

Achieving Diversity and Equity:

Paraeducator Pathways to College Success and the Teaching Profession

Insights from Journey into Education & Teaching





“JET saw the wealth of talent in classroom paraprofessionals and decided to invest in us. JET supported my journey in becoming a licensed teacher in the Boston Public Schools and worked with me every step of the way to ensure that I was staying on track. I grew more confident with the guidance and support of JET and my cohort members. I was very fortunate to receive a Teacher’s position in K0/K1 at my school. Thank you to the amazing JET.”

~ Kamini Pulchansingh
Teacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. K-8 School
JET 2017 Boston Cohort

About Us

Journey Into Education and Teaching (JET) is a proven strategy for building a diverse and quality teacher pipeline. JET supports paraeducators to obtain their bachelor's degrees and become licensed teachers. Our innovative model addresses an urgent need in urban schools and communities – the recruitment and retention of diverse teachers – while advancing the educational and economic opportunities of high-potential adult learners. We invest in paraeducators because they bring great passion to their work, valuable lived experience, and the drive to advance professionally.

Letter from the JET Team

The purpose of this report is to share the key lessons from our work in the last five years (2016–2021) and to discuss the opportunities we see for this work in the future. This report is based on external research and JET evaluation data, collected by an independent evaluator through surveys and interviews with JET participants, school district representatives, and mentors, as well as interviews with program staff.

Since 2016, the JET Program has expanded to 11 school districts across Massachusetts. During this time, the world around us has changed dramatically. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a number of challenges for our organization and the communities we serve. At the same time, new opportunities emerged, and the resilience of our constituents and partners has given us inspiration.

The lessons and recommendations shared are aimed at K-12 and post-secondary education leaders, state and federal-level policymakers, funders, and others who share a common commitment to achieving equitable education systems and communities.

The current conditions of our schools and communities in Massachusetts and nationwide speak to the urgency of JET's mission. There is a growing teacher shortage and teacher attrition rates are high. The diversity of the public school teacher workforce does not reflect the diversity of the student population. Traditional teacher preparation programs enroll mostly white students. Black, Latino, and low-income college students have the highest college dropout rates. Inequality and income gaps between the rich and the poor continue to grow.

Our goal is to inform ongoing discussions and efforts to navigate emerging and future challenges in education. Our hope is that after reading this report, you will have a greater understanding of the value of JET's community-based model for effective teacher pipelines and post-secondary pathways that address pressing needs, as well as the importance of investing in paraeducators.

Eliza P. Fabillar, JET Executive Director

Pam Herrup, JET Co-Founder

Karen O'Connor, JET Co-Founder

Acknowledgments

This report and the work it represents would not have been possible without the efforts of so many individuals and partners we have worked with over the years.

We are grateful to current and former JET participants –all incredibly skilled and dedicated paraeducators– you have inspired us and taught us so much. Thank you for allowing us to join you in your journey and for generously sharing your time to give us feedback to help us continue to improve the program. And to the JET mentors who have provided that vital individualized support to guide participants on their journey.

To our partners in school districts and in higher education institutions, this work would not be successful without you. We admire the opportunities that districts provide for paraeducators to pursue their dream of being a teacher and thank them for their in-kind services and support of JET mentors.. We respect the dedication of colleges/universities to help adult learners succeed.

We recognize the Massachusetts State Legislature, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education who value and support our educator diversity work. We are energized by our participation in state-wide networks such as the Educator Diversity Act Coalition, the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership, the Massachusetts Partnership for Diverse Educators and the Diverse Teacher Workforce Coalition.

We appreciate the support of The Massachusetts Foundation for Teaching and Learning Board of Directors Patricia Crowley, Vicki Jacobs, Lisette Kaplowitz, Joanne Mendes, Janet Michaud, and Karen O'Connor, as well as Emeriti Directors Warwick Atkins, William Dandridge, and Jeanne Widmer.

Many thanks to Janet M. Smith of Edscape Consulting, LLC for providing us with your evaluation expertise over the last 4 years and your contributions to the development of this report. We have learned so much from you and your work. Thank you also to the consultants who have led the development of this report: Lisa Hilt, lead writer, and Richard Chandler of Chandler Art & Design, graphic designer.

Our deepest gratitude to the JET team who oversees operations and ensures quality implementation of the program, including Angie Irving, Casel Walker, Sam Wettje, and Romie Robertson, as well as the graduate interns who have contributed their talents over the past five years.

Finally, to our funding partners, for making this work possible. We appreciate the support we have received from the Lloyd G. Balfour Foundation, Bank of America N.A.; The Boston Foundation; The Cabot Family Charitable Trust; the Winifred Johnson Clive Foundation; the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; the Cummings Foundation; Edvestors; Grampy's Charities; the Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust; and our individual donors.



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Context

Teacher Diversity Matters

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that teacher diversity has significant positive impacts on students. Students of color are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better on assessments, graduate, and consider college when they have a teacher who shares their racial identity and demonstrates an understanding of their prior experiences, cultural frameworks, and learning styles (Dee, 2004; Gereshenson et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies show positive experiences and impacts on all students when they are taught by a teacher of color and potential long-term social benefits for students, schools and communities, such as increased multicultural awareness in schools and a decreased likelihood that children will hold implicit biases as adults (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

While there have been improvements in teacher diversity over the last three decades, the educator workforce in the United States still fails to reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of students and the population at large. Nationally, students of color represent over half of total public K-12 enrollment, while only 21% of the educator workforce are people of color (National Center for Education Statistics). In Massachusetts' public schools the ratio is similar: 44% of students and only 12% of full-time educators identify as people of color (MA Department of Secondary & Elementary Education, April 2021).

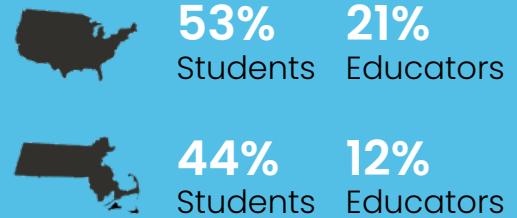
School districts and policymakers in Massachusetts and across the country are increasingly recognizing systemic issues of inequity and diversity gaps in schools and, at the same time, are facing teacher shortages and high teacher attrition rates, particularly among teachers of color. As a result, districts are prioritizing actions to address these issues, including investments in a variety of alternative pathways into teaching, all aimed at strengthening and diversifying the educator workforce, particularly in high-needs schools. Among these pathways are grow-your-own programs which aim to bring paraeducators within the school district into the teaching profession (Gist et al., 2021).

Investing in Paraeducators

Paraeducators (also known as paraprofessionals, instructional assistants, teacher aides, and education support professionals) assist teachers and provide support to students for their academic, physical, and emotional well-being. While they do not hold teaching licenses, the range of services they provide to schools makes them a critical part of the education system and crucial to student success. Paraeducators represent a large pool of potential teachers with indispensable classroom knowledge and experience. They also reflect the diversity of urban student populations more so than any other category of educators.

Investing in the paraeducator-to-teacher pipeline has several educational and socio-economic benefits for students, individual paraeducators, schools, and communities. First, paraeducators have extensive classroom instructional experience and established relationships

Figure 1.
Percentage of Students & Educators of Color



with students and other educators in the school district. Second, paraeducators are generally more likely to stay in the classroom and have long-term, positive impact on their students' learning because they have ties in the community and an established commitment to schools (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009). This is important, as research shows that high rates of teacher turnover have significant, negative impacts on student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2021). Finally, transitioning more paraeducators to the teacher workforce will increase their social and economic mobility and have ripple effects on the community. Licensed Massachusetts teachers earn, on average, more than twice the income of paraeducators. This increase in income can have a transformational impact on the individual and their families, and in aggregate, these changes can contribute to addressing broader racial and ethnic inequality and implicit biases in schools and communities over time.

Despite the many benefits, very few paraeducators in urban communities are moving into the teaching profession due to the considerable barriers they face as adult learners. The majority (63%) do not have a college degree, a prerequisite to earning teacher licensure. For most paraeducators, pursuing a degree seems unaffordable and impossible to balance with their full-time work and family demands. Many are also first-generation college students who lack academic confidence and the support networks necessary to succeed in college. For those who do try, the reality is that college retention rates for part-time students are low; only 21.3% of part-time students in two and four-year institutions complete a degree by the end of four years, and nearly half drop out before then (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021).

State licensing exams pose an additional obstacle to paraeducators. Most states and school districts still require teacher candidates to pass standardized tests in order to earn licensure, despite research that shows that black and Latinx teacher candidates fail these exams at disproportionate rates compared to their white counterparts (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, urban paraeducators' years of experience and contributions to student achievement are rarely taken into consideration or prioritized in this process or in earning degree credits. Finally, the cost of these exams can present another obstacle, particularly when a candidate must pay to take the tests multiple times (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

School districts are looking for a systems approach that enables them to overcome these barriers and build the professional capacity of existing personnel, while also addressing broader issues of inequity, diversity gaps, teacher shortages, and high teacher attrition rates.

“We [want people to] grow from within the district from one role to the next, so everyone knows there’s a career path if they want it. We have personal and professional commitment to grow people and JET fits in really, really well with that desire.”

– Quote from a JET District Liaison

Journey into Education and Teaching (JET) is the only education organization in Massachusetts to offer school paraeducators without bachelor's degrees a pathway into teaching. We collaborate with high-needs school districts, higher education institutions, and other key stakeholders across the state to support paraeducators in every step of their multi-year journey to earn a degree and teacher licensure.

JET: An Equity & Community-Centered Approach

Mission & Vision

JET promotes equity by mentoring aspiring educators from primarily underrepresented groups as they obtain a bachelor's degree and teaching license, thereby improving economic mobility for adult learners. JET partners with urban school districts and colleges and universities to establish community-based teacher pipelines to ensure a diverse teacher workforce.

We envision an effective teacher workforce that reflects the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of public schools and provides all students with the opportunity to achieve academic success. Furthermore, we envision thriving, economically sustainable communities.

History

JET was founded as a Program in 2007 by a team of educators at UMass Dartmouth, Bristol Community College, and the school districts of Fall River and New Bedford to help resolve teacher shortages and low teacher retention rates in high-need schools. Over the initial seven-year period, funded through a federal grant, JET supported over 100 paraeducators on their multi-year journey to a bachelor's degree and teacher licensure. The program retention rate was high (65–70%), and over half of the participants earned at least one degree (68% earned a bachelor's degree and 61% earned a Master of Arts in Teaching). More than 25 paraeducators became employed as teachers of record, and more were in the teacher pipeline when the federal grant ended.

Based on these impressive results, JET was invited to become a Program of the Massachusetts Foundation for Teaching and Learning in 2016. Over the last five years, JET has grown to 11 urban, high-needs school districts across Massachusetts; piloted a mentorship program; and evolved to address issues of educator diversity and educational equity more explicitly and intentionally. As this report is being written, JET is again at an inflection point as an organization. We officially obtained our nonprofit incorporation status in 2021 and are taking steps to further enhance the Program, including building an even more robust mentoring model. As a new nonprofit organization, JET has greater opportunities to deepen impact and make transformational change in Massachusetts and beyond.

Our Model

JET's approach is community-centered and designed, based on research and our years of experience, with the unique needs of adult learners and high-needs schools at the center.

Partnerships with School Districts & Higher Education Institutions: The JET Program provides a valuable link between school districts, paraeducators, and higher education institutions. In the participating school districts (see Figure 2), students of color represent 77% of the student body, well above the national and state averages, and only 20% of teachers are people of color (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). School districts have chosen to integrate JET into their teacher pipeline strategies to address the diversity gap and/or improve teacher quality and retention. JET works with district liaisons to recruit paraeducators in their district who do not have bachelor's degrees to pursue teacher licensure and then collaborates with them to provide support to these paraeducators throughout the process.

JET has cultivated strong relationships with multiple higher education institutions across the State (see Figure 2) that can provide support to paraeducators enrolled in their programs. We have advocated for more equitable services for part-time students (e.g., access to advising and greater course selection), and we are seeing that institutions are recognizing the need to serve this growing student population by expanding their Continuing Education Units. JET also ensures that districts and program participants have updated information related to financial aid, admissions, and degree programs.

Support and Mentoring for Paraeducators: Understanding the barriers that paraeducators face, a central focus of JET is ensuring that each participant in the Program receives ongoing guidance navigating the financial, academic, and social-emotional aspects of pursuing a degree and licensure. Their multi-year journey begins with recruitment and onboarding into JET and into a college degree program, as well as obtaining financial aid (i.e., Massachusetts Paraeducator Teacher Preparation Grant). Participants' engagement in the Program continues as they pursue and then earn a bachelor's degree (with a minimum of 3.0 GPA) and ends after they have earned their Massachusetts teacher licensure (see Figure 3). JET provides ongoing support to participants throughout this process.

In response to the growth of the Program and recognizing the need to provide participants with one-on-one support, JET began piloting a mentoring program in 2018 that pairs each new participant with a veteran educator working in the same school district. Notably, some of these mentors are also JET alumni. The mentors work with participants to develop individualized goals and provide them with regular guidance and support on a range of issues. JET provides mentors with mentoring tools and guidance. Based on the lessons from the pilot, JET is in a strong position to build a more robust mentoring program to provide professional development that builds on adult learning theories and addresses equity issues, giving mentors the means and strategies to effectively mentor JET participants, and enabling them to learn from one another.

“...the JET Program gave me confidence unlike anything I have known. It instilled in me the importance of perseverance and dedication. That is what I strive to instill in my students.”

– Quote from JET Participant

Figure 2. JET Partners

School Districts

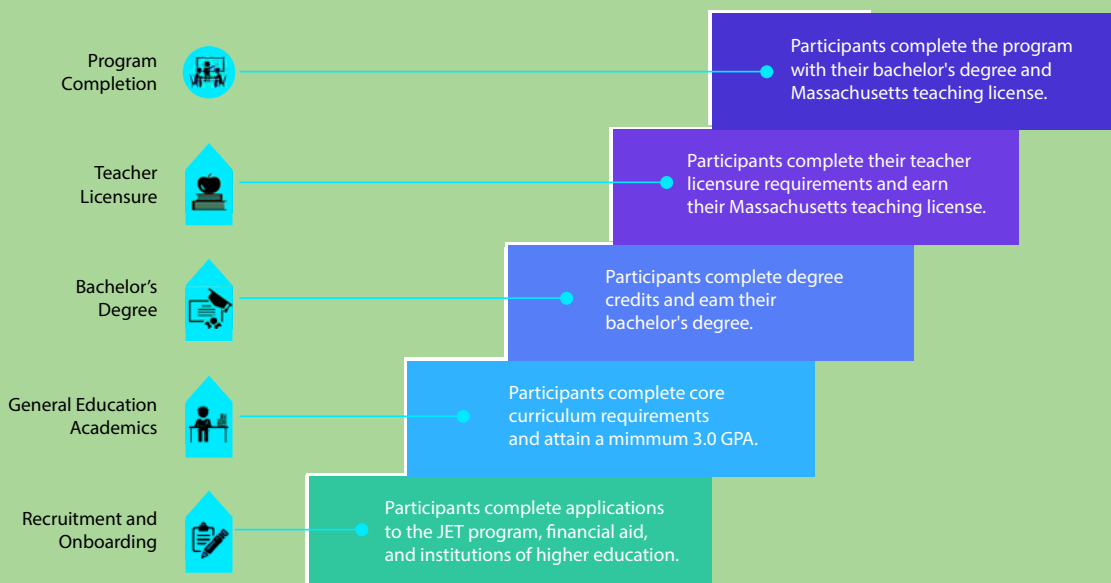
Boston Public Schools
 Brockton Public Schools
 Cambridge Public Schools
 Chelsea Public Schools
 Fall River Public Schools
 Holyoke Public Schools
 Lowell Community Charter Public School
 New Bedford Public Schools
 Springfield Empowerment Zone
 Springfield Public Schools
 Worcester Public Schools

Higher Education Institutions

Bay Path University
 Bay State College
 Bridgewater State University

Bristol Community College
 Bunker Hill Community College
 Cambridge College
 Elms College
 Lesley University
 Massasoit Community College
 Middlesex Community College
 Quinsigamond Community College
 Regis College
 Roxbury Community College
 Salem State University
 Springfield Technical Community College
 UMass Amherst
 UMass Boston
 UMass Dartmouth
 Worcester State University

Figure 3. Pathway for paraeducators in the JET program



Impact of JET

By the Numbers

In the last five years, over 100 paraeducators have participated in JET and the numbers are expected to grow as more districts join the Program. Among the paraeducators who joined the Program during this period, 70% have earned or are on track to earn their bachelor's degree, well above the national average of 31.6% for adult, part-time college students (National Center for Education Statistics), and five participants have already earned their teacher licensure (four of whom are people of color).

The diversity of JET participants more closely reflects the diversity of students in the participating districts than the current teacher workforce, with nearly 60% of participants identifying as people of color (see Figure 4). Eighty percent of the current program participants identify as female, and half joined the Program with six years or more of experience as a paraeducator. Most participants are first-generation college students who grew up in the low-income communities they serve, and they are all receiving some form of financial aid for their college tuition.

Figure 4. Racial Identity of JET Participants

African American/Black	35%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	3%
Hispanic/LatinX	19%
White	36%
Other	6%

Evaluation Findings

In 2018, in alignment with JET's commitment to continuous program learning and improvement, we commissioned an independent evaluator to provide ongoing evaluation support to assess the impacts of the Program and identify ways it can be improved. These efforts have included surveys with incoming and outgoing JET participants, interviews with participants at key milestones in their journey (i.e., completion of two and four years in the program, a bachelor's degree, and teacher licensure), interviews with JET district liaisons, and evaluations of important aspects of the Program (i.e., the JET Mentor Program). The sections below summarize the evaluation findings collected over the last four years.



Participants

According to evaluation data, paraeducators participating in JET say the Program has benefited them in the following ways:

Guidance on the path to a bachelor's degree and teacher licensure

- **Increased knowledge of the process:** Many participants report having increased knowledge of the steps needed to pursue a degree and licensure because of their engagement in JET, which provides the pathway they need to navigate the oftentimes confusing and overwhelming process.
- **Information and support in completing each step:** According to participants, the guidance and detailed information provided during the Program on relevant topics (e.g., college admissions, the licensure process), is highly useful to them. Many participants also noted the importance of the individualized assistance provided to them by JET Mentors and program staff.
- **Assistance in accessing financial aid:** When asked which areas of the Program had the greatest impact, JET participants often point to the assistance they received in accessing financing to be able to pursue a degree. This includes information provided by JET on how to access financial aid (i.e., the Massachusetts Paraeducator Teacher Preparation Grant), help with completing financial aid forms, and reminders about financial aid deadlines.

Increased motivation and confidence to stay on track

- **Increased confidence in their ability to succeed:** Many participants report increased confidence in their ability to pursue and be successful in earning a bachelor's degree and teacher licensure because of the Program.
- **Accompaniment and support throughout the process:** According to JET participants, the individualized attention, care, and support they receive in the Program is a key factor enabling them to stay on track despite the challenges they face. They particularly value having a mentor, which many participants say has contributed to their motivation to continue working toward becoming a teacher and has provided comfort in knowing that they are not alone in the process.

Career development and other socio-economic benefits

- While it is still too early to assess the impact, as more paraeducators complete their degrees, earn licensure and accept teaching positions, we expect to see their income levels, social capital, and influence in the schools in which they teach rise.

Quotes from JET Participants

“Before JET, I was kind of lost.... I was doing my job and I thought that was it, with nowhere else to go. I am an adult and family provider and going back to school and getting a degree was not in my vision; I didn’t know the way forward, I didn’t have a vision. I was at [a] plateau.... Becoming part of JET and communicating with them showed me the way to getting a degree.”

“I didn’t know how smart I could be or how good in school. I didn’t know my worth. JET encouraged me all the time and said that I deserved to be educated and my kids needed me and I had something to contribute. All because of JET, and the ladies telling me ‘You’ve got this. Don’t stop. Take baby steps,’ I graduated with a 3.58 GPA. I hadn’t been to school in years and didn’t know I could do it.”

“You can get a little frazzled and nervous and don’t know where to start... especially when you are an adult going back. That part was set up really nice. It made me feel welcome and reassured and that [JET] had a relationship [with the college] and I didn’t have to run around.”



School Districts

This section summarizes the key strengths and benefits of the JET Program, according to participating school districts.

Strong partnership in efforts to diversify the teacher workforce

- **Flexibility of the JET approach and the level of responsiveness to the needs of each district:** Districts appreciate that JET recognizes that the pathway to degree completion and teacher licensure is long and that we provide support where it is needed in each district rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Knowledge & expertise in education and equity issues, schools, and the needs of adult learners:** Districts value the breadth and depth of knowledge JET brings to their efforts on multiple dimensions as well as our ability to help fill gaps in participating school districts.
- **Connections and up-to-date information on degree requirements and licensure processes:** School district staff have limited time and resources to stay abreast of degree and teacher licensure requirements; therefore, districts value JET's ability to maintain these relationships and share up-to-date information.

Paraeducator recruitment, development, and retention

- **Increased confidence in their ability to succeed:** Many participants report increased confidence in their ability to pursue and be successful in earning a bachelor's degree and teacher licensure because of the program.
- **Accompaniment and support throughout the process:** According to JET participants, the individualized attention, care, and support they receive in the program is a key factor enabling them to stay on track despite the challenges they face. They particularly value having a mentor, which many participants say has contributed to their motivation to continue working toward becoming a teacher and provided comfort in knowing that they are not alone in the process.

Career development and other socio-economic benefits

Many of the participating JET districts report seeing benefits from the Program even before the paraeducators earn their degrees or licensure. Below are some examples.

- **Increased teacher preparedness and skills among paraeducators in the Program:** The professional development JET participants receive as they pursue their degree and licensure contributes to their effectiveness at work and prepares them to teach when a position becomes available. This includes circumstances like emergency waivers, which are becoming more common as increasing numbers of teachers are leaving the profession.
- **A professional development opportunity for current and prospective paraeducators:** For some school districts, JET is also a professional development opportunity that they can offer as a benefit to paraeducators in their district; some even advertise JET as a benefit in job postings.

“JET is making the dream of being a teacher come true for our instructional assistants. The personal meetings, collaboration with Worcester State University, mentoring and the genuine caring for our instructional assistants make this program exceptional!”

— Maureen Binienda, Superintendent of the Worcester



Quotes from JET District Liaisons

“One of the main goals [in our strategic plan] includes increasing diversity in the teacher workforce...We identified some really talented paras in the school who have been here a while and are proven educators - they just needed some assistance in obtaining a degree and certification. It’s a nice partnership with JET to be able to deliver on that goal for the school while delivering for these professionals individually.”

“The district is investing years into paras [to diversify the teacher workforce] before seeing a return on investment in that. But in the interim years, we are each year seeing better paras. We get a teacher-in-training working with our highest-needs population. All schools need that.”

“[Paraeducators] work hard, support teachers and students and in some cases can substitute teach, so if they have desire to become teachers we shouldn’t stand in their way...the JET folks we deal with are very knowledgeable about the field and the strengths the paras bring and also of paras having to juggle different things”

Snapshots of Three JET Partner Districts

BROCKTON

Brockton, the sixth largest city in Massachusetts, is a diverse community – 69.2% of residents are people of color, and the city has a poverty rate of 14.8%. Within Brockton Public Schools, over three-quarters of the student population are people of color (85.6%), while the same is true of less than 25% of teachers and 41% of paraeducators. Over a quarter of students are English learners (28.2%) and over three-quarters are low income (76.4%).

Since JET began operating in Brockton in 2018, JET has recruited and supported 10 paraeducators, one of whom graduated from Bridgewater State University in May 2021. These participants, of whom 70% are people of color, much more closely mirror the students in the district than the existing teacher population.



The JET Program is a core component of the District's broader efforts to diversify its teacher workforce through 'grow your own' and improved recruitment strategies. Of note, Brockton's ads for paraeducators now include JET as a pathway to teaching in the district. JET works closely with the District's Human Resources Department to implement this paraeducator-to-teacher pipeline, providing paraeducators with ongoing guidance and support from JET staff for financial aid and college enrollment and individual mentors. The mentors, all of whom are district educators, are selected and paid by the district and then trained by JET to support the adult learner. Two of the Brockton mentors are InSPIRED Fellows, educators committed to increasing the diversity of the educator workforce in Massachusetts.

NEW BEDFORD

New Bedford, a city in southeastern Massachusetts, has a population of 101,079, of whom slightly over 20% are living in poverty. Within the New Bedford Public Schools, 62.5% of students are people of color, while 15.6% of teachers and 36% of paraeducators are people of color. Over 80% of the student population is low-income, and over 25% are English language learners.

New Bedford is one of two districts that were part of the first iteration of the JET program from 2007 to 2014. During that time five JET graduates became employed as licensed teachers in the district and remain teaching today. New Bedford Schools rejoined JET in 2018 at the behest of the district's Executive Director



of Human Capital Services. Since that time the JET Program has grown rapidly; JET currently supports 17 paraeducators and provides training for each of the JET Mentors, all of whom are district educators selected and paid by the district. Among these mentors are three JET graduates, former participants who have come full circle to offer their experience and support to new JET participants.

In recognition of their skills and dedication, New Bedford Public Schools is committed to investing in the long-term growth of their paraeducators. According to the JET district liaison, JET is a key pathway to achieving this. The district aims to increase the number of JET participants to represent 15–20% of their paraeducators.

WORCESTER

Worcester is the second largest city in Massachusetts, with a population of over 185,000. Twenty percent of the city's residents are living in poverty, well above the national average (11.4%). Within Worcester Public Schools, nearly three-quarters of the student population in the District are low-income (74.3%). The majority of students, 72%, are people of color, while only 12% of teachers are people of color. However, paraeducators are 27% people of color, more than twice that of teachers.

JET began operating in Worcester in 2018 at the Superintendent's request to provide a pathway to teaching for paraeducators without bachelor's degrees. Since then, 15 paraeducators have been recruited and supported through JET. One earned a bachelor's degree and teacher licensure in 2021 and is now employed as a teacher.



The JET Program is part of the school district's strategy to develop local teaching talent and diversify the teacher workforce. While JET supports all paraeducators interested in pursuing a college degree and licensure, JET works with the district's Chief Diversity Officer to recruit and support a more diverse group of paraeducators who reflect the diversity of the student population. Each JET participant is provided a JET mentor who is a local experienced educator and paid by the district. The district also enables JET participants to fulfill their student teaching requirement while maintaining their paraeducator positions in the district.

Data Sources: Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (<https://www.doe.mass.edu>), 2020 U.S. Census (<https://www.census.gov>), and JET District Liaisons (via interviews).

Mentor Program

As the Participant section highlights, the pilot Mentor Program has had an overall positive impact on paraeducators. Some benefits are presented below, along with a summary of the key factors contributing to the success of the Program so far based on findings of surveys of mentees (2020 & 2021) and interviews with Mentors (2020).



Benefits to Participants

- **Motivation to continue working toward a college degree and becoming a teacher:** According to JET participants, the Mentor Program has been an important source of motivation to persevere despite the challenges they face. Eighty percent of participants surveyed reported that having a JET mentor greatly influenced their motivation in pursuing their degree, as well as their longer-term goal of becoming a teacher.
- **Confidence that they can succeed in becoming a teacher:** In addition to motivation, 80% of participants surveyed state that having a mentor has greatly influenced their confidence in their ability to become a teacher.
- **Success in college courses:** Nearly three-quarters of participants report that having a mentor has greatly contributed to their success in the college courses they are taking to earn their degree.
- **Knowledge of the steps to take to become a teacher:** The majority of participants said their mentor has helped them to understand the process to become a teacher, at least to some degree, with 63% reporting they had a great influence on their understanding.

Benefits to Mentors

JET mentors also report personal benefits of participating in the Program, including learning, growth, and a sense of fulfillment resulting from their ability to help others and contribute to the field of education.

Factors contributing to mentoring success

- **Mentors demonstrate genuine understanding, empathy and care:** In line with findings from other mentoring programs, the JET evaluation found that in order for the mentor-mentee relationships to be successful, there must be a match between the mentor and mentee in terms of personal characteristics; and the mentee must be open to the relationship and willing to reach out for help. In general, successful JET mentors have experiences and backgrounds that are similar to the participants they are mentoring, they empathize with the mentee's demanding situation and their discomfort in asking for help, and they demonstrate to the mentee that they genuinely respect and care for them.
- **Flexible and supportive approach, focused on the needs of the paraeducator:** Based on feedback from both mentors and mentees in JET, successful mentoring relationships ensure

that the Mentor Program provides real value to the mentee and that the communication methods used respond to the individual needs of the mentee. In successful relationships, mentors are knowledgeable on relevant topics, they provide support in setting goals and provide advice when difficulties arise. For many mentees, the mentor is a strong advocate for their success, providing a listening ear when they need to vent or be reassured.

Successful communication between mentors and mentees is both structured and flexible. Most mentor-mentees maintain communication at least once per month and allow for flexibility in the timing and mode of communication. When asked what type of communication mentees prefer, the most common answers were texting, email, telephone calls, Facetime, and in-person meetings, or a combination of multiple types of communication.

- **Mentors receive training and feedback:** According to JET mentors, the training and ongoing support provided by JET is a key factor contributing to the success of their mentor-mentee relationships. The mentor training is designed to respond to the differing levels of experience the mentors bring coming into the Program, while also ensuring each mentor has a solid understanding of the JET mission and model (and clarity on their role as a mentor), the steps and processes that JET participants will need to complete in the Program, and how to be a successful mentor. In addition to training, there is a dedicated coordinator and staff available to respond to the needs of mentors as they arise.

Quotes from JET Mentees

“The best part is to have someone to go to and vent to and you know they are going to be there for you.”

“Don’t sleep on it – just reach out and talk with your mentor about problems you are having. They will give good advice and are there for you.”

“ I was sitting in my car one day after work, after a very bad day, trying to get prepared to go to class and [my mentor] happened to call unexpectedly. After just a short call, when I was able to vent to someone, I was more ready to go to class. It was great to know that I was going to be OK.”

Quotes from JET Mentors

“Mentoring is a great opportunity to help support the education field...to create great teachers”

“The best part is letting my experience be an asset to people just starting out... I have something to make their journey a bit easier and I want to be able to do that. I’m in awe of how they handle all the new technology and when talking to them I was learning myself: the old meets the new.”

“JET is doing a great job...I hope it expands because the current group of par-aeducators working from within should be the future of the classroom. They know the language and the programs...and have experience in the trenches.”

Lessons Learned & Opportunities

Insights from the past five years of JET highlight a number of important lessons and opportunities for improving outcomes for paraeducators in the teacher pipeline, while also contributing to broader goals related to increasing teacher diversity and improving student outcomes.

Mentoring is vital

Establishing a support structure for paraeducators, with dedicated one-on-one attention, greatly improves participants' levels of confidence and motivation, program retention rates, and the likelihood that paraeducators will earn a degree and teacher licensure. Furthermore, districts recognize the value of mentoring in creating opportunities for teachers' professional growth and leadership.

In order to be successful, the mentoring program must take into account the unique needs and challenges of the adult learners who are part of the program (e.g., working full-time, family responsibilities, first-generation college students) and ensure that each participant feels they have someone who truly cares and is there for them. In addition, mentors must be equipped with the experience, training, dedication, and compassion required to foster a successful mentor-mentee relationship. In response to lessons learned from the pilot phase, JET is poised to build a robust mentoring model that includes professional development and peer learning communities.

Long-term investment is essential

While it is cost-effective, investing in paraeducators requires a long-term commitment by sources of financial and social support (e.g., foundations and government, school districts, two and four-year higher education institutions). On average, it takes three years for JET paraeducators to obtain a bachelor's degree, depending upon their academic progress when they join the Program. They then must also pass the tests required to achieve the licensure necessary for employment.

The JET experience mirrors that of our peers (e.g., Paradigm Shift) and others (Carver-Thomas, 2018) in that the State teacher licensing examinations (MTELs) have been a hindrance for many participants in their path to teacher licensure. Yet, research shows that these standardized tests are only modestly correlated with in-service teacher performance measures (Gershenson et al., 2021; Petchauer, 2019). Going forward, the professional licensing process should take into consideration the teaching experience of paraeducators, which would ensure quality and result in improved licensure rates. Given the great need for teacher recruitment and retention, it is an opportune time for more states and districts to invest in a long-term strategy by tapping into the paraeducator role for an effective teacher pipeline approach.

Cross-sector partnerships ensure effectiveness

In order to ensure resources invested in paraeducators are targeted and not duplicated, services must be coordinated among school districts, two and four-year institutions, government agencies, state and federal-level policymakers, and education organizations and institutions. We see opportunities for further coordination, with contributions from JET, particularly in the areas of teacher preparation, teacher licensure pathways, student financial aid, and education equity issues of teacher diversity and student achievement.

Furthermore, we see opportunity and the need to ensure that investment in paraeducators contributes to and is integrated within broader strategies to improve educational equity and diversify the teacher workforce. According to the New England Secondary School Consortium (2020), eliminating achievement disparities and improving overall educational equity will require a full review and redesign of the educational system and a comprehensive approach to supporting diverse educators throughout their career development. We see opportunities for JET to be part of this comprehensive approach.

Collective advocacy can lead to meaningful change

As attention to and acknowledgment of the importance of teacher diversity and educational equity has increased, so have opportunities to promote and enact State, regional and national policies and practices that have the potential for significant impact in the near and long-term future. As a result of this and in acknowledgment of the strength of collective advocacy, JET has become increasingly involved in networks and coalitions organized to promote policies and practices that will lead to greater equity and educator diversity in schools (e.g., DESE Diversity Network, Educator Diversity Act Coalition, MA Partnership for Diverse Educators [MPDE], MA Equity in Education Partnership [MEEP] – Education Trust, Diverse Teacher Workforce Coalition of Western Massachusetts, New England Secondary School Consortium). The ability to develop and have an influence on effective policy is strengthened by bringing together and aligning the positions of key stakeholders for collective advocacy.

Continuous learning from research and communities inform quality programming

JET has always sought to strengthen itself through learning from our work and that of others, particularly from research and the communities with whom we work. The challenges of recent years have called on us to increase our investment in these efforts to ensure we are adapting the Program continually based on this learning and responding to the needs of our communities. Since the emergence of COVID-19, JET has worked to strengthen its programming through virtual community building among participants and by providing more opportunities to address participants' social-emotional wellbeing. As diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice continue to be pressing issues in the communities that we serve, we have also improved our professional development offerings for mentors to ensure they are equipped with effective tools and strategies to support diverse adult learners.

Conclusion

While there is increased recognition that systemic changes are needed to address educational challenges, existing programs and policies often take siloed approaches to advance educational equity, workforce development, teacher diversity, college readiness and success, and community development. JET's model is distinctive in that it creates a bridge between K-12 schools and higher education while addressing diversity, disrupting inequities, and creating workforce solutions in low-income, underserved communities. The potential impact of JET and similar programs is far-reaching as the model provides a community-based teacher pipeline and an effective postsecondary pathway. Long term, JET's integrated strategy can result in collective impact, leading to systemic change and thriving economically sustainable communities.

JET sees great opportunities to further expand its efforts, to partner with key stakeholders to advance Massachusetts' priorities and policies around diversity and educational equity, and to serve as a model for other states.

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