

# *Grow Your Own Illinois*

## **The Roles of the Cohort Coordinator Building Relationships among Candidates**

**Draft**

### **Best Practices from the Field**

Representatives from Grow Your Own Teachers consortia across Illinois met at the Statewide Learning Network meeting in December 2006. One main topic of discussion was the role of cohort coordinators—how they are building strong relationships among teacher candidates and what issues they are facing. Since GYO Illinois is interested in developing best practices based on lessons from the field, recorders captured a wealth of learning and it is reproduced below in conversational form, reflecting the discussion.

### **Key roles of a good coordinator**

At the Statewide Learning Network meeting, small groups were asked to identify what they thought were the key roles of a good cohort coordinator. They said:

1. Connection/liaison among candidates and higher education and cbos
2. Support for candidates needs
3. Motivator
4. Mediator—knowing details of all partners
5. Managing all the pieces
6. Building relationships and support, candidates, universities, cbo's
7. Providing individualized support
8. Really knowing all the candidates
9. Helping to organize a powerful voice
10. Helping to resolve issues: personal and academic
11. Genuinely caring: needs of candidates, lives of candidates, and most importantly, willingness to go the extra mile to ensure the success of the candidates
12. Facilitating/fostering relationships: build trust among stakeholders; maintain/sustain communication lines (serve as an informational source)
13. Maintaining progress: follow-up! (encourage, motivate, up-lift, support staff)
14. Encouraging and preparing candidates academically and logistically
15. Staying in communication
16. Building trust and one-on-one relationships within the cohort
17. Solving problems; making sure people don't drop

### **Building a Cohort: Issues and Strategies**

The notes below were drawn from a discussion of cohort coordinators talking with each other about issues they face and strategies they have found to be successful.

### **Dealing with retention**

The coordinators need to let potential candidates know the expectations upfront, and encourage those who are enthusiastic. They encourage people to stick it out and to let

them, the coordinators, know if they are running into issues. This is best done on a case by case basis. It is an individualized thing. Sometimes lack of academic progress is just too discouraging for a candidate or the higher education partner will say they just cannot continue the person's education. Each semester there is a certain date and deadline by when the candidate must drop a class. The candidate should come to the coordinator who is handling the paper work at the university and then they can discuss it together. Tutoring or other supports might help. The candidates also give each other support.

### **How-to Advice from Coordinators on Organizing a Strong Cohort**

**a. Cohort contact list** Develop a list of contact information for all cohort members and share it with the cohort. It is also useful as an email distribution list.

**b. Cohort meetings** When all agree on a meeting date together and two meetings are scheduled in advance, you get pretty good turnout that way. Effective meetings include some discussion and some study time. Another coordinator felt that if a meeting was planned in advance, the candidates forget. They tend to show up when a meeting is called on very short notice. One coordinator tried to find a night when most were in class and delivered needed information at that time. But in addition to information, they noted is important to bring candidates together to build relationships .

**c. Study groups.** Some coordinators found that large meetings weren't working too well and they are now doing study groups in the evening. The candidates also study at each other's houses.

**d. Other suggestions:** delegate the responsibility for meeting attendance to the candidate representatives on the consortium. Maybe having a peer calling them will reduce the embarrassment of their not wanting to say they cannot come.

### **One-stop Registration**

The South Suburban consortium developed a one-stop registration process. All the people they needed to see were there: financial aid people, deans, coordinators. The president came and welcomed them. The candidates could get everything taken care of at one time. They know they can now come to any administrator for help. This was a good way to begin. But this session should be well planned. The college now has a designated advisor for GYO students. Dean for Student Life is keeping a data base for the South Suburbs.

### **Retreat on "first day of class"**

Logan Square Neighborhood Association tried to take advantage of the time between semesters since the candidates are SO busy during the semester. They had a retreat in August before classes started, though it was billed as the first day of class so everyone came. Most of the relationships have formed in the classes. Students now plan a lot of their own things and invite the coordinators. The "first day of class" covers what the community organization does and what is expected of the candidates. .

### **Building relationships with the candidates**

Chicago State University attended a play performed by Target Area Development, their community partner. That allowed the university partners to see the students on stage in a different part of their life. Over half of the students were involved in the play. This

allowed the people involved to interact outside of class, rather than only “did you turn in that financial aid form?” It showed that higher education partners cared about the culture of the community organization.

The Little Village Community Development Corporation held an “Open Mike” in the summer. The candidates were invited. One read her poetry. This allowed the coordinator to see a completely different side of the person that she had not seen. She felt proud that they had such talent in the community. It is important to go out and have coffee, not just nag them.

### **Keeping track of the candidates**

LaShonda Brown, cohort coordinator for North Lawndale, bought a teacher grade book at Staples in which she keeps records on each candidate: the meetings that they attend, their application, waivers signed, class schedules, child care, transportation, vouchers, and notes on the candidates if they aren’t too personal. She also has an “etc. section” with information like referrals, attendance at weekly classes and the like.

The South Suburbs has a web based page with information on each candidate. They have 10 partners and this allows them to work from the same data.

**Suggestion:** Keep two copies of everything. Morgan keeps a second copy of all forms.

### **Would it be helpful for coordinators to get together from time to time?**

Yes, this would allow the coordinators to show each other support and get together on a professional level. It provides new ideas from people who are going through the same things. How often: once a semester in the middle. LSNA agreed to host. But this is harder for consortia in different areas of the state. List serve or a blog would be really helpful since they are limited by grant funds in the travel they can do.

### **Building/supporting a cohort**

The following ideas were taken verbatim from post-it notes prepared by small groups.

**Community Organize** Visit regularly; have support from grassroots organizations; inspire future teachers by developing mentor/mentoree relationships; be flexible to needs of the community; create a network for student support; have a core of people to do work; get as many people involved as possible; work with elected officials; involve candidates in another issues (such as stopping a school closing or getting someone’s gas heat turned on); visit a legislator together, thank him/her; ask for more funds; do a phone bank at the office together; call legislators to get their support; communicate with others the methods used to build, support, organize the cohort; joint projects, like staffing a tutoring center.

**Meet regularly with cohort** Rap sessions about social problems; reflection sessions on success and challenges; sessions to set goals—personal and group; share stories; study groups; keep open and honest communication between consortium and cohort; share each other’s experiences; allow for personal friendships to be formed; have

regular meetings that entail teambuilding/support services; care about people (including what goes on outside in people's lives); develop relationship, listen to people, communicate; email; always have more than one plan; letters; study together; monthly meetings;

**Move Action** Work to address concerns of cohort; we can pray; we can march; lobby; give to one another; have fun!; break bread; involve cohort in advocacy; go to Washington, DC and talk about GYO to Congress; go to Springfield together

**Build Relationships** Make candidates responsible for each other; have dinners together; have regular meetings; listen to the people that live in the neighborhood; participate in an educational workshop; help bond with personal experiences; listen to candidate's experiences; keep in mind that everyone can be going through a rough time; ownership; care about people (what goes on outside); listen to people; develop relationships; take an interest in their lives; take initiative to help create relationships between cohort participants from individual cohorts and statewide. Check in regularly; get the word out to fellow parent mentors about GYO and how it changed your life; learn what is important to other cohort members; build a strong relationships with cohort organizer.

**Education information** Have candidates do press/publicity advertising events; work to plan an event; have candidates work on recruiting other schools/candidates; inform; you can never be too organized; counsel.

**Academic support** Develop study groups; provide tutors; provide basic knowledge of GYO program; get laptops for each candidate; investigate supplemental tutoring and supportive services for candidates.

**Fellowship: Building a Cohort Community** Party; share food; get to know the cohort; invite the candidates to do a presentation at a Christmas party; celebrate the successes; celebrate achievements; have parties together; celebrate when people complete steps in the program. make the cohort groups as small as possible; network!; create an online community; create a phone tree; drive to class together; initiate study groups; create study circles, preferably at candidates' houses; trade child care for study time; Meet regularly, hold regular meetings with the cohort; team building exercises; have someone obtain resources; family oriented gatherings, pot lucks; keep eyes on the prize

**Resource Training Management** Attend classes with the cohorts; continue to provide resources needed by the cohort; provide leadership training for the cohort.

### **More Advice on Building a Cohort**

#### **What were your first impressions of being a part of "cohort"?**

Logan Square Neighborhood Association: Maestras Sin Fronteras (Logan Square's second cohort) candidates were aware of Nueva Generación (their first cohort) and they

seemed like a family, laughing together, having parties together. They were people from the community that we already knew; we felt like family. Cohort = family.

**Kenwood Oakland Community Organization:** We had a situation of bringing two cultures together--people in our community (African American) with people from a Latino community. We had a dinner. We first saw the two cohorts together in the classroom—saw support, saw dual cultures, students operated faster. What brought the two together? KOCO chose ISU as their higher education partner and ISU already had a partnership with Little Village Community Development Corporation. This turned out to be good for KOCO as a community group; they had heard positive things about LVCDC and this gave them a chance to work with them. They learned that Latino candidates would have some language barriers and African Americans have some other issues. The professors were patient and able to connect with both groups of candidates. Both groups had students at different levels. The cultural competence of the professors was very important. **Lesson: It is very important that the higher education faculty relate well to this population.**

When KOCO/LVCDC hit the bump in the road, a Malcolm X (their community college partner) professor said “I have never seen an African American and Latino group stick up for each other and stick together as much as you all have.”

#### **What are the benefits of the cohort model?**

- 1) Relationships and support. They get to know each other.
- 2) One-on-one supports among the candidates. Southwest Organizing Project’s candidates are very diverse in terms of college readiness, but they are supporting each other across levels.
- 3) Accessibility: The higher education institution comes to the community. It has made a big difference to have school in the community. Many of the candidates have been out of school for YEARS and not having to sit in class with “children” was helpful.

#### **What are strategies for helping cohorts bond?**

Team building activities and monthly meetings provide times for candidates to meet and plan with each other, even if attendance is sometimes spotty. “After our final, let’s all go out to dinner together.” They also invited their teacher.

The South Suburbs asked the group for advice: The South Suburbs have 6 school districts across a large geographical area. They are thinking about having candidates from one area introduce candidates from another area to the area of the South Suburbs in which they live. Would this be too much? A candidate responded: that is how we get to know each other; it helps to build the relationships. A Springfield representative responded: We are expecting candidates to teach in a particular community. It will help them get to know other areas.

#### **What are the topics for cohort meetings?**

KOCO: Updates on their academic standing, financial aid; status of their coursework; community issues. SWOP: Celebration with all consortium members there. Discussions

about obstacles; goal setting. But some felt that it was intimidating to set goals or discuss problems in the whole cohort group. People felt stressed out with too much to do. So started study groups with the more advanced cohort members supporting the others academically. For next semester they are looking at who will need help with writing or English. This is happening on the margins now, but how to bring it into the cohort.

LSNA: A student council meets regularly to discuss what is going on in the classroom and the needs of the students.

KOCO: A meeting at Malcolm X with the faculty and the candidates. This has helped to identify the needs for extra supports.

### **How do you help a cohort with different levels of academic achievement see themselves as a group?**

Quad Cities: hope to have one course a semester that all will take together. WIU is taking the program north to Quad Cities, so they have to do a lot of planning. Western takes professors (so they don't have to hire adjuncts) to Quad Cities since they think it is important to have the most experienced professors. They had to hire adjuncts for the regular campus instead. They may have to waive some requirements for some of the candidates in order to keep the cohort together. Some flexibility is needed.

South Suburbs: also has a large geographic reach. In trying to decide where to hold classes, do we move it north and accommodate most of the people? Do we move it south to accommodate some? We have chosen a central location at Prairie State.

LSNA: Nueva Generación (the model program) candidates are tutoring the new cohort. They meet at a restaurant or at the LSNA office so they can be intimate. They started by assigning one tutor to a group; now more diversified by need. How ensure one big family? Invite everyone to celebrations. Maestras Sin Fronteras (the new cohort) are now feeling responsibility to tutor or to encourage the next group. They regularly share names and phone numbers.

### **What are some of the challenges you've faced in trying to build strong cohorts?**

The diversity of the group has been a strength, but also a challenge. If you are talking about helping half the group get into the College of Education, the other half is sitting idle. We have some monolingual speakers. Some have teaching degrees from their home country. But the students are willing to help each other. "If you need help in speaking English, call me since I went through it as well."

A great deal of informal learning goes on. One true value of GYO is that it encourages the understanding of the community—the students and their families—that will support GYO candidates being good teachers.

### **What support services have been important?**

**a. Child care** In the South Suburbs, both of the higher education institutions have child care on site. They are also trying to find churches in the community that will offer child care. LSNA: one of their community centers in a school is providing child care.

**b. Transportation:** S. Suburbs is providing stipends for gas directly to the students, especially if they are car pooling.

**c. Tutoring:** CSU brings in tutors for Target Area Development. Malcolm X provides tutors for KOCO and Little Village.

**d. Computers:** LSNA raffled off ten computers. Had a program where you can buy a computer on time. Candidates can also use computers at LSNA.

**e. Quiet study time:** choose a quiet home for a study group.

**f. Employment:** KOCO has helped candidates find another job that is more conducive to their participating in GYO. Springfield helped GYO candidates get positions and jobs in the district, such as tutors.

**g. School supports:** S. Suburbs: school districts recruited paraprofessionals in their districts. The superintendents or their representative called people up. One district said “if you go through this program, we will guarantee you a job.” Most of their candidates are paraprofessionals. They committed “light,” to releasing candidates for half a day to go to classes. Kim (the coordinator) is working with the school people to understand what the supports will need to be, to prepare the schools for the needed changes so they will welcome GYO candidates in with open arms.

Springfield: a lot of candidates came from principals who supported them to apply. Principals, knowing they have GYO candidates, need to understand the flexibility they will need to provide. Transcripts and background checks. Supervisor knowing what they are doing is really helpful.

Union representatives: S. Suburbs and Springfield both have union reps on their Steering Committees. In Springfield, they helped interview candidates.

**Any supports your cohorts need that they don't have?**

**a. Laptops** Springfield School District has a foundation. Maybe write a grant to the school foundation for funds for computers. There is a Computerbank in Springfield that might have some computers. GYO Illinois might help here.

**b. Technology training for the candidates**

**c. Future supports.** Thinking ahead, candidates will need mentors as they transition to student teaching and then becoming teachers. It is not too early to begin discussion of powerful mentoring programs.

**And finally: Ingredients for strong cohorts**

The group was asked to name one ingredient that is essential to creating a strong and productive cohort. The responses:

- Relationships
- Vision
- Flexibility
- Communication
- Cooperation
- Understanding
- Trust
- Faith
- Commitment
- Confidence
- Shared Assets
- Support