

Boosting Teacher Readiness and Retention: Southern Arkansas University's Rider Residency

Moving Learning Forward

**From Policy to Progress:
The LEARNS Act**



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When It Comes to Classroom Experience, SAU Finds More is More

Focused on concrete skills and classroom practice, SAU's paid year-long residency is boosting teacher readiness, student test scores, and hiring retention.

Research shows that giving prospective educators more classroom experience boosts student outcomes and retention in the field. The LEARNS Act requires that by 2027 all Arkansas teacher candidates complete a one-year supervised teaching residency alongside an experienced mentor and a credentialed clinical supervisor.

Previously, most traditional educator preparation programs (EPPs) in the state required only one semester of student-teaching that consisted primarily of observing mentor teachers and fulfilling licensure requirements. The quality of training varied widely from placement to placement. Many new teachers lacked the practical skills and confidence to lead classrooms on day one, leading to high teacher turnover and poorer student outcomes.

With support from Forward Arkansas, several EPPs had already begun to move toward the residency model. In 2021, the nonprofit launched the EPP Design Collaborative, a competitive grant program that supported eight participating universities with resources and guidance to develop plans for transformation. In 2022, Forward granted \$3.6 million in implementation funding to the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Southern Arkansas University at Magnolia for their teacher preparation programs to transform the teacher candidate experience to be more practice-based.

Fast forward to January 2023, when Southern Arkansas University (SAU) launched the Rider Residency with a cohort of 18 residents in partnership with the El Dorado and Texarkana Arkansas school districts. Since then, interest in the program has significantly grown, and SAU now places 131 residents each year across seven school districts.

Residents are paid \$100 a day, and their mentors receive \$3,000 a year. Funding comes directly from partner school districts that invest in the training of in-house residents as a future hiring pipeline. Compensation also contributes to the sustainability of the residency itself.



“Most of our teachers are first-generation college students and Pell grant recipients. 95% of SAU’s students work their way through school,” says Neelie Dobbins, chair of SAU’s department of teacher education. “If we didn’t have this, they would teach all day and then have to go to work at night. That’s going to make it exceptionally hard to become a prepared teacher. This is a way to ensure that our students are getting the quality education they need, in a way that’s affordable so they can graduate and stay in our communities.”

Rider residents complete 1,080 hours of meaningful classroom practice during their residency, well above the 630 hours required by the state. Impact data from partner schools shows a significant return on their investment. In the El Dorado School District, two-thirds of resident-mentor pairs produced student performance outcomes on the ACT Aspire and ATLAS assessments that exceeded district and statewide scores.

The bet on hiring retention is also paying off. Last year, 77% of candidates stayed to teach in the schools where they completed their residencies. The improvement is dramatic. SAU estimates that hiring retention prior to the residency was close to 20%.

Dobbins hopes the Rider Residency is on its way to becoming a national leader in teacher preparation. “We want to be the model,” she says. “We know what we’re doing is good, and we know what we’re doing is right. We really do care that every person who leaves SAU is one of the best teachers in the state of Arkansas.”

In the 2024-2025 school year, **77% of Rider Residents stayed to teach** in the schools where they completed their residencies—a huge jump from the **previous retention rate of 20%**.

Building a Residency: The Case for Responsive Design

SAU created the Rider Residency in response to feedback from its partner schools. “[Districts] were saying, ‘We’re constantly having to help new graduates manage their classrooms,’” says Dobbins. “We realized that our students’ brief classroom experience wasn’t enough. When they got to their own classrooms, they were missing certain pieces.”

At the time, SAU’s teacher preparation model looked like most other EPPs across the state: a 15-week semester in which student-teachers primarily observed mentor teachers, with limited opportunities to lead instruction. Faculty supervision was virtual. Professors observed lessons remotely and emailed feedback to students. Professional development seminars were held twice a semester, focusing primarily on licensure compliance rather than practical classroom skills.

Dobbins and her colleague, assistant professor of education Lynze Greathouse, wanted to build a more pragmatic program that closely integrated pedagogy with classroom practice. When SAU launched its first two residencies, Dobbins and Greathouse volunteered as site coordinators at the partner schools. They served as liaisons between SAU, residents, and school administrators and began designing weekly seminars to address real classroom challenges residents faced.

SAU also reset expectations for mentor teachers. “We made it clear that we need mentors who are willing to co-teach, coach, and give up control,” Greathouse says. “We wouldn’t match mentors who wanted residents sitting in the corner all day.”





Mentor teachers must now complete an eight-hour training before the residency begins and participate in two four-hour trainings each semester, while residents cover their classrooms. SAU also introduced a structured feedback cycle that includes a pre-conference, live observation, and post-observation coaching session.

As classroom hours for residents increased, SAU knew it would have to fundamentally revamp its curriculum and gave its faculty latitude to adapt coursework to the new model. Greathouse says, “We came together and went, ‘What would the perfect program look like?’ And our team just ran with it.” The result was a more cohesive curriculum with a strong focus on concrete skills.

Learning theory and lesson planning were shelved in favor of more relevant skill-building, such as teaching residents to use high-quality instructional materials mandated by the state. Academic coursework and standalone field experiences are integrated to reinforce one another.

In a critical mindset shift, SAU and partner districts are intentional about introducing residents to classrooms as co-teachers, not student teachers. Residents are expected to attend parent-teaching conferences, contribute to professional learning communities, and act as instructional partners. “We no longer use ‘gradual release’ where you sit and watch for two weeks, take over one class for a week, then two classes,” Greathouse explains. “Now it’s pure co-teaching from the start.”

SAU also created regular feedback loops to continuously improve the model. Site coordinators and SAU administrators hold quarterly governance meetings with district principals to review resident performance and address issues or gaps in support. Feedback directly informs weekly resident seminars.

“Now our candidates come in, and they know how to manage a classroom, how to create their own rules and procedures,” Dobbins says. “They know because they’ve been embedded for a whole year with a teacher.”

The Rider Residency’s impressive hiring retention numbers are, in large part, thanks to SAU’s careful matching process, which mimics a medical residency match. SAU does not simply assign residents. Rather, residents select their preferred districts and participate in an interview day.

“We bring all partners to campus, and it’s like speed dating—candidates get a 20-minute interview with every district they’ve selected,” Dobbins says. Afterward, residents rank their preferred placements and indicate where they plan to live after the residency. Districts submit their ranking based on hiring needs and budget capacity.

In the matching process, SAU considers all factors and each candidate is offered only one residency position. “We really try to match up teachers with schools and locations they want,” Dobbins says. “Our goal is to send our districts teachers who will stay.”

Greathouse believes that SAU’s residency model can become a blueprint for broader replication. “The biggest impact of our residency model is simple—we’re preparing teachers with districts, not for them,” Greathouse says. “I hope this will impact other EPPs and policies moving forward, whether in the state or nationwide, because you can’t deny the results.”



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Recommendations

1. Launch your residency with trusted district partners.

“Don’t beat the bushes to find a brand-new partner district,” Greathouse says. “Look at your existing partners and go from there.” Early partners serve as your proof of concept, so choose districts you know will be flexible, innovative collaborators as you test and refine your new program.

2. Replace canned seminars with relevant, skills-focused professional development.

Pursuing compliance-based coursework is often a waste of valuable weekly sessions. Empower site coordinators to use data from walkthroughs and observations to customize content to resident needs.

3. Establish a clear observation cycle.

It’s not enough to have an observation rubric. Train residents and mentors on consistent expectations for pre-conferences, classroom observations, and post-conferences to ensure all residents receive high-quality feedback and coaching.

4. Design the residency around your program—not the other way around.

Residencies aren’t one-size-fits-all. There’s no need to force your EPP to fit a rigid residency template. Align the model to your instructional goals and streamline curriculum and systems to serve your priorities.

5. Promote a start-up culture and mindset.

Trust and encourage your department leaders and expert faculty to experiment and innovate for the best results. Stay nimble and don’t be afraid to pivot.

SAU’s Rider Residency is reimagining how teacher preparation can be delivered in Arkansas and across the nation. Real classroom experience and mentorship ground a new model that prioritizes day-one teacher readiness, student outcomes, and a community-driven solution to retain teachers in high-need placements.

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