

# WAKING RIP VAN WINKLE

## A proposal to redesign the education workforce



Utah's Center for the School of the Future takes a team approach to instruction and to preparing future teachers.

**By D. Ray Reutzler & Parker C. Fawson**

In the 1819 tale by Washington Irving, Rip Van Winkle meets a mysterious Dutchman while walking in the Catskill Mountains, partakes freely of his liquid spirits, and falls asleep for 21 years. Nowadays, educators often invoke the story to illustrate how little has changed over time. That is, if Rip Van Winkle woke up today from a decades-long sleep, he'd find that classrooms look pretty much the same as he remembered — one teacher, one classroom, 25 desks, 25 students, whole-class presentation methods, and so on. Actually, though, that's precisely the opposite of what happens in Irving's story: After 21 years, the protagonist wakes up to find himself in a vastly changed world; he had slept through the American Revolution.

According to Carole Basile (2018), dean of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University, the PreK-12 education workforce could, in fact, be revolutionized in the coming years: "The one-teacher-to-one-classroom model must change," she argues. "[W]e need to re-design the profession, the workplace, and how we prepare people for both," and for inspiration we can look to recent changes in

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the practice of medicine. Much like education, she notes, the field of health care has faced increasing demands for high-quality services while, at the same time, coming under intense pressure to contain or reduce overall costs. Unlike education, though, most of the world's health care systems have implemented a solution.

In past decades, when we visited a health clinic or medical practice, we expected to be attended to by a doctor. Today, we're more likely to meet with a member of the doctor's integrated health care delivery team, such as a physician assistant, a nurse practitioner, or even a student intern engaged in required clinical rotations. And because patient care responsibilities have been distributed among various team members, doctors can spend more of their time on the specialized services that only they can provide. Not only does this maintain quality while reducing costs (since physician assistants, nurses, and interns tend to be just as capable as highly paid doctors at providing routine services), but it also introduces health care workers to a variety of professional roles and clinical settings, which helps them find a satisfying career pathway.

As Basile argues, PreK-12 education might well benefit from a similar redesign of its workforce. "Instead of relying on one person to serve as an instructor," she says, "a student should be served by a team of qualified professionals much like newer integrated health care models. Students would be led by master teachers and a tiered team of educators and volunteers who can address individual learning needs."

We agree. It is high time that our school systems become much more strategic in deciding which duties and responsibilities we assign to whom, not just to contain the immense personnel costs that public education contends with, but also to create a healthier, happier, and more effective workforce. As things stand today, the teaching profession struggles with low morale, high levels of accountability and stress, crushing workloads, high rates of attrition, and declining interest in the career among young people. Much of this could be improved, we argue, by taking bold steps to differentiate among the various kinds of work that go on in schools and the varied roles that educators can and should play.

### **Toward an integrated education workforce: Lessons from Utah**

Established in 1998 by an act of the Utah legislature, Utah State University's Center for the School of the Future (CSF) aims to bring together stakeholders from across the state to develop ideas that build on

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"the most effective education policies, programs, and practices" for creating and sustaining a continually improving public education system.

In 2018, at a time when Utah was experiencing acute and protracted teacher shortages (particularly in traditionally hard-to-staff academic subject areas, but also in elementary and early childhood education), the CSF staff began meeting with local education leaders and community members to discuss ways to redesign the education workforce, ideally to improve teaching and learning without incurring large cost increases. In response to the needs expressed by our local partners, we decided to begin with a focus on expanding the workforce in elementary education, specifically by drawing upon the many young people who aspire to teach at this level.

We developed a proposal to expand the responsibilities of our existing tutors and paraeducators, as well as giving meaningful — though carefully supervised — instructional roles to college students enrolled in local teacher education programs. Under this program, college students would have the opportunity to apply for and be employed as teaching assistants, tutors, paraeducators, and eventually as intern teachers of record. Master teachers and licensed teachers would receive special training on how to mentor, supervise, and direct the work of these college student employees.

Traditionally, our schools have assigned more limited responsibilities to these aspiring teachers, but we reasoned that it would make better sense for them to be simultaneously enrolled in job-embedded teacher preparation programs and inducted into elementary schools as employees. As we saw it, this redesigned early-career pathway could have several benefits:

- Moving away from a one-teacher-one-classroom model toward an integrated team-based model can stabilize or decrease costs while improving student outcomes.

- Employing potential future teachers (both those studying education and those in current assistant roles) can help with the recruitment of new and diverse teachers, reduce students' debt because they are able to earn income as they learn, and enable future teachers to scale up their responsibilities gradually.
- Offering opportunities in the education workforce that do not require a teaching license can tap into traditionally untapped populations (e.g., military retirees, career changers, college students) to meet workforce needs and identify people with potential to become lead teachers.
- Embedding students from university-level teacher preparation programs into schools early in their preparation and over a sustained period of time enables them to have clinical experiences that are more closely linked with the content of their education courses.

### The model in action

To see what it would look like to move away from the traditional one-teacher-one-classroom model and toward a more team-based approach, without incurring additional staffing costs, we launched a pilot project at a school we'll call Starpoint Elementary in 2018. We paused the program in 2020 because of COVID, but it restarted in 2021. At Starpoint, students in grades K-6 were grouped into seven grade-level pods of approximately 100 students each, to receive instruction from a team that includes a master teacher, classroom teachers, paraeducators, interns, aides, and tutors. College students can begin serving as paid teacher assistants and tutors during their freshman and sophomore years, and then move into paraeducator roles as juniors and opt for a yearlong teaching internship during their senior year.

### Staffing structure

The master teacher in each pod is an accomplished teacher who has experience producing outstanding student outcomes on district and state assessments and who is committed to working with both K-12 learners and teacher candidates. Master teachers must commit to additional graduate-level education in adult learning and agree to mentor intern teachers. Each master teacher is the learning engineer of the team, responsible for scheduling and

leading planning meetings, coaching and supporting regular classroom teachers and teacher interns, and coordinating delivery of instructional and assessment services to individual students and to students assigned to targeted small instruction groups. As team leaders, they tend not to be involved in day-to-day instructional decisions but instead coordinate the overall direction of the team's work.

The specific composition of the team can vary somewhat but will typically include one master teacher, three licensed teachers (or one licensed teacher, two intern teachers, and one mentor), two or three paraeducators, and two or three teacher assistants or tutors shared across the grade level. A licensed teacher is released from teaching to mentor two interns who receive a salary for half of the year, making the staffing cost-neutral. Some of the regular classroom teachers (those who have shown an interest in mentoring the next generation of teachers) are paired with an intern, and they plan and implement instruction for their assigned students in the pod while supporting the teacher candidates on the instructional team as they learn to do the same. Special subject teachers provide instruction in music, art, and physical education; push-in special education, English learner, and other services are offered as needed. Most instruction is delivered in small groups.

When this model of integrated, team-based instructional service delivery was first proposed, some parents expressed concern that their elementary students would be taught by staff who were not licensed, experienced teachers. But parents and others who questioned this approach quickly became strong advocates because they saw that children received more focused attention from members of the delivery team than they received in a traditional classroom.

### Preparing new teachers

This transformation of the workforce comes hand in hand with a transformation of teacher preparation. Rather than entering the profession through a single eight-to-16 week unpaid student teaching experience, teacher candidates complete a year-long paid internship under a carefully selected and trained mentor teacher who co-teaches with the intern at least 50% of the time until the intern teacher is ready to function as the teacher. The yearlong internship consists of one semester that is similar to traditional student teaching, with the remuneration being the credits needed to complete a bachelor's degree. After this first semester, intern teachers graduate from college and become licensed and are able to receive full teacher pay

while they complete their intern year. Employing intern teachers in this way has doubled the typical teaching capacity for K-12 students at the same cost.

In our pilot, we also have sought to broaden the pipeline into teaching by giving support staff opportunities to pursue teaching licensure. For example, a portion of existing district funds were redirected to recruit a cadre of paraeducators who complete their university methods coursework at the school or online while continuing their employment as paraeducators at the district's current pay rate. (Currently, they can choose between two university programs, but other universities are considering offering similar options.) Teacher candidates filling paraeducator jobs also receive a scholarship to offset their degree program costs. Once they complete the coursework, they can advance to the position of intern the following school year. In support of this "Earn While You Learn" program, the 2021 Utah Legislature provided \$9.2 million for a statewide pilot.

The school district and partner teacher preparation programs also provide funds so that staff in other school-based instructional jobs, such as teacher assistants or tutors, may obtain scholarships and continue to receive hourly pay while taking courses leading to a teaching career. Schools redeployed Title 1, English as a second language, or special education funds for supplementary support to hire potential teacher candidates as tutors or teaching assistants for K-12 students who needed extra help, especially due to COVID-related problems. This program enables future teacher candidates to become accustomed to the culture of schooling before committing extensive time and money to pursuing a license and gives those who could not afford to enroll in a degree program an opportunity to achieve their dream.

Through a cost-sharing agreement, the district and university teacher-preparation programs pay a portion of the salary for a district supervisor, who acts as the on-site teacher educator and supervises all teacher candidates participating in job-embedded clinical experiences.

### **Facility redesign**

To accommodate this new workforce, we arranged our school facilities into grade-level pods in which several classrooms flow easily into a central small-group instruction area. Using this shared space, integrated educational delivery teams are able to plan for and implement the curriculum, assessment, and instruction for each group of 100 students. Teachers and intern teachers are assigned to specific classrooms within the space, while master teachers,



Each grade-level pod includes classrooms that flow into a shared space for small-group instruction and team meetings.



The higher education space includes areas for instruction, interactive video conferences, and individual and group study.

paraeducators, aides, and other personnel move in and out of classrooms and small-group spaces in the pod as needed.

Starpoint also provided extra rooms, allowing the teacher recruits to complete their university coursework at the elementary school where they are employed or completing their clinical experiences. This higher education space includes interactive video conferencing technology for online courses, space for on-site face-to-face instruction, a study area for teacher candidates, and higher education faculty offices. Having a higher education space within the elementary school strengthens the ties between the school and its university partners. Frequently, current licensed teachers in the school or other district leaders serve as adjunct faculty, delivering coursework in the university teacher preparation program.

### Lessons learned

This pilot project in Utah has been years in the making, and it continues to evolve. Such innovation is hard, messy work, but we are pushing forward with new ways of educating elementary students and future teachers.

So far, teacher recruits who've completed their teacher preparation through this program show a 95% retention rate in the profession after the first three years of teaching, potentially solving a long-standing conundrum of new teachers exiting the profession within the first three to five years. Because retaining teachers in their jobs is far less costly than constantly replacing and retraining new

teachers every few years, we expect that this will result in long-term cost-benefits — but we will have to wait for more long-term data to become available.

Our proposal for education workforce redesign may not work equally well in all settings and communities, and those who pursue this approach should be prepared to make adaptations and modifications, based on school district, community, and university needs. For example, in many of Utah's rural school districts, there aren't 100 students or more per grade level to create a pod. Consequently, integrated education delivery teams may need to span multiple grade levels to be cost effective. Further, we suspect that some districts in rural communities may need to offer free or reduced-cost housing to teacher candidates to entice them to move to geographically isolated settings.

Also, master teachers who lead integrated education delivery teams will need a new set of teaching and organizational skills, which will require an investment in professional development. In turn, universities, school districts, and states may need to create and sustain degree and certificate programs for teacher leaders, just as the health care sector has had to develop new degree pathways and certification programs for roles and jobs other than registered nurse or physician.

Additionally, the transition from intern teacher to teacher of record has presented some administrative problems for university teacher education programs and school district human resource professionals. For this reason, we have found it best to make a clean separation between the roles of intern teacher and teacher of record by requiring intern teachers to complete their bachelor's degree and obtain their teaching license before transitioning to teacher of record. To simplify the transition, the intern teachers begin their intern year on the same calendar contract basis as other school employees and are only considered teachers of record after completing a full school year as interns, despite graduating and obtaining their licenses midway through the intern year. Other states, universities, and districts may need to organize their transition differently, though, depending on licensure requirements and administrative needs.

As we scale up this redesign to secondary schools, we anticipate the delivery of clinical and academic coursework experiences to become much more complex. For example, we may need to begin by focusing on selected subject areas where demand for teachers is high and supply is low (e.g., disciplines such as math, technology, and science). We also suspect that we will need to integrate delivery teams within subject areas and across grade levels to improve vertical curriculum design within



*"You all know the rules... No erasing!"*

disciplines. Once we've strategically addressed areas of greatest need, we can scale up gradually, using what we've learned from our initial efforts.

We anticipate, as we continue on our journey, that we will discover other bumps in the education workforce redesign road. Innovation is by its nature disruptive, and change is unsettling. On the other hand, innovation and change bring a sense of renewal and revitalization. The trick is to balance these opposing aspects of change and innovation so that the system is renewed and revitalized without overwhelming the people who must make the change happen.

If we're able to achieve this balance and continue pressing forward, perhaps a Rip Van Winkle who falls asleep today will awake from his slumber to find the educational system to be almost bewilderingly altered for the better. Imagine his delight as he sees an integrated team of education service providers working with large and small groups of learners to read and discuss science concepts, seek out answers to challenging questions, and send their work electronically to their lead teacher's digital grading folder for feedback. Imagine Rip Van Winkle also

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sees teacher candidates taking courses at the school where they work, continuing to earn an income by serving as tutors, teacher assistants, and paraeducators while they take their first steps toward becoming interns and eventually newly hired teachers of record. We can do this and we must. The time for the schools of the future is now. ■

#### Reference

Arizona State University. (2018, February 8). ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College proposes new education solutions, including a team approach to staffing and design labs that work directly with districts. *ASU News*.

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