



# Community Teaching Pathways

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## Overview

Within teacher education, community teaching has long been promoted as a counter to overly prescriptive and decontextualized forms of teacher preparation.<sup>1</sup> In truth, “community teachers draw on richly contextualized knowledge of culture, community, and identity in their professional work with children and families.”<sup>2</sup> At The Evergreen State College, the Community Teaching Pathway Program is grounded in the beliefs that preparing community teachers requires an understanding that knowledge lives beyond the four walls of classrooms, that connections to the land are vital to individual and collective wellbeing, and that community teachers often must take a stand alongside caretakers and communities to create and support classrooms of joy and justice.

In this innovation, members of the faculty of the Community Teaching Pathway program and their partners engaged in a project to expand and amplify the role of families in its curriculum and field experiences. Specifically, the innovation sought to: (1) increase communication and strengthen relationships between middle and high school teaching candidates, families and caregivers, (2) include family and community collaboration more intentionally in teacher candidates’ Inquiry, Action, and Equity projects, and (3) support the inclusion of Indigenous ecological knowledges into the Community Teaching Pathway, with a particular emphasis on teaching with the seasons and teaching with native plants.

### PROJECT PARTNERS

#### **The Evergreen State College Community Teaching Pathway**

**Garden-Raised Bounty (GRuB)** a nonprofit organization working at the intersection of food, education, and health systems to grow healthy food, people, and communities

**Multicultural Education Rights Alliance (McERA)**, an organization focused on advocating for education and justice with multicultural families and youth throughout Washington state

## The Innovation

The innovation focused on six main activities:

- **Re-designing the Community Teaching Pathway Inquiry, Action, and Equity Project:** As a culminating Master's project in the Community Teaching Pathway and as a requirement for recommendation for certification, teacher candidates plan and enact an action research project. The innovation team re-designed this culminating project to include a component of family, caregiver, and community participation. To support candidates in this component of the project, the team increased time in the Community Teaching and Teacher Inquiry class to devote to conversations, workshops, and brainstorm sessions specific to family and community collaborations, and increased attention to and support for family communication as part of teacher candidates' field observations.
- **Providing classroom mini-grants:** To support mentor teachers in guiding education candidates' in partnering with families, the innovation team provided eight mini-grants (up to \$250 each) that specifically supported teacher candidates' and mentor teachers' work with families and caregivers. See the text box on the right for a description of some of the mini-grants awarded.
- **Workshops on sustaining relationships with families:** Teacher candidates participated in two workshops with the Multicultural Educational Rights Alliance around developing and sustaining relationships with families across significant differences (e.g., racial, political, economic class).
- **Workshops to support the inclusion of Indigenous ecological ways of knowing into teaching and learning:** Teacher educators and teacher candidates participated in three workshops led by community mentors that were designed to help teacher educators infuse Indigenous ways of knowing into their practice. The three workshops – Tend, Gather, Grow, Plant Teaching for Growing Social-Emotional Skills: Cultivating Resiliency, and Wellbeing with Northwest Plants – provided hands-on activities for participants to further their teaching and learning.
- **Further developing the Community Teaching Pathway's "Inquiry, Action, and Equity Symposium":** As a culminating activity, teacher candidates presented their inquiry projects to faculty, mentor teachers, members of the Professional Education Advisory Board and the broader community. The innovation team expanded and further developed this work to raise awareness around projects focused on family and community engagement.
- **Recognizing and celebrating community mentors:** At the 2023 Departmental Hooding Ceremony, the innovation team worked in partnership with teacher candidates to recognize community mentors who

supported the education candidates towards their degrees. Successful teacher candidates led the graduation ceremony that formally recognized two community mentors with an invitation to speak to the theme: Plants, Nature, and People. Jolyn Gardner Campbell, from the Multicultural Education Rights Alliance, and Christie Tran, an anti-racist educator and artist, were the honorees. Dr. Dexter Gordon, Evergreen's Executive Vice President, presented the keynote address.

### Classroom Mini-Grants: Giving Back to Family Engagement

The Give Back is an important tradition at The Evergreen State College's Tacoma campus. It takes a variety of different forms, but is often given after a class session to a presenter, guest teacher, or a group as a way to share what was learned and taught during the lesson. In the spirit of Give Back, the innovation team started a mini-grant program to support teacher candidates and mentor teachers to work together on family engagement projects. Below are three of the projects that were funded:

- A second/third grade classroom used funds to support a family event at the end of a unit on "Movers and Shakers," about the history of marches, protest signs, protest speeches and what it looks like to be movers and shakers for social justice causes.
- Modeled off a curriculum project from Densho, a Seattle-based organization for the preservation of artifacts and stories of Japanese American incarceration, a fifth grade classroom used funds to support a home-school art connection called the "The Suitcase Project." Supplied with art supplies and a small canvas, students and families discussed how people of Japanese descent had to make decisions about items from their lives that could fit into the one suitcase they were allowed to take with them after Executive Order 9066. Students and families then painted an image of what they would bring in a suitcase if they had to leave. Through the project, students and families could get a glimpse of the history of Japanese American incarceration camps and express their own perspectives on the importance of personal belongings and cultural heritage.
- A teacher candidate and mentor teacher used funds to support: (1) a zine project where students wrote and shared stories, (2) a family event, and (3) a display at the local branch of the county library system. Student zines revolved around an Inquiry Design Model unit that explored the question: Is the United States really a democracy? The project sought to elevate the voices of students from an AP Government class by displaying and distributing their zines at the Spanaway Lake/Parkland branch of the Pierce County Library.



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## Outcomes

### **Education candidates increased their interactions and understanding of collaborating with families and communities.**

Upon graduation, candidates completed a Community Teaching survey. In it, 94% of teacher candidates “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they gained a stronger understanding of the importance of engaging with families and communities and had opportunities to make connections between teaching, learning and the land from their time in the Community Teaching Pathway. A full 100% “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they saw examples and understood how community teachers often must take a stand alongside caretakers and communities to support classrooms of joy and justice. Moreover, nearly all teacher candidates reported engaging in some form of reciprocal positive communication with families and caregivers and named this as an ongoing part of their future practice. For example, one teacher candidate wrote, “It’s been good to focus on relationships with families. Next year I will continue sending out surveys, and I will hold casual meet ups (popsicles in the park) throughout the year,” while another noted, “This year I reached out to families by mailing home hand-painted and hand-written cards with QR Codes for surveys. I will repeat this for next year. During my time teaching in the Spring, I connected with families with emails and phone calls.”

### **The revised Inquiry, Action, and Equity Project helped teacher candidates and teacher educators reorient their language and practices in more relational ways by placing families and communities as knowledge holders.**

The revision of the Inquiry, Action, and Equity Project created a framework to intentionally embed family and community engagement topics into teacher candidates’ entire inquiry process. It also created intentional opportunities and support for candidates to spark new ideas and ‘try them out’ in placement classrooms. From inquiry question formation, to the research planning stage, to the implementation, reflection and naming of next actions, students had opportunities to deeply reflect on what it means to collaborate with families and communities. This revision also had faculty changing their language to describe the work of teacher inquiry. Instead of the language of “data collection,” they started to use the language of “knowledge gathering.” This change helped candidates and faculty reorient to practices that are less extractive and more relational. Students’ projects that centered around family and community engagement included: (1) How can I build stronger relationships with Latinx families to promote student success and family engagement? (2) How can we best serve ELL students and their families? (3) How does curriculum content generated by students and caregivers affect student joy and engagement? If engaging with families and communities was not central to their Inquiry, candidates were asked to designate a portion of their action research to a family and community engagement component. And,



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importantly teacher educators modeled and engaged with them about ways to not simply work with families and communities in one-sided school centric exchanges.

**A strengthened relationship with GRuB's Wild Foods and Medicine Team increased integration of Indigenous ecological knowledge into the Community Teaching Pathway.**

Feedback from teacher candidate surveys and debriefs with community mentors highlighted how the collaboration with GRuB's Wild Foods and Medicine Team increased recognition and understanding amongst teacher candidates and faculty of Indigenous ecological knowledge and the ways in which this knowledge can be integrated into teacher education, K-12 classrooms, and into daily lives. In just one example of this, at one middle school an Indigenous community educator brought teacher candidates together with middle schoolers to install a micro-prairie as part of its science curriculum at the school. This project resulted in increased cultural ecosystem awareness among everyone involved and increased attention to land-based, place-based, and seasonal practices.

**The innovation as a whole increased time and attention to reciprocal connections, relationships, and communication among families, community members, faculty, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates.**

As teacher candidates increased their instructional responsibilities in their placement classrooms throughout the spring quarter, and as they planned and implemented their

Inquiry, Action, and Equity projects, teacher candidates spent more time talking with classroom and faculty supervisors about their family and community experiences. They also spent more time in conversations with peers and community mentors considering dilemmas of practice. This notion of reciprocity reverberated in multiple ways.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This innovation highlights how efforts to increase communication and strengthen relationships among teacher candidates, families, and caregivers with a particular focus on Indigenous ecological knowledge can lead to multiple positive outcomes. By revising its Inquiry, Action, and Equity Master's project and embedding a variety of family-centered activities into the curriculum, the innovation increased teacher candidates' interactions with and understanding of collaborating with families and communities. It also created more space for time and attention to reciprocal connections and communication among families, community members, faculty, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates. This work is especially important against the backdrop of a sometimes volatile and hostile political context that has created divisions between parents and educators. The innovation team is currently considering how to best support alumnx's continued family and community engagement efforts, including alumnx professional development.

<sup>1</sup>Zeichner, K. (2023). *Communities: Keywords in Teacher Education*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>2</sup>Murrell Jr., P. C. (2001). *The community teacher: A new framework for effective urban teaching*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, p. 4