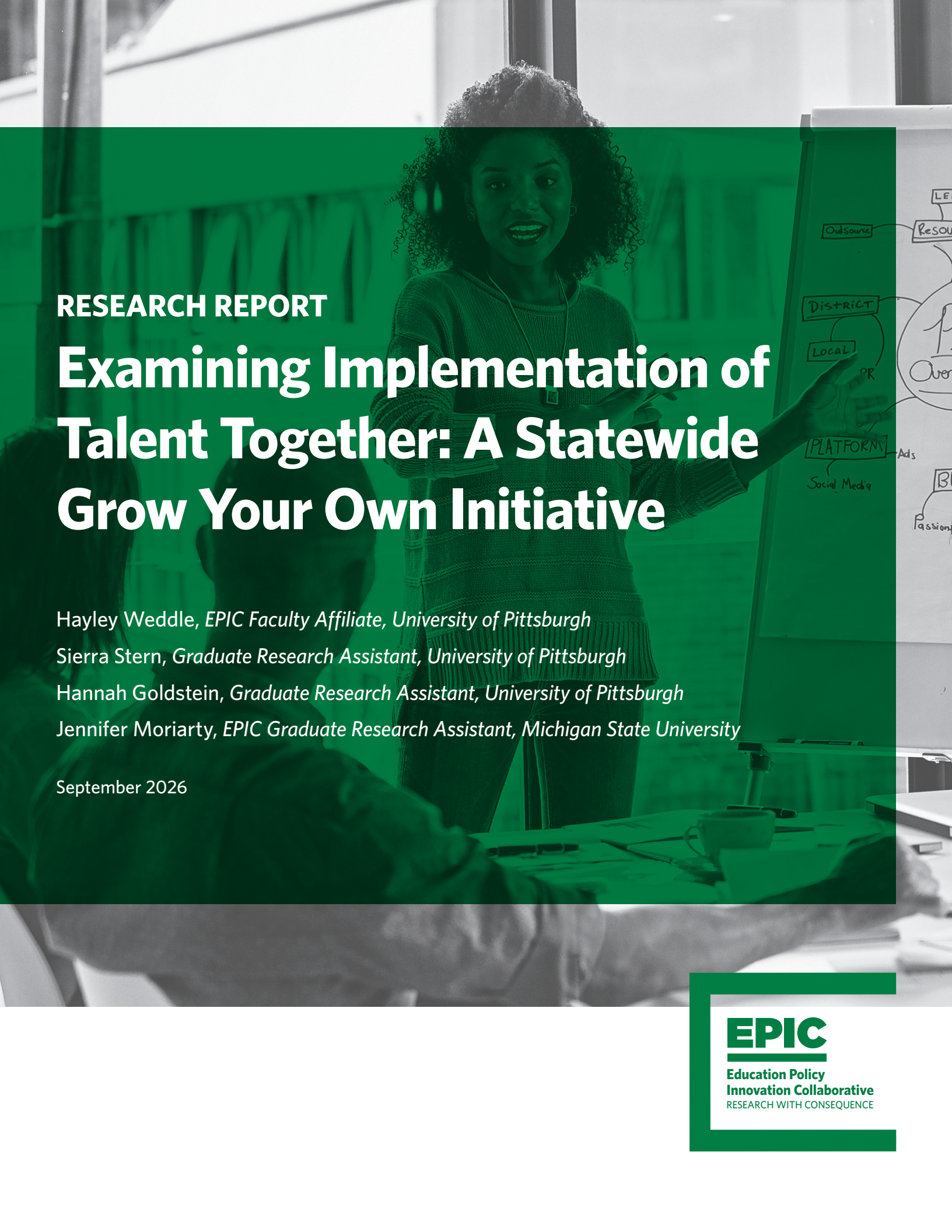


A woman with curly hair, wearing a green sweater, is pointing at a whiteboard. The whiteboard has a diagram with boxes labeled 'Outsource', 'District', 'Local', 'Platform', 'Social Media', 'Ads', 'Passion', and 'Over'. The background is a blurred office setting.

RESEARCH REPORT

Examining Implementation of Talent Together: A Statewide Grow Your Own Initiative

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DISCLAIMER

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University is an independent, non-partisan research center that operates as the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) and other agencies and organizations in Michigan. EPIC conducts original research using a variety of methods that include advanced statistical modeling, representative surveys, interviews, and case study approaches. Results, information, and opinions solely represent the author(s) and are not endorsed by, nor reflect the views or positions of partners, grantors, MDE, CEPI, or any employee thereof. All errors are our own.



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Executive Summary

Like many other states, Michigan is experiencing teacher shortages and has recently invested in Grow Your Own teacher preparation initiatives to improve the teacher supply (Kilbride et al., 2025; Kilbride et al., 2026). Representing one such approach, Talent Together is an initiative established in 2023 that aims to reduce barriers to entry into the teaching profession and strengthen the educator workforce. To understand the implementation of Talent Together in its first two years, researchers from the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) interviewed 24 Talent Together teacher candidates and 15 program leads and partners from postsecondary institutions, the Michigan Educator Workforce Initiative, and Intermediate School Districts (ISDs). Successes in the initial years of operation spanned candidate experiences and the broader systems level. These are the key successes related to candidates' experiences:

Financial support helped remove barriers to high-quality teacher preparation. Candidates widely shared that Talent Together removed barriers to high-quality teacher certification, citing financial support as one of the program's most influential features. Tuition coverage helped enable access to higher education and certification pathways, particularly for candidates from underrepresented racial backgrounds.

The work-study model, including online coursework, served as an effective and accessible pathway to teacher certification. The structure of Talent Together allowed candidates to continue working at their schools and earn an income while pursuing their degrees or certifications. Alongside the ability to maintain employment, candidates appreciated the online format of university coursework, emphasizing its flexibility and relevance to their daily work in schools.

Talent Together staff provided comprehensive support for candidates as they navigated program requirements. Candidates shared many examples of how they benefited from Talent Together support and described staff as responsive, accessible, and knowledgeable. Examples of staff support included matching candidates with appropriate preparation programs, assisting them in completing Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) requirements, addressing challenges with colleagues, and providing guidance on their job searches.

In-depth training through the apprenticeship program prepared candidates for the realities of teaching. Candidates who participated in the RAP described positive experiences learning from their mentor teachers and completing the RAP standards. Several noted that the apprenticeship provided valuable hands-on teaching experience that helped build their confidence and prepared them for future roles as educators.

Interview participants also shared successes related to the systems level, such as:

Statewide collaboration and commitment fostered a coordinated system to address teacher shortages. Leaders and candidates described Talent Together's statewide consortium model as an effective example of collaboration to ensure all students have access to well-prepared educators. Partnerships with universities and districts were also essential for understanding local needs and ensuring teacher candidates' access to high-quality mentors.

Initial implementation of Talent Together provided a strong foundation for improving the teacher workforce across the state. Many participants highlighted the program's promising impact, including diversifying the teacher pipeline and preparing well-qualified educators to serve their communities. Leaders emphasized the program's reach across all regions of the state, including both rural and urban districts.

Alongside key successes, interviews revealed challenges of implementation related to candidates' experiences:

For some teacher candidates, passing the required MTTC teacher licensing exams was a barrier to earning certification. Several candidates noted that preparing for and passing the Michigan Tests for Teacher Certification (MTTC) test was a challenging part of their program. For some, this challenge ultimately delayed certification and complicated their job searches. Talent Together leaders shared examples of how they offered additional preparation support for candidates over time, including tutoring and study groups.

Balancing program, professional, and personal commitments was complex and time-consuming. For many Talent Together candidates, keeping up with coursework was challenging while balancing responsibilities across their programs, staff positions, and personal lives. Additionally, some candidates in the RAP found the standards time-consuming to complete.

At times, challenges promoting coherence across organizations and within Talent Together led to inconsistent candidate experiences. Early implementation of Talent Together revealed challenges in building coherence across districts and postsecondary partners as well as within Talent Together. In some cases, variability in partners' understanding of program requirements and uneven coursework and mentorship experiences contributed to inconsistent candidate

experiences. Program leaders shared ongoing efforts to strengthen partnership agreements, clarify expectations, and expand support, particularly for teachers of record who cannot participate in an apprenticeship.

Finally, interviews revealed two systems-level challenges related to program launch and scaling:

During the early implementation of Talent Together, leads and partners encountered challenges aligning the program with local workforce needs. At times, misalignment between Talent Together's initial admissions and local-level hiring needs meant that some Talent Together graduates had trouble securing positions that matched their new credentials in the district or school where they had been working. Additionally, some leaders expressed concerns about whether Talent Together could meet the significant statewide demand for the program given its limited fiscal resources.

Efforts to promote Talent Together's sustainability were complicated by the program's fast launch and uncertain resources. While Talent Together's rapid launch enabled a timely response to teacher shortages, the program also experienced early challenges with role clarity and consistency of candidate support. Unstable funding further complicated sustainability by constraining long-term planning for Talent Together leaders and partners. Together, these conditions highlight the importance of sustained investment to support the program's continued development and long-term effect.

The successes and challenges above have important implications for GYO efforts within and beyond Michigan. Findings reflect the need for 1) intentional collaboration across ISDs, districts, and postsecondary institutions (PSIs) to address teacher shortages while being responsive to local workforce needs; 2) reduced financial barriers, accessible coursework, and responsive program staff to support candidates' successful pathways to certification; 3) mentorship and hands-on training to bolster candidates' readiness for the teaching profession; and 4) ongoing investment in GYO programs to continue fostering a high-quality educator workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives have emerged as an increasingly prominent strategy for strengthening the educator workforce (Garcia, 2020; Gist, 2022). GYO is an umbrella term for programs that recruit, prepare, and support individuals from local communities to become teachers and remain in those communities (Edwards & Kraft, 2025). These initiatives are often positioned as a dual-response strategy: addressing persistent educator shortages while also diversifying the teacher workforce in ways that better reflect the students and communities that schools serve.

Although GYO initiatives show considerable promise, research examining how these programs are implemented remains limited. Sustained attention to how large-scale GYO initiatives operate across varied regional contexts can help promote all students' access to well-prepared teachers. Generating evidence about implementation is therefore essential for informing policy, practice, and future investments in educator workforce development.

Purpose of This Report

This report is part of a broader mixed-methods study examining the implementation of Talent Together, a large-scale GYO initiative in Michigan. Like many states, Michigan continues to experience teacher shortages and has invested in innovative strategies to strengthen the educator pipeline (Moriarty et al., 2025). Talent Together represents one such strategy, operating statewide across all 56 ISDs and aiming to prepare and retain the next generation of highly qualified teachers.

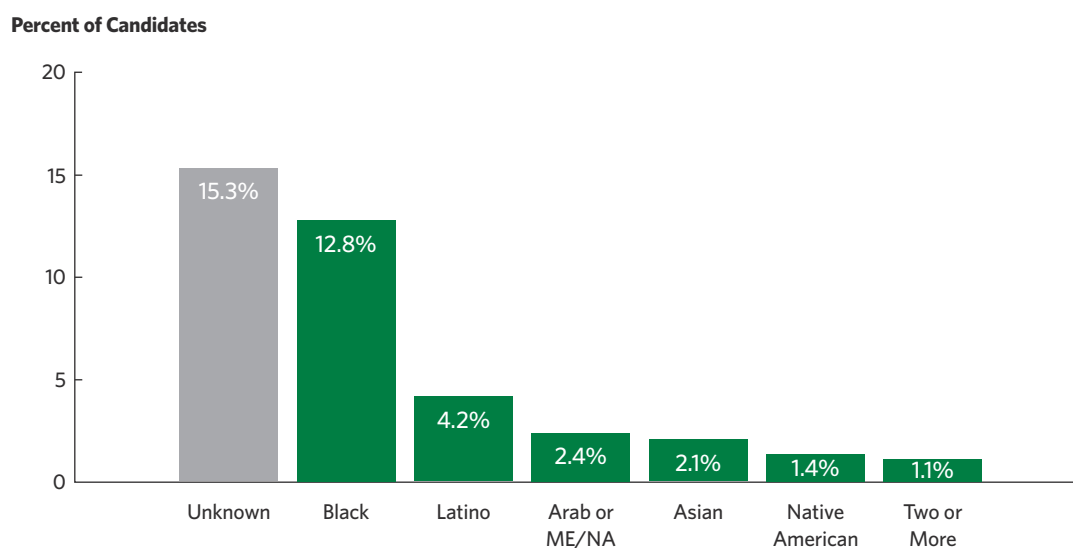
Given its statewide scope, Talent Together offers a valuable opportunity to examine how a large GYO model functions in practice. The purpose of this qualitative report is to document key successes and challenges in program implementation and to identify considerations for ongoing improvement. These insights are intended to support Talent Together leaders and partners in strengthening the program's design and delivery. At the same time, the findings contribute to the broader field by highlighting promising approaches to implementing large-scale GYO initiatives to address teacher shortages.

About Talent Together

Talent Together is a statewide consortium of all 56 ISDs in Michigan dedicated to reducing barriers to entry into the teaching profession and strengthening the educator workforce. The program is overseen by a governing board comprised of 15 ISD leaders representing all regions of the state. The board provides direction to Talent Together program leads, including financial oversight and guidance advancing six goals: 1) emphasize ISD collaboration around teacher growth and development to increase the quantity of highly qualified and certified educator candidates; 2) eliminate vacancies in the certification areas identified as highest need; 3) improve alignment of educator and student demographics; 4) improve educational outcomes for students served by program participants; 5) increase retention of novice and experienced teachers, and 6) improve the economic mobility of candidates in support staff roles. Aligned with these goals, Talent Together's main activities are outlined below.

Recruiting: In partnership with ISDs and school districts, Talent Together recruits and selects teacher candidates who reflect a wide range of identities (including race, ethnicity, gender, age, and language) and prior experiences (such as paraprofessionals, community members, and other school-based staff). Given that a key goal of this initiative is to improve student demographic representation within Michigan’s teacher workforce, Figure 1 outlines the shares of candidates in underrepresented race and ethnicity groups within Talent Together’s first three cohorts.

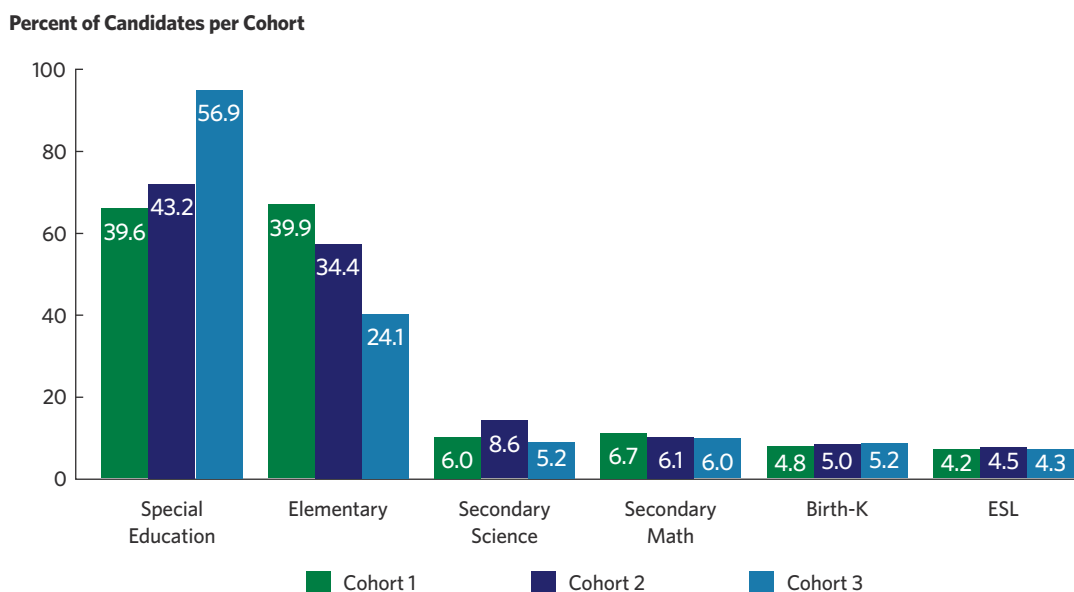
FIGURE 1. Share of Talent Together Candidates in Underrepresented Race and Ethnicity Groups



Notes: Percentages reflect a total of active and graduated candidates in each race/ethnicity group from all three cohorts. The identification category Arab, Middle Eastern, or North African was abbreviated to “Arab or ME/NA” due to space constraints. Individuals who identified with multiple race or ethnicity categories are included in the “Two or More” category, but counts are too low to separate this category further and maintain candidate anonymity.

Recruitment efforts are strategically aligned with districts’ most pressing hiring needs. The program supports both non-certified school staff pursuing initial licensure and certified teachers seeking additional endorsements to expand instructional capacity in high-need areas. Figure 2 shows the high-need certification areas being sought by Talent Together candidates in each cohort to meet the widely varying needs of districts across the state. Notably, the share of candidates seeking special education certification has increased dramatically, reflecting a significant need amid the state’s ongoing shortage in this area (Kilbride et al., 2025).

Partnering: In partnership with more than 18 vetted postsecondary institutions (PSIs), Talent Together supports candidates across multiple credential pathways, including early childhood, elementary, secondary math and science, English as a second language, and special education, as well as add-on certifications for licensed teachers. The educator preparation programs span traditional and alternative routes to certification, and the quality of each program is regularly assessed by the Talent Together team. Each candidate, including aspiring teachers who have not yet earned their bachelor’s, works with Talent Together staff to be matched with an appropriate degree or certification program.

FIGURE 2. Share of Talent Together Candidates Pursuing Each Credential Area

Notes: Percentages reflect shares out of the total number of active and graduated candidates in each cohort. Candidates seeking multiple certifications are represented in both bars for their cohort.

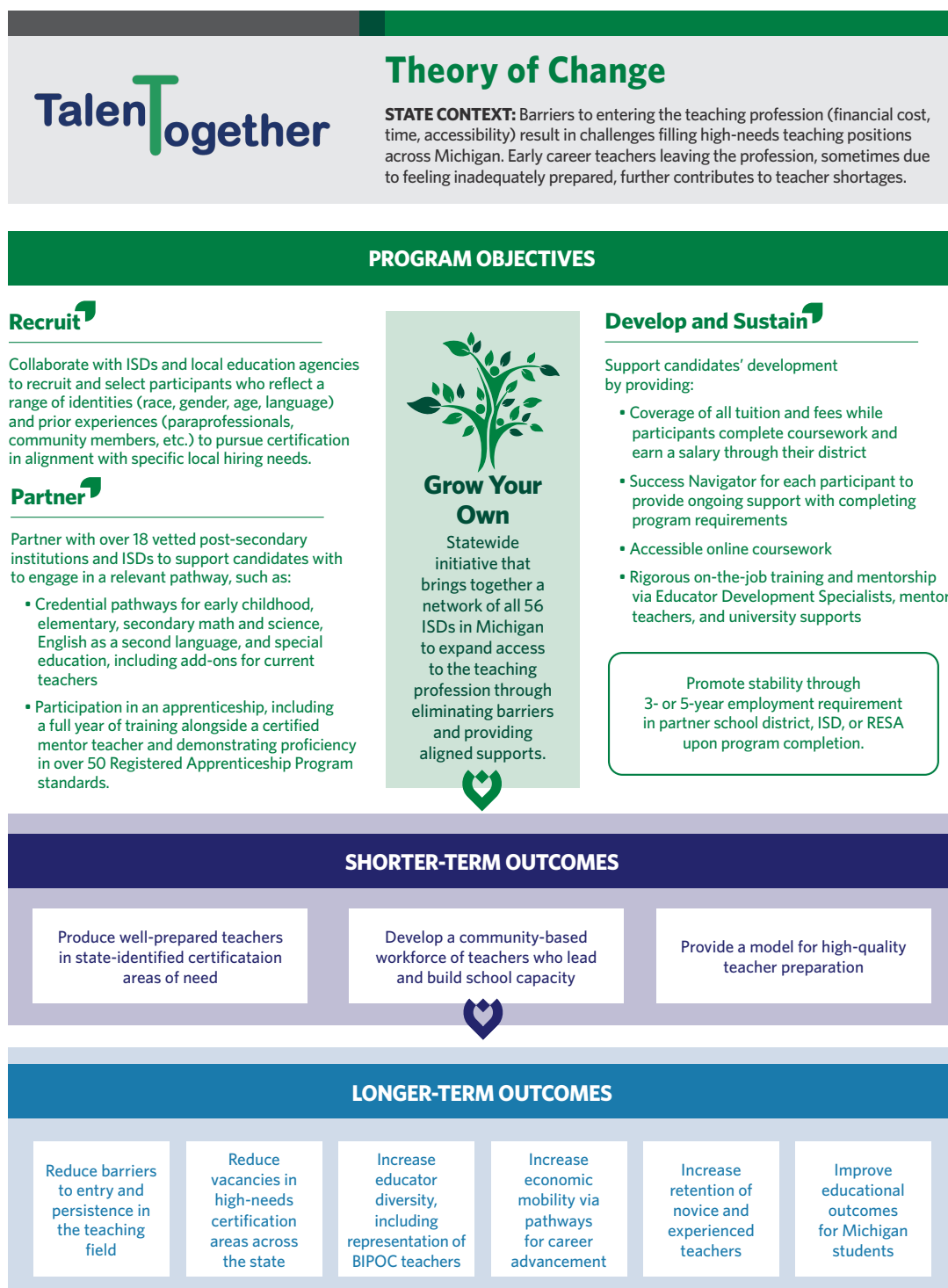
Participating candidates and ISDs are served by four regional Talent Together hubs, including Mid-Michigan and the Thumb, Northern Michigan, Southeast Michigan, and West/Southwest Michigan. These hubs enable the program to respond to regional workforce needs while maintaining a coordinated statewide infrastructure. Each regional Talent Together team includes a Regional Program Director who oversees partnerships with ISDs and districts, Success Navigators who support candidates in navigating barriers to certification, and Educator Development Specialists who help candidates become excellent teachers. Educator Development Specialists also provide professional learning to mentor teachers who support apprentices during their Registered Apprenticeship Year, as explained below.

Developing and Sustaining: The program model is intentionally designed to reduce financial and structural barriers and to support teacher candidates in filling high-need teaching positions. Tuition and required fees are fully covered, and teacher candidates continue to earn their regular wage through their existing staff position. Coursework is delivered through partner PSIs in accessible online formats to accommodate working professionals. Each candidate is paired with a Success Navigator who provides individualized, ongoing guidance to help them achieve program milestones and complete the program.

Talent Together candidates typically participate in a Registered Apprenticeship Program. In this year-long on-the-job training and learning experience, candidates co-teach alongside their certified mentor teachers while completing standards set by the Department of Labor. Throughout the year, apprentices take on increasing levels of responsibility and instructional leadership. Apprentices earn a salary and benefits through their employing districts, which are reimbursed by Talent Together. This rigorous, practice-based training is supported by Talent Together Educator Development Specialists. Upon graduation from Talent Together, newly certified teachers

have three- or five-year employment commitments in partner ISDs and districts to promote sustainability of the workforce.

These key functions of Talent Together are reflected in the Theory of Change. The Theory of Change provides a concise overview of Talent Together's program objectives, as well as the anticipated short- and long-term outcomes.



METHODS

Data Collection

During the fall of 2025, the qualitative research team collected data from teacher candidates, program leaders, and key partners as part of our evaluation of Talent Together’s program implementation. As outlined in Table 1 below, EPIC conducted 24 interviews with teacher candidates across three cohorts, as well as 15 program leads and partners, including Talent Together leadership, higher education professionals, leaders situated in the Michigan Educator Workforce Initiative (MEWI), and ISD superintendents serving on the Talent Together board, for a total of 39 interviews.

TABLE 1. Interview Participants	
Role	Number of Interview Participants
Cohort 1 teacher candidates	11
Cohort 2 teacher candidates	6
Cohort 3 teacher candidates	7
Talent Together program leads	8
Post-secondary partners	2
MEWI leaders	3
ISD board members	2

Interviewees were purposively selected to participate in this research. Talent Together program leaders participated in the initial interviews and collaborated with the research team to identify additional program-level partners (e.g., postsecondary partners, MEWI leaders who supported the creation of Talent Together, and ISD leaders serving on the governance board). The research team then selected participants from Talent Together’s three cohorts to generate a diverse sample across identity characteristics (e.g., age, race, gender), regions, and credential areas. Throughout this report, these interviewees are referred to as “teacher candidates” or “candidates” to align with the program’s terminology.

The confidential interviews took place in fall 2025 and focused on participants’ experiences navigating the implementation of the Talent Together program from its launch to the time of the interviews. Depending on their program track and individual progress, some interview participants had completed certification, while others were continuing in the Talent Together program. Interview questions prompted participants to reflect on their perceptions of Talent Together’s goals, barriers to the teaching profession, and successes and challenges related to key program features. For example, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with coursework, Talent Together staff, mentor teachers, the MTTC licensure tests, and job-search support. Interviews were semi-structured, so each conversation was tailored to the participant and their role.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with thematic coding (Miles et al., 2019) using a set of codes aligned with the literature on teacher shortages and implementation (e.g., supports, barriers, and school context). We also created analytic matrices to document implementation successes and challenges

described by each interview participant and to develop initial findings. Finally, the research team engaged in ongoing analytic discussions to refine our assertions, helping to promote the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

FINDINGS

Successes

Reflections across interviews revealed six main successes of Talent Together program implementation. The first four successes relate to candidates' experiences, while the remaining two focus on the systems level. Successes include: 1) removing financial barriers to the teaching profession; 2) effective and accessible work-study model; 3) comprehensive support provided by Talent Together staff; 4) in-depth training through the Registered Apprenticeship Program, 5) statewide collaboration and commitment to address teacher shortages; and 6) promising initial impact on the teacher workforce.

Candidate Experiences

Financial support helped remove barriers to high-quality teacher preparation.

Across interviews, participants shared that the Talent Together program aligned closely with its stated goals, particularly in removing barriers to high-quality teacher preparation. All candidates cited financial support as one of the most influential features of the program. Many described tuition coverage as directly enabling their access to higher education and certification pathways. One teacher candidate explained, *"I always wanted to continue my education to become a teacher, but it was so expensive, and I did not want to take on student loans."* In addition to tuition coverage, candidates highlighted the value of support for additional education-related expenses, such as textbooks, laptops, and certification test costs. A candidate said, *"Even when I went to take my certification test, they paid for it. ... When it comes to financial need and being covered, that was amazing."*

Several teacher candidates highlighted the equity implications of this support, with one noting that financial barriers have historically contributed to the underrepresentation of educators of color in the profession. She explained, *"Talent Together removes barriers, especially for myself and for women of color."* Aligning with this perspective, another shared, *"Without the [Talent Together] program, there is no way I would be here."* In this sense, Talent Together provided a pathway into the teaching profession for candidates with relevant school experience who might otherwise not have been able to earn their certification.

The work-study model, including online coursework, served as an effective and accessible pathway to teacher certification.

Many candidates praised Talent Together's work-study structure, which allowed them to continue working at their schools while pursuing their degrees or certifications online. One candidate noted the importance of keeping her job while moving toward her long-term goal of becoming a certified teacher, explaining:

This was something I had been thinking about doing for years, and the Talent Together Program offered the paid apprenticeship. Honestly, that was the selling point for me because in any other program, to do your student teaching, you would have to quit your job and not get paid. ... Being able to have income and insurance was huge for me.

Aligning with this perspective, almost all candidates mentioned the benefits of continuing to work in their staff roles while earning their credentials.

Candidates widely appreciated the online format of university coursework, emphasizing its flexibility. Several noted that this was essential to managing their time across multiple responsibilities. One candidate explained:

Being a working mom, I don't have the ability to take classes during the day and eliminate my ability to work or earn income. The other reason is that we're in a very remote area up here, and we don't have a four-year college anywhere nearby. Talent Together allowed me to be completely remote online, so I have the flexibility to take classes online, work at my own pace, and do everything when I have time.

As reflected above, the online format helped to promote accessibility for teacher candidates living in more rural areas. This is especially important given prior EPIC research demonstrating that rural districts often struggle to find the specific types of teachers they need (Kilbride et al., 2025).

Many teacher candidates described the university coursework as both accessible and relevant to their daily work in schools. They cited classroom management strategies, role-play scenarios, and approaches to family engagement as particularly useful. One candidate shared, “I learned so much from [instructor] because she also has multiple years being a classroom teacher. She taught us a lot of hands-on activities and presented real-life scenarios.” Others emphasized that their instructors were easy to reach and supportive, with one candidate sharing, “[Instructors] understood our situation as most of us were full-time teachers ... they were able to accommodate us on that level.”

Talent Together staff provided comprehensive support for candidates as they navigated program requirements.

Candidates across the three cohorts shared many examples of how they benefited from Talent Together support and described staff as responsive, accessible, and knowledgeable. Many referenced regular communication from their Success Navigators, including personal emails and invitations to schedule meetings as needed. For several candidates, this support began at the onset of their enrollment in Talent Together. One candidate explained:

Trying to find a teaching program was super confusing. “How do I student teach and not have an income? What does that even look like?” I just felt like I was alone in figuring out the next step without Talent Together. So, I felt really lucky that they were able to connect me with the degree I actually want, which is to become a certified teacher ... They did a really great job of helping me get through the hard bureaucracy of degrees.

Reflecting on the responsiveness of Talent Together, another candidate shared, “I sent an email about my classes and [Success Navigator] sent me a Zoom link and said he'd be willing to talk in two minutes ... He told me everything I needed to know.” While some candidates did not choose or need to communicate with staff often, almost all felt they were available should they need assistance.

In addition to support with enrollment and coursework, candidates shared examples of Talent Together staff, including Educator Development Specialists, assisting them with RAP requirements, addressing challenges with colleagues, and providing guidance on their job searches. Reflecting on the effectiveness of Talent Together staff, leaders emphasized the importance of strong collaboration routines and the value of diverse expertise, including experience beyond K-12 teaching. One leader explained, *“Some of [staff] have counseling backgrounds, some have previously worked at a postsecondary institution. I would say it is something that makes the team successful because we have such varying backgrounds and experiences.”*

In-depth training through the apprenticeship program prepared candidates for the realities of teaching.

Talent Together candidates who were earning a credential for the first time and not employed as a teacher of record participated in a one-year RAP. These candidates described positive experiences learning from their mentor teachers and completing the RAP standards, with several noting that the apprenticeship provided valuable learning opportunities beyond their coursework. One candidate described the apprenticeship as *“the best part of Talent Together.”* Others emphasized the importance of having high-quality, trusting, and supportive mentors. One candidate shared, *“I am able to give my best because I feel comfortable with [mentor] as a human being and as a teacher. We are a team.”* Aligning with this perspective, program leaders described intentional processes for selecting mentor teachers and supporting them in effectively collaborating with and mentoring their apprentices.

For many candidates, participating in the RAP provided hands-on teaching experience that helped build their confidence as educators. One candidate explained:

The apprentice teacher year was especially helpful. It was helpful to know I had that year to really dig deeply into parts of the job I had not done as a paraprofessional before ... Talent Together laid out the requirements for the apprenticeship. And so all the things they required me to learn and do led to a great deal of confidence when it was time to accept the job.

For this candidate and several others, completing the apprenticeship helped prepare them for the transition from their current staff roles to the responsibilities of a teaching position. Recognizing the importance of this in-depth, on-the-job training, Talent Together leaders shared efforts to grow and improve the RAP over time. One leader reflected on the success of the apprenticeship, *“The growth of the program, the depths of the support ... Experiences for those individuals have gotten so much more robust and feedback-driven over the years, and I know it continues to head in a great direction.”*

Systems Level

Statewide collaboration and commitment fostered a coordinated system to address teacher shortages.

Aligned with the initiative’s goals, several leaders emphasized that Talent Together is a strong example of statewide collaboration to ensure all students have access to well-prepared educators. The successful engagement of all 56 ISDs in the state was described as particularly noteworthy, with one ISD leader sharing, *“I don’t want to take for granted a huge success of getting 56 out of 56 intermediate school districts in the state of Michigan to sign on to this—it is amazing.”* Similarly, a

Talent Together leader described the statewide collaboration as *“Incredible. It really is nothing I have ever seen before. [The ISD] board is incredibly engaged.”* Others shared that the Talent Together board was well-designed with clear governance structures and goals to support the program.

Consistent with these perspectives, several leaders felt implementation of Talent Together demonstrates the helpful role ISDs can play in addressing the states’ workforce needs. One leader explained, *“When a crisis arises like this, we can provide solutions and make them happen.”* Others emphasized the importance of the consortium’s shared commitment to identifying and supporting qualified candidates rather than merely filling vacancies. Reflecting on the planning and launch of Talent Together, one leader explained, *“We did not sacrifice the quality that is required to be a successful teacher.”* Another leader shared, *“We look for K-12 experience and, of course, a passion for what they do.”*

Partnerships with universities and districts were described as essential to Talent Together’s success. Some leaders described the service Talent Together provides to districts in its role as an intermediary, which reduced administrative burden. A Talent Together leader explained:

The amount of work that it would take an HR leader in the district to manage a Department of Labor partnership and a program of this high quality, it would be impossible. ... Districts love that Talent Together is the intermediary.

Others noted that strong partnerships with districts were essential for understanding local-level needs and ensuring teacher candidates’ access to quality mentors. Similarly, university partners played a critical role in providing pathways to certification and supporting candidates’ learning. Reflecting on the importance of Talent Together’s partnerships, one leader summarized:

We have phenomenal partnerships, and obviously, we need them to continue. We are only as good as our partners. We want to put out phenomenal teachers; we do not just want certified teachers. We want phenomenal teachers in the classroom, so we need our partnerships.

As explained in more detail below, these partnerships helped Talent Together support candidates in pursuing their credentials across all regions of the state.

Initial implementation of Talent Together provided a strong foundation for improving the teacher workforce across the state.

Candidates and leaders described the program’s initial impact as a significant success, with several noting that candidates reflected diversity across race, nationality, language, geographic context (rural and urban areas), and age. One leader expressed particular pride in the racial diversity of the candidate pool, sharing:

I am really proud of the diversity of the candidate pool. Having cohorts with 30% and 40% people of color is pretty remarkable. And certainly runs counter to most trends, especially when you think about the state, which only has about 10% of its teachers who identify as folks of color right now, and 30+ percent of students who identify as folks of color. I am proud that Talent Together, given its scale and its representation, [is] maybe the single biggest gap-closing effort for racial diversity.

In addition to supporting diverse cohorts, leaders reflected on early successes in graduation and hiring. Reflecting on the hundreds of Talent Together participants and graduates working across the state, one leader shared, *“Every county has at least one Talent Together participant, which tells me we have been able to build a program that works in the most rural of places and the most urban places in the state.”* Another leader emphasized that Talent Together graduates are well-prepared, sharing:

We have heard that a lot of our apprentices are showing up like second-year teachers. They are not showing up with a chaotic classroom that maybe my first year in the classroom looked like. So I think that adds some nuance to what ‘well-prepared’ really means.

Reflecting on both the speed and scope of the program, a leader noted, *“It is amazing to see the statewide immediate impact.”* Across interviews, leaders and candidates were optimistic about Talent Together’s progress in addressing teacher shortages in Michigan.

Challenges

While interviews highlighted many positive aspects of Talent Together, participants also shared challenges in implementing an innovative statewide program. In the sections below, the first three challenges relate to candidates’ experiences, while the remaining two focus on the systems level. Challenges include: 1) passing required MTTC teacher licensing exams to earn certification; 2) balancing program, professional, and personal commitments; 3) coordinating across organizations and regions, which led to inconsistent candidate experiences; 4) difficulty aligning with localized workforce needs; and 5) navigating uncertainty about future funding and subsequent planning implications.

Candidate Experiences

For some teacher candidates, passing the required MTTC teacher licensing exams was a barrier to earning certification.

Several candidates noted that preparing for and passing the MTTC test was a challenging part of their program. One leader explained, *“Passing the MTTC tests is a big barrier for many of our students.”* Contributing to this challenge, some candidates felt that the content included in the MTTC tests was disconnected from their coursework. One explained, *“I don’t know how many questions are on the MTTC, but I would say only 20% were like the coursework.”* Misalignment between the test and course content was heightened for candidates in secondary math and science, who sometimes felt they did not receive enough preparation to pass the MTTC. Summarizing this challenge, a leader explained:

We know that folks in secondary math and science have a very different experience from those in other certification areas, because many of the alt. route programs we use do not necessarily go into content. So, if someone is coming from a non-math background and trying to get certified in math, they are not learning statistics and geometry in their alt route program. They’re learning teaching methodology and lesson planning. So then, when it comes time to do the MTTC, they’re sort of like, “Wait, what are these equations? I didn’t learn this.”

Similarly, a candidate pursuing a math credential shared, *“I feel like that has been a little bit challenging for me because I basically have to teach myself the content.”*

For some candidates, passing the MTTC was the final barrier to earning their credentials. One candidate explained, *“I graduated from the [PSI partner] program last year. But to get the endorsement, I also need to pass the MTTC test.”* For some, not passing the MTTC test was further complicated by the work commitment candidates agreed to when joining Talent Together. Individuals pursuing their initial teaching certification agreed to a required 5-year commitment, and current teachers adding an additional endorsement agreed to a 3-year commitment. Reflecting on cohort mates who did not pass the MTTC, one candidate shared, *“It would be challenging for them to find a [teaching position], but they signed the contract ... I can see the stress there.”* Recognizing the pervasiveness of challenges related to licensure exams, Talent Together leaders shared examples of how they have offered additional preparation supports for candidates over time, including tutoring and study groups. One leader highlighted the importance of thinking about the issue from a statewide systems perspective, noting, *“We continue to track these individuals and the reasons why they are unable to pass the test and get the certification. That gives us the [information] to address the larger systems piece.”*

Balancing program, professional, and personal commitments was complex and time-consuming.

While candidates were widely appreciative of the opportunity to participate in Talent Together, many were doing so while navigating significant demands on their time. Some candidates noted that keeping up with the pace of their coursework or the number of concurrent courses was intense. Others shared that time management was complicated by balancing responsibilities across their program, staff position, and personal lives. One candidate explained:

I did the semester, but because of how short the weeks were, it was so much content. And for somebody working at the front desk of an elementary school with [hundreds of] students, teachers, and parents, I was just really drained. Being a mother myself, I couldn't keep up with the content.

For this candidate and several others, it was difficult to keep up with fast-paced program requirements. Similarly, some candidates who participated in the RAP found its standard time-consuming to complete. One candidate described falling behind the completion schedule, sharing, *“I couldn't get the RAP standards done at the right timeline ... it was hard.”* Another shared, *“I think [the RAP] is making a very well-rounded teacher out of people, but there is a lot of repetition and bonus work.”*

Importantly, Talent Together leads and partners shared that some PSIs and districts were more supportive than others in terms of recognizing candidates' multiple responsibilities. One leader explained:

Some school districts are very willing to give their teacher candidates a little more flexibility because they understand what they are working toward, and some school districts are not. And for our PSI partnerships ... not every professor that the teacher candidates are going to have has that same level of knowledge or understanding of the different things that the teacher candidate needs to balance.

As explained below, candidates' experiences were often shaped by how closely districts and credential programs aligned with Talent Together's goals and requirements.

At times, challenges promoting coherence across organizations and within Talent Together led to inconsistent candidate experiences.

Several Talent Together leaders noted that managing the range of partnerships with districts and PSIs was a complex aspect of the program. For example, some leaders and candidates reported that districts were occasionally unclear about what candidates' participation in Talent Together entailed (e.g., coursework and apprenticeship requirements). One leader summarized, *"I think the districts are not always fully aware of what the candidate is going to be asked to do."* Further reflecting variability, others noted differences across candidates' experiences with PSI partners, including the clarity of credential requirements, quality of coursework, and flexibility of professors. One program lead shared:

Consistency has been a challenge, but we have an annual review process and feedback loops with our institutions of higher ed. For example, at our last Talent Together board meeting, we made a decision to discontinue [some] partnerships due to quality concerns. And so, it is not "once you are a partner, you are always a partner." We hold high standards.

Talent Together leaders were committed to building coherence with PSI partners and ensuring alignment with the program's standards. Over time, program leaders strengthened partnership agreements and evaluation processes. One leader explained, *"We now have the ability to say, 'these are our terms of what is acceptable and what is not going to work for us in these partnerships.'"* Developing clearer processes for managing partnerships was also important amidst turnover across organizations. One leader described frustrations about turnover at partner sites, sharing, *"All of a sudden we have this new person that we are dealing with that has heard nothing about Talent Together [or] the intricacies of our program."* In this sense, building and maintaining coherence across partnerships was ongoing work.

In addition to variability across partnerships, interviews revealed inconsistencies across some candidates' mentorship experiences. For example, one candidate reported difficulty finding a mentor and wished she had received more support from Talent Together earlier in the process. Another candidate felt that their mentor was not dedicated to the mentorship process, which constrained their ability to meet the RAP standards. Further illustrating variation in candidates' experiences, a program leader noted that supporting candidates who were already working as teachers of record was especially complicated because they often did not participate in the apprenticeship. The leader explained:

A lot of our teachers of record are emergency-certified through the Michigan Department of Education. They are not certified yet, but because they're already filling that role in their schools, they [often] do not complete a registered apprenticeship with us ... I feel like that is an area we are looking at a lot more closely. What can we provide them with, like classroom help, especially for those who feel thrown into [teaching]?

The leader explained that close to a third of Talent Together participants are teachers of record. One such participant shared that they felt underprepared for their current role, noting that the preparation they had received was *"not enough information for me to really feel what it feels like to*

be that teacher.” They went on to explain, “If I were to have spent a year [as an apprentice], I would have a really good understanding.” Recognizing these challenges, Talent Together leaders described ongoing efforts to improve mentoring and support for all candidates, particularly those who could not participate in the RAP.

Systems Level

During the early implementation of Talent Together, leads and partners encountered challenges aligning the program with local workforce needs.

Reflecting on the statewide nature of Talent Together, some leaders and candidates shed light on the challenges of aligning the program with local workforce needs, particularly during the rapid launch and the first year of implementation. Describing this initial challenge, a program leader shared:

We have seen a couple of scenarios where the ISD has put [candidates] up and then their district is like, ‘we don’t want to keep them.’ That puts the student in a tough position, and puts Talent Together in a tough position.

As reflected above, decisions to accept initial candidates were made in collaboration with ISDs, which at times were misaligned with district-level perspectives or needs. A Talent Together leader explained, “It was really challenging for some districts that do not feel the staffing shortage as acutely, because they were like, ‘[We] have internal systems about how we move paras to teachers. We are not going to circumvent that.’” In this subset of districts, some leaders did not feel committed to hiring Talent Together candidates whom they had not helped select.

At times, misalignment between Talent Together’s initial admissions decisions and district-level hiring needs meant that some Talent Together graduates had trouble securing positions that matched their new credentials in the district or school where they had been working. One candidate described the job search as “more competitive” than anticipated. Following this early challenge, the Talent Together program team worked to strengthen communication with districts, particularly during the evaluation and acceptance of applicants. Leaders emphasized the importance of communicating with districts about workforce needs and the likelihood that they would hire prospective candidates, using this information to inform program decisions.

Another concern raised in interviews was whether Talent Together could meet the significant demand for the program statewide. One Talent Together leader shared that with thousands of strong applicants, Talent Together did not have sufficient resources to admit many of them. The leader explained:

Another challenge is being able to answer the call. We have close to 7,000 applicants, and [the challenge is] answering this call of so many people in the state who want to be teachers. I don’t know if our current model can withstand that number.

While the number of applications reflects strong interest in the teaching profession, Talent Together admitted only a few hundred candidates to the latest cohort. As explained in more detail below, sustaining the program beyond its initial implementation is an important challenge.

Efforts to promote Talent Together's sustainability were complicated by the program's fast launch and uncertain resources.

Several Talent Together leaders and partners discussed the complexities of the program's rapid launch. While launching quickly allowed the program to respond to pressing teacher shortages, it also resulted in challenges. One leader explained that the program hired "30 people in six weeks," some of whom were not a good fit for the organization. Another leader explained:

[The program] scaled so fast. The plane was built while it was flying, and there was not the time to really iterate and build slowly and be as mindful as I wish there had been. But we do have the benefit of doing it now.

Understandably, building a statewide program and defining responsibilities for a large team was complicated. One leader shared, "I think there have been some challenges figuring out roles." Others described the importance of clarifying responsibilities and creating documentation to promote consistency and sustainability.

As Talent Together launched, some candidates felt that program requirements were unclear. Areas of confusion included whom to contact at Talent Together, how tuition would be paid, requirements for the apprenticeship, and the timing of MTTC tests. Reflecting on the first year of the program, a staff member shared, "It was so challenging at the beginning to immediately start supporting teacher candidates and have no answers to any questions they were asking. It was a challenging time, and I also think it was a success—we accomplished so much." While some challenges remained, interviews improvements in the program over time as the Talent Together team developed deeper partnerships and clearer systems.

Leads and partners identified uncertain funding as the program's largest sustainability challenge. While Talent Together received initial funding to support the program's launch and first few years of implementation, resources for subsequent years are uncertain. Several leaders noted that the lack of stable funding made planning difficult and affected postsecondary partners. One postsecondary partner shared that they developed a new online program with Talent Together to address a shortage area, but subsequently received no students due to funding constraints. The partner explained, "[Talent Together] was not able to forecast that their funding was going to be reduced, and that had unintended negative consequences." Several leaders emphasized the need for stable, ongoing funding but also recognized the complexities of state resources. One leader shared, "We are trying to walk a really narrow line: making sure people know that we need to be funded, that we deserve to be funded, and that schools have to be funded first."

IMPLICATIONS

The successes and challenges documented in this report highlight both the promise and complexity of implementing large-scale GYO initiatives. Findings from Talent Together underscore the importance of coordinated systems, reducing barriers, and sustained investment to strengthen educator pipelines. The implications below offer considerations for policymakers, program leaders, and partners seeking to expand access to high-quality teacher preparation in Michigan and beyond.

Intentional collaboration across ISDs, districts, and PSIs is essential to address teacher shortages while being responsive to local workforce needs.

Talent Together’s statewide consortium model demonstrated how collaboration can mobilize a coordinated response to teacher shortages. Leaders and partners described the participation of all ISDs as a significant achievement, reflecting shared commitment to preparing well-qualified educators. Partnerships with ISDs and postsecondary institutions reduced administrative burden for districts while supporting candidates’ access to certification. Findings illustrate how coordinated systems can expand educator pipelines while focusing on quality.

Findings also highlight the ongoing work required to maintain coherence across organizations and ensure responsiveness to local workforce needs. Early misalignment with some district hiring priorities, as well as variability across postsecondary partnerships, contributed to differences in candidate experiences. Talent Together’s work to strengthen communication and systems helped ensure program goals and activities were better understood across organizations. Such coordination is critical for aligning statewide initiatives with local workforce needs to systematically improve the educator workforce.

Reduced financial barriers, accessible coursework, and responsive program staff can support candidates’ successful pathways to certification.

Findings indicate that reducing financial barriers is central to expanding access to teacher preparation. Candidates consistently identified tuition coverage, payment for certification exams, and support for materials as enabling their participation, with several noting that they would not have pursued certification without these supports. By removing cost barriers that have historically limited entry into the profession, Talent Together created pathways for paraprofessionals and other school-based staff to become certified teachers in their communities. These pathways are especially important for candidates from underrepresented backgrounds who have faced systemic barriers to entering the teaching profession.

Accessible program structures and supports further broadened participation. Online coursework and the work-study model enabled candidates to maintain employment while progressing toward certification. Candidates in rural areas and those with caregiving responsibilities especially appreciated this model. Consistent and responsive support from Talent Together staff helped support candidates’ pathways to certification. While candidates valued the program, many identified the MTTC tests as a barrier to certification. Thus, the findings suggest that additional preparation for the licensure exams (e.g., tutoring, study groups, asynchronous resources) may be needed to ensure that more candidates achieve timely certification.

On-the-job training through an apprenticeship bolsters readiness for the teaching profession.

Talent Together’s Registered Apprenticeship Program represents a promising approach to complementing coursework with practical training. Candidates described the apprenticeship as providing meaningful, hands-on experience that supported their transition into teaching roles. Many mentor relationships fostered collaboration and professional growth, enabling candidates to gain experience in preparing lessons, applying instructional strategies, and building relationships

with students and families. Leaders noted that these experiences helped candidates take on new teaching roles with confidence and preparedness.

Findings also point to the importance of strengthening consistency across candidates' experiences. Variability in mentor quality, challenges securing mentors, and limited support for teachers of record contributed to inconsistency. These findings shed light on the importance of clear mentoring expectations, intentional selection and matching processes, and ongoing support to ensure quality implementation. Expanding support for teachers of record who often do not participate in the apprenticeship can further ensure that all candidates are well prepared for the complex realities of teaching.

Sustained investment is necessary to maintain GYO programs that foster a high-quality educator workforce.

Early implementation of Talent Together shows promise for strengthening Michigan's educator workforce by expanding access to certification pathways across rural and urban regions, supporting diverse cohorts of candidates, and providing in-depth practical training. Interview participants described the program as an important strategy for addressing shortages while preparing well-qualified teachers who reflect the communities they serve.

The program's rapid launch enabled a timely response to urgent teacher shortages, but findings underscore the importance of sustained resources and time to build coherent systems. Early challenges reflect the complexities of scaling a statewide initiative while simultaneously establishing partnerships and infrastructure. The development of clearer systems and stronger communication improved candidate experiences, demonstrating the importance of sufficient time to grow and develop GYO initiatives.

Uncertain funding emerged as the most significant threat to long-term sustainability. Constrained resources resulted in limited admissions despite high demand, and also complicated planning across organizations. While thousands of applicants expressed interest, only a fraction could be served, raising questions about the resources needed to meet statewide workforce needs. Sustained investment, including multi-year funding and sufficient resources for coordination, will be essential to realizing the long-term workforce goals of Grow Your Own initiatives, including Talent Together.

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