

Urban Teaching Academies Providing Quality Teaching in High-Priority Schools

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do we need Urban Teaching Academies?

As a nation, we say that our goal is to leave no child behind, but the schools we provide for some children say otherwise. Low-performing urban schools typically have high concentrations of inexperienced teachers who are too often unprepared for the challenges they face. The teacher dropout rate is often higher than the student dropout rate. These struggling schools rarely close the teaching quality gap, let alone the student achievement gap, because they are constantly rebuilding their staff. As teachers head for the exits they cite poor preparation, insufficient classroom support, and inadequate opportunities for career advancement. To break this cycle, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) is launching an Urban Teaching Academies initiative with the support of MetLife Foundation to provide quality teaching in high-priority schools.

What are Urban Teaching Academies?

Urban Teaching Academies (UTAs) develop and retain teachers who are well prepared to teach in urban settings through the melding of teacher preparation with practical clinical experience in urban classrooms. Drawing on many of the features of teaching hospital/medical residency programs, Teaching Academies build effective urban teaching teams of teacher candidates (often called "residents") who observe and work alongside veteran teachers in specially selected training schools (often called "teaching academies"). Residents integrate their daily classroom experiences with what they are learning from formal teacher education courses that are held on-site at their academy after school hours. The residents' academic coursework is sequenced around the teaching cycle of the school year and their content and methods courses are well aligned to the host school district curriculum standards and student learning needs. On-site preparation with guided practice and collaborative teamwork focused on improving teaching quality and student achievement in high-priority schools is at the heart of an UTA.

In March, NCTAF and MetLife Foundation recognized and awarded grants to three Urban Teaching Academies. Why were these models selected?

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future identified three programs that have taken promising approaches to meeting the needs of urban schools through the teaching academy model. The goal of the NCTAF – MetLife Foundation grants is to put a national spotlight on these programs so that others might learn from them, and to help each program advance its goals. The three programs are:

- *Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL)*. AUSL, founded five years ago as a nonprofit organization in Chicago, Illinois, is the first teacher training academy in the nation to partner directly with a school district to recruit, train, and place certified, highly-qualified, and well-educated teachers. Today, AUSL is supported through a unique public-private partnership and each year recruits 45 to 60 mid-career professionals and recent college graduates to participate in an intensive 12-month clinical teacher preparation program.

- *California State University at Long Beach (CSULB)*. CSULB offers four specialized Masters Degree programs to cohorts of practicing teachers, delivered entirely at their elementary schools at Long Beach. The content of these Masters Degree programs is tailored to the specific needs of the school, based on goals set out in each site's School Effectiveness Plan. A preservice residency program at these schools will be added to the CSULB program, with the graduates of the Masters program serving as the mentor teachers.
- *Montclair State University's Urban Teaching Academy (UTA)*. The UTA was created in 2001 and works with schools in urban Newark and Patterson, New Jersey. This program has three key elements: intensive and well-supervised school-based field experiences; community-based internships; and explicit attention to teacher candidates' notions regarding race, culture and social justice. The program also has an early childhood cohort recruited exclusively from nearby Essex and Passaic County Community Colleges, creating a seamless "Pipeline to Teaching" educational program leading to early childhood certification.

Is the Teaching Academy model applicable only in urban schools?

Teaching Academies can be adapted to meet the teaching quality needs of local school districts. For example, Science Teaching Academies can be designed as a way to meet the local demand for highly trained science teachers, just as Urban Teaching Academies are meeting the needs of urban schools. Others might be designed around preparing special education teachers, or those working with second language learners. Teaching Academies are appropriate for meeting the needs of rural schools for highly qualified teachers committed to working in rural communities. Similarly, the rapid growth of the small schools movement has also created a pressing need for Teaching Academies to prepare and retain teachers who know how to work as members of the professional teams that are central to success in these redesigned learning environments.

What are the key elements of Teaching Academies?

There is no one model for Teaching Academies, as the leadership, organizational design, and activities vary according to the resources and needs of the local districts they serve. However, there are a number of common factors present in most approaches:

1. Teacher candidates ("Residents") are engaged in extensive clinical practice, working alongside teams of expert teachers;
2. Higher education faculty teach in the academy setting and use what is learned about local schools to better align teacher preparation with the needs of the schools where their graduates will teach;
3. Accomplished teachers continue to learn as they take on new roles, serving as mentors, collaborators, and clinical faculty, helping to tailor the teacher preparation curriculum to Residents' learning needs;
4. After Residents graduate, they are provided induction support by academy staff as they move in teams to other high-priority schools in the district; and
5. In addition to providing a rich teacher preparation environment, the academy's mission is to develop and sustain redesigned learning environments that improve student achievement.

Are Teaching Academies the same as Professional Development Schools (PDSs)?

Teaching Academies do build on the lessons learned in PDSs that effectively use clinical practice to link teaching theory and practice. But the Teaching Academy design promoted by NCTAF takes the PDS model several steps further by using the teacher preparation and induction process to establish professional learning communities that can create and sustain a culture of success in high-priority schools. Working in teams, teaching residents, accomplished teachers, and university faculty are able to collaborate with principals, students, and parents to improve teaching quality and student achievement beyond what any of them could accomplish alone. In addition, Teaching Academies are able to facilitate the link between teacher preparation and school and district needs.

What are the roles of various participants in a Teaching Academy?

Teacher Candidates or Residents typically:

- train in cohorts;
- spend at least a semester in a full-time residency in specially selected PreK-12 teaching schools (“Academies”);
- take courses and seminars at the PreK-12 school academy site;
- have multiple opportunities to observe other teachers and reflect together on their observations and experiences; and
- complete a portfolio as part of their certification requirement.

Highly skilled teachers in teaching academies typically:

- serve as supervising or mentor teachers for Residents;
- collaborate with teacher education faculty;
- participate in special training to prepare them for this responsibility, and continue to learn alongside the Residents; and
- gain recognition, rewards, and career advancement in conjunction with their support of teaching candidates during preparation and induction.

Higher education institutions typically:

- work with the participating school district to redesign the teacher education curriculum to meet the teaching needs of the district;
- provide classes on-site with university faculty working in concert with PreK-12 teachers; and
- offer credit towards the teaching credential and academic degrees.

Teaching Academy graduates typically:

- have preferred status for staff openings in partner high-priority schools in the district;
- are placed in teams or cohorts in these schools;
- receive continuing support from the Teaching Academy in the first few years of teaching; and
- commit to working in the target school community for a specified number of years as a condition of their support during training.

Do Teaching Academies eliminate the need for teacher certification?

No. Teaching Academies are **not** shortcuts to teacher certification. Unlike some alternative preparation programs where candidates become full-time teachers after a few weeks of summer coursework, Teaching Academy Residents work during the school year alongside experienced, specially selected mentor teachers. The Resident, who has ample opportunity to collaborate with a team of accomplished teachers in the Academy, is a learning apprentice, not the teacher of record. Teacher preparation coursework in the Academy is rigorous and focused on the curriculum, students, and culture of the schools in which the Resident will ultimately teach. Peer and group learning based on feedback and reflection about classroom experiences, as well as follow-up support from accomplished teachers, are integral features of the Resident’s experience. Teachers who graduate from these academies with appropriate certifications are then expected to continue teaching in the high-priority schools they move to within the district; if not, they have a payback requirement for the funds invested in their training.

In short, Teaching Academies provide high-priority schools with well-prepared teachers who collaborate as members of professional teams that can create and sustain a culture of successful teaching and learning.