

# Orange School District: Fostering Diverse Schools Landscape Analysis

September 2025



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## Executive Summary

The Orange Board of Education (BOE) partnered with Opportunity Consulting to conduct a district-wide landscape analysis from January to September 2025 as part of the U.S. Department of Education's Fostering Diverse Schools Grant Program. This Program awarded funding to the New Jersey Schools Consortium, which consisted of three school districts in 2025 (Belleville, Orange, and Weehawken Public Schools), to conduct a comprehensive assessment to identify barriers and areas of opportunity towards enhancing academic and social emotional needs with the intent to create Grow Your Own pipelines where students could become the teachers of tomorrow in their respective communities. This study sought to examine how Orange Public Schools is recruiting, developing, and retaining an educator workforce that reflects and responds to its diverse student population in order to improve school conditions and student learning.

The analysis surfaced five key findings:

1. Although Orange district's Hispanic student population is steadily increasing, the district's teaching and administrative population remain largely Black/African American and White, and does not fully reflect the changing student population.
2. Students in Orange have limited exposure to teaching as a career pathway, but both students and their families are interested in pursuing a teaching career if financial barriers are addressed.
3. Orange has many early-career and new-to-district educators, and staff have identified mentorship and stronger onboarding procedures to train new Orange teachers, aligning with research on the direct relationship between strong induction models and increased retention.
4. With teacher shortages in high-needs subject areas, current educators are interested in advancing their careers and upskilling in Orange with support from the district.
5. Orange has opportunities to expand a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline, and can diversify its hiring to include non-traditional or alternate pathway professionals to address high-needs subject area shortages, including bilingual education.

Together, these findings point out a central imperative for the district: to invest in its "Grow Your Own" teacher pipeline by expanding support and access across every stage - from high school exposure to paraprofessional certification, to teacher onboarding and advancement.

To move from insight to action, this report offers five recommendations. These are informed by local data, national best practices, and input from over 1,400 stakeholders, including Orange students, families, district leaders, and educators. Designed to be high-impact and feasible within the district's current infrastructure and partnerships, they recommend Orange should:

1. **Begin** developing Grow-Your-Own pipeline pathways for high school students to become teachers in the district.
2. **Strengthen** early teacher onboarding and mentorship programs to improve retention.
3. **Incentivize** hiring and credentialization for teachers with targeted high-needs skills.
4. **Focus** a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline on addressing high-needs subject area shortages.
5. **Lean** into existing IHE partnerships to strengthen pathways into the teaching profession from all levels.

## **Acknowledgements**

Opportunity Consulting extends its gratitude to the following Orange Board of Education experts who commissioned and contributed to this assessment:

- The Orange Board of Education, NJ
- Dr. Gerald Fitzhugh, II, Superintendent of Schools
- Ms. Faith Alcantara, Executive Director of Innovation, Community Engagement, Titles/Grants and Special Projects
- Orange Board of Education district leadership
- Members of the Orange School District's community, including family members of students, school principals teachers, paraprofessionals, and students in grades 9-12

Their commitment to the work was instrumental in our efforts to connect with students, staff, and family members whose voices may have previously gone unheard. We are thankful to everyone who dedicated their time and energy to this effort.

We also recognize the hard work and perseverance of several of Opportunity Consulting's team in writing and preparing for this final report: Iris Bond-Gill, Ed.D., Anannya Sharma, Adrian Ali-Caccamo, Lyndsay Brown, Ed.D, and Travis Henderson.

## **Report Preparation**

Opportunity Consulting partners with community-based organizations, school systems, municipal and state leaders, and local, state and national nonprofits to discover, design, and deliver solutions that improve opportunity and impact through community engagement, evidence-based solutions, and sustainable implementation. Opportunity Consulting is committed to driving transformative change by addressing systemic barriers in access to high-quality education, social services, and workforce and economic opportunities. Opportunity Consulting believes that those who live the challenges should architect the solutions, and this philosophy shapes its collaborative approach. Opportunity Consulting, a dba of IBG Consulting Group, is based in Washington, DC, with additional senior staff in Massachusetts.

Learn more about Opportunity Consulting at [www.opportunityconsulting.com](http://www.opportunityconsulting.com).

## Introduction

Across the United States, public school systems are contending with the compounding crises of teacher shortages and gaps in racial and linguistic representation between students and their educators in the classroom<sup>1</sup>. Consequences of this mismatch can be far-reaching, but research<sup>2</sup> shows that students benefit academically, socially, and emotionally when taught by culturally responsive educators who either share or understand their cultural backgrounds, yet current systems do not sustainably attract, prepare, and retain these educators. Consequently, fewer young people are choosing to pursue teaching careers at all<sup>3</sup>. Average enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined nationwide.<sup>4</sup> Middle and high school students cite financial concerns with obtaining teaching degrees, low professional compensation compared to other industries, a lack of respect from students and community, and lack of awareness about career growth<sup>5</sup> as deterrents. The burden of these shortages is unevenly distributed: schools serving low-income communities and/or students of color are more likely to experience high teacher turnover, particularly among teachers of color<sup>6</sup>, vacancies in core subjects like bilingual education, special education or STEM, and present an urgent need for pathways that bring more educators of color into the profession.

Against this backdrop, the Orange Board of Education (BOE) launched a district-wide landscape analysis through its partnership with DC-based education consulting firm [Opportunity Consulting](#) as part of the U.S. Department of Education's *Fostering Diverse Schools* initiative. From January to September 2025, the study had a clear charge: to examine the district's current educator workforce and student body to identify strategies to recruit, develop, and retain a workforce that reflects and responds to the needs of its students. It involves looking at the challenges and opportunities in the recruitment, retention, and career development of its staff and educators, with a goal to evaluate student interest in the education profession, and educators' current interest and outcomes related to professional development, career advancement, and support they need.

This work is timely to the district, which has a majority student population that is Black and Hispanic/Latine, with increasing numbers of multilingual learners and students navigating economic hardship. Yet, its educator workforce is disproportionately Black and White, and a significant number of teachers are either early career or new to teaching in the district. This lack of the teaching body being reflective of the student body becomes important when we understand that students feel most supported by teachers who understand their lived experience.<sup>7</sup>

The imperative is clear: if Orange is to improve its student outcomes and interest in the teaching profession, close opportunity gaps, and support long-term educator retention, it must continue and expand investment into a more representative and supportive workforce. This study and report provides the groundwork for that effort; it identifies current gaps, surfaces some promising existing practices, and lifts the community-informed

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<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer, K. (2021). *America's public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students*. [Pew Research Center](#).

<sup>2</sup> Muñoz, J. (2019). *5 Ways Culturally Responsive Teaching Benefits Learners*. [New America](#).

<sup>3</sup> Koruth, M. A. (2025). *Amid NJ teacher shortage, young people aren't choosing that career*. [North Jersey](#).

<sup>4</sup> Saenz-Armstrong, P. (2023). *Data Brief: How do trends in teacher preparation enrollment and completion vary by state?*. [National Council on Teacher Quality](#).

<sup>5</sup> From a 2025 survey conducted with 1000+ students in Orange school district

<sup>6</sup> Hinkley, S., & McCorkell, L. (2019). *Retaining Teachers of Color to Improve Student Outcomes*. [Institute for Research on Labor and Employment](#).

<sup>7</sup> From a 2025 survey conducted with 1000+ students in Orange school district.

solutions to build and sustain a teacher pipeline rooted in the Orange school district's strengths.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this work is structured around four research questions:

1. In what ways are student career and college readiness outcomes unequal?
2. What are the characteristics of the district's educator workforce, including demographics, tenure, and shortages?
3. How do students, families, and aspiring educators perceive the education profession?
4. What is the landscape, and effectiveness of, efforts to build, strengthen, and diversify the educator pipeline?

The study produced the following findings:

**Finding 1:** Although Orange district's Hispanic student population is steadily increasing, the district's teaching and administrative population remain largely Black/African American and White, and does not fully reflect the changing student population.

**Finding 2:** Students in Orange have limited exposure to teaching as a career pathway, but both students and their families are interested in pursuing a teaching career if financial barriers are addressed.

**Finding 3:** Orange has many early-career and new-to-district educators, and staff have identified mentorship and stronger onboarding procedures to train new Orange teachers, aligning with research on the direct relationship between strong induction models and increased retention.

**Finding 4:** With teacher shortages in high-needs subject areas, current educators are interested in advancing their careers and upskilling in Orange with support from the district.

**Finding 5:** Orange has opportunities to expand a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline, and can diversify its hiring to include non-traditional or alternate pathway professionals to address high-needs subject area shortages, including bilingual education.

## Methodology

Opportunity Consulting conducted this study using our mixed-methods Outcome-Led Equity Review™ approach to examine the conditions shaping educator recruitment, advancement, and retention in the Orange School District, with particular attention to how these conditions influence and impact student access to (a) a representative and effective educator workforce and (b) interest in the education profession. The approach rests on four guiding pillars: 1) prioritize outcomes, 2) emphasize local context, 3) focus on the possible, 4) make findings accessible. 1). As part of identifying drivers of inequality in representation between staff and students in the districts, we assessed:

- Community, student, and staff perspectives of studying and working in the district,
- Student perceptions of the teaching profession,
- Paraprofessionals and teachers' professional and career development needs,
- District policies and practices that act as barriers or opportunities towards reinforcing or dismantling access to equitable opportunities.

The study focused on workforce demographic and student outcome data, identifying shortage areas and gaps in the data that can lead to barriers in the district and its classrooms. This involved narrowing in on the policies and practices Orange engaged in to remove these barriers to access to achievements and outcome for both students and educators. Drawing on the data and policies, we finally identified target populations whose lived experiences in the district would help build a robust understanding of the potential drivers behind a lack of representation and interest in the profession through qualitative data processes.

- **NJDOE-reported district-level quantitative data**

Review of district-level data reported to the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) for its School Performance Reports, including teacher and student demographic information, student achievement outcomes in ELA and mathematics, graduation rates, CTE participation, and chronic absenteeism. These indicators contributed to understanding broader patterns in academic performance and their potential intersections with workforce characteristics, especially representation gaps and instructional access for high-need student groups.

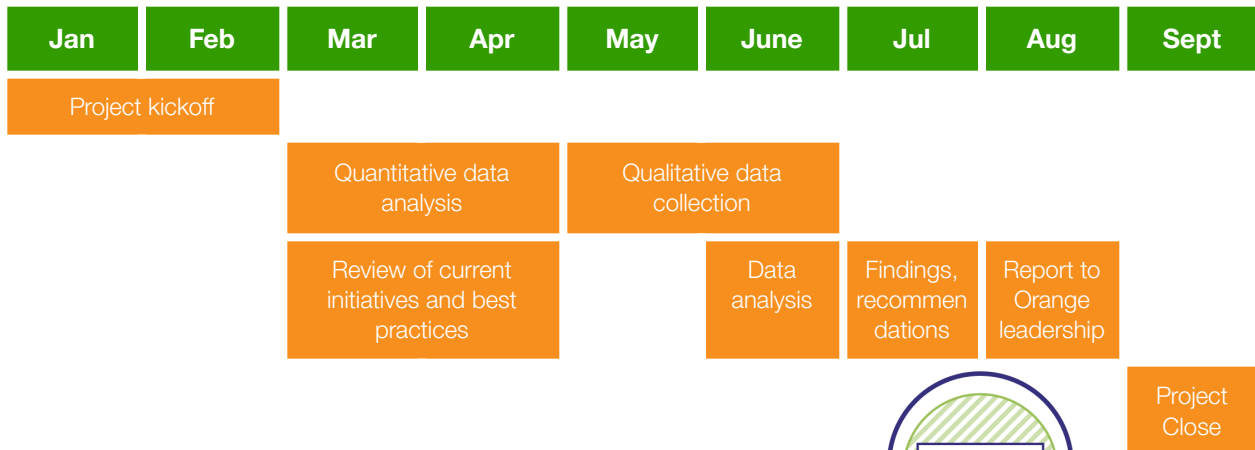
- **Administrative data**

Internal administrative datasets provided by the district included educator and paraprofessional demographics, retention rates, and educator educational attainment data. The process of analyzing district staffing allowed the research team to explore the relationship between workforce composition and student access to culturally-responsive instruction, the potential to create a workforce pipeline, and advance existing educator capacity.

- **Qualitative data**

- **Surveys:** Between April 11 - May 20, 2025, three district-wide surveys were administered to 893 students, 372 families, and 165 staff members. They focused on student and parent perceptions of the teaching profession, educator-student relationships and the impact of cultural sensitivity to students' sense of belonging, barriers to entering or advancing in education careers, and current support systems Orange provides towards teachers' professional development.

- **Interviews:** Five semi-structured interviews with district leaders overseeing academics and innovation in Orange shed light on current and planned initiatives and strategic intentions behind their existence.
- **Focus groups:** A focus group with Orange educators who either currently taught in the district, served as staff mentors, or were former Orange district alumni provided insights into what supported or hindered teacher retention, career growth, and satisfaction - from the perspective of practitioners in the classroom.



This triangulation ensured that data was grounded in and informed by lived experience and district stakeholder-identified priorities. This stakeholder engagement also offered a multi-layered view of Orange district's educator and pipeline landscape and perspectives, contributing to the study's identification of findings, and how they underpin the recommendations it provides in the final section of this report.



The research-based OLE framework is underpinned by a critical quantitative methodology that aims to identify who is represented in the data and who is not. The goal of data collection and analysis is to identify gaps in services and access. The qualitative data collection portion of OLE focuses on individual experiences and emphasizes the importance of disaggregated data in capturing diverse narratives and counternarratives, especially with regard to the perspectives of those most impacted by existing policies, institutions, and social structures. Using this framework, Opportunity Consulting identified six (6) findings that can contribute to barriers to teacher retention, and community and student perceptions of the profession. The school district's community stakeholders provided input to create both the research questions and findings for this study.

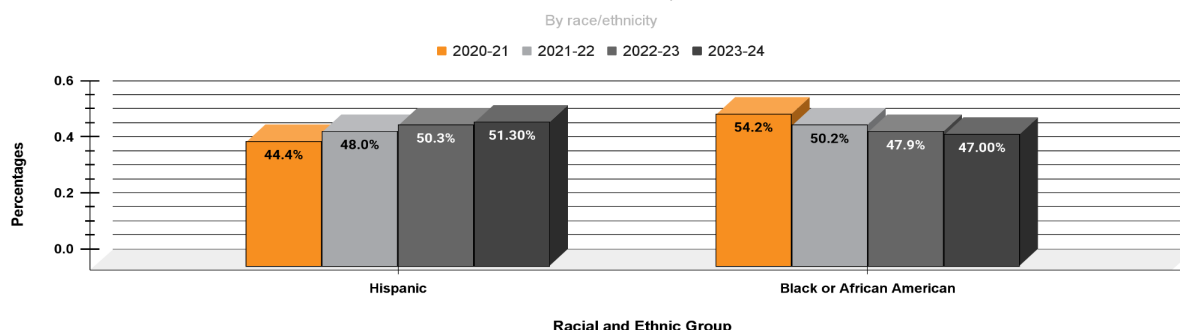
## Findings

### Finding 1

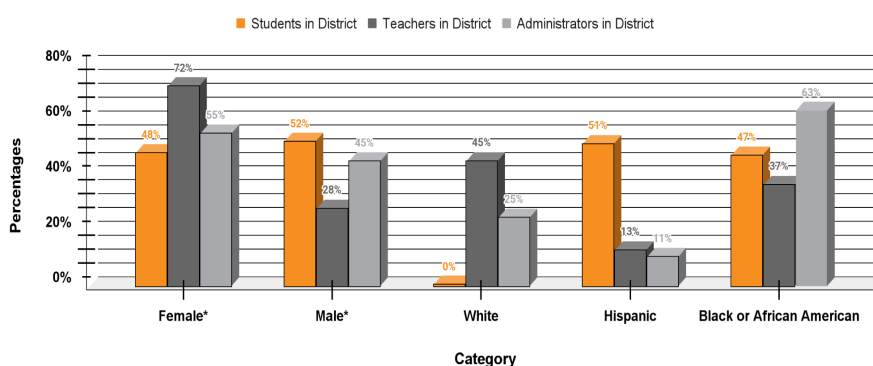
**Although Orange district's Hispanic student population is steadily increasing, the district's teaching and administrative population remain largely Black/African American and White, and does not fully reflect the changing student population.**

The Orange School District has been experiencing a significant demographic shift over the past few years. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of Hispanic students increased from 44% to 51%, making them the largest student group in the district. During the same period, the proportion of Black/African American students declined from 54% to 47%. While the student population becomes more linguistically and culturally diverse, the teaching and administrative workforce has not shifted in the same way. As of SY2023-24, only 13% of teachers and 11% of administrators identified as Hispanic, compared to 51% of students. In contrast, Black educators made up 37% of the teaching workforce - representing more closely the Black student population - while 45% of teachers identified as White, with White students constituting less than 1% of total enrollment in the district.

**Student Enrollment, SY20-24**



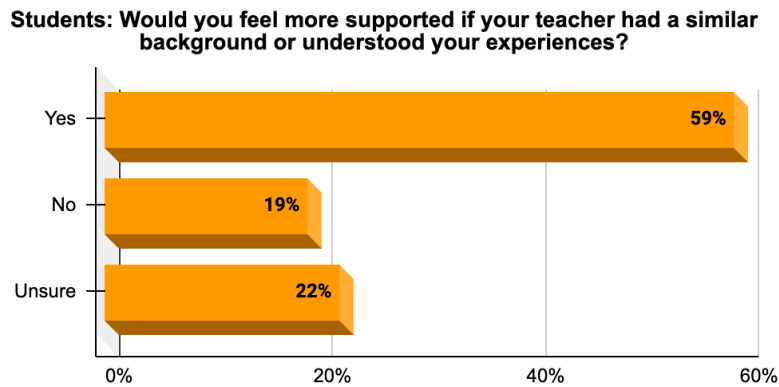
**District Staff Demographics 23-24**



This gap in representation is more than a demographic mismatch; it has real-world implications for student well-being and academic engagement. In surveys,<sup>8</sup> 59% of students said they would feel more supported by teachers who either had a similar background to them or understood their experiences. Families echoed that

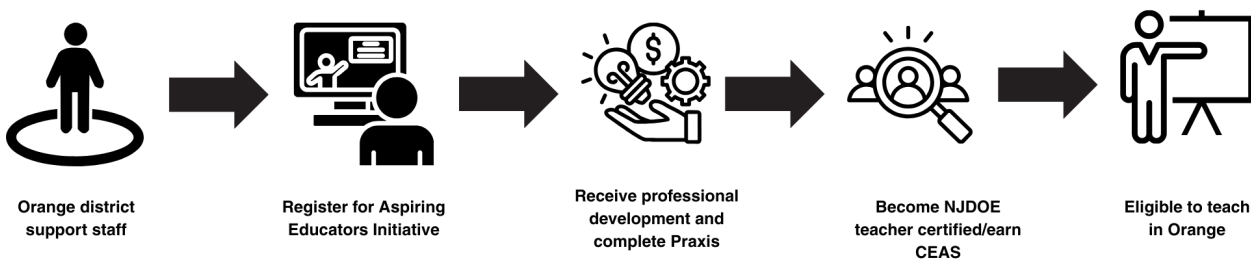
<sup>8</sup> Conducted by Opportunity Consulting in 2025

sentiment, with 57% stating that they find their child’s teachers largely understanding of their background and culture, and that it was a key component of a positive student-teacher relationship. Conversely, the lack of such a cultural connection led to some parents voicing concern about instances of misinterpretation of student behaviors and ineffective communication during challenging academic and behavioral moments.



Teachers also expressed this need for deeper cultural alignment and capacity building. In survey and focus group discussions, educators shared that the need to meet the requirements of increasingly multilingual classrooms could be challenging without the appropriate linguistic skills, training, instructional strategies, and inclusive curriculum design required to help students succeed.

Orange has been successful in hiring and retaining Black educators, and cultivated a paraprofessional body more representative of the student population than that of teachers (80% of Orange paraprofessionals in SY2024-25 were Black and 18% Hispanic). However, this has yet to translate into an equivalent of New Jersey Department of Education-certified staff. Recognizing this, the district took steps to build its [Aspiring Educators Initiative](#) (AEI) that offers a promising bridge to enable support staff in their transition into teaching roles through certification and training support. This Initiative has already supported or currently supports seven paraprofessionals towards their goal of becoming certified teachers in Orange.



Survey responses also suggest the need for broader awareness and access to programs like AEI, especially for staff in classrooms and seeking to advance to teaching or administrative roles. This desire for educators who reflect and understand students’ lived experiences is not unique to Orange, but backed by national

research<sup>9</sup> that highlights how students of color perform better academically, are more engaged, and face fewer disciplinary actions when taught by culturally responsive educators, or teachers of color. In this context, diversifying Orange's teaching workforce is more than a matter of representation, but one of equity of student achievement.

## Finding 2

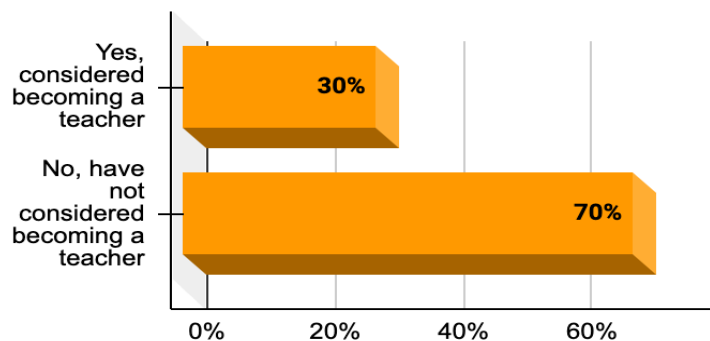
### **Students in Orange have limited exposure to teaching as a career pathway, but both students and their families are interested in pursuing a teaching career if financial barriers are addressed.**

Across the country, school districts are grappling with the issue of attracting a new generation of educators at a time when few youth are interested in or entering the profession<sup>10</sup>. For many students, especially in urban and under-resourced communities, teaching is not widely presented as a valued or attainable career path. In Orange school district, students, despite their appreciation for teachers who act as positive role models, report little to no structured exposure to teaching as a profession, with few incentives to pursue it, and limited opportunities to meaningfully engage in it as a viable career choice. In Orange Public School District, students have an appreciation for their teachers who serve as positive role models, despite little structured exposure to the teaching profession.

*"A supportive teacher is someone who you could always ask for help , someone who is a good role model, and someone who makes you feel like you're always welcome in their class." - Student*

Orange student survey data shines light on this gap between interest and access: 70% of students said they'd never considered becoming a teacher. The reasons behind this ranged from an unfamiliarity with the profession, perceptions of its low compensation and high stress rates, and a lack of career advancement in school settings. Yet, at the same time, the same students appeared enthusiastic about the concept of applied learning and gaining real-world experiences and knowledge that would help them grow and succeed in life beyond secondary school. They ranked good pay, learning new things, and experience (e.g., paid internships or scholarships), as top motivators for entry into a field, including education.

**Students: Interest in Teaching**



This disconnect between low exposure to the teaching profession and a high interest in future-focused and skills-based learning can be a key opportunity for Orange to build a structured education career pipeline. While the district already offers several robust Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs (including culinary arts, entrepreneurship, cosmetology, and health sciences), it does not yet offer an

<sup>9</sup> Blazar, D. (2021). *Teachers of Color, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from the Random Assignment of Teachers to Classes* (Working Paper No. 21-501). Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/iyw0-wz02>

<sup>10</sup> Nuyenh, L. N. (2024). *The decline of the teaching profession*. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).

education-focused pathway. The New Jersey Department of Education has several approved pathway opportunities, such as “Child Development” and “General Education” programs to introduce students to the teaching profession, and there are several surrounding NJ school districts who have taken advantage of this - such as Newark, Randolph, Camden City, Union County Vocational-Technical, and Paterson Public Schools - to blend high school coursework with college credit or fieldwork.

Taking a similar approach to integrating a K-12 pathway into its existing infrastructure and curriculum can allow Orange to launch student interest in the education field early in their school careers. This can involve the implementation of a K-12 “Educators Rising” or “Future Teachers” track, using existing CTE infrastructure and industry-aligned supports. These pathways would allow students to explore teaching as a profession, gain classroom and leadership experience (including expanding on the existing “adopt a class” initiative), and earn early college credit or certifications towards, for example, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, an industry-valued credential (IVC).

The district could also consider expanding its partnerships with local universities to support dual enrollment in education-focused coursework. Orange’s existing partnership with Montclair State University for the Urban Teacher Residency program can be an easy pathway to advancing the partnership towards including a dual enrollment option for students. Newark Public Schools has partnered with Montclair for its [“Red Hawks Rising” dual enrollment program](#), an initiative allowing high school students to take college level courses and earn credit while being exposed to higher education and education career options early in their academic journey.

Orange students are eager to learn in ways that connect to their futures and develop “future-proof” skills. Well-structured educator pathways that start in middle or early high school and connect to local colleges and certification programs could simultaneously increase interest in teaching, elevate the profession in students’ eyes, and help the district build a community-rooted pipeline of future educators.

Parents’ comments on exposing their students to the teaching profession illustrates both a sense of pragmatism and passion behind this support:

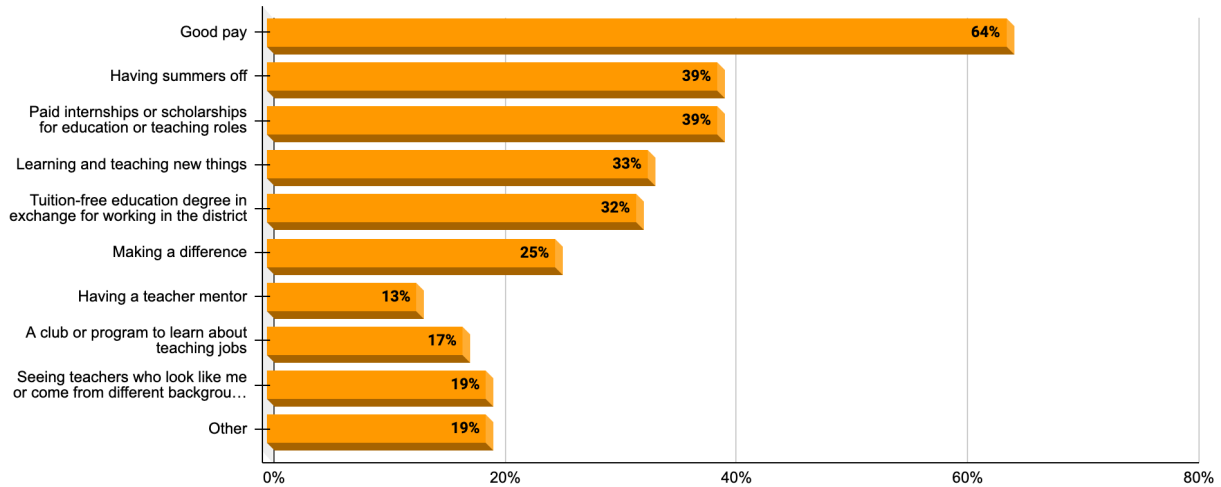
*“My child is a natural-born ‘big brother.’ He enjoys explaining how things work and working with younger children. Although he has not shown an interest in teaching, I would encourage him to always remember the alternate route program.” - Parent*

Others described the specific subject areas their children wanted to become teachers in, and that children wanted to join the field because, as one parent notes, “all [their] teachers, thus far, have made an immensely positive impression” on them. These comments reveal opportunities for the district to nurture this interest. Both students and their families recognize the value of teaching, but also the financial and emotional burdens that can deter someone from pursuing it. Data<sup>11</sup> highlighted that students would be more likely to consider teaching if the district provided paid internships, free or affordable degrees, or guaranteed job placement. Similarly, families noted that better pay, increased respect for teachers, and lower education costs would make them more enthusiastic about the profession as a viable future for their children.

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<sup>11</sup> From Opportunity Consulting’s 2025 survey

### Students: What Would Increase Interest in Teaching Profession

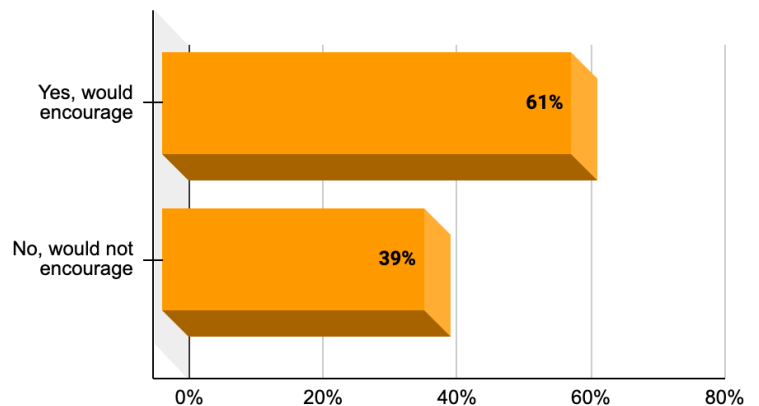


Students and their families therefore recognize the value of teaching, but also the financial and emotional burdens that if left unsupported, can deter entry.

Their insights align with national research. A 2024 analysis<sup>12</sup> of three national studies found that although there are “some positive signs” for teacher pipelines, it is not as strong as it could be because interest remains uneven and financial barriers continue to deter many would-be educators.

While student survey results report limited exposure to teaching-related programs - 70% of students who responded said they hadn’t considered becoming a teacher, and few knew about teaching or education-related clubs - 61% of family members expressed a strong interest in encouraging their children towards the profession when conditions were “right” i.e., when key barriers such as assumed low pay, high stress, and tuition costs for degree programs and certifications were addressed.

### Parents: Encouraging Their Children to Teaching Profession



National evidence<sup>13</sup> shows that pathway programs for youth once they graduate, such as teacher residency programs or Grow Your Own programs like Pathways2Teaching offering paid, year-long classroom or college experience alongside credentialing support, have been proven to increase both retention and hiring of “homegrown” educators in high-needs subject areas and districts. According to the Learning Policy Institute, residency programs produce more effective first-year teachers, with higher retention rates and stronger preparation compared to traditional routes. These models often eliminate the financial burden of certification

<sup>12</sup> Will, M. (2024). *Some Positive Signs for the Teacher Pipeline, But It’s Not All Good. What 3 Studies Say.* [Education Week](#).

<sup>13</sup> Learning Policy Institute. (2024). *Teacher residencies: State and federal policy to support comprehensive teacher preparation.* [URL](#).

for students and their families, provide structured mentorship, and encourage long-term commitment through service agreements and local hiring pipelines.

Orange has taken steps towards advancing its paraprofessionals into teaching roles through partnerships with local universities, and previously offered after-school programs such as Pathways to College. However, expanding access to free or subsidized teacher preparation could increase interest and help the district build a sustainable, community-rooted workforce. Orange students and families want teaching to be a possibility. If the district can reduce financial and structural barriers by creating clear onramps to teaching through residencies, scholarships, and early college experiences, they can meet the moment of interest and also address long-term staffing needs.

*"[Pathways to College] was absolutely awesome. The kids were able to visit Harvard University, Yale, Northern State ... they intermingled with different college students, was able to take tours. It was absolutely awesome then. The next year we hear the principal say it was out of budget." - Teacher*

The district's community is open to seeing education as a fulfilling career in the event that the pathway is visible, supported, and financially viable. Through investments into structured, local pipelines that begin at the middle and high school level or teacher certification, Orange can nurture a generation of community-driven educators to serve its changing and expanding student population.

### **Finding 3**

**Orange has many early-career and new-to-district educators, and staff have identified mentorship and stronger onboarding procedures to train new Orange teachers, aligning with research on the direct relationship between strong induction models and increased retention.**

Teacher turnover is a growing challenge nationally, with recent analyses showing that over 44% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years<sup>14</sup>, often citing a lack of support and inadequate preparation as driving factors. Teacher attrition has become a leading contributor to ongoing shortages, particularly in high-needs schools<sup>15</sup>. Strengthening mentorship and induction programs is among the most effective ways to improve early-career teacher retention and build instructional quality over time.

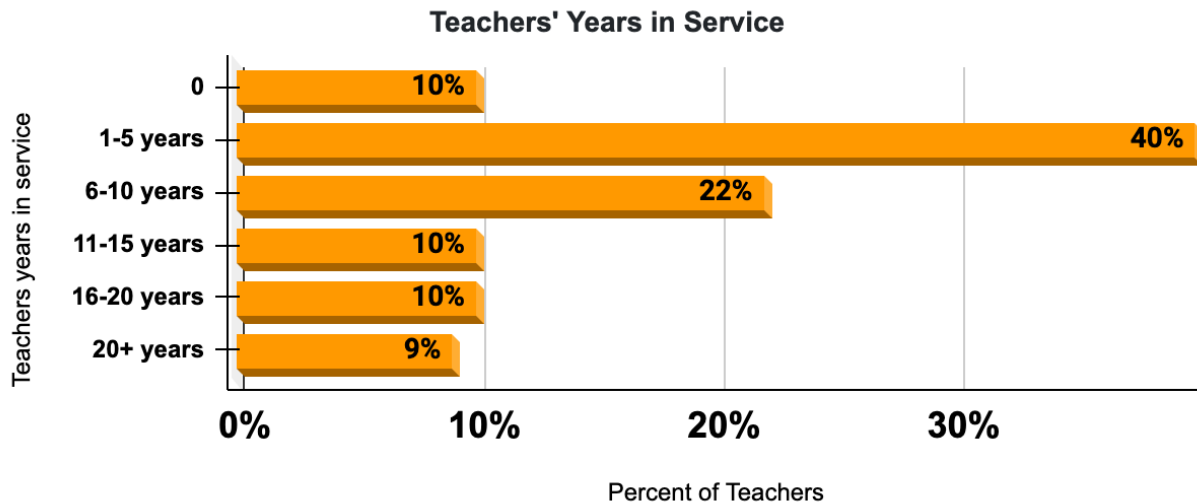
*"There's so many new teachers that complain to me. 'Oh, well, I didn't have a mentor. I don't know how this works and how that works.' And you need a veteran teacher or someone that can tell them." - Teacher*

Orange reflects this national trend. According to district workforce data, half of all teachers in the district have five or fewer years of experience, with 10% in their first year and 40% in their first one to five years. An additional 22% have between six and ten years of experience, meaning more than two-thirds of Orange educators are relatively early in their careers. While this brings energy and new talent into Orange's classrooms, it also underscores the importance of comprehensive onboarding, mentorship, and instructional support structures to build stability and prevent educator burnout.

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<sup>14</sup> Hunt, D. (2025). *The teacher turnover crisis: Why 44% quit within five years*. [Berkeley High Jacket](#).

<sup>15</sup> Patrick, S.K., & DiNapoli, Jr., M. (n.d.). *Tackling Critical Teacher Shortages: Insights on Federal Policies & Programs*. [Learning Policy Institute](#).



SY2024-25 Data

Some Orange teachers across the experience spectrum reported feeling overwhelmed by classroom and district requirements and newer teachers may be underprepared for the realities of teaching in a classroom. One focus group participant shared that in the process of mentoring a new teacher, *"the biggest challenge for her was trying to balance everything ... The parents, the administration, and she was trying to do so much, and at the end of the year she was just like, 'Oh, my God! I don't know if this is for me.'"* In this case, the speaker's mentorship may have contributed to this new teacher staying in the district. Several Orange educators shared that while mentoring structures technically exist, they are inconsistently applied.

Orange has invested in onboarding processes such as their four-day orientation for teachers, weekly guidance emails, superintendent communication throughout the school year to both teachers and administrators - all of which provide a foundation of support for new and current educators. At the same time, some teachers expressed that onboarding alone is insufficient, particularly for those entering teaching from alternative routes or those new to the district's instructional expectations. They called for more robust and personalized mentorship experiences extending beyond orientation into day-to-day practice, as will be discussed in this report's second recommendation.

However, Orange educators also remembered past practices that had worked well and could be reintroduced or scaled. One example is the mentorship initiative hosted by the district, which involved:

- School- or district-wide cohort-based mentorship of new teachers
- Central Office-led meetings for new teachers
- Monthly mentee gatherings to collaborate, share and discuss challenges, best practices, what is and isn't working for instructional practice, classroom management, etc.

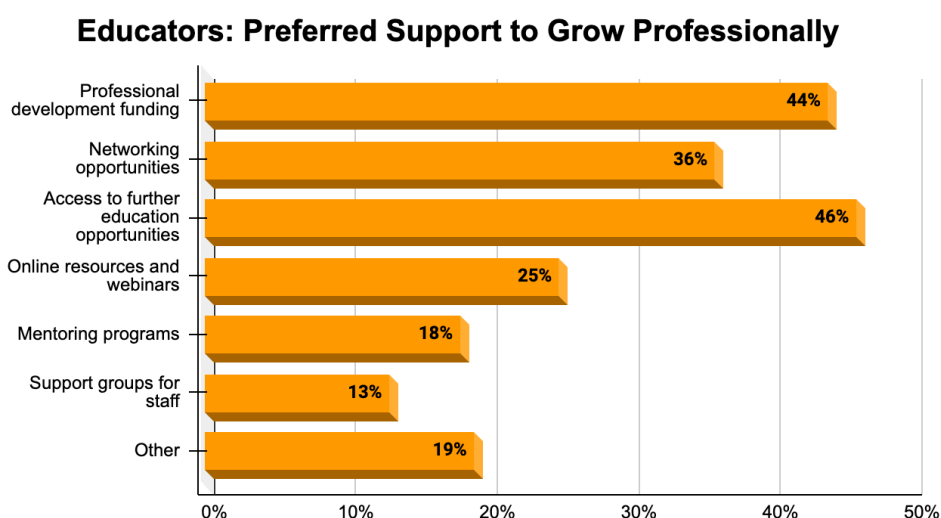
*"It's almost like departments coming together and talking ... that was very helpful, so that they could so it allows them to not feel like 'I'm the only one.'"* - Teacher

Orange's formal District Mentoring Plan includes mentor assignments, new teacher orientation, and guidelines for supporting novice educators through their first year. However, as district teachers noted, the

plan is not consistently implemented or sufficiently resourced. Veteran teachers expressed the need for compensated mentorship roles, protected time for mentor-mentee collaboration, and regular structured meetings that go beyond compliance checklists and provide real instructional and emotional support.

Strengthening this existing mentoring framework towards a stronger induction program that includes collaborative professional learning, coaching, and onboarding elements can be critical in encouraging the retention of both Orange's many new teachers as well as build relationships between new and veteran teachers, improve instructional quality, and enhance both student and teacher outcomes.

*"I like the concept of mentoring that's not just for new teachers. How [does Orange BOE] think about folks in different stages of their career, and within that pipeline being able to use structured mentorship to help them get to the next level?" - Teacher*



## Finding 4

**With teacher shortages in high-needs subject areas, current educators are interested in advancing their careers and upskilling in Orange with support from the district.**

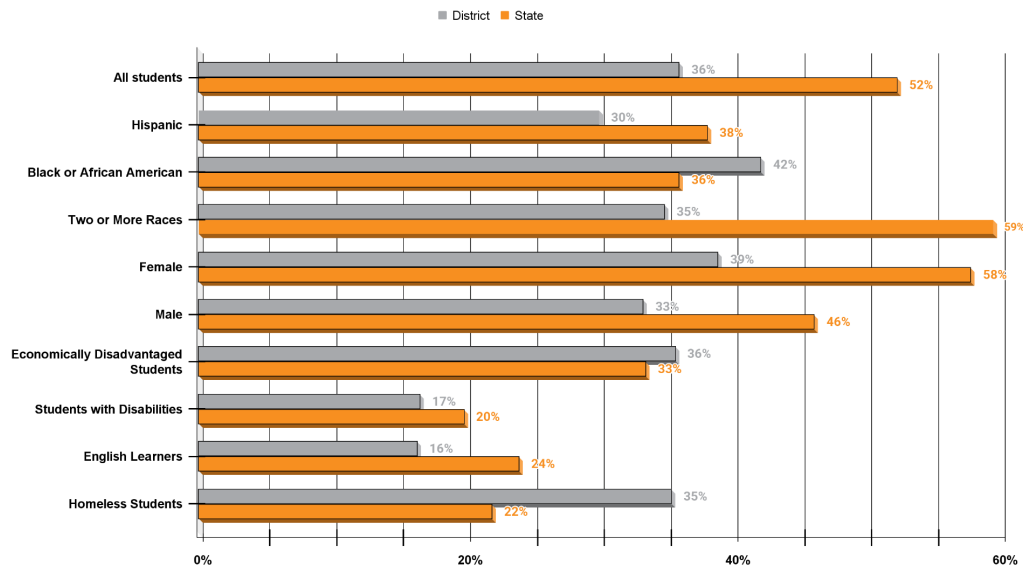
National and local evidence both confirm a critical challenge in today's education landscape: not only are there shortages in high-demand subject areas such as bilingual education, special education, and STEM, but many of the educators who are best positioned to fill those roles face systemic barriers to advancement and credentialing.<sup>1617</sup> Rather than rely solely on external recruitment to solve these strategies, Orange school district has the opportunity to expand its investment in the professional growth of their current workforce who is interested in upskilling, which will also have the benefits of improving retention, diversifying leadership, and building capacity from within.

<sup>16</sup> Lachlan-Haché, L., et al. (2023). *Prioritizing an Integrated Approach to Educator Shortages and Workforce Diversity, Part 2*. [Center for Black Educator Development, American Institutes for Research](#).

<sup>17</sup> Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the Teaching Profession Through High-Retention Pathways*. [Learning Policy Institute](#).

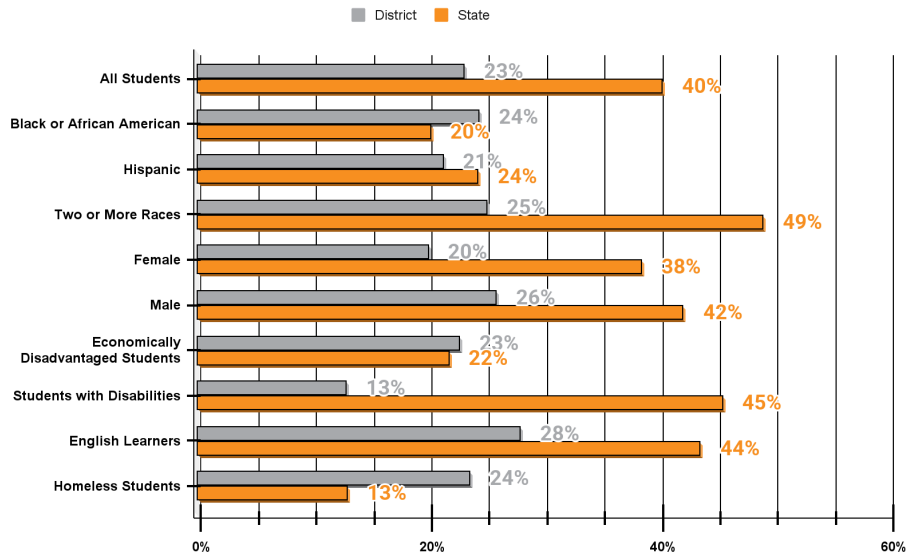
## English Language Arts Outcomes, Percent of testers meeting/exceeding expectations

SY2023-24 data, district vs. state, for student groups with available data



## Mathematics Outcomes, SY23-24

Percent meeting/exceeding expectations, by student group



Orange student academic performance data reveals gaps in state achievement benchmarks, particularly in English Language Arts and mathematics. These gaps are especially pronounced among multilingual learners and students from low-income households. These academic disparities mirror the district's staffing challenges: vacancies are often concentrated in high-need content areas, and classrooms frequently lack teachers certified in specialized roles such as ESL, special education, or advanced math and science. At the same time, district teachers have expressed a strong interest in advancing their careers and deepening their

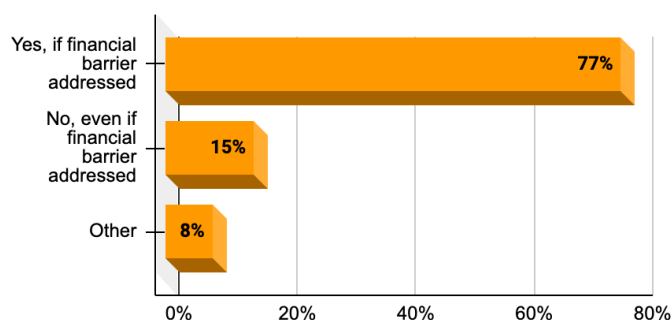
instructional expertise, particularly if they're given clearer pathways and financial support to do so. Survey responses indicate that 46% of teachers want access to further education opportunities, and 44% cite professional development funding as one of the most important supports the district could offer to help them grow. Not only are teachers interested in upskilling, but also in staying in Orange if they're given the resources to do so.

Several teachers highlighted the value of internal promotions in terms of the positive impact it can have on students. Seeing the same teachers who cared for their personal and academic lives take on a leadership position may open channels that “better connect into getting [students] to do things that won’t get them suspended. They respect you more.”

*“There’s a quote ... I love: ‘The kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care.’” - Teacher*

Furthermore, the process of district-sponsored career advancement creates positive relationships and professional networks teachers can leverage to improve their instructional practice. One teacher discussed the Montclair State University’s district partnership that allowed Orange teachers to travel and meet new teachers in different cities and counties, expanding their knowledge about teaching and learning practices, and how that knowledge could be brought back to Orange to implement in their classrooms’ context.

### **Educator Interest in Degrees/Certifications to Advance in District**



A 2017 report<sup>18</sup> identified key characteristics of effective professional development and its link to student achievement and teacher retention. Teachers who participated in high-quality professional learning experiences were significantly more likely to stay in their districts and show growth in student outcomes. Key features of effective upskilling programs may include:

- Alignment with individual’s career advancement and interest (e.g., certifications, leadership roles)
- Cohort-based models that build relationships and peer networks
- Financial support for tuition, materials, testing
- Opportunity to practice, gain feedback, and reflect

Orange already has some of these components in place, including partnerships with Montclair State University and Kean University, and the Aspiring Educators Initiative designed to support paraprofessionals in pursuing teaching credentials. However, as teachers noted, the district could do more to systematize, promote, and resource these opportunities so they are accessible to a broader range of staff, including current teachers seeking bilingual, leadership, or advanced content certifications.

<sup>18</sup> Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. [Learning Policy Institute](https://www.learningpolicyinstitute.org/publications/effective-teacher-professional-development).

Upskilling is more than a tool to promote retention. It can be wielded as a strategy to promote equity, stability, and long-term instructional excellence in Orange. Investing in Orange's educators who are already committed to the school and students can create a culture of continuous learning that benefits both teachers and the students they serve.

### **Finding 5**

#### **Orange has opportunities to expand a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline, and can diversify its hiring to include non-traditional or alternate pathway professionals to address high-needs subject area shortages, including bilingual education.**

As teacher shortages persist across the state and country, more districts are turning inward to build talent pipelines from their existing workforce and communities. Paraprofessionals, many of whom have deep relationships with students, live in the community, and reflect the district's diversity, represent one of the strongest assets in addressing staffing gaps. Orange is well-positioned to capitalize on this opportunity by strengthening its paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline and embracing alternative certification pathways for non-traditional candidates, including career changers and displaced workers.

As of 2025, Orange's paraprofessional workforce is predominantly Black (80%) and Hispanic (18%), making it more demographically representative of the Orange student body than that of the teacher population. These paraprofessionals also bring years of experience: 60% have worked in Orange schools for more than five years, and 30% have served over a decade. Most are mid-career professionals, with 39% aged between 36-40 years of age. Furthermore, many are also academically prepared to take on the additional requirements to become teacher-certified; 44% hold a Bachelors degree, and 28% hold Associate degrees. This means that a significant portion of Orange's paraprofessional staff is near meeting eligibility for New Jersey's alternate route certification options. According to the New Jersey Department of Education's teaching requirements, candidates can enter the profession without completing a traditional education degree if they:

- Hold a Bachelors degree
- Pass the Praxis Core and content area exams, and
- Complete a Certificate of Eligibility (CE) and Provisional Teacher Program during their first year of teaching

Few staff members report being enrolled in a pipeline program, and many are unaware of or lack support to navigate the complex process.

Another way for the district to strengthen its pipeline of educators in shortage subject areas is by investing in microcredentialing, an emerging strategy in K-12 education for upskilling staff in targeted, job-embedded ways. Microcredentials - short, competency-based certifications that validate specific teaching skills (behavior management, instructional strategies for multilingual learners, trauma-informed teaching) - can serve as stackable, affordable pathways into full certification<sup>19</sup> for paraprofessionals who need flexibility or incremental progress towards teacher certification. Microcredentials are also gaining traction in states like

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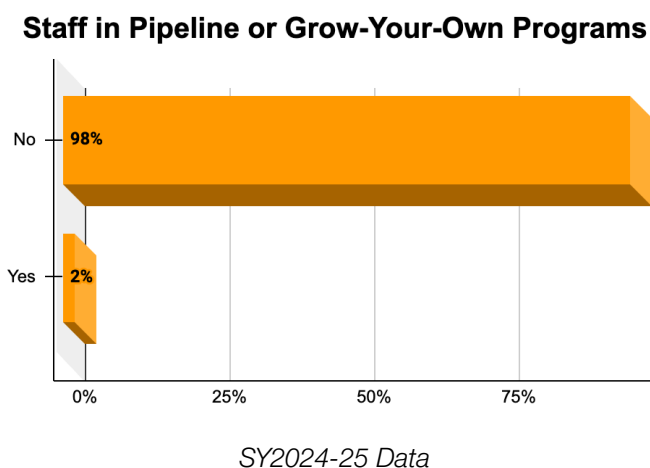
<sup>19</sup> Kim, A. (2025). *Skill Building: The Emerging Micro-credential Movement in K-12 Education*. [FutureEd](#).

Texas, Georgia and North Carolina as scalable teacher preparation tools.

Another promising direction comes from state-level initiatives, like those seen in Maryland. There, the state has launched a grant-funded program to support displaced workers in transitioning into teaching careers through partnerships with local universities, alternate certification support, and targeted mentorship.<sup>20</sup> Orange could explore a similar model by:

- Expanding partnerships with local colleges (e.g., Kean or Montclair State) to create subsidized certification tracks for paraprofessionals,
- Offering district-sponsored Praxis preparation and testing stipends,
- Developing microcredential bundles that lead to NJDOE-recognized endorsements, and
- Identifying career changers in the community, especially bilingual or STEM professionals, and recruiting them into the field through an “alternate path into education” initiative

Though the district already has a foundation to build on with its AEI that offers support for paraprofessionals pursuing teacher certification, a staff survey<sup>21</sup> shows that the majority of educators were unaware of any existing pipeline initiatives, and those who *were* interested faced logistical challenges like cost, time, or program fit. Some called for clearer information, more flexible options, and structured district support systems to help interested educators advance in their careers in the district.



Deepening and expanding its approach to pathways - through “homegrown” pipelines, alternate pathways, certification and microcredential assistance - can help Orange address its subject shortage areas while growing a workforce that reflects and is rooted in its community. This approach not only fills vacancies, but also builds a more stable, experienced, and connected educator pipeline for the future.

## Recommendations and Areas for Further Exploration

The recommendations in this report aim to bridge the gap between the current state of Orange’s educator

<sup>20</sup> Office of Governor Wes Moore. (2025). *Governor Moore Announces Grants for Maryland Institutions of Higher Learning to Help Address Teacher Shortage and Support Displaced Federal Employees* [Press release].

<sup>21</sup> Conducted by Opportunity Consulting in 2025

workforce and its vision of a district where all students are supported by highly skilled, representative, and community-rooted educators. Each addresses the findings from the landscape analysis and is grounded in both local needs and evidence-based practices. They are designed to assist district leadership in planning how to:

- Build clear pathways into the teaching profession
- Strengthen supports for early-career and non-traditional educators
- Promote upskilling and retention through investment in professional development
- Expand the pipeline by removing barriers to certification and credentialing, and
- Leverage existing partnerships to amplify impact and reduce duplication of effort

These recommendations can serve as a roadmap for the district to achieve its broader goal of ensuring all students have access to teachers who understand and reflect their lived experiences, and supporting those teachers to succeed and stay in Orange.

## **Recommendation 1**

### **Begin developing grow-your-own pipeline pathways for high school students to become teachers in the district.**

Although the percentage of Hispanic students in Orange has increased over the last few years, teachers in the district remain largely African-American and White. Only 13% of the teachers in 2023-2024 identified as Hispanic, despite Hispanic students constituting 51.3% of the total student body in 2024. One way to begin creating a teacher workforce that more closely reflects the student body is to develop a grow-your-own (GYO) pipeline pathway for students to become teachers in the district. GYO programs are an effective strategy for diversifying the hiring pipeline, strengthening district-community relationships, and increasing student achievement. A report focusing on “positive outlier” districts in California, which have high levels of African American, Latine/x, and white student achievement on state assessments, found that diverse educator pipelines were assisting with strong student outcomes.<sup>22</sup> While the district exceeds state rates of Career and Technical Education (CTE) participation, over three-quarters of students do not concentrate in any CTE pathway. This implies significant room for expansion of CTE programs. Additionally, Orange does not currently have any education-focused CTE pathway or development program.

Most Orange students have never considered becoming teachers due to a lack of exposure and visibility, low teacher pay, summer funding gaps, and perceptions of teaching as a challenging and stressful profession prone to burnout. However, students in Orange generally expressed a desire for real-world and future-oriented academic preparation, and families expressed that they would encourage their students to become teachers if working conditions and wages were improved. Families additionally shared that educators sometimes misunderstand students’ cultural backgrounds and behaviors, which could potentially be addressed by developing a GYO program that more closely aligns the overall teacher workforce with student demographics.

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<sup>22</sup> Learning Policy Institute. (2019). *Closing the Opportunity Gap: How Positive Outlier Districts in California are Pursuing Equitable Access to Deeper Learning*. [URL](#).

### Add a K-12 education CTE pathway to the district

Orange should consider adding an education-related CTE pathway to its existing CTE curricula opportunities. Specifically, “Child Development”, “Education, General” and/or “Family and Consumer Science/Human Sciences, General” all work towards industry-valued credentials (IVCs) such as the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Developing a CTE pathway could involve engaging with community-based models of Career and Technical Student Organizations like [Educators Rising](#), and [Family, Career and Community Leaders of America](#) (FCCLA).

Nearby programs in Newark Public Schools (NPS) could provide models for the types of student-to-teacher pathways that would be viable in Orange. In a partnership between NPS and Montclair State University, the Red Hawks Rising Dual Enrollment Program allows NPS students to receive free college credits clustered in specific pre-educational studies coursework. Upon graduation and successful completion of all coursework and admissions requirements, participants in the Red Hawks Rising program are guaranteed admission to Montclair State University’s Teacher Education Program. An additional Teacher Academy program in Newark expands the front end of the Montclair State University partnership, providing students with a four-year, comprehensive CTE pathway even before they’re eligible for dual enrollment. Their comprehensive curriculum, which could serve as a model for Orange, emphasizes social justice topics and the significance of teaching.

Research from a teacher-academy partnership in Maryland showed that high school students who participated in academy-style pipeline programs had higher graduation rates and were more likely to enter the teaching profession.<sup>23</sup> While studying the program, researchers settled on four recommendations for strengthening pathway programs: recruit young men and students of color who are already interested in high needs subject areas, outline a clear course sequence that includes both theory and development, incorporate hands-on classroom experience, and begin early financial planning for higher education and certification.

### Provide financial support for students to pursue a teaching career

With students and families in Orange referencing teacher pay as a factor deterring them from the profession, GYO pathway programs should include sustainable funding to support students’ academic and credentialization needs. Landscape research on best practices of teacher preparation programs stresses the value of recruiting, developing, and retaining the talent of district high schoolers to become future teachers within the district.<sup>24</sup> After recruiting district students and providing a pathway partnership with higher education institutions, research emphasizes the importance of financial incentives such as free introductory courses, tuition assistance, and reimbursement for graduates who return to the district to teach. Facilitating this ongoing support requires a financial investment from the district. To do so, best practices recommendations from Educators First suggest developing a sustainable funding stream.<sup>25</sup> Both Educators First and the New Jersey Department of Education highlight the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, as amended by the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), as an approved and successful source of federal support for GYO program development. Additionally, the district should connect interested students to supports like the Federal TEACH (Teacher

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<sup>23</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2024). *4 keys to building a pipeline from high school to the teaching profession*. [Education Week](#).

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, S. M., Shannon L. K., (2022). Landscape of Teacher Preparation Programs and Teacher Candidates. *National Academy of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/3/4>.

<sup>25</sup> Educators Rising. (2023). *Grow Your Own: Sustainable Funding For Educator Pathways*. [URL](#).

Education Assistance for College and Higher Education) grant, which offers up to \$4000/year to junior and senior students who intend to teach in a high-need field at a school serving students from low-income families.

## **Recommendation 2**

### **Strengthen early teacher onboarding and mentorship programs to improve retention.**

Orange has a high rate of new-to-district teachers, who expressed a desire for improved onboarding and sustained mentorship opportunities. District practices relating to support and mentorship directly affect teacher retention.<sup>26</sup> Using both randomized control trials and a quasi experimental design, researchers at the learning policy institute found four characteristics of mentorship programs which improved teacher retention, skills, and student outcomes: (1) building the capacity of districts and school leaders to effectively support mentoring program, (2) assign full-time release mentors to caseloads of no more than 15 teachers each, so that teachers have personalized and comprehensive support (3) provide mentors more than 100 hours of intensive training across institutes and fieldwork, and (4) use high quality formative assessment tools to provide sustained mentorship to early-career teachers.<sup>27</sup> There is a need for new teachers to have effective onboarding aligned with more structured mentorship programming. Expanding Orange's onboarding process and District Mentoring Plan, with a goal toward sustainability, can reduce attrition, accelerate teacher effectiveness in a shorter period of time, and increase educator confidence, particularly in early years in the district.

#### Improve District onboarding processes

As discussed in the findings, some teachers in Orange desired an enhanced onboarding process with continued support and professional development. Some teachers felt as though the onboarding process was not sufficient to fully prepare them for teaching in the district, and thought additional supports could improve teaching quality, satisfaction, and retention. This is supported by research, which suggests that creating comprehensive induction programs for early career teachers that provide an in-depth introduction to policies and practices, and offer a framework for continuing professional development, are critical components of effective teacher development.<sup>28</sup> In combination with research suggestions, Orange should consult its existing teacher workforce for feedback on current onboarding processes and room for improvement. This would allow district leadership to communicate existing support systems, and ensure alignment between leadership and teachers. In addition to providing important insight into the needs of new teachers during the onboarding process, this partnership would foster positive collaboration between teachers and administrators and develop iterative feedback processes which could be used for other district initiatives.

#### Expand and strengthen Orange's District Mentoring Plan

Orange has an existing mentorship program in which non-tenured and provisional teachers who hold a Certificate of Eligibility (CE) or CE with Advanced Standing (CEAS) are guided through the Provisional Teacher Induction Program. The stated purpose of the mentorship program is for experienced teachers to assist new

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<sup>26</sup> Learning Policy Institute. (2017). *Effective Professional Development Promotes Powerful Learning*. [URL](#).

<sup>27</sup> Young, V. M., Schmidt, R., Wang, H., Cassidy, L., & Laguarda, K. (2017). *A Comprehensive Model of Teacher Induction: Implementation and Impact on Teachers and Students* (Evaluation of the New Teacher Center's I3 Validation). [SRI Education](#).

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, S. M., & Shannon L. K. (2022). Landscape of Teacher Preparation Programs and Teacher Candidates. *National Academy of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/3/4>.

teachers in developing content mastery of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, pedagogical skills, reflective practice in self-assessment, and collaborative learning between new and experienced teachers. While this is a good start, Orange should explore ways to expand the existing mentorship program to all new teachers, not solely provisionally licensed teachers, and create infrastructure for more robust and ongoing mentorship.

The factors leading to effective mentorship programs are complex, involving numerous interacting components, however, there is space for Orange to strengthen the District Mentoring Plan processes. Recent framework development has synthesized research on mentorship programs to highlight sixteen design elements for which an implementation decision must be made.<sup>29</sup> Although elaborated in more detail in the original publication, with supporting research studies to explain each component, mentorship design includes the following considerations: objectives, roles, cardinality, tie strength, relative seniority, time, selection, matching, activities, resources and tools, role of technology, training, rewards, policy, monitoring, and termination. When implementing changes to the District Mentoring Plan, it would be worthwhile for Orange to consider each of these sixteen components to develop comprehensive support for all new and incoming teachers.

In short, comprehensive and effective programs include mentorship, coaching, and feedback from grade and subject-area-matched mentors, with opportunities for new teachers to observe experienced teachers, participate in development workshops, orientations, and retreats, and gain comfort in the teaching profession through enhanced classroom assistance and reduced workloads. When programs with these components are implemented, research suggests that new teachers are roughly twice as likely to remain in the profession.<sup>30</sup> Given Orange's high rates of teacher turnover and stated desire by current teachers for bolstered support systems, improvement of standard mentorship programs may go a long way towards increasing district retention.

#### Develop peer networks for new teachers

In interview focus groups, teachers spoke positively about the idea of peer networking and support groups for new teachers. Specifically, Orange previously organized a monthly centralized support meeting for all new teachers who were participating in the mentorship programs. They described the program as both practically and socioemotionally useful, allowing new teachers to share best practices and feel as though they had a community that was experiencing the same joys and challenges. Within the district, teachers appreciated the opportunity to connect with same grade and subject area teachers at other schools. Outside of the district, they also found value in third-party support networks, which allowed them to connect with teachers across the state and country.

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<sup>29</sup> Dawson, P. (2014). Beyond a definition: Toward a framework for designing and specifying mentoring models. *Educational Researcher*, 43(3), 137-145.

<sup>30</sup> Ingersoll, R., & Kralik, J. M. (2004). *The Impact of Mentoring on Teacher Retention: What the Research Says*. [Education Commission of the States](#).

### **Recommendation 3**

#### **Incentivize hiring and credentialization for teachers with targeted high-needs skills.**

The Orange school district has a particular need for teachers with targeted skills in fields such as bilingual and special education. While the district should consider these needs while pursuing future hiring, there is also room to upskill and better maximize the abilities of the existing teaching workforce. As the findings show, teachers in the district have an interest in professional development and upskilling, including in high-needs areas such as bilingual education and special needs education. Additionally, teachers were interested in developing their leadership skills, which could be beneficial for both future administrative positions and for curating a strong group of experienced teacher-mentors.

As the Hispanic student population has increased over the last five years, so too has the percentage of English as a second language (ESL) students in the district. With some intentionality behind recruitment, and awareness of cultural and racial backgrounds, this recommendation could additionally address the underrepresentation of Hispanic staff in teaching and admin roles. While not all Hispanic students or staff are multilingual or ESL, effective attention to this overlap could help with both ESL needs-based deficiencies in the district and better cultural awareness and representation. As Orange tries to fill teaching gaps for ESL students, special education, and other subject-area needs, particular attention should be paid to supporting the upskilling and credentialization of already eager teachers.

#### Collect data on existing teachers' certifications to maximize skillset

Some teachers in Orange report that although they've received certifications from the district or other sources, their skill sets are not being effectively used. The first step for the district should be effectively gathering data on the certifications and skillsets of its existing teacher workforce. With shortages in particular needs areas, the fastest and most cost-effective solution would be to better match teachers with relevant classroom needs. Additionally, teachers who have such certifications may feel underutilized or underappreciated, particularly given the stated gaps in workforce ability. Thus, by better understanding the skillset of the existing workforce, Orange has the opportunity to increase satisfaction, drive, and morale amongst its teaching workforce and better serve students with appropriately skilled teachers.

#### Allocate resources towards upskilling the existing teaching workforce

After better understanding the current landscape of teacher skills, Orange should allocate annual funds and resources towards upskilling its teachers through certifications. This assistance could include professional development leave, administrative assistance with redistributing responsibilities, travel and/or credential reimbursements, sponsoring participation, and advertising available opportunities to the teacher workforce. While there is certainly a need for ESL and bilingual certification, an internal survey of teacher skills may illuminate other areas for which the district could pursue upskilling and certification.

The New Jersey Department of Education's Office of Recruitment, Preparation, and Certification provides resources to help teachers attain a [Multilingual Learners Educator Certification](#). State-approved bilingual and English as a second language certification programs exist at Montclair State University and Kean University, and could provide opportunities for Orange to expand existing partnerships. For teachers interested in upskilling towards improved teaching or future administrative work, universities in New Jersey have opportunities for Masters-level coursework. Voorhees University's EPI Center is an example of a free online

Master's degree in Education Systems Improvement. The program also provides tuition-free National Board Certification, individualized coaching, and access to the ATLAS platform.

In addition to external certifications, workshops, and upskilling, Orange should explore ways to improve internal professional development. As discussed in the findings, many Orange teachers do not feel as though current professional development is aligned with the realities they face in the classroom. Staff expressed frustration and resistance to top-down mandates, limited communication, and omission from key decision-making processes. Teachers want to be professional collaborators with administrators and district leadership, and want feedback opportunities both for professional development agenda setting and on district policies. For internal professional development, teachers expressed a desire for content that is targeted, relevant to classroom experiences, equity-driven, and delivered by experts with lived experiences relevant to these topics. While this is an important start, Orange must use this improvement period to develop a process by which teachers can be involved in professional development requests, agenda setting, and policy revision, as their classroom needs will continue to evolve. These combinations of policies, which support teacher voice and provide opportunities for professional development and continued learning, have been shown as effective strategies for teacher retention.<sup>31</sup>

#### Create salary incentives for those teaching in target classrooms requiring additional skills

Throughout focus groups, participants expressed a desire for increased teacher pay that reflects their skill sets and the challenging work involved in teaching. One way to do this, while promoting recruitment and retention of high-needs areas, is to offer salary incentives for particular target area teaching positions. Research from the Education Commission of the States found that at least twenty-three states had some form of diversified pay scheme in place, which gave bonuses to teachers working in high needs districts or subject areas.<sup>32</sup> Their research found that when districts implemented and maintained these bonuses, they were effective for increasing retention in these high needs areas.

## **Recommendation 4**

### **Focus a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline on addressing high-needs subject area shortages.**

Orange's annual focus on supporting paraprofessionals to become certified teachers is a strong program to foster a more diverse teacher workforce, and should be used to emphasize hiring of high-needs skills and subject areas. Strengthening this initiative should involve better tracking of high-needs vacancies and vacancy fills, improved dialogue between paraprofessionals, teachers, and school administrators, career guidance for paraprofessionals interested in teaching, and financial support to empower paraprofessionals to achieve teaching certification.

#### Track vacancies and vacancy fills in high-needs areas

To understand the scope of the district's need, Orange should implement district-wide tracking for positions classified as a high-need skill or subject area. This tracking would involve awareness of vacancies as they emerge and are filled, allowing the district to maintain an up-to-date inventory of teaching needs and areas for recruitment. Current high-needs areas include bilingual/ESL education and STEM positions, although the

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<sup>31</sup> Shuls, J. V., & Flores, J. M. (2020). Improving teacher retention through support and development. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 4(1), n1.

<sup>32</sup> Aragon, S. (2016). *Mitigating Teacher Shortages: Financial Incentives* (Teacher Shortage Series). [Education Commission of the States](#).

district should maintain flexibility to reevaluate and update its high-needs classifications as contexts change over time. By keeping ahead of district needs, Orange would be better positioned to develop necessary skills amongst its teacher and paraprofessional workforce, and identify paraprofessionals who would have a clear pathway to a certified teaching position.

#### Improve dialogue between paraprofessionals, teachers, and school administrators

Paraprofessionals and teachers spend all day in the classroom, giving them the best sense of student needs and current deficiencies among the district's available resources and teaching force. Throughout focus groups, teachers and paraprofessionals often expressed a desire for a more iterative and collaborative feedback loop between classroom staff and administrators. Given this interest, the district should lean into teacher and paraprofessional feedback to help identify classroom needs and areas of improvement for staffing plans. Developing this trust and collaboration would also assist with initiatives for school administrators to better understand the current skills of their teacher and paraprofessional workforce. Research additionally shows that positive teacher-administrator relationships improve teacher retention.<sup>33</sup> Formalizing dialogue processes between paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators would likely improve the district's efficiency in identifying high-needs areas, clarify the skills of their existing teacher and paraprofessional workforce, and increase satisfaction amongst classroom staff.

#### Offer structured and formalized career guidance for paraprofessionals interested in teaching

For paraprofessionals who are interested in pursuing full-time teaching, the district should offer personalized advising and career guidance to streamline the certification process. New Jersey has existing policies in place for paraprofessionals to achieve teaching certifications. However, navigating state certification requirements can be time-consuming and confusing. By providing centralized advising, the district would assist interested paraprofessionals, thus potentially generating cascading interest, and the district would streamline its ability to fill essential positions in its classrooms.

Existing credentialization and certifications could be advised depending upon paraprofessionals' interests in career counseling sessions. New Jersey currently offers a [Bilingual Language Paraprofessional Credential](#) for paraprofessionals who are interested in providing K-12 classroom language instruction assistance. This credential either requires sixty college or university credit hours in specific language instruction and bilingual language acquisition courses, or lesser coursework if a paraprofessional has an associate's degree or higher and passes a series of language proficiency exams. New Jersey additionally has alternate route pathways, which could be used by paraprofessionals to acquire a Certificate of Eligibility (CE). For paraprofessionals with relevant expertise to serve as a Career and Technical Educator, the [alternative routes program](#) creates a pipeline from a CE to a provisional teaching certificate, and ultimately, permanent credentialization. These processes do not require participation in a formal educator preparation program. For paraprofessionals interested in credentialization through formal educator preparation, programs like The College of New Jersey's [Paraprofessional to Teacher](#) Education Bachelor's Degree are specifically designed to accommodate the career realities facing paraprofessionals.

While there are other similar programs and opportunities across the state, career advising could go a long way towards helping paraprofessionals find the correct opportunity match for their interests and credentials.

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<sup>33</sup> Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Ing, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2011). The influence of school administrators on teacher retention decisions. *American educational research journal*, 48(2), 303-333.

Centralizing this information collection and advising by Orange district leadership would help streamline the process for paraprofessionals and the district, allowing Orange to more quickly fill classroom vacancies.

### Implement financial support for paraprofessionals to acquire teaching credentials

To ensure that a paraprofessional-to-teacher pipeline is viable, Orange should continue prioritizing financial support for interested paraprofessionals. Tuition can be a barrier to paraprofessionals enrolling in necessary coursework, and additional expenses for exams, credentialization, and test preparation can quickly become unaffordable. Research on best practices suggests implementing tuition and other financial support for paraprofessionals to pursue high-quality teacher preparation and credentialing.<sup>34</sup> Additional suggestions include program flexibility, to allow for teacher preparation in conjunction with existing job obligations.<sup>35</sup> By providing tuition reimbursement and financial assistance, Orange can both ensure that paraprofessionals become certified to teach and incentivize their return to positions in the district.

## **Recommendation 5**

### **Lean into existing partnerships to strengthen pathways into the teaching profession from all levels.**

Research on Grow Your Own and teacher development pipelines emphasizes the importance of collaborative development between school districts and higher education partners.<sup>36</sup> School districts can identify and recruit potential teacher candidates, while the higher education institution plays the essential role of preparing the soon-to-be teachers. Over the last few years, the Orange school district has had several partnerships with higher education institutions to fill some portion of its teacher development needs. Moving forward, these partnerships should be used as a starting point for expanding additional pathways into the teaching profession for high school students and paraprofessionals, and upskilling opportunities for current teachers.

The district's most prominent pathway program, the [Aspiring Educators Initiative](#), has thus far been effective in training Orange paraprofessionals to become teachers. While designed to prepare prospective teachers for NJ Department of Education certification and the Praxis exam, participants also have the opportunity to enroll in reduced or reimbursed coursework at Kean University or Essex County College. With already existing relationships, these partnerships should be built upon to expand additional opportunities in line with the findings in this report. Kean University's [Tomorrow's Teachers](#) program offers dual credit enrollment to high school students interested in entering the teaching profession. This could be a helpful program to incorporate into the development of a grow-your-own pathway for high school students in Orange. Additionally, Kean hosts a bi-annual on-campus [Future Teachers Academy](#), which could help high school students better understand the possibilities of a teaching career and offset negative assumptions about the profession. The district should also strongly advertise the [Alternate Route to Teaching](#) and reimbursable coursework at Essex County College, which would empower graduates to earn a full Certificate of Eligibility to teach in New Jersey. This partnership could be leveraged to expand the current Orange-Essex [dual enrollment](#) offerings, creating an explicit teacher preparation pathway for district high schoolers.

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson, S. M., & Shannon L. K. (2022). Landscape of Teacher Preparation Programs and Teacher Candidates. *National Academy of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.31094/2021/3/4>.

<sup>35</sup> Conn, C. A., Martin, C., Weaver, T. J., & Mellott, R. N. (2023). University and School Districts Working Collaboratively to Develop a Grow Your Own Partnership. *Kenneth Young, Editor*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

In 2020, Orange Public Schools and the Newark Board of Education won a Department of Education grant to implement the [Urban Teacher Residency](#) at Montclair State University (MSU). The program focused on bringing professionals into the teacher workforce, and credentialing them with a Master of Arts in Teaching degree, teaching certification with an endorsement in teaching students with disabilities, and a Highly Qualified mark in their area of licensure. The program additionally had the explicit goal of fostering a diverse teacher workforce that reflects the demographics of the districts. Although no longer accepting applicants, partnerships with MSU could be expanded to meet numerous Orange district goals. MSU has comprehensive [Alternative Route](#) programming, allowing individuals to enter the teaching profession who did not complete a formal teacher preparation program. They additionally provide numerous [teacher education programs](#) for individuals interested in bachelor's, master's, or post-baccalaureate education. These programs could be useful for high school pipelines into the teaching profession, as suggested in Finding 1, and upskilling interested current teachers.

Other higher education institutions have been discussed throughout this report, and this section is not an exhaustive list of available programs. Colleges and universities in New Jersey provide numerous opportunities for prospective and current teachers to receive education and further their teaching aspirations. To address the findings in this report, and begin implementing recommendations towards a more diverse teacher workforce, it would be beneficial for Orange to embrace existing partnerships and cooperatively develop teacher training pathways for the district's high schoolers, paraprofessionals, and current teachers.

## Conclusion

This study affirms both the strengths and the urgent needs within Orange Public Schools' educator workforce. The district has a foundation of dedicated educators, strong community relationships, and innovative programs that can, and have been, expanded to meet the demands of a changing student population. However, to retain existing new teachers in the district and introduce students to the profession, there is an immediate need for strategic, equity-driven action.

The findings make clear that students and families in Orange value education and the role of teachers in shaping futures. There is both interest and potential to build a pipeline of local, culturally responsive educators, but only if the district removes structural and financial barriers that limit access to the profession. Moreover, current educators are ready to grow their impact and commitment to Orange if supported through mentoring, upskilling, and meaningful career pathways.

This report's recommendations offer a roadmap for this action; they are not theoretical, but grounded in the lived experiences of Orange students, families, and educators, and informed by best practices from across the state and country. Building a workforce that reflects the diversity, strengths, and aspirations of the Orange community is not only a strategic priority, but an educational imperative, and this study can serve as both a guide and call to action for this work.