Transforming Teacher Education: A Community- and School-Based "Residency" Model of Urban Teacher Preparation

Robert E. Lee
Carlos Nelson
Peter Auffant
Rachel Perveiler

From the university’s perspective...

Ten years ago it seemed that virtually every teacher preparation article on recruitment and retention stated that by 2010, we would need 2.2 million teachers for our nation’s classrooms due to high levels of attrition (National Center for Education Statistics 1997) coupled with an acceleration of baby-boom generation teachers retiring (Carroll and Foster 2009). And now, in 2011, teachers are being cut from the very schools and districts we thought we needed to fill. The mantra in the face of such a shortage “crisis” was recruit, recruit, and recruit. It has now become clear that the approach should have been more focused, as we now have too many teachers and an overall surplus of candidates to available positions (Lee, Eckrich, Lackey, and Showalter 2011). However, few new teachers are prepared for “tomorrow’s schools,” which have characteristics that were once associated with inner-city urban areas. Challenges from lack of funding and resources, high teacher attrition, and an increased population of English language learners, all in the face of lower student achievement (as measured by standardized tests), are now pervasive in districts across the United States.

Robert E. Lee serves as Illinois State University’s executive director of Chicago programs and partnerships and directs its Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™.
Carlos Nelson is Executive Director of the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC).
Peter Auffant is Principal of the Collegiate Academy at Chicago International Charter School—Longwood Campus, and EdisonLearning school.
Rachel Perveiler is a special education teacher at Finkl Academy in Chicago, Illinois.
So, why do so many teacher preparation programs continue to train our future teachers in isolation of these challenges?

The new mantra should be recruit, but with a concentration on cultivating teachers in the highest-need fields (literacy/reading, math, science, and bilingual and special education); increase clinical hours at the onset of a preparation program, but those that are active, tied directly to course instruction; and provide services to schools and university training, but ones that are school-based, culturally relevant, and community contextualized.

The Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™ (CTEP) at Illinois State University (ISU) offers such a continuum of learning. Included in teacher preparation and effectiveness is student achievement, which is directly tied to whole school and community progress. Our work with local community-based organizations is about reframing schools as the central resource and asset of the community, and working together to leverage additional resources.

Through the TEACH (Teacher Education and Access to College for Highschoolers) program, we encourage high school students to think about teaching and ways that they can give back and reinvest in their own community. Being part of the change and influencing the next generation by tutoring and mentoring children who attend feeder elementary schools (often the very same feeder schools they attended) can have a powerful impact on both the high school TEACH mentor and the mentee. As we work to recruit more underrepresented students from Chicago public schools to pursue teacher education, CTEP continues to establish TEACH chapters in public high schools to provide students with post-secondary awareness seminars (including campus visitations), college-application and financial-aid workshops, and ACT preparation courses.

Once on the university campus, students interested in pursuing teacher education are able to take courses that have been redesigned for the Urban Teacher Preparation track. Each year since 2005, ISU faculty members from across the colleges (Arts & Sciences, Education, Applied Sciences & Technology, Business, and Fine Arts) have been provided opportunities to redesign a course they regularly teach to better prepare pre-service teachers for the realities and complexities of urban schools. This program recognizes the need for faculty training in order to offer our students the early immersion that we envisioned was a critical part of changing the culture at ISU. Now, over forty courses across twenty-one disciplines have been
fundamentally redesigned so that the content of their coursework is juxtaposed contextually to the needs, assets, challenges, and issues often found in our partner schools and communities. Our training program for faculty has a demonstrated history of success, and most faculty members continue to instruct their redesigned course long after their inauguration into the program.

![Personal and Professional Preparation](image)

**Course Redesigns Across Disciplines**

Over the course of their participation in the 2008–11 course redevelopment program, faculty grantees \((N = 24)\) increased their preparedness, knowledge, and confidence regarding urban education. Increases were observed among every item on the Personal and Professional Preparation scale over time. The increase of the composite score was significant, \(t(5) = -3.20, p = .01\).

Designing and offering such courses has provided a foundation for building an effective Urban Teacher Preparation strand under a newly approved Civic Engagement and Responsibility minor. This minor, among other things, helps guide future educators as they learn that public schools and their inhabitants—whether affluent or under-resourced—are situated within
a nexus of social, cultural, historical, economic, political, and geographical contexts.

Our longitudinal research suggests that the sooner we can get pre-service teachers into the type of school we ultimately want and need them to teach in, the more likely they will be to feel connected to the community/school and express an interest and commitment to teach in an urban area.

**Overall Findings Among Course Development Grant Students**

Course-redesign student enrollees in the spring 2011 semester \( (n = 246) \) were surveyed pre-course and post-course to assess changes in attitudes and perceptions over time. Analyses demonstrated highly statistically significant increases in both teaching efficacy, \( t(245) = -4.51, \ p = .00 \) and urban experience, \( t(238) = -7.72, \ p = .00 \). These findings indicate that at the conclusion of the course, students had more experience in urban settings and were more confident in their ability to become urban educators. Although participants increased their urban teaching intentions over the course of their enrollment, it was not to a statistically significant degree.
Early exposure and immersion helps us create a win-win-win situation for all partners, and more than settling on “fly on the wall” clinical observation, we have been moving toward service-learning modules, in which university faculty and students provide direct services to teachers, students, and community members. Our vision of urban teacher preparation provides teacher candidates, from day one, with rich and sustained firsthand experiences in urban schools and neighborhoods. These experiences are infused and followed with frequent opportunities to engage in thoughtful discussions with peers and experienced professional educators. Such discussions promote the notion of teaching as a reflective and collaborative practice. They encourage us to examine how our own identities and those of our students and colleagues shape our understanding of and experiences in school. These conversations value collaboration over competition, nurture peer feedback and mentoring, and create safe yet challenging learner-centered classroom communities.

The compounding result of more courses redesigned with embedded urban field experiences means that more ISU pre-service teachers are being exposed to Chicago’s communities and its public schools. The effort is grounded on campus with engaged faculty and students, simultaneously situated in Chicago for contextualized learning, and service-oriented to meet the needs of partner schools and community-based organizations.
Our next challenge was to transform guided pathways for true relational developments to occur between our university students and teachers in our partner schools, staff in community-based organizations, and area residents. Our inaugural Summer Teacher Education Partnership for Urban Preparation (STEP-UP) program was launched in 2010 to bring this pathway together. STEP-UP has a strong focus on the role community plays in education and the ways in which teachers are part of the greater community effort toward improving the quality of life for all residents. The program provides pre-service teachers an in-depth understanding of one partner community by fully immersing them in the neighborhood and allowing them an opportunity to literally “step-up” and commit to teaching in Chicago’s public schools upon graduation.
In 2010, the inaugural STEP-UP cohort was launched in Little Village, a predominantly immigrant Latino community on the southwest side of Chicago. Twenty pre-service teachers (fellows) completing their sophomore or junior year were accepted into the highly competitive four-week intensive summer residency immersion program. These top-caliber ISU students (average major GPA of 3.7; average cumulative GPA of 3.5) co-taught alongside veteran teachers in Chicago's public schools; engaged in service-learning projects with partner community-based organizations; and completed seminars taught by ISU faculty, public school teachers, and McCormick Freedom Project staff covering a broad range of topics (e.g., Response to Intervention; Universal Design for Learning; Multiple Literacies; Restorative Justice; and Educating for Democracy). All twenty fellows lived in traditional homestays with Chicago Little Village residents. In 2011, STEP-UP introduced eighteen new fellows and expanded its outreach to include service to the Greater Auburn Gresham community, a predominantly African-American neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. Evaluation of the STEP-UP program has yielded impressive results, with positive growth observed in teaching competencies, community service self-efficacy, and attitudes toward urban communities.
To assess teaching efficacy among the 2011 STEP-UP Fellows ($N = 15$), three subscales (Planning and Preparation, Instruction, and Classroom Environment) were developed from the Framework for Teaching domains (Danielson 1996). Over the course of the program, each of the Teaching Efficacy subscales demonstrated significant increases over time: Planning and Preparation, $t(14) = -4.28, p = .00$; Instruction, $t(14) = -5.28, p = .00$; and Classroom Environment, $t(14) = -4.63, p = .00$. These findings indicate that participants were significantly more prepared in teaching competencies (planning abilities, instructional skills, and classroom management) at the conclusion of the program, compared to pre-program levels.
After STEP-UP, students return to the university campus for another year of study and have the opportunity to either enroll in a semester-long traditional student teaching (TST) placement or apply for our flagship program, the yearlong Professional Development School (PDS). In the PDS program, students complete a full-year of in-service residency in addition to senior-year methodology coursework taught by ISU faculty on-site in a community-based school. Our research suggests that intern teachers working for a full residency year are better supported and mentored by effective veteran teachers through a process of socialized induction—a “guided” acculturation process into urban education, which has been shown to increase teacher retention when such induction and support for beginning teachers is provided.

Each year, as the program grows, new schools are being transformed into PDS sites. Yearlong residency programs at PDS sites provide future teachers with enhanced opportunities to observe, reflect, and later deal with challenges associated with establishing their own classrooms—including management strategies.
Twenty-three pre-service teachers participated in CTEP’s evaluation of the 2010–11 student-teaching programs (PDS internship and traditional student teaching [TST]). Perceptions of students’ preparation to serve as in-service teachers were measured at the onset (Time 1) and at the completion (Time 2) of their respective assignments (PDS or TST). Scores on the Classroom Environment subscale demonstrated significant increases for both TSTs, $t(11) = –2.33$, $p = .04$, and PDS interns, $t(10) = –3.80$, $p = .00$. This indicates that both participant groups gained a significant amount of confidence related to managing the classroom over the course of their participation.
We believe teacher candidates should be exposed to the kinds of hard-to-staff classrooms and schools in which they will be teaching as soon as possible. It is this experience that can help shape teachers as they formulate their emerging professional identities and transition from student teacher to teacher professional.

**From the community’s perspective...**

Illinois State University’s Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™ is an exceptional model for urban teacher preparation. It not only includes the efforts of the university to work with prospective urban educators but also incorporates a community development partner and its partner organizations from the urban community of choice—in this case, the Auburn Gresham community on Chicago’s south side. Entering into a partnership with ISU’s CTEP in 2010 brought about a tremendous level of excitement within the community-based partner. After all, how often does the number one academic center for producing educators look to nest a program within a low- to moderate-income community on the south side of Chicago?

As the momentum and excitement of the partnership took off, so did some levels of apprehension. How will the new, young prospective teachers “fit in” at their schools, at the homes of their host families, in the offices of other community-based organizations, and in the general community? And how will community residents take to embracing or accepting these new faces throughout their neighborhoods? It seemed like an exciting venture for the Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation (GADC), seen by many in the community as a trusting community ally.

The GADC is a comprehensive community development corporation formed to foster and promote revitalization of the low- to moderate-income south side Chicago neighborhoods of Auburn Gresham, Englewood, and West Chatham. The GADC fosters and promotes the revitalization of its community areas in a myriad of ways, all focused on leveraging physical and human assets to enhance residents’ quality of life. This is achieved through actions that generate a higher quality of life for the residents and businesses of the community areas it serves. The targeted service area currently runs from Sixty-Seventh Street to Eighty-Ninth Street (north to south), and the Dan Ryan Expressway to Damen Avenue (east to west).
The GADC's current projects were initiated to strengthen the safety, health, and personal well-being of the residents in the communities it serves. It is a proud member of the Local Initiative Support Corporation’s (LISC), New Communities Program (funded principally by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation), which allowed it to engage in a community-visioning process that resulted in a comprehensive quality of life plan completed in 2005. This plan has resulted in projects that support the community’s economic development via real estate development and property management; provides the community’s senior population with services that support the maintenance and stability of their property; creates community-engagement activities, festivals, and arts and entertainment; and, in 2007, began a collaboration with Access Community Health Network and Perspectives Charter Schools–Calumet campus to create a school-based health clinic, which opened in June 2009. This collaboration also provides Perspectives Charter Schools with intensive after-school programming through its Elev8 program, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. Additionally, leveraging the expertise and momentum generated from the Elev8 initiative, the GADC created a model replicating facets of the Elev8 initiative.

In October 2009, GADC and its community partners, including Neighborhood Housing Services–Auburn Gresham, initiated the School Yard Project by organizing community service providers and residents to participate in a parent-centered resource fair at Richard Oglesby Elementary School. Over one hundred Oglesby parents and students attended the fair and discovered many local services available to enhance their quality of life. After several conversations with the principal of Oglesby and two additional resource fairs, the School Yard Project was redesigned and emerged as a comprehensive resource to neighborhood school principals in Auburn Gresham, assisting in their efforts to increase parental involvement, strengthen school-community relations, and improve academic outcomes, while helping to increase the quality of life in the Auburn Gresham community.

In January 2010, LISC and ISU’s CTEP presented GADC with an opportunity to leverage the work of the School Yard Project by competing for a partnership with the university’s federally funded TEACHER+PLUS project, which sought to redesign and fundamentally transform how teachers were to be recruited, prepared, inducted, and supported in Chicago’s public schools.
At the heart of the project was a teacher residency experience. By teaching and living in a partner community, teacher candidates could learn more about how their role as a teacher would fit with the social, cultural, and educational landscape of the targeted community- and school-based partnerships and the expressed needs of the district. During the program, teacher candidates would volunteer for New Community Program lead agencies or other community-based organizations within the community in which they were teaching and living. As a New Communities Program lead agency, GADC successfully competed for this project, and during the 2010–11 school year, students and faculty visited, taught in, and participated in the Auburn Gresham community in preparation for the first cohort of live-in teaching interns to take place during the 2011–12 school year.

During the planning process, we envisioned that the interns would learn about and become acclimated to the Auburn Gresham community via direct participation in the School Yard Project. Live-in teacher candidates participating in the home-visiting (parent outreach) and community-based student recognition components at our partnering schools would diversify their experience as they gained a new understanding of the community and their roles as educators through personal interaction with parents and students.

When the reality of GADC’s partnership opportunity with ISU’s CTEP started to unfold, we were thrilled. Here was an opportunity to expose our youth to higher education in an expanded format. With TEACH, we could have a deliberate strategy to uncover high-school-aged children interested in teaching. The TEACH program works to recruit underrepresented students from Chicago public high schools to pursue teacher education, which is clearly a need in communities like ours, in which it is extremely rare to find young African American teachers.

STEP-UP involves Auburn Gresham families hosting STEP-UP fellows in their home for a summer. This is where the excitement of the ISU partnership really hit home for the GADC and for the community as a whole. Though as a community development corporation we tend to see the community for the assets that abound, it is clear that the areas we service (99.9% African American) are not accustomed to seeing the kinds of things that the GADC-ISU partnership would bring. For instance, I recall my own reaction in the summer following the launch of the partnership in Auburn Gresham to seeing a group of eight or nine young Caucasian women
walking around the community. It was a warm Friday evening in the inner city of Auburn Gresham, and walking down Seventy-Ninth Street in the heart of the bustling community, these ISU students looked as if they were comfortable in their surroundings and belonged! They were in *their* community. I only wish I could have felt that same level of comfort, not realizing that by having those fears, I was perpetuating those societal fears about our community. Seeing those students helped me. In fact, post-STEP-UP survey results suggest that over time, the students adapted and felt a connection to our community, and perceived it to be much safer for them than they had thought prior to the program.
In 2011, two instruments were used to gauge participants’ attitudes toward their community of residence (either Little Village or Auburn Gresham). Community Commitment, which assessed how well participants adapted and felt a connection to the community, demonstrated a highly significant increase over time, $t(14) = -4.92, p = .00$. The second scale, Community Safety, which assessed how safe participants perceived their community, also demonstrated a significant increase, $t(14) = -5.78, p = .00$. These findings, taken together, indicate that participants had substantially stronger connections and more positive attitudes toward their STEP-UP community at the conclusion of the program.
In another example, I saw a smaller group of STEP-UP Fellows congregating in the front yard of the school on May Street. They appeared to be relaxing in a picnic-like formation, no doubt just being young adults. At that moment, I thought to myself, How wonderful this whole concept is, not just for the ISU students who are becoming acclimated to the “Auburn Gresham way of life” but also for the residents of Auburn Gresham young and old, some of who might have harbored similar fears about the integration of the STEP-UP fellows, TEACH club members, and participants of other ISU-led programs.

Most of the students who have been introduced to our community, particularly for the immersive STEP-UP and PDS programs, come from areas very far from inner-city Chicago—if not in geography than in way of life. Some are from downstate Illinois, while others are from suburban Chicago, which for many of the students might as well be downstate Illinois, since inner-city Chicago is typically thought of as a foreign, war-torn land not to be visited. An early group of ambitious ISU students that I met included a young student from suburban Chicago. Her name was Rachel Perveiler, and she was visiting Auburn Gresham and spoke about her upbringing as if she lived hundreds of miles away from her placement community of Little Village (the predominantly Latino community) and thousands of miles away from Auburn Gresham. In fact, Rachel’s home was only fifteen miles away, yet worlds apart. Rachel was committed to the program and has become a role model for many current and future ISU students. Rachel now works and lives in her “new” community of Little Village.

The experience to date for the Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation is nothing short of wonderful. We have worked with fabulous interns who have designed community projects and participated in most of the GADC’s community engagement activities. The success of the partnership is already evident at one of our local high schools, where a TEACH chapter was established in 2010. In just one year, nearly twenty students were accepted into and have decided to attend ISU.
Although we recognize that it is still too soon to know if young African American students will graduate from ISU having studied teacher education and with a desire to return to our community, one thing is already certain: Kids in the community are becoming more accustomed to seeing student teachers and interns as “regular” people who happen to live in the same neighborhood as they do—regardless of ethnicity or gender. And the ISU students are learning, on the job, how to teach youth in urban settings and are hopefully preparing to launch their careers as Chicago public school teachers.
From the school's perspective...

How do we create the right type of experiences to prepare teacher candidates for the challenges and joys of urban teaching? Thanks to the work that the GADC is doing in the community, worlds are being brought together that have traditionally, at least on the south side of Chicago, been separated across socioeconomic and demographic lines. The reality is that in large urban centers, community members need to see their neighbors as a source of strength and opportunity, a relationship that if leveraged can advance the work of both parties. Likewise, teachers must also see the communities they serve as the central component for strength in the lives of young students.

How do the lenses we look through to examine learning and teaching obscure our perspective? Teachers and administrators in urban schools must first take a look in the mirror and decide, “Who am I, and what do I have to offer the students and the community?” When teachers take a student-first or community-first approach to teaching, they can evidence this shift from “I’m here to save the children” to “I’m here to serve the children.”

There is urgency in the work that we do because we have the power to influence and change lives. When we are effective in the classroom and breathe life into our students, communicating the positive expectation that all students can and will achieve greatness, then there is hope for us yet. Our students have only one shot at this class: right now. They have only one shot to get it right in algebra, biology, economics, and so on. Our students deserve the best, and we owe it to them to show a sense of urgency in our collective work. They need their first-year teacher to perform as a fifth-year veteran—they need it now, and they don’t have time to wait for teachers to figure it out before they get it right.

To provide some context, Chicago International Charter School–Longwood campus (CICS Longwood) has been in existence since 1998. The school serves 1,450 students in grades three through twelve in the Longwood corridor near the Washington Heights neighborhood. Our talented students come from various neighborhoods across the south side of Chicago: 85 percent are eligible for federal free and reduced lunch; 99 percent are African American; 93 percent of our graduates are accepted to colleges and universities. If you choose Longwood, you choose college success for your child; our motto is “At Longwood, achievement is not an option.”
Over the past year, four teachers from ISU’s Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™ have joined the teaching faculty at CICS Longwood. These first-year teachers are experts in their content area, are dedicated—often the first and last teachers in the building—and represent some of the most reflective teachers in the building. As graduates of Illinois State University, they share more than just a collegial bond through school color and mascot. Three of the four are graduates of the STEP-UP program, three are National Science Foundation scholarship recipients, two are STEM scholarship award winners, and three were members of UNITE (CTEP’s on-campus registered student organization, Urban Needs in Teacher Education). Each of these teachers evidence the shift from "save" to "serve" and maintain positive expectations for their students. Their drive has created a considerable ripple effect across our campus, resulting in new clubs, such as the ISU-sponsored TEACH club. At CICS Longwood, TEACH club members meet regularly; discuss topics in learning and teaching; visit college campuses; maintain a campus garden of their own design; and, most recently, started a tutoring club for younger students on campus, directed by older students. In just a short time on campus, these first-year teachers are proving that they are at Longwood in service to the students.

As an administrator, I did not come by these successful ISU graduates by chance. With recent openings across all subject areas, ISU CTEP students rose to the top. I know that I can rely on the efficacy that these students will exhibit, primarily because ISU has already done a lot of the groundwork. Not all students at ISU are CTEP students—there is a rigorous selection process involved to identify the right type of candidate for success in urban schools. Having already evidenced a desire to work in concert with communities, ISU then provides the right mix of opportunities on campus to support teacher development. Opportunities include on-campus memberships to UNITE and other teacher candidate organizations, yearlong PDS student teaching, and multiple scholarship opportunities. Each of the candidates participated in multiple opportunities during their teacher preparation program, each by choice and individual determination to build a base of experience that would advance his or her work as a first-year teacher to resemble that of a more veteran teacher.
In 2010–11, significant increases were observed on the Professional Responsibilities subscale for both TSTs $t(11) = -2.88, p = .02$, and PDS interns, $t(10) = -2.38, p = .04$. These findings indicate that both participant groups grew confidence in their professionalism significantly over the course of their student teaching.

Does this guarantee that all ISU CTEP grads will live up to the same expectations? We can only hope. But I can say that I have evidence that the ISU’s CTEP is identifying quality teacher candidates and providing them with the right type of access to the right types of experiences to prepare the right type of teacher to be effective with students in our community.

As a professional community charged with the responsibility for growing the type of teacher who will make an impact in urban education, we have a great responsibility to keep the needs of the students and community at the center of the work that we do; strengthening the bonds between university,
Transforming Teacher Education

teacher, community, and school is our call to action. If we are to truly make sustainable impact on student lives and in communities where teacher graduates will serve children, we have a responsibility to continue our support past graduation day. I look forward to collaborating with ISU to provide continued post-graduate support for teacher graduates; to combine mentoring with job-embedded professional development, where first-through third-year teachers address problems of practice that cannot be worked out during student teaching; and to coordinate efforts between the university, the school, and the community—all in service to children.

From the teacher’s perspective...

As a newly minted Chicago public school teacher, only months into my transition as a professional special education teacher, I was introduced to an organization called the Polar Bear Club. The members in the club travel to nearby lakes or ponds, specifically during the winter months, and swim together. The event is meant to foster togetherness, personal courage, and growth. It is said that the best way to partake is to immerse oneself in the water, with cohorts on either side. From my experience with Illinois State’s Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™, I am able to draw a connection between a Polar Bear Club immersion and my recent urban teacher training immersion.

I was a young child when I first thought about becoming a teacher. This is similar to many of my peers, some of whom are also just starting out in the classroom. While in high school, I had narrowed my focus to special education, and planned one day on teaching in the suburban school district that served me as a K–12 student. During this time, a teacher mentor of mine urged me to apply for a Golden Apple Foundation scholarship program, which provides scholarships in exchange for a future teaching commitment in a “school of need.” Toward the completion of my senior year in high school, I was offered a spot in the program, but not everyone felt as enthusiastic about the opportunity as I did. My parents played a major role in my debate of accepting the scholarship. We had many questions: What was a school of need? Where were these schools located? Why have I never been in one of these schools?
My parents both grew up in neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago, with their large, Irish Catholic families. They met and married in their late twenties. Having grown up blocks away from each other, they came from similar backgrounds and watched as their neighborhoods grew and changed. They watched the beginnings of White Flight in Chicago: the migration of their white American neighbors from their increasingly racially diverse Chicago communities to new, racially homogeneous suburbs. As my parents were beginning their marriage, they decided to migrate to a developing suburb, about fifteen miles south of their childhood homes. There, my journey of education began, with Chicago acting as nothing more than a nearby tourist destination. Our closest interaction with Chicago Public Schools was through the news.

My parents and I continued to wonder and research: What was a school of need? Where were these schools located? To my surprise, a town just twenty minutes west of my hometown housed some schools of need. I decided to accept the scholarship, knowing that I could look for a teaching position in that neighboring town. Before I knew it, the next summer I was interning in Chicago during Chicago Public Schools’ summer school session. My cohorts and I lived in university dorms in an affluent Chicago neighborhood and traveled to teach in schools of need around the city. I had presumptions about the metal detectors and why students did not have recess in the daily schedule. Despite my curiosities, I thoroughly enjoyed the internship. In fact, I began to feel comfortable living in the city, about which my parents continuously warned. I even enjoyed observing and eventually teaching in the city.

As I became involved on Illinois State University’s campus with student education organizations, I continued to visit schools of need. This increased my familiarity and, in turn, began to mold new perceptions of urban education. ISU provided me with opportunities to gain familiarity with Chicago schools as well as with its unique neighborhoods. Groups of students traveled by bus to Chicago to observe and discuss teaching strategies in urban schools. Many students traveled with a class from campus and continued the discussion upon their return to campus, with a culminating activity based on the class’s academic discipline. These trips increased my interaction with students in urban areas and also increased my curiosity. I no longer wondered what a school of need was. At this point, I wondered about the experience of the students and families attending the school I visited. What was it like to live here?
The Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™ was piloting STEP-UP (Summer Teacher Education Partnership for Urban Preparation), a summer immersion internship in Chicago. This program expanded my experiences of previous internships by inviting me to live with a host family and work in the neighborhood. My parents wondered why I was interested in this opportunity, as they knew of opportunities in the suburbs with which they were more familiar. Their concerns helped me recognize the importance of becoming familiar with schools and surrounding neighborhoods. As I increased my familiarity with schools of need and urban education, I become less concerned. However, my parents were yet to have such opportunities. To clarify, I return to the experiences of the Polar Bear Club swimmers. The parents of a first-time swimmer might feel a level of anxiety and discomfort similar to that of my parents. On the other hand, the parents of a veteran swimmer might react with more encouragement and fewer concerns.

Flash-forward to the present day: I have completed student teaching in Chicago and was lucky to live with neighbors of my host family from STEP-UP. I still rent from those neighbors and managed to secure a teaching position at an elementary school in the community. I am enjoying each day’s challenges in my new career as a special education teacher with my middle school students. At the end of each school day, I travel the mile and a half home to be greeted by either the neighborhood kids or a stack of papers to grade. On weekends, my parents may visit and walk with me to enjoy delicious Mexican food down the street.

So what exactly have I learned from my early experiences with urban education and CTEP? I have learned the importance of getting to know my students’ backgrounds and cultures. I recognize how to incorporate social justice issues in the classroom, and how crucial it is to evoke critical thinking in students. I have practiced making meaningful connections in a community as well as in a school, and using such connections to guide my instruction. When making school decisions, I have a unique perspective because the students are also my neighbors. I understand how to analyze the assets of a community and build on its strengths. Moreover, I seek to build on the strengths of my students and of myself as a teacher.
Conclusion

By training pre-service teachers in high-need schools and providing “residency” opportunities for teacher candidates to live in the community, pre-service teachers not only learn critical pedagogical and disciplinary skills but also experience unique culturally contextual aspects of a community. This approach as evidenced ensures an early immersion into teaching, and inculcates community ownership and service. With this systemic model of change in place, the Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline™ is transforming teacher education and creating a new generation of teachers dedicated to investing in and committing themselves to teach in high-need schools from which they were trained and often in the community in which they lived. Through these collective experiences, students begin to embrace the idea of living and teaching in an urban setting as they transition from student teacher to teacher professional.

References

