

Case Story: University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Reimagining Educator Preparation Through UT PLAYS

Located in the heart of the city, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) is the flagship campus of the University of Tennessee System, Tennessee's land-grant institution. UTK combines a strong tradition of academic excellence with a commitment to service, research, and workforce development. Its Educator Preparation Program (EPP) exemplifies this mission, leveraging innovation and statewide partnerships to expand access to high-quality teacher preparation. UTK was one of only two public institutions statewide to receive the top-tier "Exceeded Expectations" designation on the latest Tennessee educator report card.

Meeting the Moment: A New Model for Teacher Preparation

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) launched UT PLAYS (Personalized Learning at Your Speed) to meet the growing demand for flexible, high-quality educator preparation pathways. What began as an effort to expand additional endorsements through grant funding has evolved into a bold redesign of how teachers are prepared—placing competency, affordability, and accessibility at the center.

Early experiences with UT Grow Your Own initiatives made it clear: existing programs were designed for traditional students not serving adult paraprofessionals, career changers, and others already embedded in schools. Many aspiring teachers faced barriers of cost, schedule, geography, and program relevance. UT PLAYS was designed to break those barriers while maintaining rigorous preparation for classroom readiness.

“We saw people who wanted to be teachers, but existing programs didn’t fit their lives. UT PLAYS is about meeting them where they are, without sacrificing quality.”

— Dr. Amelia Brown, Director, Office of Professional Licensure, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, UTK

“This program was a missing puzzle piece to my teaching journey. After leaving healthcare, I was struggling to find a program to fit my busy life and my district introduced me to UT PLAYS.

–Kalli Bass, UT-PLAYS Special Education Initial Licensure Participant, Putnam County Schools

“This program works well for me. The online format and self paced modules allow me to work when I have the time.”

–Chris Carrizales, UT-PLAYS Mathematics Initial Licensure Participant, Blount County Schools

Reimagining Pathways: Competency-Based and Flexible

UT PLAYS embraces several elements of competency-based learning:

- Accessible, Asynchronous Coursework – Coursework is delivered online at candidates’ own pace, removing traditional seat-time requirements.
- Recognition of Prior Learning – Candidates’ professional experiences are evaluated and counted toward program requirements, honoring the expertise they already bring.
- Job-Embedded Practice – Aspiring educators apply new strategies directly in their classrooms, supported by mentor teachers and high-touch faculty coaching.
- Modular Design – Core coursework in trauma-informed practice, literacy, classroom management, and educational psychology coursework is followed by specialty tracks in the high-need areas of math and special education.
- Quality Results – Clearly articulated competencies, aligned to accreditor and state standards, are aligned to learning activities and assessments that reliably demonstrate the skills of every program graduate.

The flexible design of the program allows candidates to advance at the right pace for their circumstances, with intentional scaffolding to ensure they are day-one ready.

"I was attracted to this program because I could complete it at my own pace and the material was available online. This program was also attractive to me because I had my degree already and this offered a path to complete only the certification."

—Chris Carrizales, UT-PLAYS Mathematics Initial Licensure Participant, Blount County Schools

"The embedded practice really challenged my learning because I had to think outside the box to include them in my curriculum which helped me see other sides of how I could bring more diversity into the classroom."

—Rebecca Hay, UT-PLAYS Mathematics Initial Licensure Participant, Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools

"The competency-based assessments were very helpful for my learning. The assignments were in-depth and required a fair amount of work. You couldn't not learn when doing those!"

—Deborah Drake, UT-PLAYS Special Education Initial Licensure Participant, Hamilton County Schools

Affordability and Workforce Investment

UT PLAYS operates as a non-credit, post-baccalaureate professional development model, allowing it to keep costs low. The current price point is \$2,500 per year for initial licensure and \$1,250 per year for additional endorsements, far below the nearly \$30,000 cost of a master's degree.

Districts are able to directly invest in their own workforce through UT PLAYS. Many provide tuition support, mentor compensation, or flexible scheduling, ensuring candidates succeed while staying employed in schools. This employer-driven model has fostered stronger partnerships and deeper district ownership of teacher pipelines.

"When districts invest in these educators, it shows they want them to succeed and are willing to go the extra mile. It matters because these are their people from the start—an employer-driven approach makes all the difference."

—Dr. Amelia Brown, Director, Office of Professional Licensure, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences, UTK

Faculty Engagement and High-Touch Support

Although housed outside UTK's traditional programs, UT PLAYS was designed by faculty through the Coalition of the Willing (COW Team), a group committed to aligning preparation with workforce needs. Faculty carefully separated degree requirements from licensure requirements, ensuring candidates focus only on what is required for licensure and essential for effective teaching.

High-touch support is central to the model which is accessible 100% online. UT PLAYS Facilitators meet individually with each participant at key points in the program, host weekly office hours, and provide flexible one-on-one coaching. On average, faculty hold 20–25 participant meetings each week, ensuring no candidate is left to navigate alone.

"I feel like Dr. Robertson has gone above and beyond to not only provide rich learning material, but has always communicated so well."

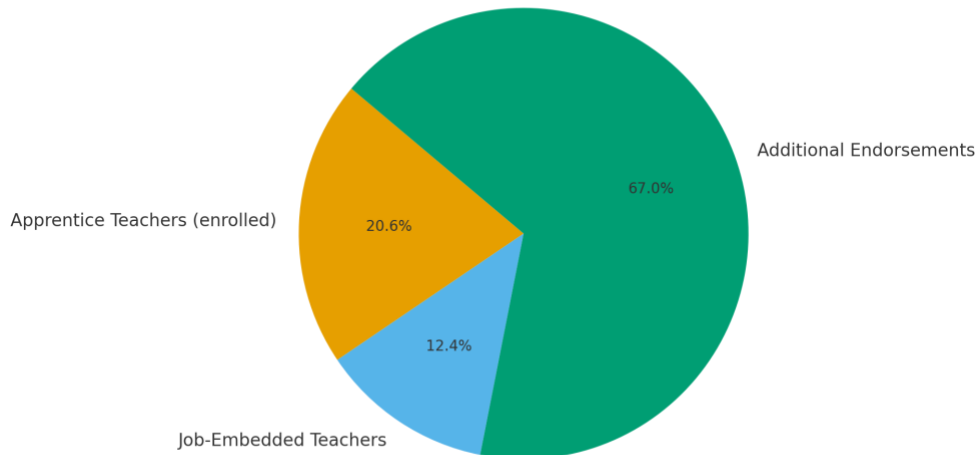
–Kalli Bass, UT-PLAYS Special Education Initial Licensure Participant, Putnam County Schools

Early Outcomes and District Impact

Since its launch:

- 86 apprentice teachers are currently enrolled.
- 52 job-embedded teachers are pursuing licensure.
- 280 candidates are earning additional endorsements.

Current UT Plays Participants



- UT PLAYS has issued 70 initial teacher licenses and over 1,200 additional endorsements to date.
- Candidates have been placed in over 90% of Tennessee districts, with initial licensure candidates currently in 27 districts.

Retention is strong: Early evidence supports that UT PLAYS participants remain in classrooms at higher rates than the state average. Districts consistently report that completers are well-prepared, adaptable, and committed to staying in the profession. As one school district partner put it, *“Whatever you’re doing is working. These teachers are fabulous, and we’re grateful to have them.”*

Recognizing the Power of Collaboration

The success of UT PLAYS reflects the collective effort of many partners. UTK faculty played a pivotal role in designing and delivering the program. Dean McIntyre and Associate Dean Cihak supported faculty buy-in, and faculty governance ensured that intellectual contributions were central to the program’s creation. Their work in curriculum design is a cornerstone of UT PLAYS’ success and must be acknowledged.

Equally critical are the contributions of district partners, who have shaped and refined the program to ensure its workforce relevance.

Their willingness to co-create, designate mentors for candidates, and invest in their own educators has made UT PLAYS a model of employer-driven preparation.

Finally, the Tennessee Department of Education provided the foundational vision and funding that allowed this program to launch and scale. Their ongoing support has ensured that UT PLAYS not only addresses immediate workforce needs but also strengthens Tennessee’s long-term teacher pipeline.

Together with the UT Grow Your Own Center, these partnerships have built a collaborative initiative that is changing the landscape of educator preparation. As Eddie Graham, Human Resources Supervisor of Union County School shared, *“Everyone is always so professional and willing to go the extra mile for your people!”*

Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead

UT PLAYS has highlighted the power of true partnership between universities and school districts. District leaders not only provide mentors and support but also co-develop new endorsements, ensuring programs are directly aligned with workforce needs.

Key lessons include:

- Ask more of your partners early. Districts are willing to invest deeply, both financially and in program creation, when invited.
- Select the right faculty team. Those with K–12 experience and flexibility are essential to online, competency-based success.
- Expect resistance. Shifting to competency-based education requires cultural change, but faculty buy-in grows as outcomes become visible.

Looking forward, UT PLAYS is expanding specialty areas, *refining competency-based assessments*, and building seamless pathways into advanced degree programs.

- Expanding specialty areas: UT PLAYS is currently expanding to offer English as an Additional Endorsement pathway, currently planning to launch in Fall 2026. School partners have also expressed strong interest in Early Childhood

and Secondary Science specialty areas, which are under review for inclusion in the UT PLAYS programming in future years.

- Refining competency-based assessments: UT PLAYS currently offers an expedited pathway for individuals with prior learning or educational experience. However, further work is needed to improve the assessments that recognize prior learning upfront. In light of the evolving role of AI in education, it is more important than ever to ensure that competency is measured in a valid and reliable way, rather than relying on indirect indicators like the completion of assigned tasks. UT PLAYS is excited about a potential partnership with TeachBridge Pathways, a competency-based curriculum built through a partnership between UT Grow Your Own Center and C-BEN, funded by a generous grant from Ascendium Education Group. This collaboration would enhance and expand UT PLAYS competency-based assessments, ensuring that competencies are measured in ways that remain resilient to advances in AI while also enabling earlier measurement within programs to better tailor coursework and supports.
- Building seamless pathways to degree completion: UT PLAYS is developing clear, articulated pathways that allows learners to transfer credits efficiently into degree programs. While progress has been made, the current process remains complex and requires refinement to reach its full potential. The goal is to streamline policies and practices to create a process that is both attainable and easily communicated to program completers.

By leveraging UTK's dual role as a land-grant and R1 institution, the program is extending access without sacrificing rigor, serving learners at every stage of life.

"Every child, regardless of zip code, deserves an excellent teacher. UT PLAYS ensures that districts have the tools to make that a reality."

— Dr. Cheryl Robertson, Grow Your Own Program Coordinator, UTK

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