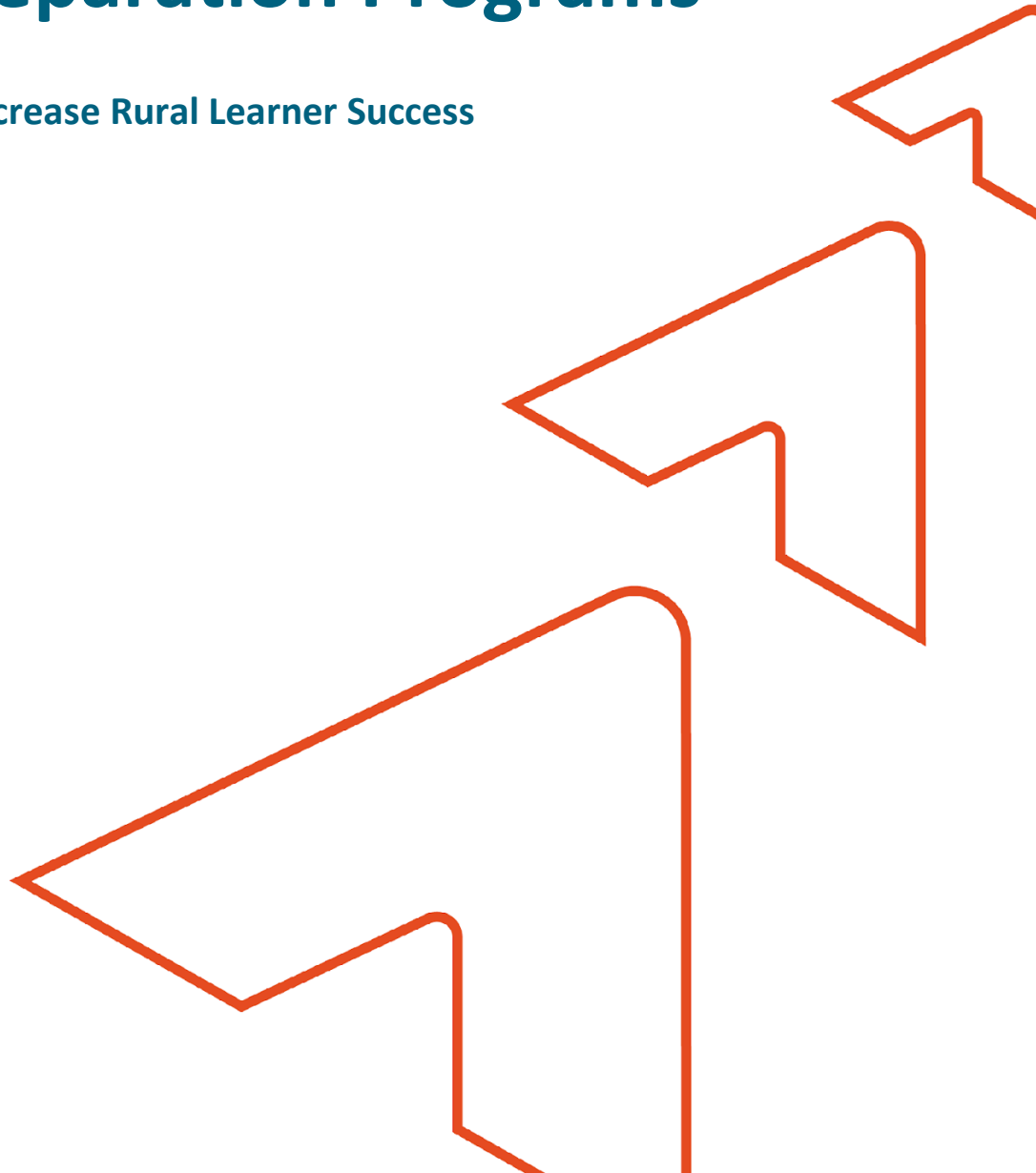


Project Summary

Surfacing the Needs of Paraeducators Enrolled in Rural Teacher Preparation Programs

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



Surfacing the Needs of Paraeducators Enrolled in Rural Teacher Preparation Programs

Western Illinois University | Macomb, IL

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Western Illinois University designed and implemented an equity-centered teacher preparation pathway that expanded access for diverse, rural, and working professionals, serving more than 150 candidates and achieving a 96% 3-year persistence rate, with all program completers advancing to higher-responsibility roles or earning increased compensation. The pathway created intentional opportunities for parent volunteers, especially multilingual parents, to progress from informal school roles into licensed teaching positions through partnerships such as the Parent Mentor Program. By addressing financial and geographic barriers with evening coursework, embedded student teaching, and prior learning credit, the program enabled candidates to remain employed while completing licensure, exemplified by one participant who advanced from parent volunteer to lead preschool teacher. Comprehensive supports included bilingual tutoring, financial aid assistance, and no-cost professional development, alongside a place-based mentoring model pairing candidates with regional mentors and dual language or early childhood specialists. The pathway focused on rural and high-poverty communities and integrated ESL/bilingual approval into early childhood and elementary endorsements, preparing graduates to serve Illinois districts where multilingual learners average 25% of enrollment and exceed 70% in some areas.

– Western Illinois University

Project Overview

This project focused on a paraprofessional teacher education option (PTEO) at Western Illinois University (WIU) and allows for an in-depth examination of a unique alternative pathway to postsecondary education and access to the teaching workforce serving rural, low-income, and diverse learners.

Research Objectives Achieved

- Assessed the impact of WIU's nontraditional teacher education pathway on reducing systemic barriers for rural, low-income paraeducators from diverse backgrounds.
- Analyzed experiences, programs, and supports within alternative pathways that improve persistence, completion, and job placement for rural, low-income learners.
- Examined how a rural-serving four-year university creates and sustains flexible pathways that support degree completion, credentialing, and career advancement for underrepresented rural populations.

Research Methodology

WIU used a mixed-methods research design to capture the multilayered reality of educational contexts within West-Central Illinois through pre- and post-surveys, job placement surveys, field observation of students and program coordinators, review of university and state policy documents, and semi-structured interviews of participants. Participants in this project include rolling cohorts of rural low-income paraeducators enrolled in the PTEO from among three areas—Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and Special Education. Other participants include program coordinators, program advisors, student mentors, course professors/instructors, and university administrators.

Key Findings

- A nimble and collaborative partnership between the state, universities, and school districts can help successfully overcome barriers to paraprofessional licensure through intensive coordination.
- Financial support is critical to the ability of nontraditional rural learners to access and complete paraprofessional licensure programs.
- Cohort program models foster peer mentoring and build stronger, more equitable programs that improve success rates for nontraditional rural students in paraprofessional licensure programs.
- Active support from principals and administrators is key to nontraditional rural student success in paraprofessional licensure programs and, thus, to strengthening the rural education workforce.
- Developing a paraprofessional pipeline within local schools and communities enables rural districts to “grow their own” workforce.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Create stable, multiyear funding streams for students entering paraprofessional licensure programs.
- Encourage licensure programs to develop cohort-based models that integrate peer mentoring.
- Frame paraprofessional licensure programs as a “grow your own” initiative can encourage support from principals and administrators, which is critical to nontraditional rural student success.
- Integrate ESL/bilingual standards for endorsements and credentials into early childhood and elementary education pathways given that percentages of multilingual children across rural and urban settings continues to increase.

Resources

For more information on this project, please see:

- [Project website](#)
- [Reimagining Pathways for Educational Equity in School-based Partnerships: An Early Childhood Case Study](#) (2026)