

Opening Doors to Classrooms in South Carolina: A Programs' Efforts to Remove Barriers and Support Future Teachers of Color

Marla Sanders¹ and Kelly Kinard²

¹ *Columbia College*

² *APEC Center*

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss lessons learned from our seven years preparing nontraditional teachers of color through an alternative certification program. Specifically, we discuss the challenges our preservice teachers of color endured to achieve certification and the program structures that supported them on their professional journey. These lessons may inform other preparation programs working to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. The obstacles discussed in this paper include certification exam requirements and test anxiety, time management and academic skills, and beliefs about one's teaching potential.

Keywords: Preservice, Teachers, Certification

Introduction and Related Literature

In 2018, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (CHE) released a request for proposals (RFP) for the state's Centers of Excellence Program, an initiative of the Education Improvement Act of 1984. The Centers of Excellence grant program provides funding to higher education institutions that "develop and model state-of-the-art teaching practices, conduct research, disseminate information, and provide training for P-12 and higher education personnel in the Center's specific area of expertise" (South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 2025). The 2018-2019 RFP had three priorities. One priority centered on the creation of a Center of Excellence in Alternative Certification. Columbia College, a private, liberal arts college, applied and was awarded a grant to create the Alternative Pathways to Educator Certification (APEC) Center.

The APEC Center targets paraprofessionals who are interested in becoming certified teachers. Since 2018, APEC has enrolled one cohort of students, called Fellows, per year. APEC is a unique alternative preparation program as it is grounded in the teacher residency model and requires a year of graduate study before a Fellow becomes teacher of record. Research on the effectiveness of teacher residencies indicates that teachers prepared through residencies are more likely to be retained and have a positive impact on student achievement (Yun & Fitz, 2025). Since its inception, APEC has prepared more than 100 classroom teachers employed in 50 schools including 37 underperforming or high-need

SRATE Journal

A peer-reviewed publication of the
Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE)
2026, Volume 35, Issue 1
SRATE.org



schools. Given the program's focus on school district paraprofessionals, the APEC Center has recruited a significant number of teachers of color. Approximately 60% of teachers completing the program in the first six years self-identified as a person of color. More than 90% of these teachers self-identified as African American.

The diversity among APEC teachers adds to the pool of qualified South Carolina educators. While approximately 48% of South Carolina's public-school students are students of color (South Carolina Department of Education, 2024-2025), more than 75% of public-school teachers self-identify as white (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021-2022). According to Showalter et al. (2019), rural districts in South Carolina have among the "highest rates of enrollment for students of color" in the country (p. 5). Many of our rural students are also living in poverty, and their performance on the NAEP reading and math assessments are among the lowest in the nation. Programs that increase the number of teachers of color are significant as research shows that access to teachers of color has positive academic and social benefits for all students. Carver-Thomas (2018) found several benefits: teachers of color boost the academic performance of students of color and both students of color and white students report having positive perceptions of these teachers. Lindsay and Hart (2017) also found that exposure to a Black teacher in elementary school reduced high school drop out by 39% and increased the college aspirations of Black male students.

Working with external evaluators from 2018-2025 to evaluate the program's quality, we have continually refined program structures to ensure that APEC Fellows are retained in the program and successfully complete all state certification requirements. Additionally, APEC joined the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) network in 2020. Through this collaboration, APEC has further developed a comprehensive program guided by NCTR's framework for effective teacher residencies (NCTR, 2025). Annually, data were collected through focus group interviews, program surveys, course and field evaluations, certification exam pass rates, and NCTR's graduate, mentor teacher, and resident surveys. Following the data analysis, APEC staff collaborate with the evaluation teams to identify areas for improvement.

Data gathered from these sources and feedback from APEC Fellows indicate that various obstacles can prevent preservice teachers from successfully completing certification programs, if institutions do not intentionally design programs to address those obstacles. APEC has evolved to meet student needs, provide resources and support, and eliminate those barriers. APEC currently has an 86% certification exam pass rate and an overall 95% teacher retention rate.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss lessons learned from our seven years of preparing nontraditional teachers of color through an alternative certification program. While preservice teachers of all backgrounds face difficulties completing certification programs, we focus here on our work with APEC Fellows of color because states need to increase the diversity of public school teachers and address the attrition of teachers of color who have higher turnover rates than white teachers (Ingersoll et al., 2019). The challenges our Fellows of color endured to achieve certification and the program structures that supported them on their professional journey may inform other preparation programs working to improve the recruitment and retention of diverse teachers. The obstacles discussed in this paper include certification exam requirements and test anxiety, time management and academic skills, and beliefs about one's teaching potential.

Barriers and Supports

Certification Exams

In South Carolina, all candidates enrolled in an alternative certification program must achieve a passing score on the Praxis 2 content and pedagogy exam before receiving their initial certification. Within the first three years of teaching, the candidate must pass the Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT) exam to be eligible for professional certification. While certification exams are common teacher certification requirements for both traditional and alternative programs, these exams can be a major obstacle for people of color. According to Fenwick (2021), certifying examinations have excluded many Black and Hispanic candidates who struggle to meet the minimum qualifying score on required exams. Similarly, Carver-Thomas (2018) notes that teacher licensure exams disproportionately exclude candidates of color despite little evidence that these exams predict teacher effectiveness.

Within the first six cohorts, 13 APEC Fellows have been unable to pass their Praxis 2 certification exam despite successfully completing the teacher residency requirements and demonstrating proficiency in their teaching observations using the South Carolina Teaching Standards (SCTS) 4.0 rubric, the tool used in the state's teacher evaluation system. Among the Fellows who have struggled to pass the certification exam, all but one self-identify as African American. While working with APEC Fellows, we have developed processes and program structures to support Fellows as they navigate the certification exams, which in the vast majority of cases is the program requirement that delays a Fellow's initial certification.

Test Anxiety

In South Carolina, paraprofessionals who pursue certification can apply to have their years of service count on their teaching certificates. As such, a person who worked as an instructional assistant for 10 years may receive the salary of a teacher with 10 years of experience once he becomes certified. Consequently, some APEC Fellows earn a more than 100% salary increase once they become certified and complete their graduate studies. Despite knowing the potential salary increase and the lifechanging benefits for themselves and their families, our Fellows experienced debilitating test anxiety, which led many of them to delay even registering to take their certification exams. Fellows often assert, "I'm just not a good test taker" and "Some people are just better test takers than others."

Research on test anxiety, motivation, and avoidance suggests that anxiety may stem from a fear of failure which can lead an individual to avoid situations in which success is uncertain (Tan & Pang, 2023). In working with our first cohort, we assumed that our Fellows, all nontraditional, adult learners, would be motivated to study provided materials and register for their certification exams when given a specific deadline. Fellows would begin submitting their application for teacher certification in June and were advised to work to pass their exams by March 31. By this deadline in 2019, only three in the initial cohort had attempted and passed the

exam. Fellows explained that their graduate studies, family, and other responsibilities prevented them from prioritizing test preparation. According to Petchauer (2012), prior negative experiences with standardized tests can affect a person's beliefs about their ability to achieve a passing score on a licensure exam. Given the high-stakes tests that many students take during their K-12 education, Petchauer suggests that "preservice teachers seldom approach licensure exams anew but instead have efficacy beliefs based on prior experiences with other standardized tests" (p. 255).

Although APEC is a graduate program that does not require applicants to achieve a specific score on an entrance exam, many Fellows enrolled in APEC after failing to meet the requirements of a traditional teacher preparation program. In South Carolina, teacher candidates enrolled in a four-year institution must pass the Praxis Core exam before they can be formally admitted into their teacher preparation program. The Praxis Core is a basic skills assessment of reading, writing, and math. In order to complete a bachelor's degree, students who are unable to pass the Praxis Core, change their majors. Because APEC is an alternative certification program, our Fellows are not required to take the Praxis Core, but the Praxis 2 exam can be just as intimidating.

To mitigate Fellows' tendency to avoid certification exams and to improve their confidence in their testing ability, we developed intensive test-preparation workshops that became a mandatory part of the Fellows' summer course load. These workshops focused on the format of the test, essential theories and pedagogical practices, and core content. Because we were not confident that Fellows would independently complete online study modules, we created the workshops to be taught on-campus and synchronously by experienced educators over several weeks. Additionally, the team provided vouchers, removing the financial obstacles posed by these exams. The initial workshops proved successful for Fellows in our second and third cohorts, improving pass rates from 70% for Cohort 1 to 90% for Cohort 2 and finally 96% for Cohort 3. We have learned, however, that workshops focusing solely on content, pedagogy, and theory are insufficient. In 2023, we expanded the workshops to include test-taking and critical reading skills. One of the authors, who serves as program director, has taught these workshops since 2023 and has provided individual tutoring to some Fellows. From these experiences, we have learned that Fellows' inability to pass their exams does not reflect deficiencies in content knowledge or pedagogy. Rather, Fellows have shown difficulty interpreting the test questions and the answer choices. For example, in a recent workshop, we reviewed practice questions in preparation for the PLT exam. In answering a question, one Fellow selected an answer choice that included the word "discussion." When asked why she selected the answer, she explained that experience showed her that students benefit from class discussions. When reminded to focus on the entire answer statement, not just one word, she recognized that the choice did not specifically answer the question.

Petchauer (2012) explains that quality materials, productive self-talk or "ideational resources," and adequate time for study, can help students of color achieve success on these exams (p. 259). When Fellows begin the program, they complete the Praxis 2 content and pedagogy workshops and then participate in the test-taking strategies workshops. Although these efforts have improved our certification and exam pass rates, we still work with Fellows from the earliest cohorts who have yet to achieve passing scores. As one Fellow explained, "I am still working in the school. My principal says I do a good job. My kids are learning. I just don't understand why I can't do this."

Financial Support

In addition to the academic supports described above, we have also secured a grant from the National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) that provides funding to cover the costs of certifying exams for those Fellows who must take the exams multiple times. The cost of these exams pose a significant burden for school paraprofessionals whose annual salary can be as low as \$23,000 per year. The registration fee for a Praxis 2 exam can be as much as \$150. One Fellow, certifying in early childhood education, took the Praxis 2 more than 10 times before achieving a passing score. Without financial support, this Fellow would have spent close to \$2000 of her salary on registration fees.

Academic and Emotional Support

As a “grow your own program,” APEC primarily recruits paraprofessional employed in our partner districts. Our APEC Fellows’ backgrounds are very diverse. They range in age from 25 years old to 60 years old. Most Fellows are native South Carolinians with some growing up in rural communities and others in more urban areas like the capitol city, Columbia. Our Fellows are also diverse in terms of their classroom experience. Some Fellows have 15 or more years of experience working as instructional assistants, while others enroll in the program with one year of experience or less. Nationally, “grow your own” programs have developed as a strategy to combat the teacher shortage crisis. While the design of these programs may differ, research indicates that these programs positively impact teacher retention as they “recognize the assets of community members and the role they can play in supporting students and families” (Garcia, 2024, p. 11).

When we enrolled our first cohort of APEC Fellows, we believed that their prior experiences as paraprofessionals would provide a seamless transition to the role of teacher of record. During the application and admission process, applicants submit a writing sample in which they explain their goals and reasons for becoming a teacher and discuss ways they demonstrate the qualities of an effective teacher. During interviews before APEC faculty, staff, and district leaders, APEC Fellows are asked to discuss their experiences in education and how they would manage situations with students and their colleagues. Applicants are also required to submit letters of recommendation from colleagues and administrators who can speak to their work with students. Acceptance is offered to applicants who demonstrate commitment to the profession and potential for success as a classroom teacher.

School paraprofessionals have significant roles in schools. As Reddy et al. (2021) explain, these employees may provide support in special education classrooms or work with school psychologists to provide academic and behavioral support. Despite the importance of their job responsibilities, Reddy et al. note that paraprofessionals often have little training on how to effectively implement student interventions. Additionally, teachers are often unprepared to supervise and use paraprofessionals in the classroom. In describing a paraprofessional pathway in which only 16% of participants completed certification requirements, Garcia (2024) explains that various supports were needed to help participants transition to new roles. Garcia quotes one individual who explains

“...They need emotional support as well as guidance while on this journey to become a credentialed teacher” (p. 4).

Although the APEC courses are designed to teach the knowledge and skills of effective teaching, data gathered from interviews and surveys show that Fellows, many of whom have been out of school for more than 15 years, needed support to learn how to be a student again. This support involves time management, identification of resources, and effective study skills. Although course evaluations show that Fellows overwhelmingly rated their courses and professors positively, Fellows repeatedly complained about the amount of course work. Instructors also stated that many Fellows needed extensions and one-on-one support to complete projects. To address these concerns, APEC staff continue to work to better align the residency and course requirements so that Fellows make connections and requirements are not duplicated. Further, Saturday class meetings, which occur once a month for six hours, provide space for Fellows to collaborate on class projects and conference individually with instructors. A mandatory program orientation, conducted in the spring of each year, introduces Fellows to campus instructional, technology resources, and support services.

Reflecting on their time as paraprofessionals, Fellows have described very limited roles in the classroom and shared that lead teachers rarely involved them in curriculum work. In describing her working relationship with past lead teachers, one Fellow explained, “They treat us like we’re beneath them.” As paraprofessionals, Fellows’ duties often involved working with small groups on activities already created or designed by the teacher, taking students to related arts while the lead teacher attended grade level planning meetings, or making copies and creating materials for students. This work did not teach them the theory behind their teachers’ instructional strategies or classroom management plans. While the extent of their paraprofessional duties depended on their schools’ cultures and teachers’ and administrators’ expectations, Fellows needed to develop skills in lesson planning, progress monitoring, data-driven instruction, and differentiation before they could lead their own classrooms. Fellows also needed the confidence to believe that they could demonstrate these skills effectively.

The APEC residency is a two-semester field experience in which a Fellow works alongside a veteran mentor teacher and has numerous opportunities to develop effective teaching and classroom management skills. The experience begins in the fall when teachers return to work and continues through the spring semester. Fellows are observed at various times by their mentor teachers and field supervisors, veteran educators who have experience teaching in the certification area that their assigned Fellow is pursuing. While Fellows’ teaching abilities vary considerably, we recognized that many Fellows lacked confidence in their abilities. For example, one Fellow, certifying in special education, repeatedly canceled observations with his field supervisor. He felt intimidated and worried that his lessons would be rated poorly. Another Fellow asked to quit the program in the middle of the spring semester because she was concerned that she could not perform like other teachers. In September of one year, a Fellow withdrew from the program before completing any co-teaching or observation activities. She initially claimed that she felt her physical disability would inhibit her classroom performance but later acknowledged a fear of failure. This Fellow was in her late 50s. Upon withdrawing, she explained “I would rather be a disappointment to you now, then later in the program or after graduation when I should be performing well, but I am not.”

While these insecurities are not issues for all Fellows, our work with the more than 100 Fellows who have matriculated through the program underscores the need for social and emotional, not just academic, supports. To this end, mentor teachers and field supervisors complete the state's Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Academic (CERRA) mentor teacher training. While this training is a state requirement for all teachers who serve as mentors to first-year teachers, our mentors and field supervisors complete the training to develop their capacity to coach our Fellows through the residency, help them set goals and identify steps for achieving those goals, actively listen and respond to Fellows' needs and concerns, and provide continual feedback identifying strengths and areas for improvement. We also developed a mentor development program which meets regularly to reinforce these practices.

In their study of self-efficacy and pre-service teachers' ability to teach literacy, Mazzye et al. (2023) explains that the yearlong clinical experience provided by teacher residencies can increase pre-service teachers' efficacy as they continually engage in meaningful practice. Regular teaching, constructive feedback, and mentoring provide "mastery experiences" which support teacher efficacy (p. 156). As our Fellows practice applying theory to practice in the classroom, we encourage regular, in-depth reflection, which occurs prior to any post-observation conference. In the earlier years of the program, Fellows would reflect by rating themselves using the SCTS 4.0 rubric that was used by their observers. This practice helped our Fellows identify specific areas that they could improve, but it did not prompt them to fully evaluate their practice according to the specified criteria on the rubric. A revised reflection provides guiding questions to facilitate reflection. These questions ask Fellows to identify the strengths of their teaching and specify their actions that provide supporting evidence. They are also asked to identify ways they could improve the lesson, provide specific examples of those adjustments, and prepare an action plan. During their post-observation conferences, Fellows discuss their reflections before the observer provides feedback. This change encourages Fellows to identify their own successes and opportunities for growth rather than relying solely on feedback from the mentor teacher and field supervisor. The residency provides a year of reflection, practice, and growth which can increase preservice teachers' confidence.

Conclusion

The APEC staff continue to review evaluation data and listen to Fellows' feedback about their experiences in the program. We are committed to meeting the needs of each incoming cohort. Over the past seven years, the program has evolved to include components that were not a part of the program's original design, but our retention and certification rates suggest that these structures are essential to overcoming challenges, whether they are caused by external or internal factors. The lessons shared here can inform other programs that enroll pre-service teachers with different academic abilities, diverse backgrounds, and varying educational experiences.

References

- Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/diversifying-teaching-profession-report>
- Fenwick, L. (2021). The history, current uses, and impact of entrance and licensure examinations cut scores on the teacher of color pipeline: A structural analysis. Retrieved from <https://aacte.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CREA-v4.pdf>.
- Garcia, A. (2024). Grow your own teachers: A 50-State Scan of Policies and Programs. New America. Retrieved July 15, 2025, from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED672751>.
- Ingersoll, R., May, H., & Collins, G. (2019). Recruitment, employment, retention and the minority teacher shortage. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(37), 2-38. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3714>.
- Lindsay, C., & Hart, C. M. (2017). Exposure to same-race teachers and student disciplinary outcomes for Black students in North Carolina. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 39(3), 485– 510.
- Mazzye, D., Duffy, M., & Lamb, R. (2023). Teacher candidate self-efficacy and ability to teach literacy: A comparison of residency and traditional teacher preparation models. *Journal of Global Education and Research*, 7(2), 146-165. <https://doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.7.2.1230>.
- National Center for Teacher Residencies (2025). *Levers for teacher residencies*. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from <https://nctresidencies.org/levers-for-teacher-residencies/>.
- Petchauer, E. (2012). Teacher licensure exams and black teacher candidates: Toward a new theory and promising practice. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 81(3), 252-267.
- Reddy, L., Lekwa, A., & Glover, T. (2021). Supporting paraprofessionals in schools: Current research and practice. *Psychology in Schools*, 58, 643-647. DOI: 10.1002/pits.22457.
- South Carolina Department of Education (2021-2022). *SC teachers by race and gender*. Retrieved on July 31, 2025, from <https://ed.sc.gov/data/reports/scde-educator-profession-reports/scde-educator-profession-reports/sc-teachers-by-race-and-gender/>.
- South Carolina Department of Education (2024-2025). *Active student headcounts*. Retrieved on July 31, 2025, from <https://ed.sc.gov/data/other/student-counts/active-student-headcounts/>.
- South Commission on Higher Education (2025). *SC Centers of Excellence for Teacher Education*. Retrieved on July 31, 2025, from <https://che.sc.gov/eiagrnt>.
- Showalter, D., Hartman, S.L., Johnson, J., & Klein, B. (2019). Why rural matters 2018-2019: The time is now. The Rural School and Community Trust and College Board and the School Superintendents Association (AASA). Retrieved from, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED604580>.

- Tan, S., & Pang, J. (2023). Test Anxiety: An Integration of the Test Anxiety and Achievement Motivation Research Traditions. *Educational Psychology Review*, 35(13), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09737-1>.
- Yun, C., & Fitz, J. (2025, May). *What matters most: Successful teacher residencies*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/successful-teacher-residencies-brief>.

About the Authors

Marla Sanders, PhD is a Professor of Education at Columbia College. She serves as Director of the APEC Center. Her work addresses policy and structural barriers impacting preservice teachers of color.

Kelly Kinard, MA is the Assistant Director of the APEC Center. Kelly previously worked in museum education, developing a passion for engaging learners and advocating for teachers and equity in education.