Many Roads, One Classroom: A Case Study in Innovative Educator Preparation Pathways

BranchED
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This Case Study serves as the foundation for a three-day professional learning experience focused on innovative educator preparation pathways. It is not designed to prescribe solutions, but rather to present a realistic scenario that invites collaborative inquiry. Through discussion, reflection, and structured exploration, participants will examine how an Educator Preparation Program (EPP) and its partners might:

- Design pathways that expand access to the teaching profession
- Balance innovation with quality, coherence, and accountability
- Respond to local workforce needs while supporting candidate success

The case is intentionally complex and incomplete, mirroring the conditions under which real-world decisions about educator preparation are made.

Focus of the Case Study

This Case Study centers on the following thematic areas, which are revisited across the three days:

Innovative Pathway Design
- Explore alternative and nontraditional pathways into teaching, including residency models, grow-your-own initiatives, and community-based recruitment.
- Consider how pathway design impacts candidate readiness, persistence, and professional identity.

Candidate Experience & Support
- Examine how program structures support candidates who may be working, first-generation, or career changers.
- Identify where flexibility, coherence, and clarity are essential to candidate success.

Partnerships & Shared Ownership
- Consider how EPPs and high-need districts collaborate to co-design pathways that meet mutual goals.
- Reflect on the roles and responsibilities of faculty, mentor teachers, district leaders, and candidates within innovative models.

Why This Case Matters

Summit Valley College of Education (SVCE) is housed within an institution deeply connected to its surrounding community. The institution serves a student population comprised predominantly of students of color and is guided by a mission centered on educational access and community engagement. Many SVCE candidates are from the local area and enter the program with a strong desire to teach in nearby schools.

Despite this strong interest, local schools continue to experience persistent teacher shortages. District leaders report difficulty staffing classrooms with qualified teachers, while SVCE faculty express concern about whether existing preparation models are sufficient to meet evolving school and student needs. These pressures have intensified in recent years, creating a growing sense of urgency among institutional and district leadership.

In response, SVCE has partnered with Meadows Ridge Unified School District, a high-need urban district,

to explore innovative pathways into teaching. While there is a shared commitment to addressing workforce challenges, tensions have begun to surface. Faculty question how alternative pathways might affect program coherence, rigor, and accreditation expectations. District leaders seek faster, more flexible staffing solutions to meet immediate needs. Both partners are grappling with how to expand access without compromising quality or overburdening candidates.

Current Program Context

SVCE's existing preparation program, last revised more than a decade ago, follows a traditional four-year undergraduate model with coursework frontloaded and clinical placements concentrated primarily in the final year. Completion rates remain at 58%, licensure pass rates have plateaued, and district partners continue to raise concerns about candidate readiness, particularly in high-need schools. In addition, SVCE also has graduate programs leading to initial certification. In most instances, graduate students are also serving as Teachers of Record, which proves to be challenging for some, given their lack of preparation in pedagogy, developing positive classroom environments, and working with special populations (e.g., students with disabilities).

Leaders on both sides increasingly agree that incremental adjustments are unlikely to produce meaningful change. As a result, the Dean of SVCE, Dr. Fuentes, and the Superintendent of Meadows Ridge Unified, Dr. Johnson, have determined that a more fundamental reexamination of preparation pathways is necessary.

The Program Redesign Task Force

To move this work forward, Dr. Fuentes and Dr. Johnson formed a Program Redesign Task Force to review SVCE's preparation model and identify new approaches that better reflect institutional values, candidate needs, and district priorities.

The Task Force is intentionally cross-functional and includes:
- SVCE faculty from multiple certification areas
- Clinical supervisors
- District leaders from Meadows Ridge Unified
- School-based mentor teachers
- SVCE alumna working at Meadows Ridge Unified

Some members have long-standing professional relationships, while others are collaborating across roles for the first time. Although Task Force members share a commitment to strengthening teacher preparation and addressing workforce needs, they bring different perspectives, levels of authority, and assumptions about what innovation should look like. These differences influence how problems are defined, which priorities emerge, and how risk is perceived.

The Task Force has been charged with developing recommendations for innovative preparation pathways to be piloted over the next two academic years. Specifically, the group is expected to:

- Examine current program structures and identify limitations contributing to candidate attrition, uneven readiness, or misalignment with district needs
- Explore alternative pathway models that expand access to the profession while maintaining high standards for preparation
- Clarify roles and responsibilities across the EPP and district to better support candidates
- Consider how innovative pathways can be sustainable, scalable, and responsive to the community served

The Task Force is not expected to design a fully realized program during its initial work. Instead, its

purpose is to surface key questions, design principles, and conditions for success that can guide future decision making.

Decision Point 1: Framing the Challenge (Day 1)

As the Program Redesign Task Force begins its work, members quickly encounter a foundational decision point: how to define the problem they are trying to solve. While all agree that teacher shortages and preparation challenges are real, perspectives differ on where the root of the problem lies.

Task Force members find themselves asking:

- Are current challenges primarily about recruitment, preparation, retention, or system alignment?
- What assumptions are we making about candidates, schools, and readiness?
- Which problems feel most urgent—and for whom?

At this stage, the Task Force recognizes that how the problem is framed will shape every decision that follows. Members are challenged to slow down, surface assumptions, and build a shared understanding of the conditions driving current outcomes.

This decision point anchors Day 1 of the professional learning experience.

Decision Point 2: Examining Pathways and Trade-Offs (Day 2)

With a clearer understanding of the challenges at hand, the Task Force turns its attention to possible pathways forward. Multiple models are under consideration, including traditional undergraduate preparation, teacher residencies, registered apprenticeships, career-changer pathways, and grow-your-own approaches.

As these options are explored, a second decision point emerges, one focused on trade-offs rather than choices.

Task Force members ask:
- How does each pathway respond to the challenges we have identified?
- What system capacities—mentoring, supervision, funding, policy flexibility—would each pathway require?
- What new risks or unintended consequences might accompany each model?
- Which challenges are pathway-specific, and which reflect broader system conditions?

Rather than selecting a preferred model, the Task Force is asked to examine pathways comparatively and honestly.

This decision point frames Day 2 of the professional learning experience.

Decision Point 3: Moving Toward Action Through Learning (Day 3)

As discussions deepen, the Task Force begins to shift from analysis to application. Members recognize that meaningful innovation cannot be rushed and that readiness varies across contexts, partners, and systems.

A third decision point emerges—one centered not on selecting a pathway, but on determining how to

move forward responsibly.

Task Force members ask:

- What is the most pressing staffing or preparation challenge in our own context?
- Where are we ready to test a new approach—and where are we not?
- Who must be engaged early to ensure access, quality, and sustainability?
- What small, low-risk actions could help us learn before scaling or committing?

At this stage, progress is reframed as learning rather than final decisions.

This decision point anchors Day 3 of the professional learning experience.

How the Case Is Used Across the Three Days

- Day 1: Understanding context and defining the right problem
- Day 2: Exploring multiple pathway models and examining trade-offs
- Day 3: Applying insights locally and initiating an implementation learning journey

Together, these decision points create a coherent narrative arc that mirrors real-world redesign efforts and supports thoughtful, opportunity-centered innovation.