



PEORIA GROW YOUR OWN A COMMUNITY ENDEAVOR

Region 9 Promising

Practices is a series of brief publications highlighting successful programs and innovations across Illinois and Iowa, featuring districts working to creatively solve perplexing problems.

Through this series, Region 9 seeks to spur ideas and connections among educators and leaders in the region who are looking for real-world examples they can learn from and emulate. **This edition of Promising Practices features Peoria, Illinois, District 150**, and the Grow Your Own program the district implemented to answer the following question: **How can we create a diverse teacher workforce pipeline that mirrors the demographics of the students in the district?**



Overview

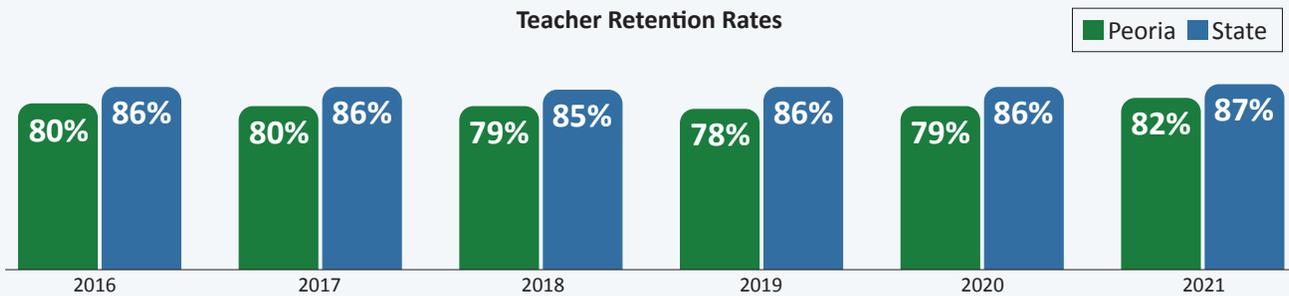
Peoria Public Schools District 150 in Illinois faces a challenge mirrored in districts across the state and nation. Not only is teacher retention an issue (Peoria has a lower teacher retention rate than the state average), but the teachers who do remain don't resemble their students. In 2021, 85.2% of teachers in Peoria were White, and only 19.7% of the student population was White. Linda Wilson, a teacher in the district and now the director of Peoria Grow Your Own (Peoria GYO), decided to act. A graduate of the then-discontinued GYO program herself, she worked with district leadership and the union to revive the program. Finishing the third year in 2022, Peoria GYO currently works with 15 candidates.

Peoria GYO is, in Wilson's terms, a "teacher scholarship program" that works to recruit local residents into the education profession by providing various forms of support (e.g., academic, social, financial). Peoria GYO candidates include paraprofessionals, recent high school graduates, and career changers. In exchange for the support they receive, the candidates pledge to teach for at least 5 years for Peoria Public Schools. Wilson hopes Peoria GYO will create a community of diverse teachers who are invested in Peoria.

DISTRICT PROFILE

- Peoria Public Schools
- Peoria, Illinois
- 12,408 students
- 19.7% White student population
- 85.2% White teacher population

Teacher Retention Rates



District Story

In 2008, Peoria began its first GYO program as part of GYO Illinois. In the 2012 school year, however, Peoria did not apply for funding for the program, and the program ended. Recognizing the district need, Linda Wilson revived the program in 2018 with support from the district superintendent and local union. Wilson worked to reinstate the GYO program based on her positive experiences during the 2008–12 program and due to the “diversity shortage” and “teacher shortage” the district was experiencing. Right now, Wilson explained, the program is very much a “one-woman show.” Wilson handles everything, including meeting with and supporting candidates, handling logistics, planning monthly cohort meetings, and securing additional funding. According to Dr. Cecile Arquette, the program’s higher education liaison at Bradley University, Wilson is “an amazing change agent in [the] school district and in [the] community.” Dr. Arquette credited Peoria GYO’s existence to Wilson’s “tenacity” and “desire to make change.”

Wilson’s goals for the program are simple. She hopes to cultivate local teachers who reflect the diversity of Peoria schools. She recognizes that the program needs to provide support from the start (as a candidate enters the program) to the end (when a candidate secures a district teaching position). As such, Peoria GYO provides more than financial support. Candidates receive academic help, wraparound services, professional development outside of college courses, peer mentors, and regular check-ins. The program focuses on building community for the candidates and removing barriers to graduation.

Implementing Peoria GYO has not always been easy. First, not all stakeholders trusted that the program would last, given that its previous incarnation was short lived. Another challenge was that some stakeholders wanted immediate or greater results—more candidates graduating faster. To mitigate both challenges, Wilson focused on building trust and highlighting successes. “You’re having a conversation with folks,” she said, “and you’re listening to them, but then also sharing celebrations. . . . Doing a lot of outreach, I think, combats a lot of that.” She also mentioned that having candidates active in the community, such as through volunteering or their churches, also helped.

“I want them [the candidates] to be the future leaders of this community. Our candidates are rooted here; they already invested here; they know the needs and the challenges and the successes of our students, and it doesn’t come as a shock to them. . . . My goal is just to support those candidates and future graduates to matriculate through the program and become really well-qualified teachers in our community.”

—Linda Wilson, Peoria GYO Director



Peoria GYO seems driven by community building, within the program and the district. When describing the program, Tekia Childs, a recent graduate of Peoria GYO, explained, “It’s just like a community where they put us together with like-minded people to nurture us and help us grow.” Dr. Arquette echoed these sentiments, calling Peoria GYO “community oriented” with “a real sense of camaraderie.” The monthly cohort meetings and mentor relationships help develop the community among the candidates. This internal community is an essential element for the program’s success. Wilson also remarked about the important role of the wider community within Peoria. More

community partnerships translate to more resources Wilson can share with candidates.

Part of building a strong community begins with candidate selection. That is, who the program recruits is just as important as what the candidates do. Dr. Arquette described seeking candidates “who look like our students, who are deeply embedded in the community, who are invested in the community, [and] who want to make it better.” These are the shared values of Childs’s “like-minded people.” Having a robust external network and cultivating a strong internal culture have fueled Peoria GYO’s successes.

Evidence in Action

Peoria GYO has layers. At its broadest layer, it is a scholarship program for prospective teachers willing to commit to teaching in Peoria Public Schools for 5 years. The scholarship is only one small aspect of the program, however. Peoria GYO also provides academic and social support.

PRACTICE PROFILE

- Peoria GYO
- Provide teacher candidates with the support they need to complete a teaching degree.



FINANCIAL | Peoria GYO offers up to \$25,000 as tuition assistance, in the form of a forgivable loan, to each candidate. The actual amount a candidate receives each semester depends on state appropriations to GYO Illinois and the respective allotment to Peoria. In addition, Peoria GYO provides wraparound services in the form of textbooks, clinical experience stipends, childcare stipends, computers, mental health support, and even the occasional gift card for groceries or gas. The wraparound supports depend heavily on additional fundraising through grants and donations.

By combining these three elements of support, Peoria GYO helps candidates not only pay for school but also thrive, survive, and stay. Childs shared that the program has helped “tremendously,” stating, “It has encouraged me mainly when times that I felt like I wanted to quit. They were there to help me, push me . . . help me see that I can do it, one foot in front of the other.”



ACADEMIC | Peoria GYO offers tutoring, academic planning with Dr. Arquette, and monthly professional development sessions during cohort meetings. These supports are designed for candidates who have not been in a classroom in several years and may require some refreshers or remediation in mathematics or test taking, Wilson explained. Content and certification tests may also be challenges. As such, Peoria GYO offers tutoring and small-group support. Peoria GYO also provides candidates professional development opportunities in topics such as cultural competency, food deserts in Peoria, and the school-to-prison pipeline. The program couples these supports with academic planning support so that entrance or reentrance into college courses is less intimidating. Dr. Arquette assists candidates with selecting college and program, securing additional financial assistance, and selecting coursework.



SOCIAL | Peoria GYO keeps in frequent contact with candidates and provides opportunities for candidates to connect with one another. Each candidate meets with a mentor, attends a monthly cohort meeting, and meets one-on-one with Wilson each semester. According to Dr. Arquette and Wilson, the mentorship program is unique to



Peoria GYO. The mentors are former candidates who are now working in the district. Wilson described the mentors as the “heart and soul of the program” and said mentors encourage candidates to keep going when they feel like giving up. The monthly cohort meetings are “an affinity space for [the] candidates to share their challenges and their successes and learn from one another,” Wilson stated. Childs described the meetings as a “safe space for us [candidates] to come and talk, be stressed. We eat, have fun. We learn.” The one-on-one meetings enable Wilson to keep track of candidates’ needs and plans.

Results in Action

Peoria’s GYO program has produced a total of six graduates thus far and expects to graduate two additional candidates in fall 2022. Candidates’ pass rate for the content area tests is approximately 95%, and their overall grade point average is 3.1. The candidates also attend the program’s regular meetings and serve as ambassadors to the larger community. They are, as Wilson described, “very motivated.” The program is working as intended. Childs, who graduated spring 2022, said she didn’t even have to apply for one job. The school, learning she was part of Peoria GYO, reached out to her. Peoria GYO’s success is more than numbers; it is how the program helps individuals succeed.

EVIDENCE SNAPSHOT

What are Grow Your Own programs?

Grow Your Own (GYO) programs are a way for districts and states to build up the teacher pipeline locally. These programs are especially helpful for rural areas or for creating a more diverse pool of educators. GYO programs take many forms, such as the following:

- Career and technical education courses or cadet teaching programs for high school students
- Paraeducator pathways with scholarships or partnerships with local educator preparation programs
- Second career pathways with alternative certification or partnerships with local educator preparation programs

What are the benefits of GYO programs?

Although research on GYO programs is still in early stages, GYO proponents believe that recruiting locally means that GYO program participants reflect their communities in ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The programs may also lead to more teacher recruits for potentially difficult-to-staff locales, such as rural areas.

There is a candidate that will be graduating this fall. . . . She was a strong paraprofessional but just did not really see the end goal in terms of a career that would be tailored for her. And so she applied for the program and, a month in, she calls me up and she says, “Well, I don’t think this is the program for me. I don’t think this is right. I think I’m going to go into a different direction.” And I don’t think we had even gone to our first cohort meeting.

I said, “You know what? Just give it a chance. Come to one meeting. Come to one meeting.” . . . “I guarantee you will change your mind about how you feel about being in this program.” And really all it took was that connectiveness. And she went to a meeting, and it did change her mind because she felt at home. She didn’t feel isolated. She felt this is a community of folks that are just like me, that are having some of the same challenges and successes. And then she met with Dr. Arquette who helped her plan her academic pathway. And she started seeing progress and light at the end of the tunnel. And she has made the Dean’s List since then. She has earned scholarships since then. She has gone from wanting to quit the program to a semester from her student teaching.

She will student teach this fall and graduate. She displayed all of the characteristics that you need to have to be a teacher. Perseverance. She had grit. She was motivated. She just did not give up. I mean, she stuck with it every step of the way after doubting herself. And she has so much confidence right now. I can’t wait until she’s folded back into the program and she becomes a mentor. But she is what I always typify.

This program is about growing, and you don’t come into the program of being polished up, and I always share my stories of some of my struggles also, and I think that’s helpful to some of the candidates. But you don’t come into the program all the time polished up and where you want to be. You are reflecting all the time. You are searching, you are seeking, you are trying to figure things out, and you are learning and reading and writing and researching. And so you are just doing all those things to grow, and I’m just so proud of her accomplishments.

—Linda Wilson, Peoria GYO Director

What's Next?

Wilson has two main foci for next year. First, she would like to recruit more men of color to the program. Male teachers of color are rare and not only in Peoria Public Schools. Second, she would like to spread awareness about the importance of the program to build up more support. This additional support could also help address the major challenge both Wilson and Dr. Arquette identified—funding. Currently, Wilson is addressing this issue by seeking grants from private organizations, as well as from the state and federal governments.



Finally, a major strength and future challenge for Peoria GYO is its director. Wilson is the beating heart of the program. Her drive, connections, and passion ensure that Peoria GYO thrives. Naturally, the following question arises: How does the program survive after her? The program has already started to address this challenge with its mentorship program. Through the mentorship program, graduates stay involved in Peoria GYO and learn how to help candidates succeed. In the future, when Wilson is ready to step down, perhaps one of these mentors will be ready to step up. At least, that is what Dr. Arquette suggested: “There are some really talented people in the mentor program who, if it came down to it, I think . . . could follow up as the director.” Peoria may be a “one-woman show” now, but it has already sown the seeds for sustainability. The community Wilson has cultivated through the structure of the program, with its frequent meetings and mentors, and the passion of the candidates who will eventually be graduates will sustain Peoria GYO into the future.

Learn More

- Peoria GYO video (pre-logo update)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uT8kuGIIrHY&t=5s>
- Illinois Report Card for Peoria Public Schools
<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/district.aspx?source=profile&Districtid=48072150025>
- How Peoria Public Schools is growing its next generation of teachers
<https://www.wcbu.org/local-news/2021-10-11/how-peoria-is-growing-its-next-generation-of-teachers>

Get in Touch

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Resources

College & Career Readiness & Success Center at American Institutes for Research. (2019). *Grow Your Own: A systemic approach to securing an effective educator talent pool*. American Institutes for Research. <https://ccrcenter.org/implementation-toolkit/grow-your-own-systemic-approach-securing>

Gist, C. D., Bianco, M., & Lynn, M. (2019). Examining Grow Your Own programs across the teacher development continuum: Mining research on teachers of color and nontraditional educator pipelines. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(1), 13–25. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0022487118787504>

Regional Educational laboratory Southeast. (2018, October). *Ask A REL Response: What research has been conducted on “grow your own teacher” program?* https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/aar/tp_10-2018.asp

Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board. (2022). *GYO Educator Infrastructure Grant: A report on building district capacity to “grow your own” educators in the road map region*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hiYsroO5a-OfI0GXVbmOs4_4gZsf22Xd/view

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