

# Grow Your Own Educator Programs – Special Edition

## A Roadmap to a Community-Based, Partnership Approach

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### Rationale

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Grow Your Own (GYO) educator programs are a potential strategy for districts and universities to employ to help recruit and retain teachers of color. When designed within an asset-based framework, they emphasize equitable approaches and critical perspectives that combine the powerful roles of “homegrown” teachers, culturally-relevant curriculum, and social justice pedagogy in addressing achievement and opportunity gaps, especially for the nation’s woefully underserved, largely urban, students of color (e.g., Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). A growing body of scholarship underscores the value of recruiting people from communities who could successfully transition as teachers to the very communities from which they emanate (Fenwick, 2001; Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, in press; Skinner, Garreton, & Schultz, 2011; Valenzuela, 2016).

Equity-based GYO teacher programs help address teacher shortages, retention issues and teacher diversity by engaging in a variety of strategies that aim to recruit teachers from local communities in hopes that the pool of candidates will increase in diversity and will be more likely to stay teaching in the community. GYO programs come in many shapes and sizes in terms of recruitment, financial assistance, curriculum and support. Some programs recruit prospective teaching candidates from middle and high schools, some from the college level, and others recruit paraprofessionals and college graduates with non-teaching degrees. Some also are designed at the state and university levels, while others are designed at the school district and community level, or a combination thereof (see e.g., Skinner, Garreton, & Schultz, 2011). From an equity perspective, it is important to keep in mind that when designing GYO programs, different strategies may work differently for different communities.

This special edition on strategies derives from many years of experience in setting up and facilitating the work of GYO programs nationally under the auspices of the National Latino Education Research and Policy Project (NLERAP [pronounced “nel-rap”], see Valenzuela, 2016). This piece highlights one such program involving a community-based partnership with a local school district to carry out the work of a Saturday academy for fourth- and fifth-graders named *Academia Cuauhtli* (a Nahuatl term [pronounced “kwoh-tley”], which means, “eagle”) in Austin (Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015). Academia Cuauhtli adheres to NLERAP’s approach that is arguably distinctive from the “community schools” model, as

captured well by the National Center for Community Schools (2014).

Of specific importance to all NLERAP GYO teacher sites is a focus on culturally-relevant, social justice curricula that more fully incorporates the students' and communities' experiences, struggles, stories, histories, cultures, languages, and student identities. This is essential to the larger goal of wholly transforming public K-12 education and university-based teacher preparation programs. In all instances, NLERAP scholars call for a social justice framework that informs its partnership-based organizational model and equity-based strategies that are pertinent to this report (Valenzuela, 2016; see box below).

This requires that K-12 and higher education undergo transformation in the process, incorporating in an intentional manner the cultures, languages, intersectional identities, histories, and funds of knowledge in all their complexity. Consequently, the overall initiative should result in an increased presence of critically-conscious teachers who emanate from historically marginalized communities to which they return upon graduation from the university, with a teaching certificate in hand.

Important assumptions that attach to this proposed framework are that you are a community-engaged scholar or community advocate and that you are starting from scratch, in the exploration stage. You are already aware of the importance of school, family and community engagement. The importance of children having not only out-of-school time, but also in enriching community contexts is obvious and appealing to you. Ideally, you are also open to an array of possibilities before you and consider these in light of local interest and

### **NLERAP's Social Justice Framework**

- Advocate for a social justice perspective across school, community, and political contexts.
- Use and further develop students' cultural funds of knowledge, bilingualism, and biliteracy.
- Lead students to achieve at academically high standards across the core curriculum.
- Guide students to explore issues of prejudice, discrimination, and multiple forms of oppression involving people of different races, socioeconomic classes, language varieties, abilities and disabilities, and sexual orientation.
- Engage students in naming, interrogating, and transforming deficit ideology related to culture, language, class, gender, race, and sexual orientation.

initiative given the high level of volunteerism that this requires. Finally, you understand that inserting yourself means that you will assume a lead partner role, including planning, implementing, and maintaining the initiative. Moreover, as lead partner, you are the intermediary between the district and the initiative, as well as between the university and the initiative. Finally, your initiative can begin at any level of schooling, from elementary through high school. Since the initial community conversation of Academia Cuauhtli (discussed below) emphasized children's literacy, the elementary grades became the focus.

# Community-Level Strategies to Consider in GYO Educator Programs

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## 1. Structure

A GYO effort always has a lead partner, ideally a community-based organization (CBO) that subsequently partners with a school district and a university – including community colleges, as partners – to direct the work of the GYO initiative. NLERAP’s term for this is “Grow Your Own-Teacher Education Institutes” (GYO-TEI), with Academia Cuauhtli being one of these. To ensure the sustainability of the GYO-TEI, the CBO works closely with partners to develop a shared responsibility framework to foster collective impact in cultivating critically-conscious teachers for the pathway. Individual university faculty and school district members can and should be members of the CBO, as this will provide legitimacy, status, and resources for the initiative. However, individual-level involvement, while necessary, does not equate to a formal partnership with higher education. The latter may likely require a memorandum of understanding or other legal, contractual agreement among all primary partners.

### **Rationale for a Community-Anchored Initiative**

- Rather than community being an afterthought – as it typically is in virtually all education reform efforts – community-anchored approaches acknowledge community as having not only the greatest, direct stake in the outcome of “the reform,” but also that they can work actively with higher education and school districts to inform curriculum, support students, and develop the applicant pool for the pathway.
- The CBO ensures the development of age- and grade-level appropriate curricula that are further state- and district-aligned with respect to standards. These curricula are social justice-oriented and culturally responsive to the precise geographical community within which the CBO is located. It draws on the local histories and funds of knowledge, values, experiences, opportunities, and resources that can inform both curriculum writing and teacher development opportunities that prepare teachers to teach it.
- It encourages sustainability by assuring a level of continuity that universities and school districts can scarcely guarantee. Even under good conditions, universities and school districts frequently undergo a great deal of instability due to an array of factors, including individuals’ pursuit of other opportunities, restructuring, reorganization, retirement, and the like. If one rests full responsibility in these institutions, the predictable departure of district and university “champions” jeopardizes the whole initiative. In sub-optimal conditions, such as when resources get cut, the CBO can look for other sources of funding to continue the work of the GYO initiative, thereby sustaining the initiative as a whole.

## 2. Process: Steps to Anchoring the GYO Pathway in Your Community

### Organize a community conversation

As members of civil rights groups, CBOs, or the non-profit sector, consider organizing a community conversation in a community-based, non-profit or cultural arts institution. Since an ultimate goal of the GYO is to grow critically-conscious educators who are themselves community-oriented with support for local, community institutions, this kind of positioning potentially benefits all. For this initial convening, public schools, churches, and city recreational sites may be other options to hold the meeting.

*A cautionary note.* Although schools are frequently well-positioned to offer these spaces, think carefully through this detail. Since the norms, values, and school-based practices, often bureaucratic, tend to accompany school spaces, opportunities that are specific to the community to which schools do not otherwise have access, could get over-looked. Academia Cuauhtli provides a good example of this (Valenzuela, Zamora, & Rubio, 2015). Specifically, chances of incorporating a *danza Mexica* curriculum that involves Aztec dance or ceremony would have diminished significantly had it not been for the location of the CBO in the local community where exposure to *danza Mexica* was not only more probable, but also valued and respected (Valenzuela, et al., 2015).

### Who makes the invitation?

Anyone can. However, well-grounded, engaged university faculty may be particularly well-situated to organize an initial convening or “public conversation” pertaining, perhaps, to the question of literacy for children and youth in the community. Also, since an important goal of a GYO initiative is to impact systemic change at the higher education level, it makes sense for university students or faculty to take at least an initial lead in sponsoring and hosting this community conversation. NLERAP’s experiences show that community members take such invitations seriously when they come from faculty who are themselves community-engaged scholars.

### Hold a community conversation

As the initial convener, organizers should be prepared to designate a lead person for this. If all you want to do is facilitate the convening, then have someone in mind who can lead. Talent, interest, and motivation also develop organically, so do not feel obliged to have to carry the initiative forward simply because you are the organizer.

- Consider carefully the *categories* of persons who are invited to the community conversation. For example, if you anticipate wanting to develop curriculum in history or civil rights for bilingual classrooms, it would be good to invite pertinent school district staff, school board members, bilingual or dual language teachers, presidents of local bilingual education association chapters, curriculum writers, arts teachers, school

librarians, as well as children's book writers and illustrators, city librarians, historians, archivists, members of the arts community, local parent leadership groups and organizations, indigenous organizations (*kalpullis*), elders and advocates with a background in such matters, and union members – for example, local National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers affiliates. It is also helpful to invite local faculty from various institutions, as they are potential partners that can bring university resources to the table. In general, the invitation goes to individuals who would likely appreciate getting invited at the inception of your initiative.

- A culturally-relevant CBO is intergenerational and encourages the presence and participation of elders who can provide the knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration for the initiative. These could include 1960s and 70s civil rights activists, a number of whom may be retired teachers (for a discussion of elders in the civil rights movement," see Valenzuela, 2012).
- Consider carefully the *kinds* of persons that you invite to join you in the overall initiative. Your goal is a diverse working group that can hit the ground running in a supportive environment. Since the success of this initiative depends on a high level of relationality, democratic processes, transparency, inclusivity, and *confianza* (trust) that builds over time, be wary of incorporating individuals known to be divisive or problematic and who can derail an otherwise good intention.
- Have a sign-up sheet with contact information for those who want to continue the conversation and then invite them to follow up with regularly scheduled weekly meetings to discuss curriculum development, teacher preparation, specific grade levels, schools to target, and finding your champions at the district level, such as within the department of English learners, dual language, or bilingual education. Maintain a regular sign-up sheet for attendees.
- At each meeting, consider having a Flor y Canto (translated literally from Spanish as "flower and song," it is an indigenous phrase for celebrating life and personal accomplishments), with one person taking a few minutes at the beginning to share something personal and inspirational. This could be a song, poem, short video, or a meaningful experience. This helps build trust and depth in relationships while encouraging the work of the group.
- Maintain good minutes and a good record of votes taken. Have an established, weekly meeting time – ideally, at the site where your initiative will ultimately be housed if that location can be determined.

### 3. Become a CBO and identify your partners

Democratically arrive at a name, develop a vision, mission statement, logo, identity, guiding principles, funding sources, partners, and find (or establish) a non-profit that can be the organization's fiscal agent. Note: Establishing a non-profit is a big item and takes a lot of time. We recommend you latch on to an existing one whose goals align with that of the CBO. For example, in Austin, the organizers first set up the CBO and gave it a name, *Nuestro Grupo*. Within a year, the group chose *Academia Cuauhtli* to be the name of the academy, which operates from October through April on Saturday mornings from 9:00 AM to noon.

**Develop a strategy for engaging district officials with the idea of potentially drawing down Title I and/or Title III monies to fund the initiative.** Such leaders may be assigned to the office of academics, curriculum, or English learners. These monies require that the students you serve attend high-poverty schools (Title I) and serve English language learners (Title III). Districts apply for these federal dollars annually. Most districts have dedicated staff who focus exclusively on applying for and managing federal dollars for underserved youth.

- Building good rapport with district officials is essential. At least initially, the role of your group's "district liaison" should go to the person or persons that have experience working in or with the school district, ideally a person who is already known and respected. Former or current teachers or mid-level administrators can often better navigate district bureaucracy than "outsiders."
- Remember that you are envisioning a partnership that consists of shared responsibility; however, since your initiative is sometimes viewed as apart from "core operations," be patient in your dealings. Trusting, reciprocal partnerships truly take time.

**Meet with district officials to develop a budget and establish the legal, contractual framework of roles and responsibilities for the establishment of a Saturday academy or after-school program.**

- School budgets can cover such expenses as teacher salaries, supplies, breakfasts, books, transportation, curriculum development, and coordinator stipends (see below). Other extraneous expenses occur and can get picked up by the CBO that in turn leverages additional outside funds for field trips, additional curriculum development, teacher preparation, and so on.

**Get a fiscal agent.** Since the *Nuestro Grupo* approach and vision aligned perfectly with NLERAP, the latter became the fiscal agent. Having a fiscal agent allows you to do independent fundraising to cover extraneous expenses not covered by district dollars, including t-shirts, buttons, speaker honoraria, meals and refreshments for teacher *pláticas*

(the name we give to teacher professional development convenings), event expenses, etc.

**Establish a Saturday Academy or Afterschool Program.** A home for your initiative can be a community center or school that has a community-oriented principal. The value of a community institution is that they, too, have resources, and they can draw children, youth, and parents from various school sites. In doing so, they could build audience participation for their own initiatives – many which could overlap with that of the CBO and academy.

**Establish paid roles for at least two coordinators.** While the academy is largely a volunteer effort, essential roles within the CBO need to be remunerated with stipends covered by the district budget. At least two co-coordinators are needed. One who can work directly with the schools, parents, and community and who should be a fluent bilingual (depending on the scope of the academy). The other interfaces between the CBO and the school district, preferably someone familiar with district policies and protocol so that they can coordinate bus stops, budgets, service contracts, teacher schedules, and field trips. Regarding the latter, Academia Cuauhtli has at least five field trips, annually. Field trips include the Tejano Monument on the grounds of the Texas state capitol, the Alamo in San Antonio, and Austin’s annual Powwow, which helps students to learn about others’, as well as their own, indigenous heritage. Corresponding curricular units on Tejano identity and history, indigenous ancestry, culture, and history, as relevant, are taught in preparation for all field trips.

- Retired or former teachers can be very helpful in establishing relationships with school principals, parent liaisons, and parents in schools where you seek to recruit students for your initiative. Parents can also, in time, fulfill this role.
- Participating teachers and curriculum writers ideally become regular visiting members of the CBO, as well, building a sense of solidarity.

**Decide what grade level (or levels) you want to impact: elementary, middle, or high school.** For example, if you are wanting to co-construct Texas history for primary school children, it is helpful to know that in Texas, it gets taught statewide at the fourth-grade level. Teachers can provide helpful information in this regard.

- Though perhaps counter-intuitive, know beforehand that if you decide to begin at the elementary school level, the impacts can be immediate with volunteer teachers or undergraduate students deciding to pursue advanced degrees or school district opportunities that are beneficial to the initiative. Why? Because faculty involvement in the community inspires young people to pursue advanced degrees upon seeing that becoming a transformational change agent is possible. This is enhanced within higher education institutions because of the intellectual, human, material, and symbolic resources that they can bring to the table, including legitimacy, status, research, and

expertise. Also consider what grade levels you want to impact in light of what gets taught at a specific grade level.

- Deciding which grade level to serve does not necessarily preclude other action at other grade levels. The Academia Cuauhtli has focused on developing curriculum in civil rights, immigration/migration, indigenous heritage, *danza Mexicana*, and the cultural arts. The district asked the academy to join its ethnic studies curriculum committee to contribute to the curriculum that is now getting taught in the feeder-pattern high schools – and hopefully, in all high schools district-wide, soon.
- Secondary school-university partnerships are another option. University of Colorado Denver Professor Margarita Bianco developed a very successful partnership with five Denver high schools and the University of Colorado Denver (UCD) called Pathways2Teaching. She works with UCD graduate students who, in turn, work with teachers in five high schools to implement a Critical Race curriculum.

**In tandem with university faculty who serve as content providers, co-construct a professional curriculum (exemplar lessons, units, and road maps) and organize teacher preparation seminars for teachers to get acquainted with the curriculum.** Explore available district- or grant-funded opportunities for both curriculum development and teacher preparation. Academia Cuauhtli, for example, focuses on the district’s dual language education students and teachers. It tapped into this community, the majority of whom also hold membership in both Education Austin, the local teacher union affiliate, and the Austin Area Association for Bilingual Education (AAABE).

- Develop culturally-relevant curriculum and pedagogy. This should be culturally relevant, critical, values-based, authentically caring, social justice oriented, place-based, foster a positive sense of identity, and grounded in the lived experiences, histories, cultures, and languages of the community. Wider, global themes are important, too, but only after students have a sense of their relationship as individuals to family, community, history, and society, as well as a sense of responsibility to self and one another (Valenzuela, Zamora, & Ribio, 2015).
- Develop a curriculum road map in advance so that all teachers know what will get taught on any given Saturday; regularly follow up instruction with a group reflection on what went well, areas for improvement, needs for additional materials, etc. Because of the focus of Academia Cuauhtli on elementary-level, bilingual learners, it has translated all of the materials into Spanish.
- Hold teacher professional development seminars in the summer months leading up to the new school year, as well as monthly during the year on Saturdays after the students have departed. Academia Cuauhtli teachers participate in *pláticas*.

- Organize teacher retreats in partnership with the district and the university. Academia Cuauhtli holds an annual teacher retreat in partnership with the district and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin to help teachers and participants reflect on the year. To date, the center has funded food and honoraria for invited speakers.

**So as to not unduly tax teachers who hold full-time jobs, prepare a pool of rotating teachers to work in teams to both develop and teach an age- and grade-level-appropriate curriculum.** Academia Cuauhtli organized teams of teachers to develop sets of bilingual/dual language Spanish-English curriculum aligned to state standards in the context of the Saturday academy. Rotating sets of teachers can pair expert with novice teachers to make professional development a regular, ongoing aspect of practice.

- Teachers should maintain ongoing communication with the CBO to make sure all needs are met. Occasional, if not regular, attendance at CBO weekly meetings helps facilitate this. Given teachers' time constraints, Academia Cuauhtli has set up a regular reporting structure with one of the volunteers who has contact as a member and participant of their convenings under the auspices of AAABE.

**Work closely with parents to address their needs.** Certain members of Nuestro Grupo are not only passionate about working with parents, but they also have experience in doing so. They convene separately with parents on Saturday mornings after they drop off their children in the classroom at the ESB-MACC where they get breakfast and their teachers are ready to attend to them. The parents can have specific concerns and needs addressed, including knowing about the advantages and disadvantages of charter schools, helping their children do well in school, helping their children further develop their Spanish language skills, and navigating school-level leadership, racism in schools, and high-stakes tests. The Academia Cuauhtli focuses on specific concerns of parents. Most recently, it established an English as a second language class that they all attend during "school hours," which begins at 9:00 AM.

**Hold high-profile events that bring attention to the academy, including an inaugural ceremony, annual graduation ceremonies, and speaker events.** Invite all your partners (school district, university-level Ethnic Studies Programs, union leadership, etc.) to both co-sponsor and attend events. Events that also provide meals and refreshments are often better attended than those that do not.

**Seek out sponsorships to local arts events.** Local institutions like museums, theater (*teatro*), and ballet often are interested in cultivating arts audiences and may offer volunteer passes to parents and children for local performances and events. Since Academia Cuauhtli is physically located in a local, community arts institution, it regularly encourages parents to attend such events as *La Pastorela*, a local Christmas play performed by one of the theater

groups locally that also is willing to allow them to attend either for free or at a reduced rate. Other events like *Día de los Muertos*, *Sábados en Familia*, and *Las Posadas* are free to the public and are well-attended by the Academia Cuauhtli parents and children.

**Consider partnering with a deeply connected, non-normalized, historical signature group that critically addresses oppressive thoughts and actions.** Academia Cuauhtli, for example, participates in a *kalpulli*, which is a Nahuatl term that means coalitions of houses, a cultural form of organizing that has existed for thousands of years. Through the *kalpulli*, children and youth, as well as the CBO members, have access to a *danza Mexica* (Colín, 2014) which delivers the preserved ancient knowledge through *danza*. *Kalpullis* are located throughout Mexico and the Southwestern United States. Every *kalpulli* has both a name and a *danza* group (for an in-depth look at the organizational and ceremonial features of *Mexica* society today, read Colín, 2014). At least in the Mexican American community, one often finds local community members, including teachers and professionals, who belong to *kalpullis*. Members of *kalpullis* are highly child-focused and mindful of the many obstacles that children and youth face and work collectively to address them (Colín, 2014). *Kalpullis* are an under-recognized resource in our communities.

#### 4. A Final note

Once your community-based initiative is well-grounded in experience, embark on a partnership with higher education to develop with university faculty and department chairs a process for developing a pathway to degree completion and certification in desired areas like bilingual education, social studies, science, and mathematics. To conclude, this process is a slow and patient one. However, it should always be enjoyable, especially from knowing that your contributions will have long-term impacts in children's lives. The process of laboring with, in, and for the community should be just as enjoyable as the outcome around which you collectively plan, implement, and sustain.

The IDRA EAC-South is available to provide technical assistance to state and local education agencies to help improve and increase pathways to teaching for faculty of color, among other capacity-building services addressing equity issues in race, national origin, sex/gender, and religion. For more information, please visit our website at [www.idra.org/eac-south](http://www.idra.org/eac-south) or send us at email to [eacsouth@idra.org](mailto:eacsouth@idra.org).

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