between the School of Education and Binford Middle School. Since its inception, *Project BEST* has grown to include all ten RPS middle schools. Funded by the National Science Foundation, RPS, and VCU, *Project BEST* has an excellent track record of raising students’ GPA, retention through high school, rates of admission into college, and selection of education as a major (Simon, Reed, and Clark 1990). Several of the VCU mentors/tutors have changed their majors and become teachers as a result of their *Project BEST* experiences.

There are five basic components of *Project BEST*:

1. VCU students mentor and tutor middle school students twice a week, with an emphasis on math and science;
2. Supervising teachers from the RPS middle schools are given a stipend to maintain folders with class materials, monitor after-school tutorials, and attend workshops;
3. Middle school students, their *Project BEST* supervising teachers, and the VCU mentor/tutors attend Saturday workshops in math and science on the VCU campus;
4. University faculty serve as mentors to the VCU students involved with the project, creating three tiers of mentoring; and
5. VCU mentors/tutors attend cultural events with the middle school students to enhance self-esteem and community acculturation.

*The first year I did Project BEST I was very nervous because everyone had told me that I shouldn’t work with city kids....[Conversations with students I tutored] changed my life and opened my eyes to how other people live. I did not grow up with a lot of money, but I always had two loving parents to support me. Talking with these kids, the things they went through shocked me*

*so much. I couldn't believe that I had grown up only about five minutes from this school and I and most of my friends lived a life 10 times better than them [sic]. Just the problems at home and lack of parent involvement shocked me. But when all was said and done at the end of the school year, I knew that city kids were the type of school I wanted to work in because I know that there is where I needed to help, not at the school type that I attended (VCU Graduate Student, Fall 2000).*

## **Collaborative Recruiting in the VCU College of Humanities and Sciences**

The College of Humanities and Sciences has joined with several other Richmond institutions to actively recruit prospective teachers locally and nationally, particularly in the areas of math and science where shortages are acute (NASBE 1998). The *Pre-Practicum Apprentice Program* is a project supported by the Virginia Collaborative for Excellence in the Preparation of Teachers under a grant from the division of Undergraduate Education of the National Science Foundation. This project works toward several objectives by placing freshman and sophomore “apprentices” from VCU, Virginia Union University, and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College into Richmond Public Schools classrooms with lead math and science teachers. The first objective is to help apprentices decide if teaching is a career they would like to pursue. The second is to show the apprentices innovative methods for science and math instruction in the hopes of interesting them in these two shortage areas. Finally, providing the apprentices with early and positive experiences in urban schools will encourage their interest in teaching in urban settings such as Richmond Public Schools. To meet these objectives, apprentices are paid to observe cooperating teachers for up to eight hours. With permission from the cooperating teacher, interaction with individual and small groups of students may be part of these observations. Three seminars are required for apprentices, including an orientation to the program in which general guidelines for behavior and professionalism are addressed. Apprentices then submit a written report on their experiences to a university coordinator.

*I hadn't been in middle school since I was a middle school student. And back then I had no idea how hard teachers had to work. They have to know the science and stuff, but they have to know it so well they can break it down into pieces that make sense for the kids. And they have to think ahead about the questions the kids are going to ask. Being an apprentice in this program gave me new respect for my teachers and my professors—teaching is hard work! (VCU Pre-Practicum Apprentice, Fall 2000).*

## **BTTE Targets Community College Students**

Community college students comprise a largely untapped market of teaching candidates. Although Virginia community colleges do not have a teacher education curriculum, they do offer the first two years of coursework needed for a liberal arts bachelor's degree. The *Baccalaureate Transition for Teacher Education (BTTE)* program is a collaborative effort of J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, the VCU College of Humanities and Sciences, and the VCU School of Education. This program seeks community college students interested in teaching and provides advising and seminars regarding transfer of course work to VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences. Students are also given preparation for Praxis I, required for all applicants to Virginia teacher preparation programs. Finally, paid field experiences in the Richmond Public Schools provide community college students with exposure to the realities of teaching so there are no surprises when they enter their own classrooms. The success of the BTTE program prompted the Virginia General Assembly to pass a joint resolution directing the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia to promote such partnerships throughout the state.

*All national studies indicate that the demand for teachers in the new decade will be overwhelming. Community college students comprise a largely untapped market that can help fill that demand. Especially in urban areas, the Baccalaureate Transition for Teacher Education program forges a close partnership between J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College and Virginia Commonwealth University by providing community college students with the opportunity to gain insights into the teaching career, to receive academic advising that leads directly to completion of the liberal arts baccalaureate and the professional education master's degrees at VCU, and to help students prepare for professional examinations like Praxis I needed as a step toward educational licensure (Dr. John Borgard, Associate Dean, VCU College of Humanities and Sciences, Fall 2000).*

## **META Fast-Tracks Paraprofessionals**

Another untapped resource for teacher recruitment has been identified in the paraprofessionals currently working in urban schools. The *Metropolitan Educational Training Alliance*, comprised of representatives from VCU, RPS, and three other area school districts, has pooled resources to initiate a fast-track program for paraprofessionals who already hold bachelor's degrees and are interested in pursuing licensure in special education. VCU special education faculty and the directors of special education from the participating districts are working together to identify coursework that will enable the paraprofessionals to meet licensure competencies for special educators in Virginia. Tuition funding will be provided by the school districts while the university will offer the necessary coursework off-campus to reduce tuition costs.

## **Preparing Teachers for Urban Settings**

Since the Commonwealth of Virginia requires newly prepared teachers to hold a liberal arts degree, teacher preparation at VCU is a collaborative effort between the College of Humanities and Sciences and the School of Education. Prospective teachers complete an extended program culminating in the simultaneous awarding of a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree in the liberal arts and a Master of Teaching degree in professional studies. This extended program is based on the philosophy that a well-trained teacher will have a broad liberal arts background with specialized knowledge in a core subject as the foundation for classroom teaching. Concentrated study of pedagogy and methods, including field experiences to encourage application of what has been learned, then prepare that individual to make decisions about teaching content and related skills in ways that enhance student learning and development.

## **Collaboration between the School of Education and the College of Humanities and Sciences**

Faculty in the College of Humanities and Sciences begin the process of teacher preparation at VCU by providing the necessary liberal arts background through general education courses. These courses have been revised to provide solid overviews of their topics rather than introductions for students who plan to major in that particular subject. Conscious of VCU's mission as an urban university and the School of Education's goal to prepare urban teachers, the College of Humanities and Sciences requires a three-credit course in the category of Urban Environment for all majors. "Students attending a public, urban university should have some understanding and appreciation of the urban environment, the challenges and opportunities that face cities today, and the influences of cities on human activities" (VCU 2000–2001 Undergraduate Bulletin). A growing number of general education and major studies courses in the college also include service learning components that place students in urban settings. For example, a religious studies course requires students to spend time in Richmond houses of worship to gain knowledge of religious perspectives on urban issues. These and other experiences have the goal of familiarizing students with life in an urban community.

Humanities and Sciences faculty also advise future teachers throughout their undergraduate programs and, many times, are frontline recruiters for the Division of Teacher Education. Nurturing students new to university routines and policies, providing exemplary models of teaching, and presenting positive images of teachers in a variety of contexts are all ways that Humanities and Sciences faculty encourage students in the extended teacher preparation programs.

## **VCU's Teacher Preparation Program**

The literature on urban schooling suggests characteristics unique to teachers successful in urban classrooms. Effective urban teachers are those who reflect on their own practices and their students' responses. They are proactive in meeting student needs before those needs affect learning (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Effective urban teachers are familiar with the history of their school and community, and are aware of the political factors that influence students, families, and the school itself (Anyon 1997). They understand how to tie curricula to student interests and backgrounds and are able to build opportunities for contextual teaching and learning into classroom activities (Delpit 1995; Sears and Hersh 1999). They are aware of the attitudes, strategies, and structures that have been effective in other urban classrooms, and have spent meaningful time in urban schools and communities (Alder 2000; Knapp et al. 1995; Haberman 1995; Powell, Zehm, and Garcia 1996). While pre-service teachers may develop some of these characteristics in university-based courses, others will only be acquired in field-based experiences.

In collaboration with the College of Humanities and Sciences, the Division of Teacher Education prepares teachers in secondary and middle school education, early and elementary education, and special education. A required professional studies course in each of these programs, EDUS 300 Foundations of Education, provides students with early experiences in the Richmond Public Schools through service learning. Students enrolled in the foundations course are required to spend up to two hours per week working in an RPS school. Activities may include assisting classroom teachers, tutoring students, or working in library or computer labs. Through weekly journals and a final paper, students describe their observations, reflect on application of course content, and ponder big-picture questions posed by their professor. Service learning in this course provides future teachers with a look at the real world of schooling early in their preparation and helps them make sense of education theories in the context of urban schools.

*I came to understand what the lives of "the working poor" were really about and the effect it has on families in the city.... I discovered that there are a lot of concerned and very dedicated people who want to help.... I was inspired to find a strong sense of community among the people of the city....(VCU Graduate Student, Fall 2000).*

Likewise, schools profit from service learning. Schools feel the immediate benefit of extra adults to interact with students. Ultimately, however, many schools see service learning as an opportunity to begin positive relationships with pre-service teachers who will soon be eligible for employment.

Each program in the Division of Teacher Education builds on early urban experiences provided by service learning through course assignments, lectures, and field experiences designed to prepare students for teaching in urban classrooms. Students graduating from the early and elementary education program will be eligible for

licensure in grades pre-K through six. This program requires students to participate in four field experiences. The first of these field experiences places students in an urban school for four hours a week and requires them to complete observations of a child, interview the teacher on behavioral guidance, and identify classroom materials that support diversity, among other tasks.

*The first day of my practicum experience was a real eye-opener. It brought back memories of my early education experience with the teacher yelling and humiliating me.... [but] this experience did not scare me away, as it might some others. Instead, it ensured my desire to teach.... Some teachers' ideas of behavioral management [is] to send students out in the hall so they wouldn't have to deal with them. These are the actions I have always wanted to stop. There will always be teachers out there who do this, but my goal is to do better. I want to show and teach students in a positive way the appropriate behavior expected in schools.... I hope this is possible and not just a young teacher's unattainable wish (VCU Undergraduate Student journal, Fall 2000).*

The second field experience, TEDU 566 Diagnosis and Remediation in Reading, requires each student to intensively tutor a child with reading difficulties for a semester. This course meets off-campus at an urban school where a faculty member supervises as VCU students assess, plan for, and instruct individual children identified by the principal.

*We're having a party at the end of the week with the kids we've been tutoring all semester. This will be fun, but sad, too. I have really gotten to love the little boy I've been working with and I feel kind of responsible for his future success in reading. I hope his teachers will continue with the kinds of things we've been doing together. It would be awful to stop now, now that he's really doing well (VCU Graduate Student journal, Fall 2000).*

Because students have some placement options for their third and fourth field experiences, they are encouraged to make choices that provide opportunities to support their teaching goals. Many students opt to complete their field experiences in RPS or in edge city schools.

Topics and themes relevant to urban teaching are also explored through course activities in the early and elementary education program. Working with diverse children and families, guiding children's behavior, organizing for instruction, developing and teaching relevant curriculum, building classroom communities, teaching at-risk children, and reflective practice are some of the ideas pursued through lectures, case studies, guest speakers, readings, and field trips. Guided explorations of these and other topics during coursework provide a knowledge base upon which students can build during field experiences. This urban emphasis can dramatically influence students' decisions about where to teach after graduation. After a visit to one RPS school, an early and elementary education student wrote to the *Richmond Times Dispatch*:

*On November 11, I was privileged to visit Whitcomb Elementary School. The visit, a part of my graduate studies at VCU in elementary education, changed everything I thought about Whitcomb. During my visit [the parent involvement] coordinator proudly described the school's achievements. These achievements include academic tutoring, improved test scores, Boy and Girl Scout troop meetings, increased PTA membership, and even adult GED classes. At Whitcomb, I saw happy youngsters eager to learn; I met a warm, smiling, professional school staff. Admittedly, the local media had brainwashed me with fast food journalism: I believed Whitcomb Elementary School was a hopeless school. This is untrue. Whitcomb blossoms with hope!*

Three field experiences are required in the Secondary and Middle School Education (SMSE) program. Two of these field experiences are completed in different school divisions, maximizing opportunities for an urban placement. SMSE students receive additional urban experience by participating in an ongoing tutorial program in an RPS middle school as part of the required course, TEDU 537 Secondary Curriculum. The course instructor monitors the tutoring experiences and facilitates group and individual discussions focused on this work. Students also keep reflective journals on their tutoring activities throughout the semester. In-class activities and reading assignments infuse research about urban education into the training of secondary teachers. Topics addressed include cultural relevancy, multiple intelligences and learning styles, issues in urban education, reading in the content areas, students with special needs, democratic classrooms, and students at risk for school failure. The tutorial experiences help students connect their ideas with real life.

*This has been an eye-opening experience for me. I have to force myself not to be too hasty in my decisions, but I am shocked at how comfortable I am in the urban middle schools environment. I have had very little experience with minorities and this made me a little uneasy about having to work with these students. I do have prejudices, but they are not of the sort that invoke anger, hostility, or great fear. I have questioned my ability to connect with these students because they are different from myself. However, having set my reservations aside, I have learned that my involvement with students in an urban school is not as much of a challenge as I had originally thought. I am so concerned about and in some ways disgusted with certain elements in our society. This may be my chance to act rather than grumble and make noise. The experience at Minnis Middle School is not only helping me prepare for the classroom, it is helping me to learn about people who have different lives than my own that I have not had the chance to get to know (VCU Graduate Student, Fall 2000).*

Another VCU student wrote that the more intimate interaction of the tutorial situation

*...allows you to develop a relationship with an individual (always a valuable thing) and get an idea of what is going on at this age... at least one perspective ...fosters empathy, a wonderful quality in a teacher... and reminds*

*us as future educators to remember the individual among the masses (VCU Graduate Student, Fall, 2000).*

SMSE students also have the opportunity to select three elective courses in their program. Students interested in an urban focus can enroll in TEDU 651 Special Topics: Diversity in the Classroom, TEDU 651 Special Topics: Schooling in the Urban Community, or TEDU 562 Reading in the Content Areas. Special education majors at VCU have a choice of programs in emotional disturbance, mental retardation, learning disabilities, and early childhood special education. All Special Education programs require students to participate in field-based practica, internships, and externships that are frequently hosted by RPS. The Early Childhood Special Education program, for example, has a strong relationship with RPS Infant Services. VCU students observe intervention specialists and work with infants and their families receiving infant services, while teachers and administrators from this program are frequent guest speakers in VCU courses.

## **Retention of Richmond Public School Teachers**

Over the past 10 years, the VCU School of Education and RPS have collaborated on several initiatives related to teacher recruitment and retention. Because “a third of beginning teachers quit within their first three years on the job,” RPS recognizes the need to provide extended support and nurturing for beginning teachers (Stansbury and Zimmerman 2000). In partnership with VCU, Virginia State University, the University of Richmond, and Virginia Union University, RPS established the Mentor Teacher/First Year Teacher Support Program in 1996. This program was funded by a matching funds grant from the Virginia Department of Education and RPS. Mentor teachers are trained in supervision skills, phases of teacher development, and how to be helpful to new teachers. “This is my first official year as a mentor. The content was invaluable to me,” was a typical comment from mentors involved in the initial mentor training. Representatives from partner universities and RPS, mentor teachers, and first-year teachers meet during the spring and summer to plan for the coming year. Mentors are then involved with RPS and university representatives in planning monthly staff development sessions for first year teachers. Staff development topics include classroom management, working with special needs children, reading in the content areas, motivation, and working with families. Evaluations are collected after each workshop, and the comments tend to be favorable: “I don’t know whether I’d teach again next year had it not been for [my mentor]. We’re such good friends now. I know where I go when I feel frustrated.”

## **Professional Development School Partnerships**

As an early member of the Holmes Group, which has worked since the 1980s for school-based reform of teacher education, the VCU School of Education participates in a Professional Development School partnership with Mary Munford Model Elementary School in the Richmond Public Schools, and with the Governor’s School for Government and International Studies, which serves RPS and other area school

divisions. In each partnership, a VCU faculty member serves as PDS liaison to the school. Liaisons work with teachers and administrators to develop activities, courses, and experiences for children, pre-service teachers, and practicing professionals. RPS teachers and administrators are likewise engaged in VCU's teacher preparation programs, serving on university committees and as clinical and/or adjunct faculty. Activities within PDS partnerships have three focal points:

1. continuing professional development for in-service teachers;
2. collaboration in the preparation of pre-service teachers; and
3. classroom-based action research with the goal of improving instruction and learning for RPS students.

PDS partnerships enhance teacher preparation at VCU by providing quality field experiences and specially trained cooperating teachers. Faculty in professional development schools have knowledge of the goals and requirements of VCU's teacher preparation program, and have indicated their willingness to supervise and mentor pre-service teachers. Working with VCU students is, for many PDS teachers, a new challenge that keeps teachers vital and interesting. Stacey Branch, VCU clinical faculty and kindergarten teacher at Mary Munford Model Elementary School, stated, "As an experienced teacher, I welcomed the opportunity to share what I had learned about teaching and children with pre-service teachers and to take on a role traditionally held by university faculty.... I experienced a new dimension of teaching!"

## **Other Partnership Activities**

Other partnership activities may not be targeted specifically toward teacher recruitment, but rather at enhancing teaching and learning in the Richmond Public Schools and in VCU's teacher preparation programs. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) has the mission of conducting educational research relevant to practitioners, and then applying that research in schools and classrooms. Established in 1994, MERC is a partnership between VCU's School of Education, RPS, and six other school divisions who share costs and benefits. MERC research connects the professional expertise and practical wisdom of school-based leaders with the research interests of VCU faculty. Practitioners set the research agenda and participate in study design and analysis. They then use the research findings in local decision-making and program development (Pisapia 1994). Current MERC projects include research on attracting and retaining teachers, the impact of over-age students in middle schools, elementary teachers' assessment and grading practices, extra-curricular activities for students with learning disabilities, and differentiated instruction in social studies.

Additional partnership activities related to the Great Cities' Universities, have helped VCU's School of Education, College of Humanities and Sciences, and RPS identify future directions for collaborative efforts. Each partner recognizes the need to align existing and future programs with the goals and requirements of the other, and both

partners have agreed to concentrate attention and effort in three primary areas: teacher induction, teacher recruitment and retention, and teacher preparation.

## **Conclusion**

The School of Education at VCU has been fortunate to find and form partnerships with other institutions that have a shared commitment to and vision for the Richmond community. In spite of these successful partnerships and the innovative programs that have been established, however, VCU and its partners still struggle with the issues that originally brought them together: more effective preparation of teachers for urban schools, increasing the diversity of the teaching force, and recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in key shortage areas. The number of individuals pursuing initial preparation in elementary, middle school, secondary, and special education has decreased from 276 in 1999–2000 to 198 in 2000–2001. Minority students constitute less than 15 percent of this enrollment, and only 29 of the 198 students enrolled in the programs listed above are pursuing certification in the shortage areas of mathematics, science, foreign language, and special education (*VCU Reports*, Fall 2000). Richmond Public Schools still faces a teacher shortage, particularly in the area of special education, and may be short 15 teachers when schools open in the fall of 2002 (H. Fitrer, personal communication, August 23, 2002).

Though the issues have not yet been resolved, in many ways progress can be claimed. Progress is found in the understanding by all partners that there are no easy solutions to the puzzles of twenty-first century American education. Our hope resides in our partnerships and their ongoing development and implementation of ideas to address the evolving issues facing our schools and universities.

Teaching and learning are complex activities in any setting, but urban schools provide unique challenges for the teaching profession. These challenges cannot be met successfully by any one institution. By itself, the university has only a surface understanding of the issues facing urban students and teachers. By itself, the school division has relatively limited resources to train and develop teachers for work in urban classrooms. Universities and urban schools must work together to provide first-hand experiences within the context of urban schools. VCU's location in the heart of Richmond provides a unique opportunity to focus on preparing teachers to meet the challenges in urban schools. Recognizing the opportunity to contribute to the training of future RPS teachers, the Richmond Public Schools have provided classrooms and cooperating teachers for VCU's teacher preparation program. RPS administrators view this partnership as a sound investment in the pre-service teacher who will soon be recruited for urban classrooms.

Partnerships within VCU are also essential to preparing teachers for urban classrooms. By itself, the School of Education can ensure that emerging professionals master pedagogy, but not necessarily content, while the College of Humanities and Sciences can ensure content but not pedagogy. Recognizing the demands that are made on urban teachers to present accurate content in meaningful ways for diverse groups of students,

teacher educators must work in concert with liberal arts faculty to ensure that future teachers have expertise in content, pedagogy, and context.

Given the national teacher shortage, it is also evident that no one institution can by itself recruit the number of teachers needed at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Numerous pipelines, originating both inside and outside of the public schools, must be established if fully trained and duly licensed teachers are to be found for Richmond's classrooms. Teacher recruitment, like teacher preparation, is necessarily a collaborative venture.

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