CASE STUDY

Growing teachers from within

How the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and the School District of Philadelphia built a debt-free path from paraprofessional to teacher

Opportunity @Work.

PHILADELPHIA FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
pft
pft.org
AFT Local 3, AFL-CIO



PHILADELPHIA

Building a teacher pipeline inside the schools

Heading into 2021, as the pandemic deepened a national teacher shortage, Philadelphia struggled to fill teaching roles. The district ran national searches and still relied on emergency certifications to staff classrooms.

At the same time, thousands of paraprofessionals already worked with students every day. Many wanted to teach, but traditional programs required them to take on loans, leave their jobs, or find childcare they could not afford.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) saw an opportunity to build the pipeline from talent already in the schools, and the district agreed.

As PFT and the district designed the program, several priorities emerged:

- **Remove the cost barrier:** Cover tuition so participants graduate without debt
- **Meet people where they are:** Create entry points for every education level, from a GED to a master's degree
- **Keep the rigor:** Pair flexibility with wraparound supports, not lower standards
- **Share ownership:** Run the program jointly, with the union and district at the table for every decision

ABOUT THE PFT

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (AFT Local 3) represents nearly every role in Philadelphia's public schools, from classrooms to cafeterias.

PFT negotiates members' salaries, benefits, and working conditions, and has an elected representative in every school.

It also offers professional development and co-runs programs with the district, including the paraprofessional pathway.

14,400+ members	2,500+ paraprofessionals	50/50 union–district program committee
~40 in the first cohort	200 vacancies a year	1 rep in every school



LESHAWNA COLEMAN

Chief of Staff and Treasurer,
Philadelphia Federation of Teachers

THE PROBLEM

Where the teacher pipeline broke down

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Philadelphia needed more teachers, and Pennsylvania was producing fewer of them. Newly issued in-state teaching certificates dropped 66% over a decade.[1] Meanwhile, paraprofessionals with years of classroom experience had no realistic way to become teachers.

During COVID, the district brought in teachers on emergency certifications. Yet paraprofessionals who are part of the community, know the kids, and choose to work in schools where they live still couldn't teach.

What the traditional path required

- Tuition paid with student loans
- Class schedules built for full-time students
- One route, regardless of experience

What paraprofessionals really needed

- A debt-free path to a degree
- Options that fit around work and childcare
- Entry points matched to their education

The result: a district searching nationally for teachers, while willing talent worked in its own classrooms.



[1] Pennsylvania Department of Education, as cited by the School District of Philadelphia, October 2022

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Collective bargaining process

PFT used contract negotiations to turn a request from its members into a program the district is bound to support.

BEFORE 2021

Members ask

Paraprofessionals wanted to teach but couldn't take on loans or afford childcare. They brought the issue to the union.

2021 CONTRACT

The framework is bargained

PFT proposed a paraprofessional pathway in negotiations, and the district wanted one too. The contract set the framework.

2021–2022

A joint committee builds it

Three district and three union members worked out the details: routes, university partners, and accountability.

2022–2026

The program evolves

It has evolved many times over five years to meet the district's staffing needs and members' educational needs.

WHY BARGAINING MATTERED

LeShawna Coleman sits on the team that negotiates PFT's contracts.

Collective bargaining made the program possible, and successful, because it requires collaboration from both the membership and the employer.

THE PARTNERSHIP

Designed together, decided together

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A joint committee of district and union members designed the program and still runs it.

THE JOINT COMMITTEE

3 + 3

district and union members designed the program

Weekly

meetings on Zoom, for hours at a time, over several months

Monthly

meetings now to run the program and work through issues

Representation

A former paraprofessional who became a teacher through the program now sits on the committee.

Four design decisions

1

A route for every starting point

Paraprofessionals ranged from GEDs to master's degrees. One size would not fit all.

2

Debt-free by design

The district covers tuition, and participants are not allowed to take out loans.

3

Rigor with support

University partners had to offer wraparound supports without lowering academic standards.

4

Shared risk

Universities repay the district for participants who don't finish or don't complete the two-year commitment.

FUNDING AND PARTNERS

Paying for it and holding partners to account

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Federal funds launched the program, and the district now pays for it from its operating budget. A new state grant will expand it.

How it's funded

Federal Title II funds

Launched the program in 2022.

$1.7M in district funds

Added later in 2022 to expand the program, including pay during student teaching.

District operating funds

The program is now funded from the district's operating budget.

State apprenticeship grant

Newly approved to expand the program. The state's Apprenticeship Board approved the proposal without requiring edits.

How partners are held accountable

Matched to starting points

Different partners serve different education levels. Bachelor's holders' options depend on GPA.

Repayment agreements

Universities repay the district when a participant doesn't finish or doesn't complete the two-year commitment.

Regular check-ins

The committee meets quarterly with each partner, and one union rep per partner works through participant issues.

Partners can change

Partners that couldn't meet their commitments were replaced. One university left over the repayment provision.

HOW IT WORKS

The participant journey

What happens between applying and leading a classroom.

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GETTING IN

GETTING THROUGH AND STAYING

STEP 1 Apply	STEP 2 Pass the readiness assessment	STEP 3 Match to a route	STEP 4 Study without debt	STEP 5 Earn certification	STEP 6 Teach for two years
Open to all non-teacher members of PFT's bargaining unit, including paraprofessionals.	A math test at a 6th-grade level, a writing sample, and an oral interview. Applicants need a combined score of 70.	Participants enter at their education level, from a GED to a master's degree without certification.	The district covers tuition, partners help with the FAFSA, and participants take out no loans.	Participants complete coursework and student teaching. PFT offers PRAXIS prep for certification exams.	Graduates commit to two years in the district, with peer coaching and IEP-writing training.

The readiness assessment was added after launch, when university screening proved too loose.

DEEP-DIVE

A route for every starting point

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Each starting point connects to a partner and a route that ends in a district classroom.

STARTING POINT	ROUTE	DESTINATION
High school diploma or GED	Associate degree at Community College of Philadelphia, then transfer to a four-year partner	A certified teacher in a Philadelphia school with a two-year commitment to the district
Some college or an associate degree	University partners build on existing credits toward a bachelor's degree and certification	
Bachelor's degree	Certification program, with partner options based on GPA (one option below 3.0, two at 3.0 or above)	
Master's degree, no certification	A direct route to teacher certification	

Current partners include Community College of Philadelphia, Holy Family University, and Drexel University.

LESSONS LEARNED

What they learned and changed

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The program didn't launch fully formed. When something wasn't working, the committee changed it.

	WHAT THEY SAW	WHAT THEY CHANGED
Screening	Universities, facing enrollment pressure, weren't screening applicants closely.	Built a three-part readiness assessment: math, writing, and an oral interview.
Partners	Some partners couldn't meet their commitments, and one university left over the repayment provision.	Replaced those partners and added community colleges for participants with a high school diploma.
Certification	Fewer than a handful of graduates missed the two-year commitment because of certification issues.	Added PRAXIS prep through the union.
New teachers	Many graduates teach special education, and IEP paperwork was the hardest adjustment.	Added professional development on writing IEPs.

Tuition wasn't the only barrier.

23 participants withdrew because of scheduling or childcare, and 17 were removed for not attending class.

> The talent was already in our buildings. Our paras know the kids and the neighborhoods. All we had to do was clear the path, and they became the teachers our students deserve."



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PARTICIPANT STORY

From bus attendant to teacher

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Gemayel Keyes

Teacher and joint committee member

THE START

Gemayel Keyes joined the district at 22 as a bus attendant and one-to-one classroom assistant, then spent about 16 years as a special education paraprofessional.

THE ASK

Keyes raised the barriers paraprofessionals faced with PFT President Jerry Jordan at a union meeting. That conversation fed into the pathway PFT negotiated.

THE RESULT

Keyes moved into a teacher residency, co-teaching special education, and now sits on the joint committee that runs the program.

EARLY RESULTS

Growing the pipeline from within

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As of May 2026, 158 participants have completed the program, and 112 are teaching.

AS OF MAY 2026

158

Participants who have completed the program

TEACHING NOW

112

Graduates teaching in district classrooms; almost all others hold other professional roles in the district

STUDENT LOANS

$0

Participants are not allowed to take out loans; the district covers tuition

What the program has delivered

Performance on par

Graduates earn “proficient” ratings at the same rate as other district teachers.

Commitments kept

Most graduates have completed or are completing the two-year teaching commitment.

Room to advance

Some graduates now serve as Special Education Compliance Monitors, earning $4,000 more a year.

What’s next

A newly approved state apprenticeship grant will expand the program.

What other districts can learn from Philadelphia

Govern jointly

Union and district share every decision.

Start where people are

Build entry points for every education level.

Commit the funding

Cover tuition so no one takes on debt.

Hold partners accountable

Tie university payment to completion and retention.

Support past graduation

Certification prep, coaching, and training for new teachers.

About us

Opportunity@Work works directly with federal, state, and local governments to modernize hiring, expand career pathways, and implement skills-based talent practices that open public sector jobs to workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs).

We provide the data, tools, guidance, and peer learning environments that help public sector leaders remove unnecessary degree requirements, improve hiring efficiency, and build more inclusive and effective workforces.

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