



Case Story: Growing the Educator Pipeline—Transformation Through GYO at the University of Tennessee Southern

Located in the rural heart of southern Middle Tennessee, the University of Tennessee Southern (UT Southern) serves as the newest campus in the UT System. Since transitioning from Martin Methodist College in 2021, UT Southern has embraced its regional mission—growing a skilled workforce rooted in the communities it serves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the explosive growth of its Educator Preparation Program (EPP), fueled by its commitment to the Grow Your Own (GYO) Program.

GYO registered teacher apprenticeship provides school districts with a structured pathway to help their own employees, particularly teaching assistants and other support staff, become fully licensed teachers. It is designed with working learners in mind, allowing candidates to earn credentials while continuing in their current roles, and ensuring that districts can develop teachers who are already deeply connected to their schools and communities.

Meeting the Moment: A Response to Local Need

When UT Southern launched its [UTS GYO program](#), the goal was clear: increase access to licensure for working adults and educational assistants while addressing the growing teacher shortage in the region’s rural districts. *“At the time, only a handful of students were completing our traditional licensure program—maybe four to ten a year,”* shared Dr. Janet Hanvy, Director of Teacher Education. *“Now, that number has more than quadrupled.”* Since implementing the GYO model, UT Southern graduates approximately 40 new teachers annually, two-thirds of whom are GYO apprentices.

This transformation was sparked by listening to the needs of regional school districts, which identified the need for Special Education (SPED) and secondary teachers, and by recognizing the untapped talent already working in classrooms. Janet Flannery,

Coordinator of New Teacher Programs and Recruitment in Rutherford County Schools, underscored this impact from a district perspective:

“The nice thing about Grow Your Own is that it kind of takes a little bit of that anxiety away. Those teachers, as far as retention, those teachers are the ones that we see stay. I attribute that to the fact that they've already been in the classroom... There's less of a shock factor.”

Reimagining Pathways: Serving Nontraditional Candidates

UT Southern's GYO program was intentionally designed to meet the needs of nontraditional learners, including teaching assistants, career changers, and first-generation college students. The university implemented a hybrid course model combining in-person and online coursework, with strategic weekend and summer offerings to allow candidates to remain employed while pursuing licensure. Courses that require field experience allow the learner to use their work experience in the classroom to reflect on the specific coursework, linking theory to practice. Courses offered in the summer have allowed the class to be offered in a shorter time span. Weekend classes continue to be developed to allow some classes to be offered over three to four weekends, giving the learners time to do their coursework in between class meetings. The program also expanded post-baccalaureate options and clearly communicated flexible pathways for paraprofessionals.

As part of this redesign, UT Southern faculty engaged in the development of [TeachBridge Pathways](#), a grant funded* statewide effort to provide competency-based learning modules for aspiring teachers. Cindy Young, GYO Program Coordinator, and Dr. Claire Paul, Special Education Program Coordinator, served as faculty fellows, helping to create online modules to ensure they were directly aligned to both the realities of classroom practice and the competencies needed for licensure. The integration of TeachBridge Pathways further strengthened UT Southern's ability to provide flexible, high-quality options that include robust assessment to ensure high quality preparation.

“We're meeting students where they are,” explained Cindy Young. *“Field experiences are embedded in candidates' on-the-job learning, so they don't have to quit their jobs to complete clinical practice.”*

Shelby Fisher, a UT Southern GYO completer in Lawrence County, Tennessee, echoed this sentiment:

“The Grow Your Own program has allowed me to work full-time while pursuing my degree and licensure. It's made something that once felt impossible actually achievable.”

Institutional Change and Strategic Alignment

To support this rapid growth, UT Southern made key internal shifts:

- Strengthened partnerships with community colleges to streamline transfer pathways
- Created dedicated roles for advising and program support
- Aligned licensure pathways with district workforce needs, including SPED and secondary endorsements
- Integrated tools like Study.com and expanded office hours for academic support
- Engaged faculty in curriculum redesign, including pilot implementation of the TeachBridge Pathways curriculum, exploration of simulations and open educational resources (OER). Having two of our faculty engaged in the development of TeachBridge has given us the opportunity to integrate some modules into coursework and provide both our working learners and traditional learners a “real-life” perspective on daily classroom events (parent teacher conferences, classroom behavior, etc).
- Established stronger cross-department coordination to ensure smoother processes for admissions, financial aid, and student support

These shifts weren’t always easy. *“We had to improve internal communication, especially with admissions and financial aid,”* noted Hanvy. *“But the results speak for themselves.”*

Strengthening School District Partnerships

Relationships with local districts have evolved from transactional to transformational. GYO contacts at school districts regularly meet with UT Southern’s GYO Coordinator to discuss hiring needs and support candidates through the program. School districts now actively reach out to the university with job openings, eager to hire GYO apprentices on clinical practice permits.

Cynthia Young, GYO Coordinator in Franklin County Schools, Tennessee, described the shift:

“Our relationship with UT Southern is much more than a partnership, it’s a collaboration. They’ve taken the time to understand what our schools need and what our apprentices need.”

That collaboration includes one-on-one check-ins, shared planning meetings, and direct communication between UT Southern and district leaders. *“We talk all the time,”* added UTS’s Cindy Young. *“We meet with district partners regularly to review hiring needs, support apprentices, and adjust to what’s working or not working. It’s built real trust.”*

Janet Flannery pointed to this collaboration as a game-changer for districts under pressure:

“Even with our unique location surrounded by universities, we still face shortages. What has made a real difference is the partnership with UT Southern. They listen, they adjust, and they respond directly to our district’s needs.”

Shelby sees the benefit of this partnership firsthand:

“UT Southern has been there every step of the way. The one-on-one support has helped me stay on track and feel confident, even when it’s hard.”

A More Diverse, Local Workforce

GYO has increased access for non-traditional working learners. UT Southern now serves a more diverse pool of candidates, including more males, more first-generation college students, more Pell-eligible learners, and more candidates of color. All participating school districts are rural, and many apprentices are from the communities where they now serve.

“I grew up here, and I want to teach here,” said Shelby. *“The GYO program has made that possible for me, and I know I’m not the only one.”*

Aspiring educators no longer face the financial and logistical barriers that previously made licensure seem out of reach. GYO funding has helped convert UT Southern’s already low-cost Teacher Assistant to Teacher Licensure (TATL) program into a no-cost pathway for many candidates.

Flannery highlighted the importance of this model for districts like Rutherford County: *“Special education has always been one of the high-need areas for us. Right now we’re sitting at about 12 open positions, nine of them in special education. I appreciate that UT Southern has kept that focus and offers us special education with the elementary endorsement.”*

Looking Forward: Sustainability and Shared Vision

UT Southern’s experience with GYO has fundamentally reshaped its approach to teacher preparation. Faculty are now more focused on flexibility, quality in online instruction, and embedding real-world application into every course. Key assessments are moving toward simulations, and curriculum continues to evolve to reflect what candidates are doing daily in their schools.

Shelby emphasized the real-time application of classroom learning in her daily work:

“Everything I’m learning in class, I get to apply in real time with my students. That immediate connection between theory and practice is huge.”

Perhaps most importantly, GYO has fostered collaboration across institutions and districts, breaking down the culture of competition among EPPs to build a shared vision of quality and access.

“We’re putting the right people in classrooms,” said Hanvy. “People who are from the communities they’re serving, who already have relationships, and who are committed to staying.”

“This is not a program that just prepares teachers,” added Cynthia Young. “It builds community. It gives people a future in the place they already call home.”

Flannery agreed:

“Our initial approach to GYO felt like building the plane while flying it. Having UT Southern and statewide partners at the table has given us structure, processes, and real support for our apprentices.”

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