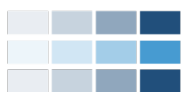


The Special Education Teacher Pipeline in Pennsylvania: Year 3 Report

Roddy Theobald
Equia Aniagyei-Cobbold
Allison Gilmour
Marcy Stein

July 2025

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Longitudinal Data in Education Research



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Contents

Contents	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Executive Summary	1
Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant	8
Developing Future Special Educators Grant	24
APR Mentoring Project	30
Networking and Learning Communities and K–2 Learning Institutes.....	38
World of Learning (WOL) ASL Courses	42
Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant.....	43
Overall Conclusions and Next Steps	50
References	53

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Abstract

This report summarizes findings from the third year of a long-term research partnership on the special education teacher pipeline in Pennsylvania and projects associated with the Bureau of Special Education’s Attract-Prepare-Retain (APR) efforts. We analyze administrative, survey, and interview data associated with seven APR projects that occurred during the 2024–25 school year: Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant, Developing Future Special Educators Grant, APR Mentoring Project, Networking and Learning Communities, K–2 Learning Institute, American Sign Language programs, and Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant. For the first six APR projects, the findings build on data from the 2023–24 school year implementation. And for the Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grants, which launched in 2024–25, data are providing early evidence about how grantees view their experiences with this project.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes findings from the third year of a long-term research partnership on the special education teacher pipeline in Pennsylvania and projects associated with the Bureau of Special Education’s Attract-Prepare-Retain (APR) efforts. In this executive summary, we highlight seven key findings from the third year of the project; these findings reflect our evaluation of seven APR projects that occurred during the 2024–25 school year. Other APR projects with limited participation were managed separately, including the School Psychology Paid Internships for Out-of-State Graduate Students and the Master's Level Speech-Language Pathologist Stipend for School-Based Placements.

Key finding 1. As part of the first cohort of program completers of the state’s Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification, 142 individuals completed the requirements for a PK-12 special education teacher certificate, and respondents to a completer survey had positive perceptions of the coursework in these programs.

We surveyed the 142 completers from the first cohort of the state’s Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant and received responses from 48 completers for a response rate of 34%. Completers had positive perceptions of the program with more than 95% reporting that it positively contributed to their growth as a professional.

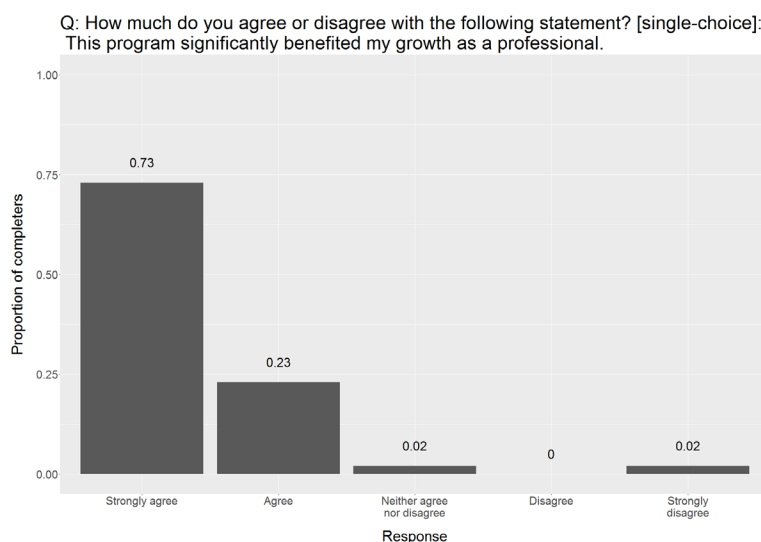


Figure 1.1. Completers’ agreement that the accelerated program benefited their growth

Key finding 2. More than half of these respondents reported that they likely would not have pursued this certificate if the program did not exist, suggesting this program is expanding the pool of individuals receiving PK–12 special education teacher certification.

Given the purpose of the program—to attract individuals to pursue a PK–12 special education teacher certificate who would not have otherwise—we also asked completers about the likelihood that they would have pursued this certification if the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant did not exist. Fifty-two percent of respondents reported that it is “unlikely” or “very unlikely” that they would have pursued this certificate if the Accelerated Program did not exist, while only 23% reported it is “likely” or “very likely” that they would have done so, with 25% neutral. If we assume that the 48 survey respondents are representative of all 142 completers, this implies that the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant attracted between 74 and 110 individuals to receive a PK–12 special education teacher certificate who would not have otherwise.

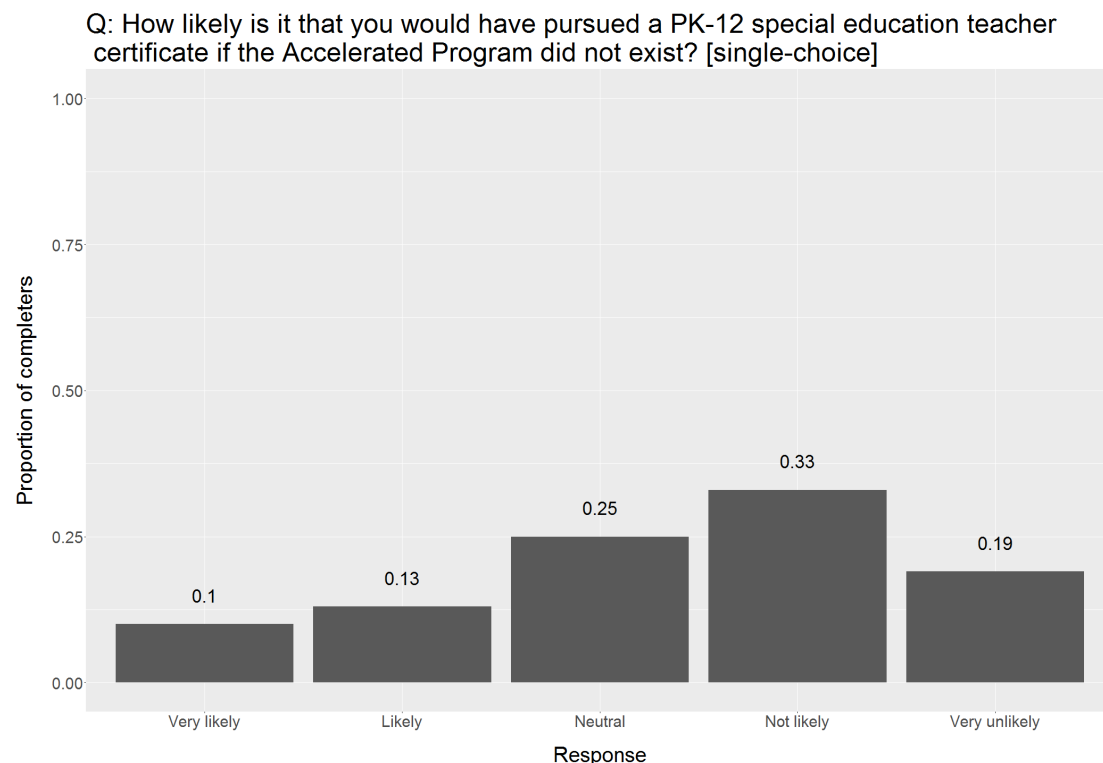


Figure 1.2. Completers’ likelihood of pursuing full certification in absence of program

Key finding 3. Consistent with findings from 2022–23 and 2023–24, students participating in the Developing Future Special Educators Grant in 2024–25 were more likely to express an interest in a career in special education after their participation than prior to enrollment.

We surveyed more than 2,000 student participants before and after they participated in experiential learning opportunities (ELOs) through the Developing Future Special Educators Grant. This grant is intended to engage secondary/postsecondary students in working with students with disabilities to inspire them to pursue a career as a special educator. Thirty-six percent of survey respondents reported an interest in pursuing a career in special education after participating in one of these ELOs, compared to 33% of respondents surveyed before participating, a statistically significant difference.

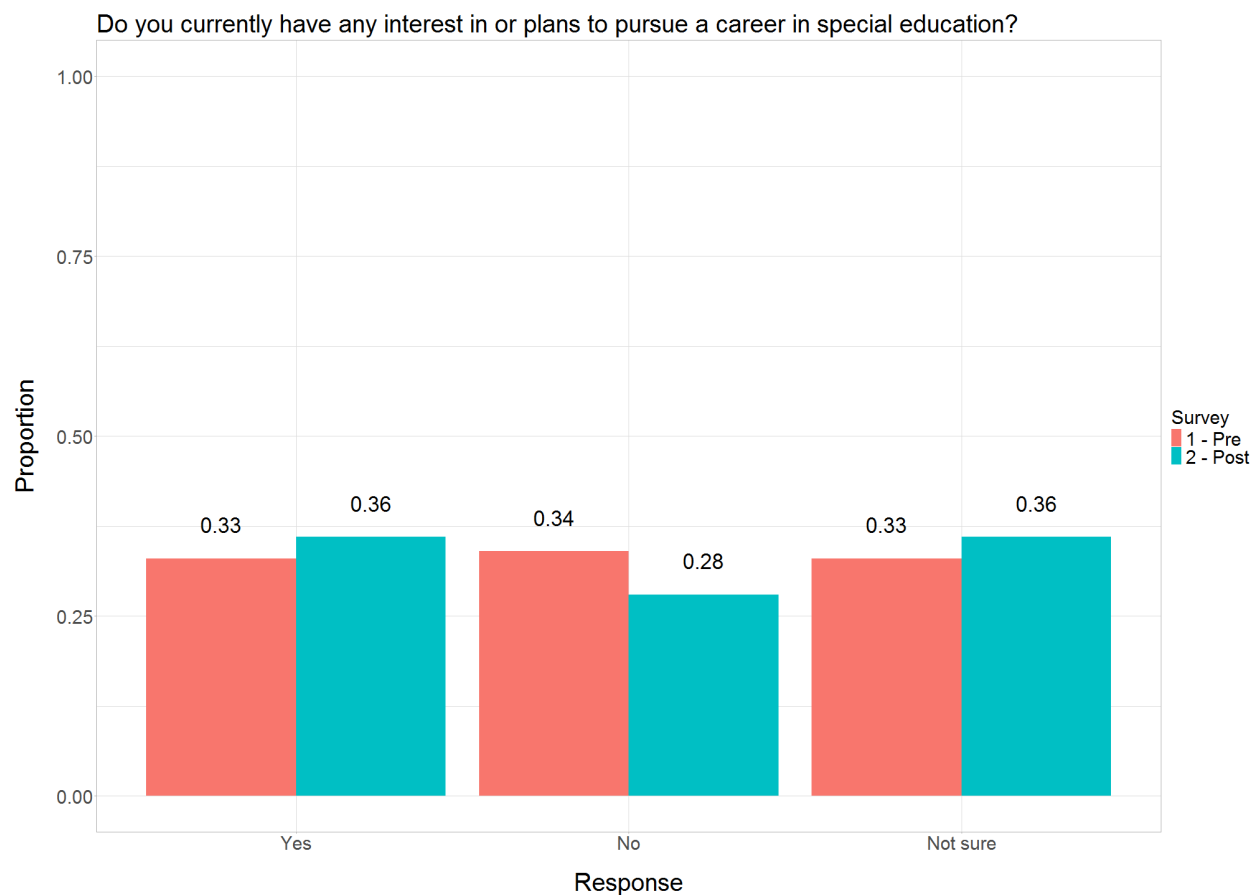


Figure 1.3. Participants' reported interest in or plans to pursue a career in special education

Key finding 4. Consistent with findings from 2022–23 and 2023–24, special educators participating in the APR Mentoring Project in 2024–25 say the program improved mentees’ professional development.

We surveyed mentors and mentees who participated in the APR Mentoring Project for school psychologists, special education administrators, special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, teachers of the deaf, and teachers of the visually impaired. Of the survey respondents, 94% of mentees and 92% of mentors “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the program positively impacted the professional development of the mentee.

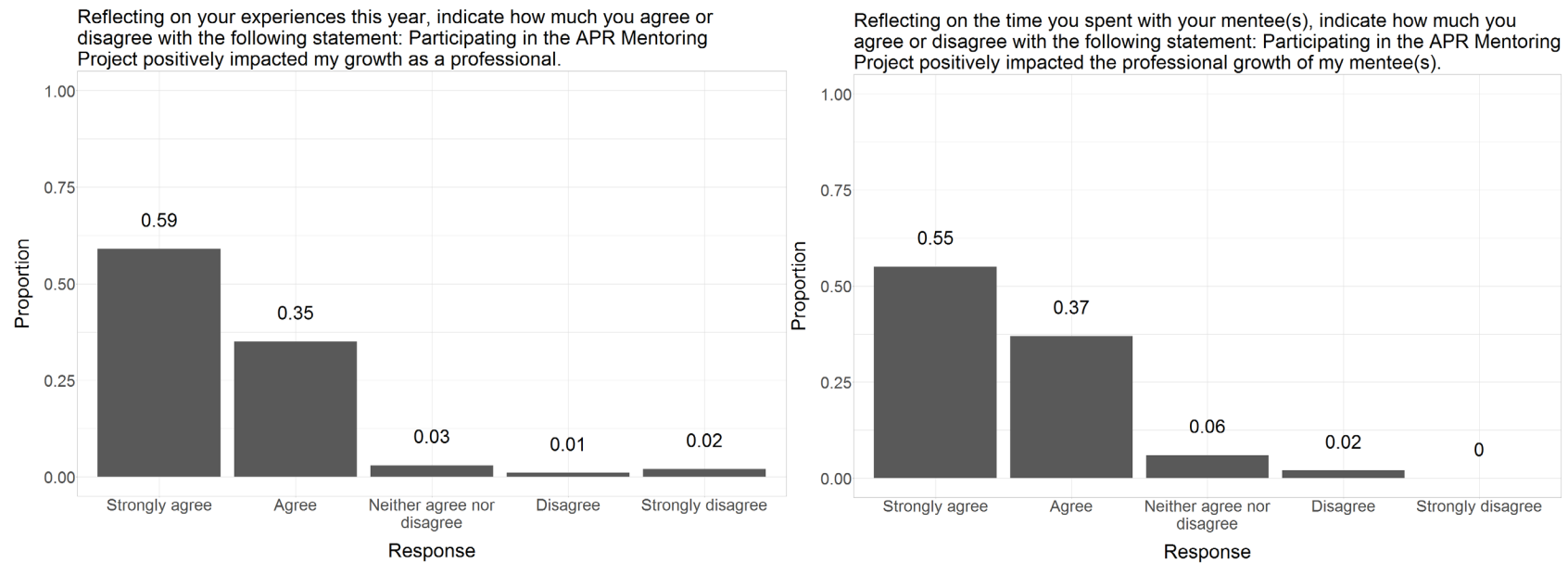


Figure 1.4. Mentees’ (left panel) and mentors’ (right panel) perceptions of program impact on professional growth

Key finding 5. Most participants in the APR K–2 Learning Institute and Networking and Learning Communities in the 2024–25 school year reported that the session they attended was relevant to their needs.

We surveyed more than 100 participants in the APR K–2 Learning Institute and more than 2,000 participants across a variety of Networking and Learning Communities sessions intended to connect special education personnel across the state. Among survey respondents from these programs, 98% of participants in the APR K–2 Learning Institute and 96% of participants in the Networking and Learning Communities sessions “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the session they attended was relevant to their needs.

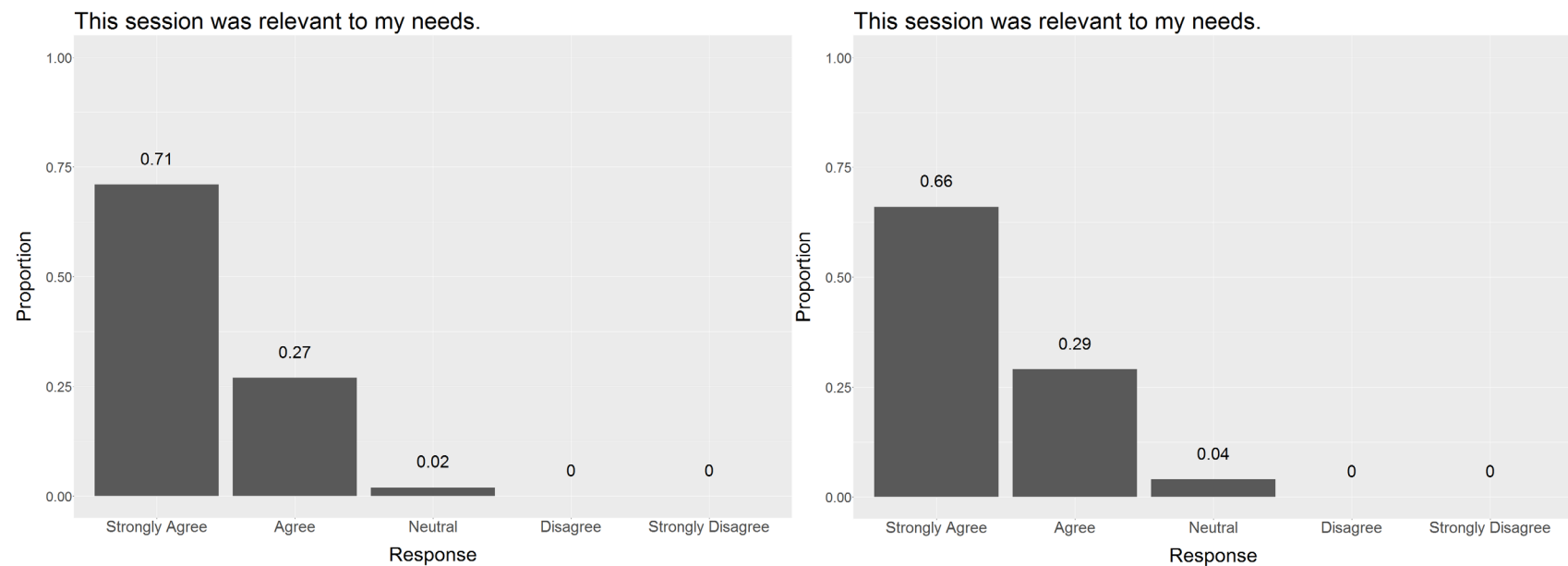


Figure 1.5. APR K–2 Learning Institute (left panel) and APR Networking and Learning Communities (right panel) participant perceptions of session relevance

Key finding 6. Unlike in the 2023–24 school year, a higher proportion of students participating in the World of Learning (WOL) American Sign Language (ASL) program in the 2024–25 school year expressed an interest in using ASL in a future career after participation in the program.

Finally, we surveyed students before and after their participation in the WOL ASL program in high schools across Pennsylvania. In the 2023–24 school year, we had found that students were *less* likely to express an interest in using ASL in a future career after their participation in the program than before. But in the 2024–25 school year, we find the reverse: 22% of participants reported an interest in using ASL in a future career after participating, compared to 17% before the program.

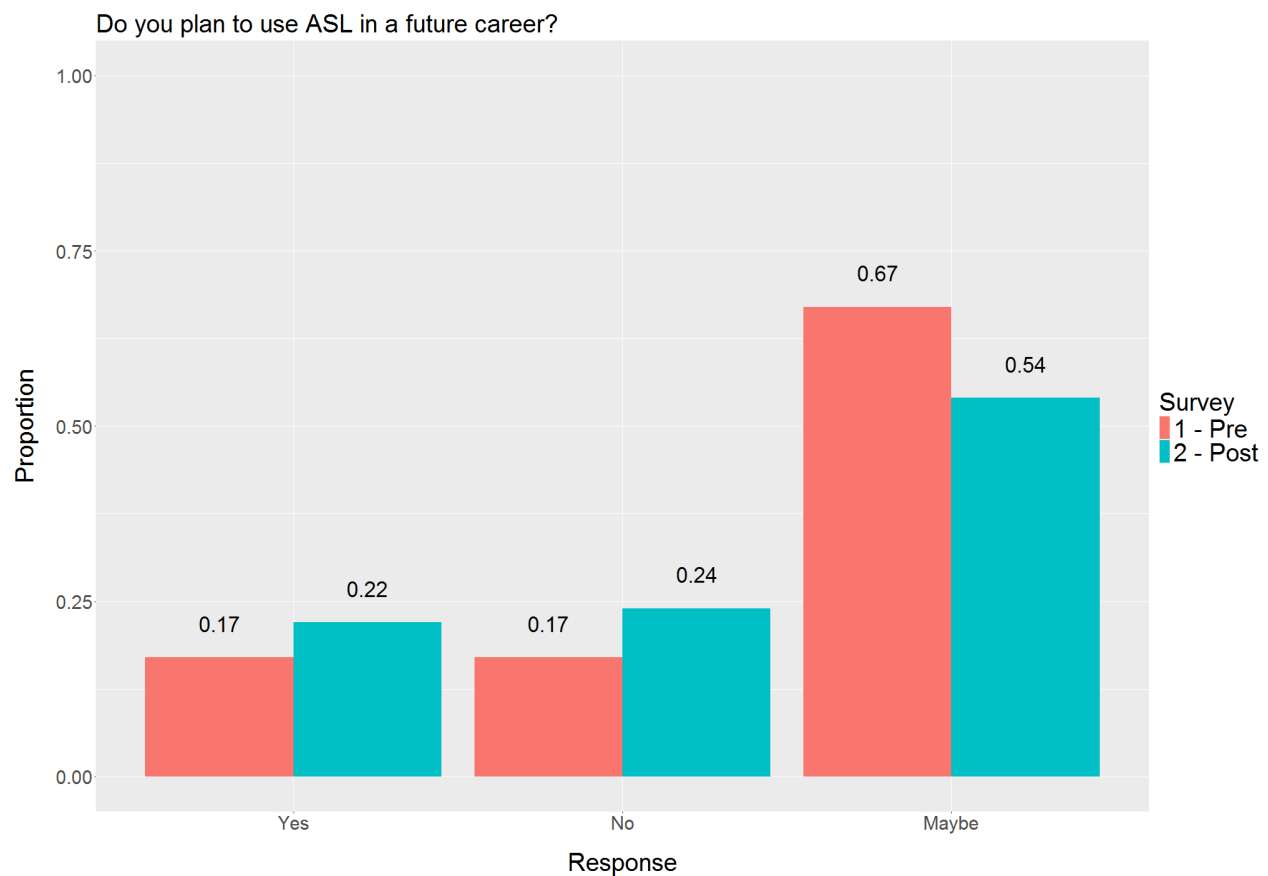


Figure 1.6. Participants’ reported plans to use ASL in a future career before and after program

Key finding 7. Grantees of the Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant reported that more than 100 paraeducators were participating in these programs, and that the program has been a successful first step in expanding access to the degrees necessary to pursue teaching positions in the future.

We collected data on participants in Pennsylvania’s Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant from two sources: fifth-quarter reports submitted to the Pennsylvania Bureau of Special Education, and interviews with grant coordinators at each of the 10 participating intermediate units (IUs). Reporting data showed that more than 100 paraeducators were participating in these programs as of the most recent reporting date, and in interviews grant coordinators reported that the program has been a successful first step in opening access to teacher certification for paraeducators by offering structured, locally responsive, and financially supported pathways to the degrees necessary for pursuing teacher certification in the future.

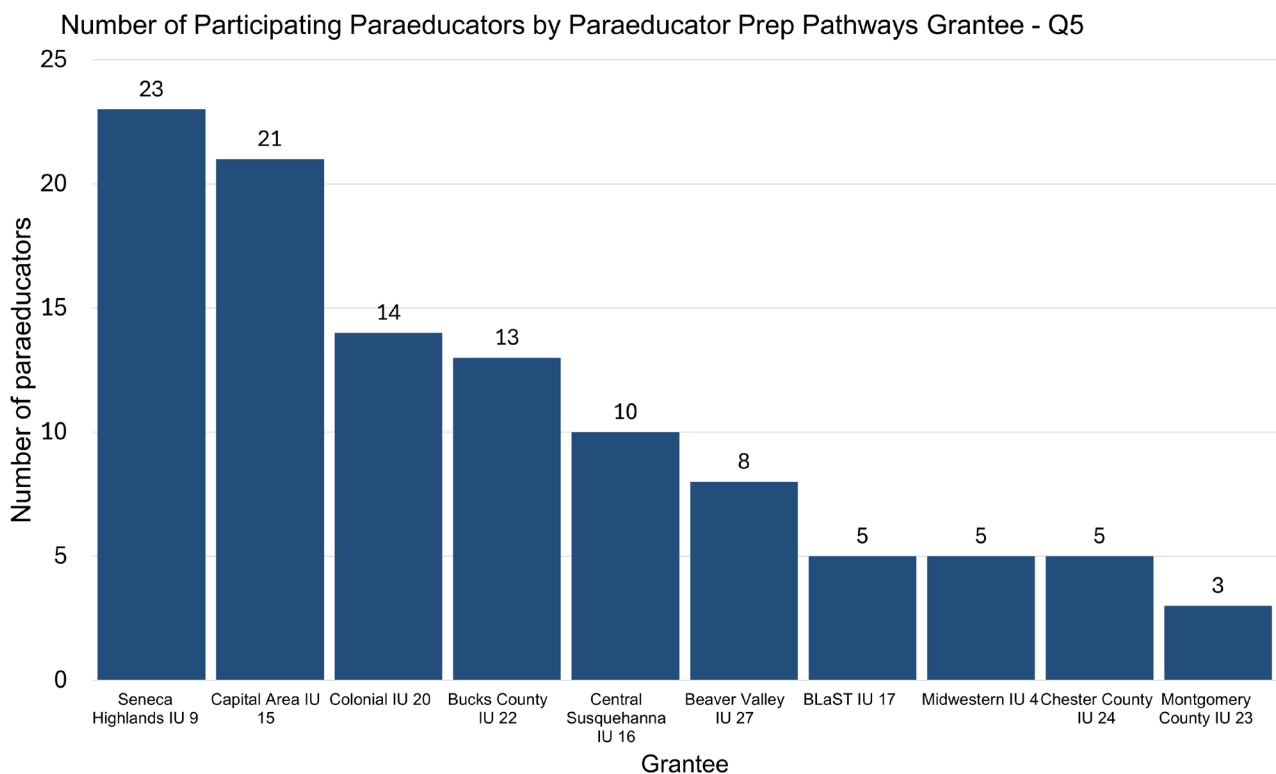


Figure 1.7. Participants in Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant Program

Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant

As described in our previous report (Theobald et al., 2024), Pennsylvania awarded grants to 15 universities during the 2023–24 school year through the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant. The accelerated programs were created for individuals interested in obtaining PK–12 special education certification within 18 months. One goal of this grant was to increase the number of certified special educators in Pennsylvania through the completion of an 18-month postbaccalaureate program by December 2024. To establish a baseline by which to measure the impacts of this APR effort on special education licensure, and specifically on transitions from emergency licensure to full licensure, we first used administrative data provided by the state to characterize the landscape of emergency permits in special education *prior to* the introduction of this program. We then collected formative data from program completer surveys and follow-up interviews with grant coordinators to characterize the early impacts of this APR effort. In next year’s report, we will have the administrative data necessary to quantify the impact of this APR effort on the use of emergency permits to staff special education classrooms in the state.

Administrative Data Analysis

In our baseline administrative data analysis, we first examined the number and percentage of new special education teachers teaching on an emergency permit. We also followed emergency permitted teachers over time to determine the extent to which, historically, these teachers obtained an Instructional I certificate in special education or left teaching in Pennsylvania. We defined special education teachers as emergency permitted if they had either a Type 1 or Type 4 permit and did not have an Instructional I certificate in special education.

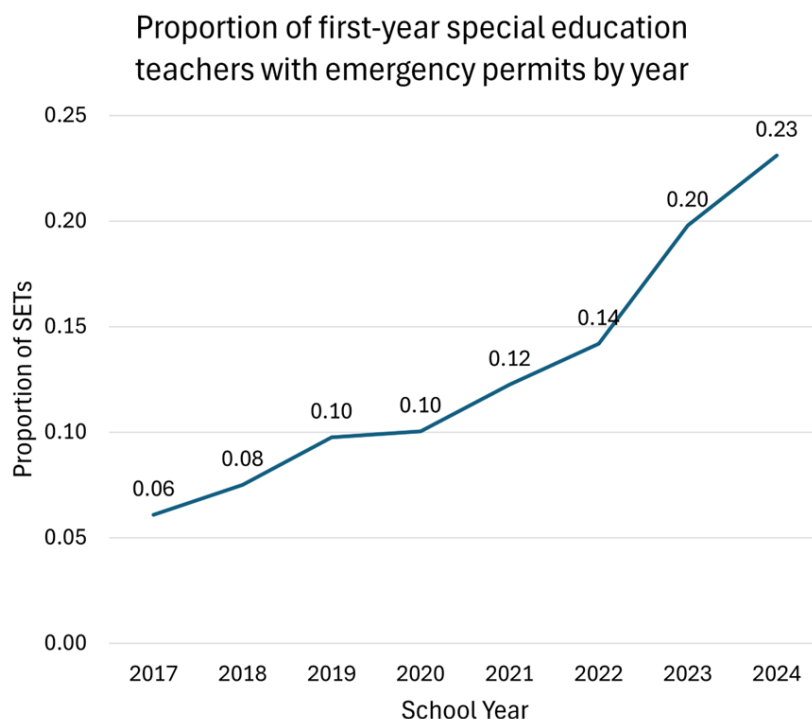
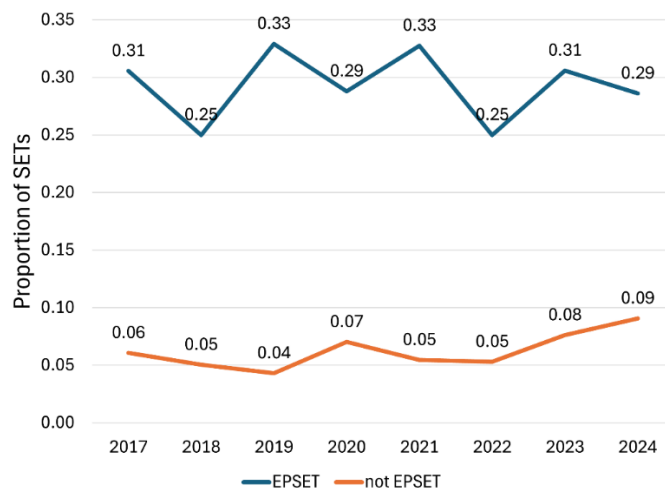


Figure 2.1. The proportion of new special education teachers with emergency permits to teach special education over time

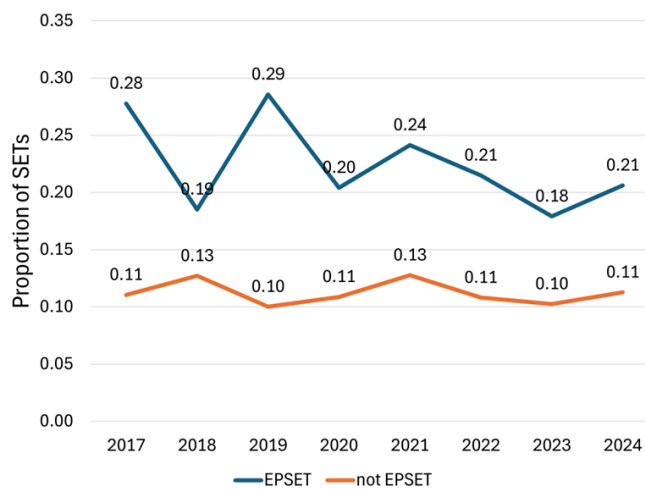
Figure 2.1 presents the percentage of new special education teachers teaching on emergency permits from 2016–17 to 2023–24. The percentage of the new special education workforce teaching on an emergency permit grew from 6% in 2016–17 to 23% in 2023–24. Notably, new special education teachers with emergency permits had different characteristics from new special education teachers with Instructional I certificates. Special education teachers entering the field with emergency permits were more diverse (Figure 2.2) and more likely to be male (Figure 2.3) than new special education teachers with Instructional I certificates. Special education teachers entering the field with emergency permits were also more likely to teach in schools with higher percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch and higher percentages of non-White students than new special education teachers with Instructional I special education certificates. Historically, emergency permits appeared to be an attractive

method for entering special education teaching for a nontraditional population of special education teachers working in harder-to-staff schools.



Note. EPSET = emergency permitted special education teacher.

Figure 2.2. Proportion of non-White first-year special education teachers by emergency permit status



Note. EPSET = emergency permitted special education teacher.

Figure 2.3. Proportion of male first-year special education teachers by emergency permit status

We next examined the extent to which new special education teachers with emergency permits obtained Instructional I certification in the state. This information is essential for

assessing if the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant improves both the timeline for emergency permitted teachers to become fully certified and the percentage of emergency permitted teachers who obtain full certification. We followed new special education teachers with emergency permits who entered special education teaching in 2016–17, 2017–18, 2018–19, or 2019–20. Figure 2.4 is a Sankey plot illustrating the career movements and certification obtainment of new special education teachers with emergency permits over time. The y-axis illustrates the proportion of new special education teachers who entered with emergency permits who left teaching in the state, returned to teaching in the state, continued teaching with an emergency permit, or obtained full certification over their first four years of teaching. There are three notable findings in this figure. First, a substantial number of new special education teachers with emergency permits continue teaching on emergency permits over time, despite the intention that these permits are temporary. Second, 33.6% of emergency permitted new special education teachers obtained full certification in special education within 4 years. Third, many emergency permitted special education teachers leave teaching in Pennsylvania. We conducted additional discrete-time hazard analyses comparing attrition of new special education teachers with emergency permits to those with Instructional I certificates in special education. These analyses helped us account for observable differences across teachers and their school and district settings. New special education teachers with emergency permits were 2.5 percentage points more likely to leave teaching in Pennsylvania and 9.8 percentage points more likely to switch to general education than new special education teachers with Instructional I certificates in special education.



Figure 2.4. Sankey plot following new EPSETs over 4 years

Overall, about a third of special education teachers who entered the field with an emergency permit in these school years obtained Instructional I certification in special education. These baseline numbers clearly establish the need for the state’s Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant to improve the transition from emergency permit to full certification and to support special education teachers to gain the knowledge they need to be successful in the classroom and remain in the field of special education.

Completer Survey

During the 2024–25 school year we surveyed the first cohort of 142 completers from institutions of higher education (IHEs) participating in the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant and received responses from 48 completers for a response rate of 34%. We first asked completers what they were doing prior to entering the program. Forty-four percent of respondents had been teaching with an emergency permit, 19% had been working as a paraeducator, and 15% had been teaching in a general education classroom.

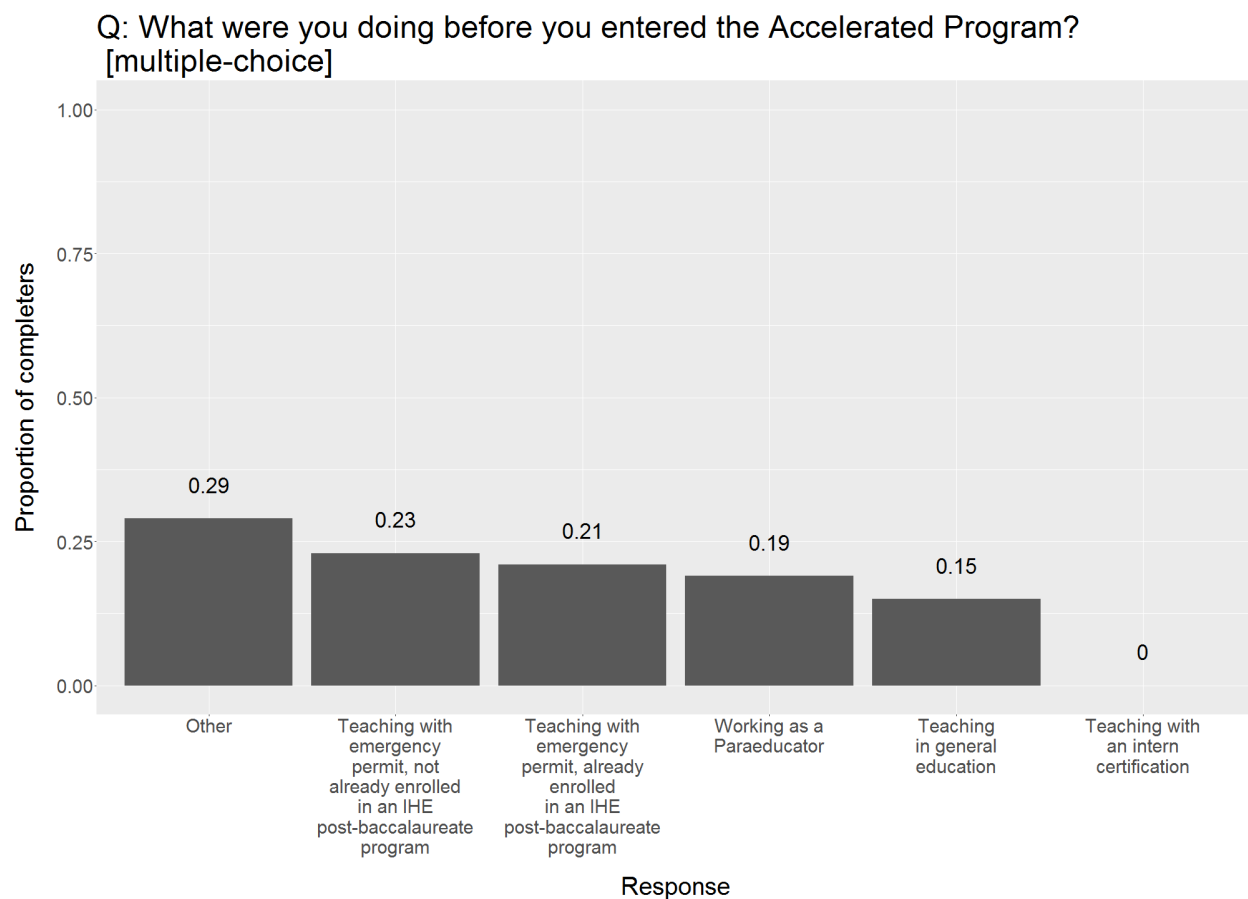


Figure 2.5. Participants in the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification

We then asked completers about their perceptions of the program. As shown in Figure 2.6, 96% of respondents reported that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that the program significantly benefited their growth as a professional.

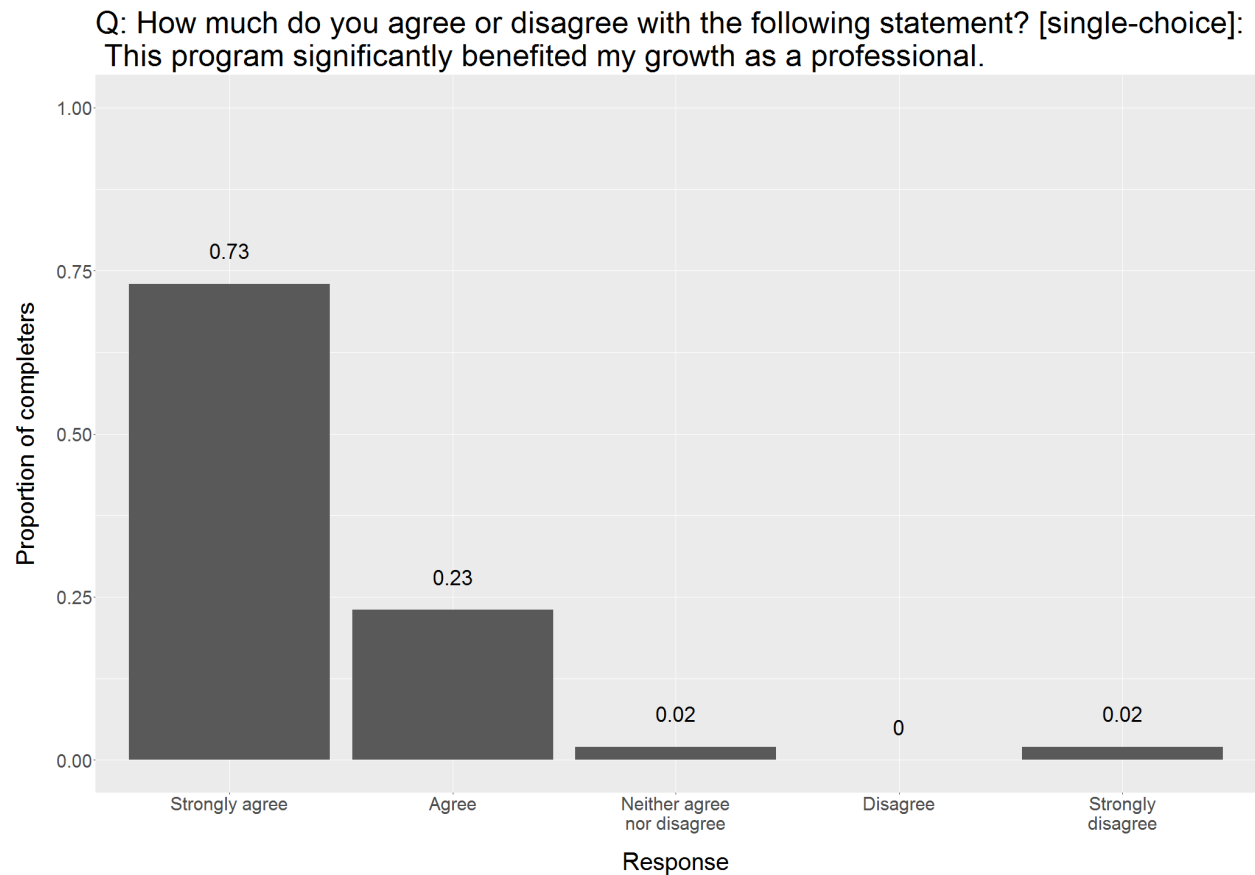


Figure 2.6. Completer perceptions of program’s impact on professional growth

Likewise, and as shown in Figure 2.7, completers had positive perceptions of the coursework in their program, with 94% of respondents reporting that they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that the coursework significantly benefited their growth as a professional.

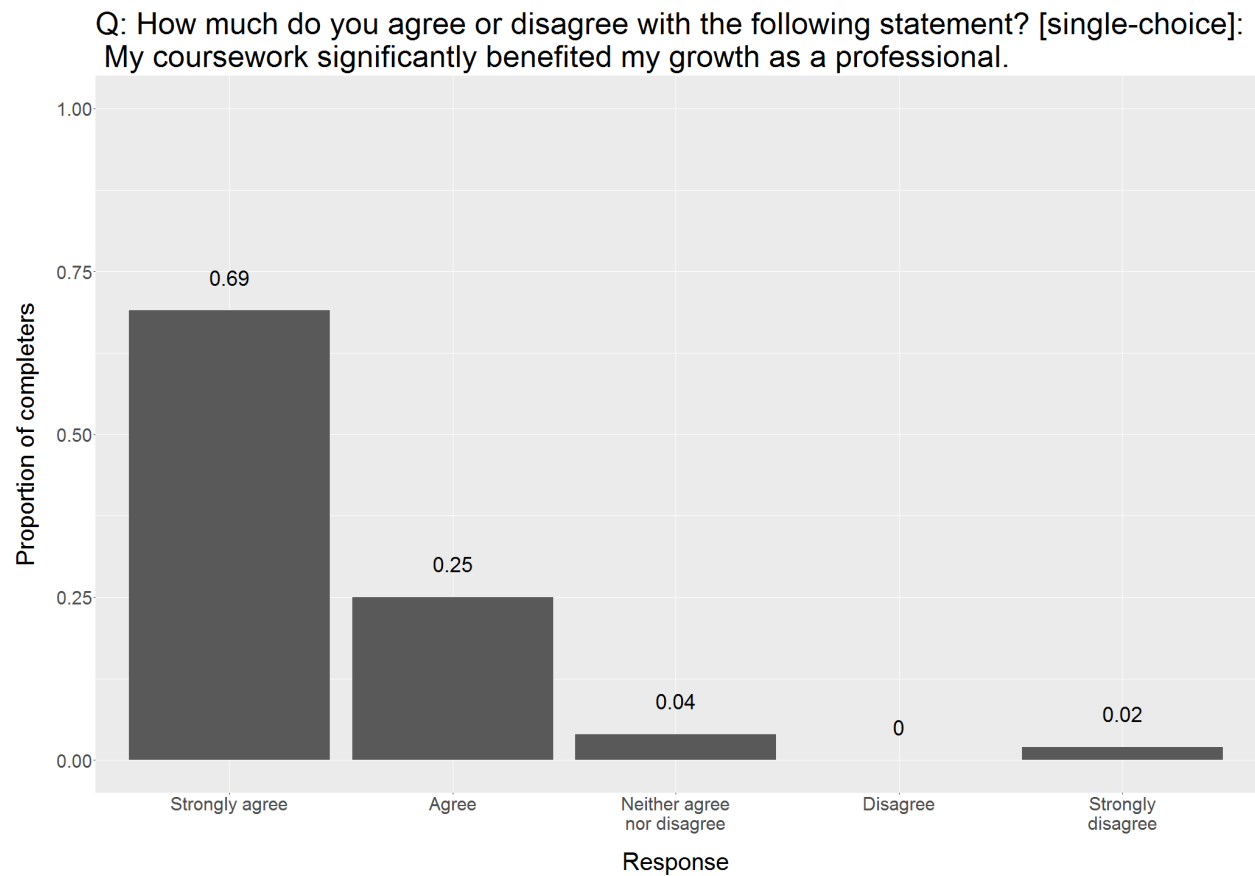


Figure 2.7. Completer perceptions of coursework’s impact on professional growth

We then asked completers a series of questions about their program-assigned mentor. Regarding frequency of meetings (Figure 2.8), almost half of completers reported meeting weekly with their mentor and almost half reported meeting monthly; the remaining 6% met with their mentor less frequently.

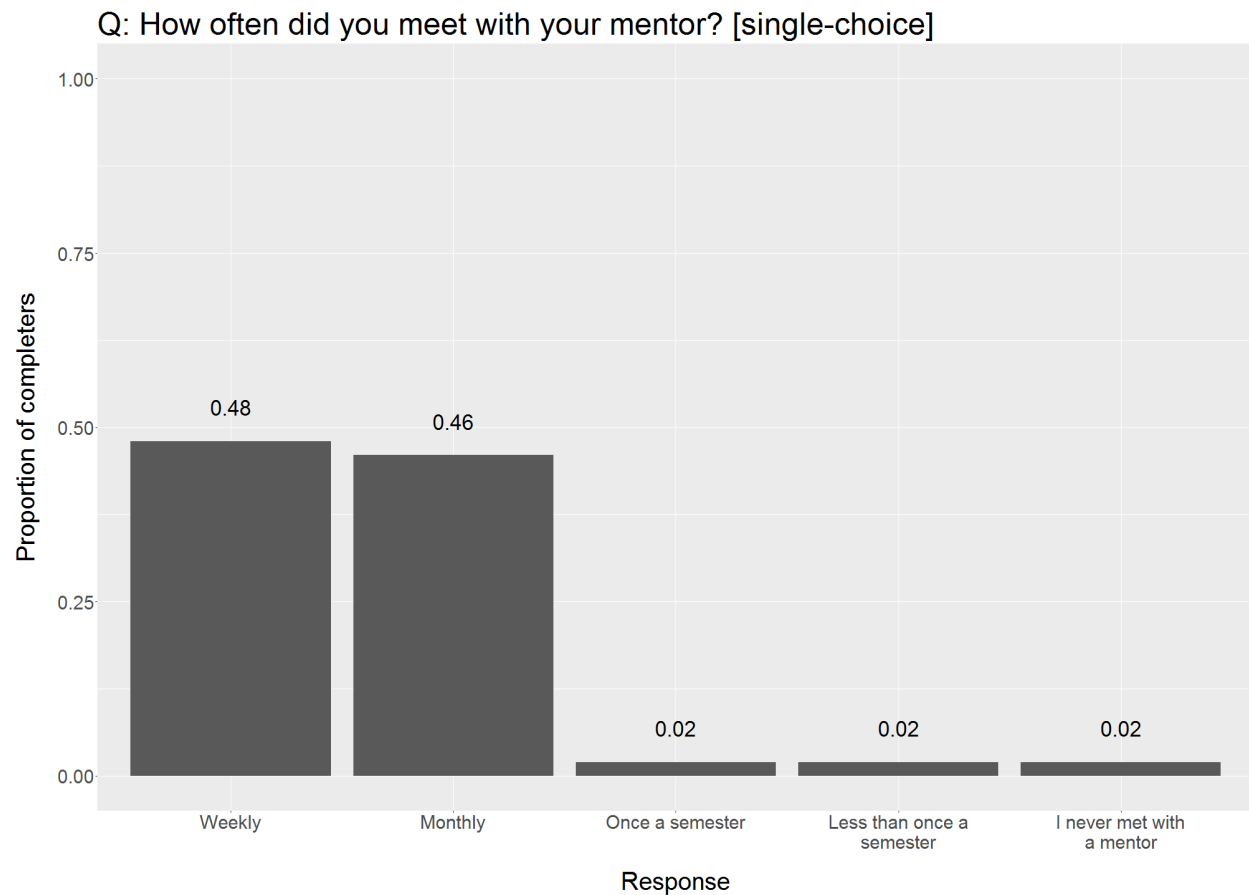


Figure 2.8. Frequency of mentor meetings

Among completers that did meet with their mentor, about half reported that the mentoring sessions lasted 30 minutes or less while 43% reported meeting with their mentors for 30 to 60 minutes per session (Figure 2.9). The remaining 6% of respondents reported meeting with their mentor for more than 60 minutes in each session.

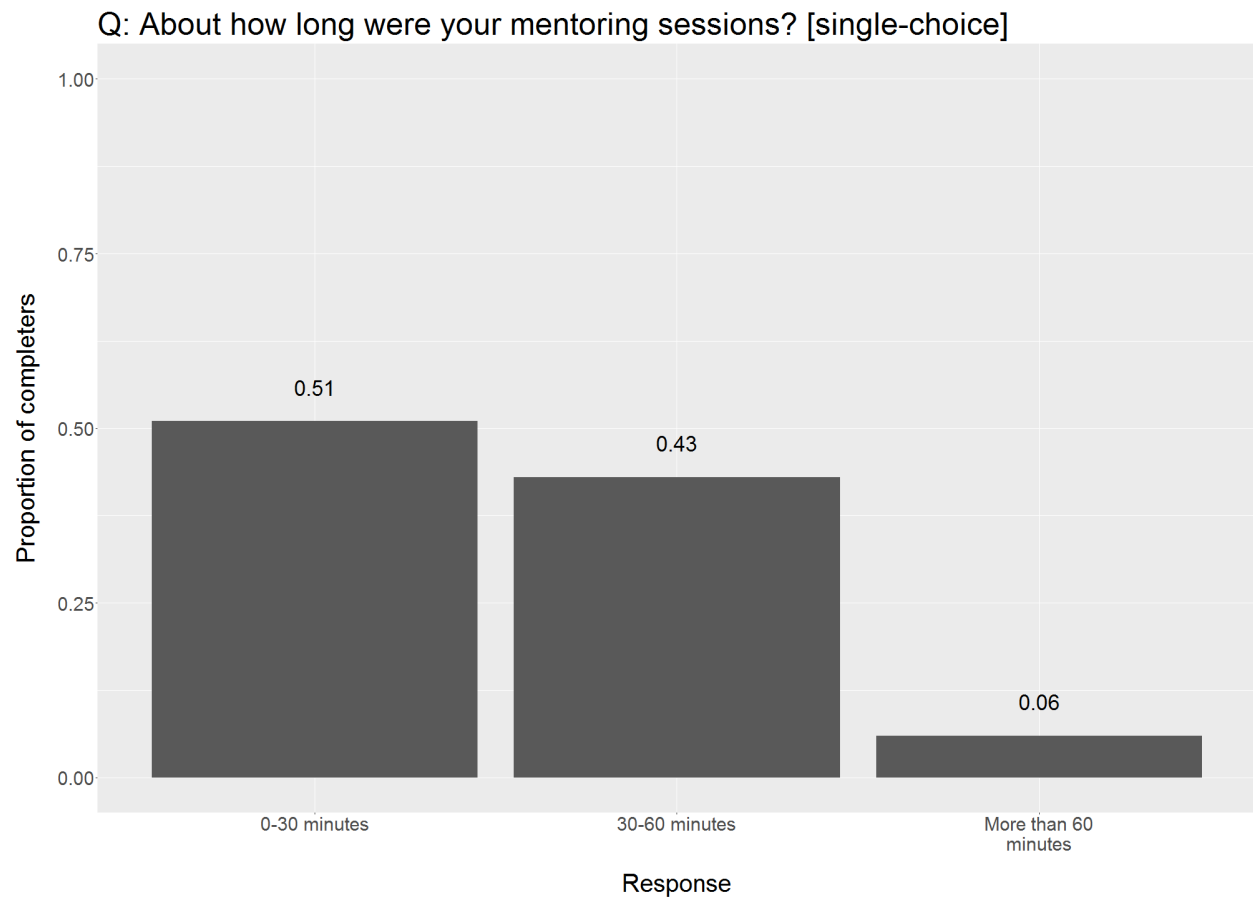


Figure 2.9. Length of mentor meetings

There was considerable variation in completer reports about the frequency with which mentors visited their classrooms. About one quarter reported that they only met virtually with their mentor (i.e., their mentor never visited their classroom), while about two thirds reported either weekly (32%) or monthly (36%) visits from their mentor. The remaining 9% reported that their mentor visited their classroom once in each semester.

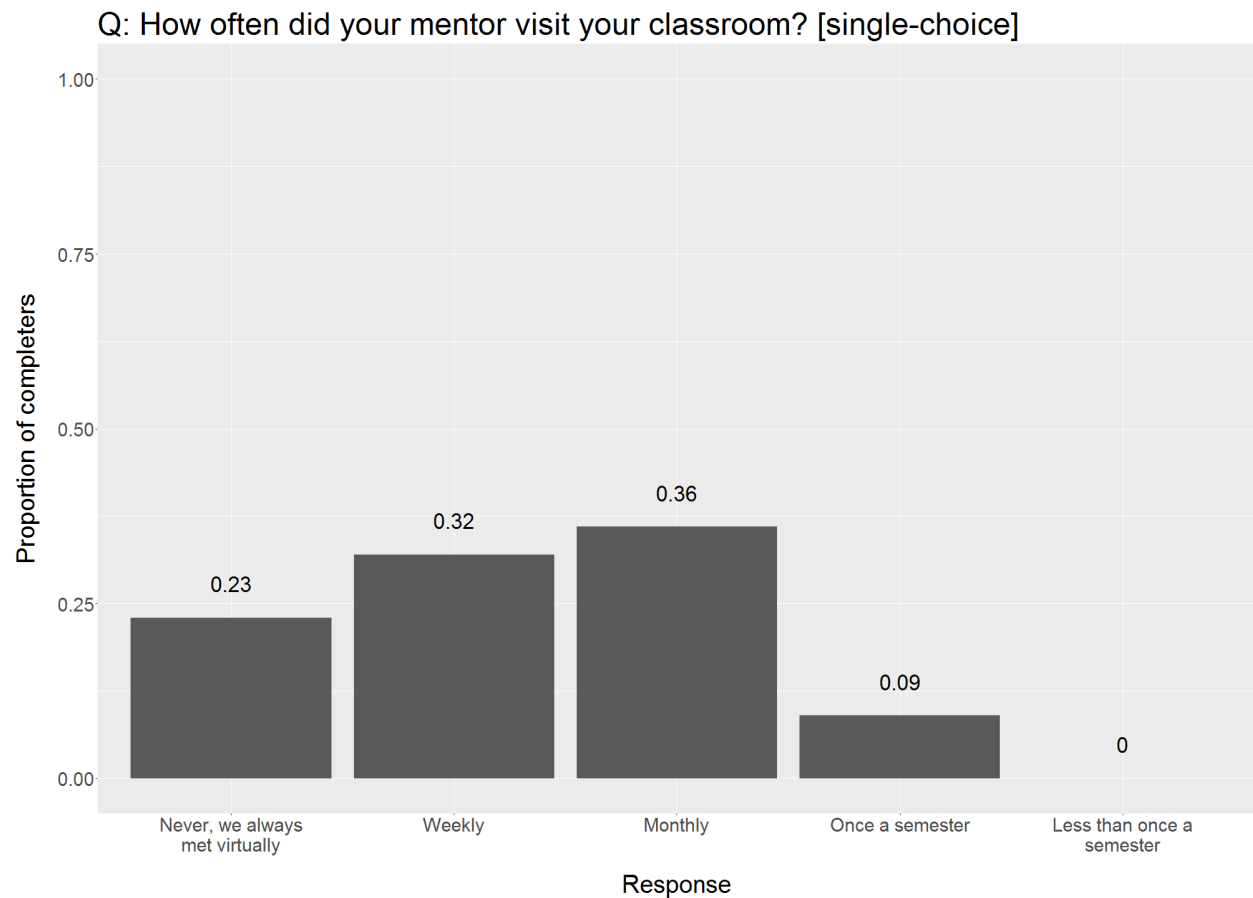


Figure 2.10. Frequency of mentor classroom visits

Completers had somewhat less positive perceptions of the helpfulness of their mentor than they did about the overall program and coursework. While 79% either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that their assigned mentor significantly benefited their professional growth, another 19% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

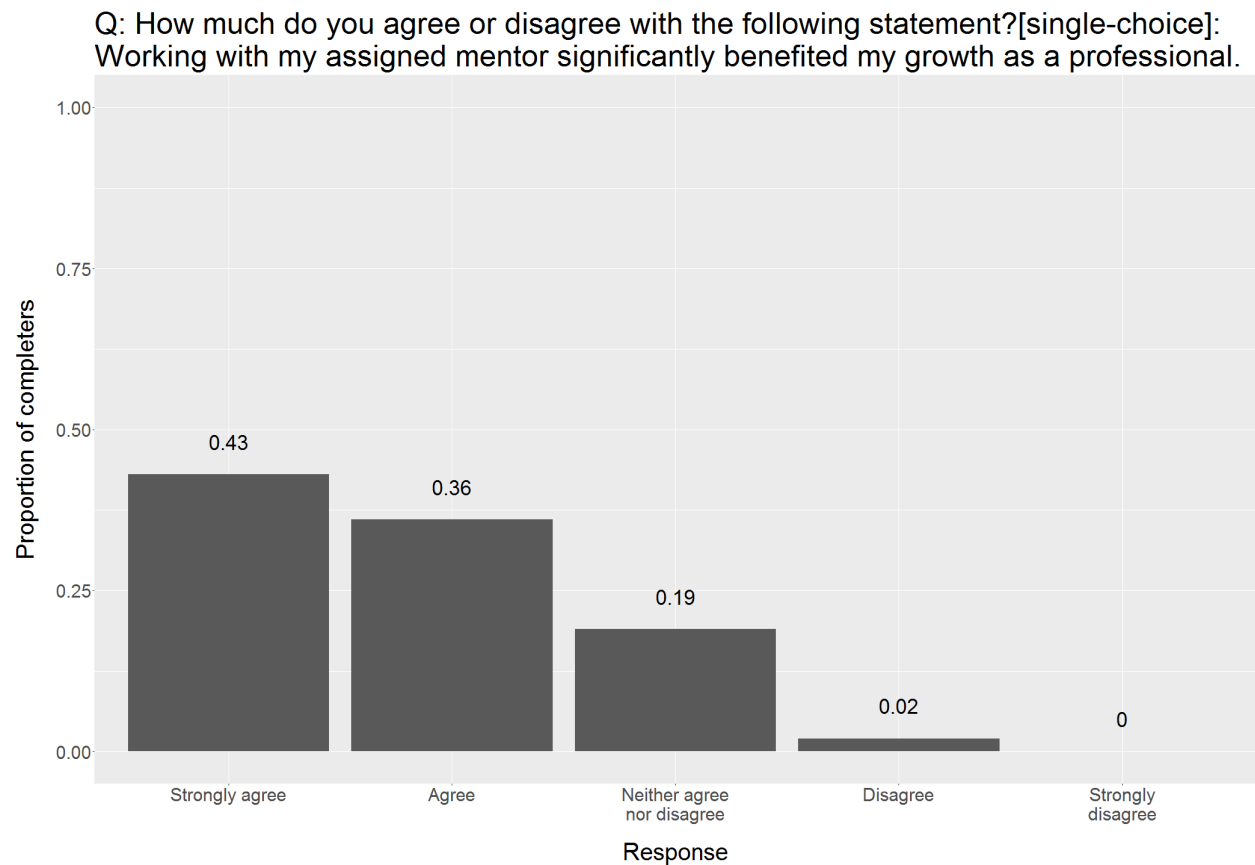


Figure 2.11. Completer perceptions of mentor’s impact on professional growth

Given the purpose of the program—to attract individuals to pursue a PK–12 special education teacher certificate who would not have otherwise—we also asked completers about the likelihood they would have pursued this certification if the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant did not exist. As shown in Figure 2.12, 52% of respondents reported it “unlikely” or “very unlikely” they would have pursued the certificate if the Accelerated Program did not exist, while only 23% reported it “likely” or “very likely” they would have done so, with 25% neutral. If we assume that the 48 survey respondents are representative of the full population of 142 completers, this implies that the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant attracted between 74 and 110 individuals to receive a PK–12 special education teacher certificate who would not have otherwise.

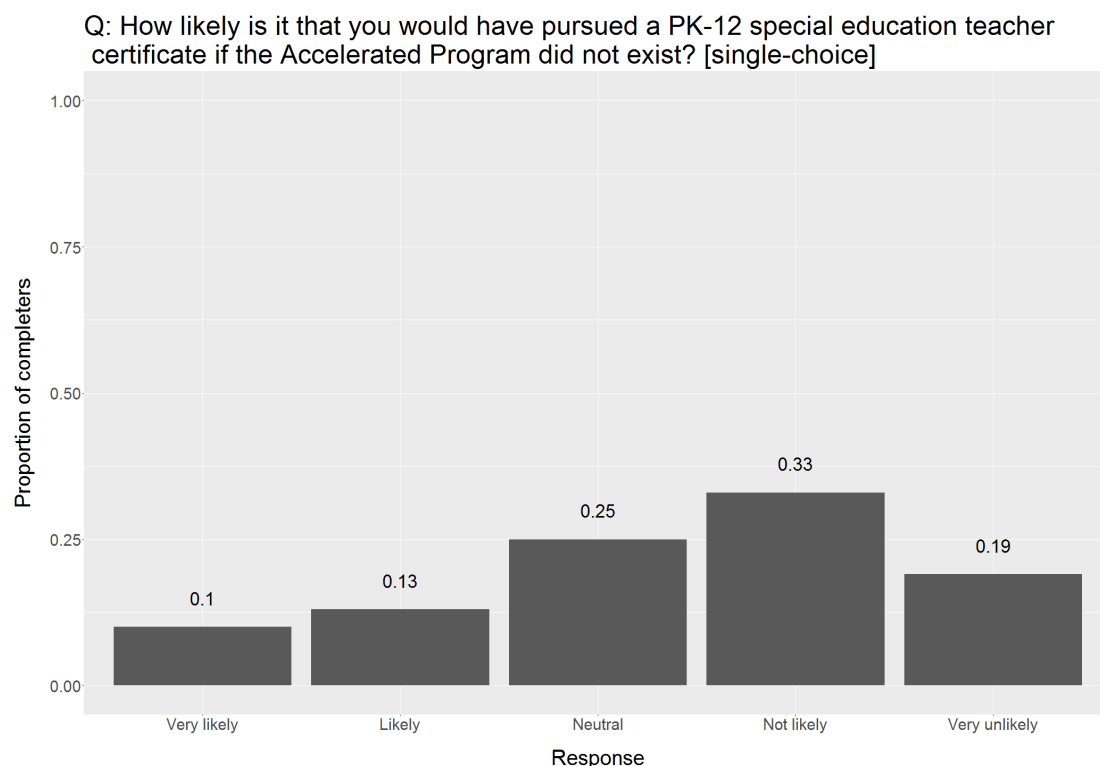


Figure 2.12. Completers’ likelihood of pursuing full certification in absence of program

Finally, we asked completers about the biggest factors that led them to choose to enroll in the Accelerated Program. Four factors were selected by more than half of respondents (options were not mutually exclusive): the program was offered virtually/hybrid (81%), the program was targeted to working professionals (79%), the program provided an expedited path to PK–12 special education teacher certification (77%), and the program was offered during the summer (56%). The financial incentives (46%) and overall cost of the program (40%) were also cited as important factors by a large number of completers.

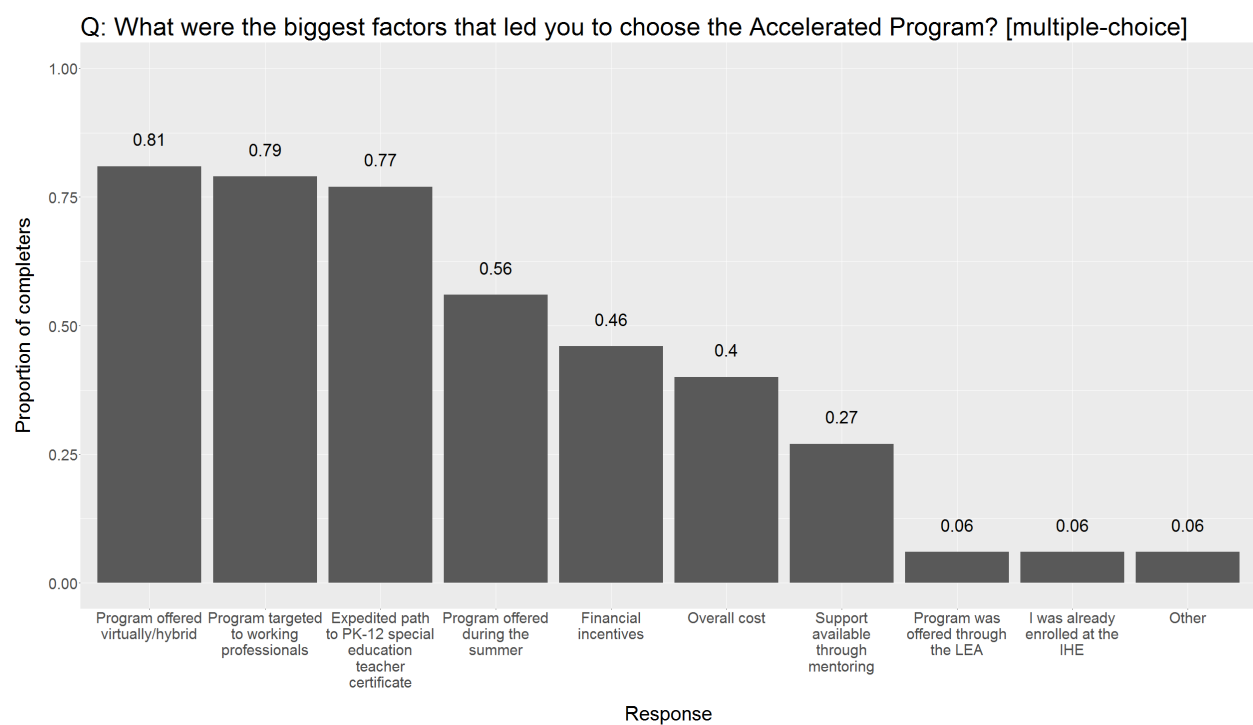


Figure 2.13. Completers' biggest factors for choosing program

Follow-Up Interviews

Given the apparent successes of the first cohort of completers of the Accelerated Program for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant, it was perhaps a surprise that several IHEs that participated in the first cohort did not reapply for funding in the second cohort. We conducted follow-up interviews with grant coordinators from these programs to better understand this decision. Their responses highlighted a range of financial, staffing, and logistical challenges that contributed to their decision.

Primary Reasons for Not Reapplying

1. Insufficient Funding and Misaligned Incentives

Many institutions cited inadequate funding as a key barrier, noting that available resources did not match the workload or program demands. Some emphasized that funds would have been more impactful if used for direct student support. Others expressed frustration that institutions that complied with program expectations were not adequately acknowledged, particularly regarding student retention efforts.

2. Staffing and Workload Burdens

Several institutions reported that limited staffing created unsustainable conditions. In some cases, a single faculty member or coordinator managed most responsibilities, including program oversight and student mentoring. Lack of institutional support and overreliance on a few individuals made continuation difficult.

3. Timeline and Scheduling Constraints

The application timeline was described as difficult to meet, particularly when it overlapped with faculty vacations. In addition, some were concerned about adopting a compressed course format (e.g., reducing 15-week courses to 7.5 weeks).

4. Program Implementation Challenges

Some institutions struggled to maintain quality field placements and partner relationships. A reduction in available student placements negatively impacted enrollment. Other concerns included managing competing federal grants and added program requirements that increased the difficulty of securing placements.

5. Other Circumstances

In three cases, a temporary leadership or medical issue impacted the ability to reapply. Another institution noted a general lack of awareness about the opportunity and insufficient staffing to maintain the program.

Maintenance of Grant-Initiated Program Changes

Despite not reapplying, some institutions retained selected program elements developed during the grant period:

- Improved sequencing of coursework, including earlier placement of behavior-related classes.
- Continued use of summer placements and mentoring models.

Some institutions also evaluated and ultimately discontinued changes such as compressed coursework due to ineffectiveness.

Conditions for Reconsideration

When asked about the potential to reapply in the future:

- Most institutions expressed openness, but only if concerns about funding levels, workload distribution, and program structure were addressed.
- A fall or winter program start was widely preferred.
- Some respondents questioned the effectiveness of the fixed 18-month timeline,

suggesting that a more flexible structure might better serve students.

Conclusion

Institutions chose not to reapply for the Accelerated Program grant due to inadequate funding, staffing shortages, unrealistic timelines, and implementation difficulties. Nonetheless, several expressed interest in future participation if key structural adjustments are made to better support program delivery and student success.

Developing Future Special Educators Grant

As described in prior reports (Theobald et al., 2023, 2024), the goal of the Developing Future Special Educators Grant is to attract secondary and postsecondary students to pursue careers in special education by providing experiential learning opportunities (ELOs) aligned to special education career pathways. In the 2024–25 school year, grants were awarded to applicants who established or expanded ELOs designed to engage students in authentic ways to support, assist, and/or work with students with disabilities.

To provide formative data on participants' perspectives of their experience in these ELOs, we surveyed students both before and after their participation. IRB approval for the surveys was provided by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and surveys were distributed through grant coordinators at each program. We received survey responses from 2,153 students before their participation in the program and 1,021 students after participation. Because we did not collect personally identifiable information about program participants under the terms of our IRB approval, we cannot identify which students may have dropped out of the program before the postsurvey and which students simply did not respond to the postsurvey. That said, an important limitation to the remainder of the formative analysis in this section is that postsurvey respondents may not be representative of all students who participated in these ELOs

or who responded to the presurvey. To remove one potential source of confounding, we focus only on survey responses from grantees who had responses on both the presurvey and postsurvey.

As shown in Figure 3.1, 36% of survey respondents reported an interest in pursuing a career in special education after participating in one of these ELOs, compared to 33% of respondents surveyed before participating. This difference is statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < .05$).

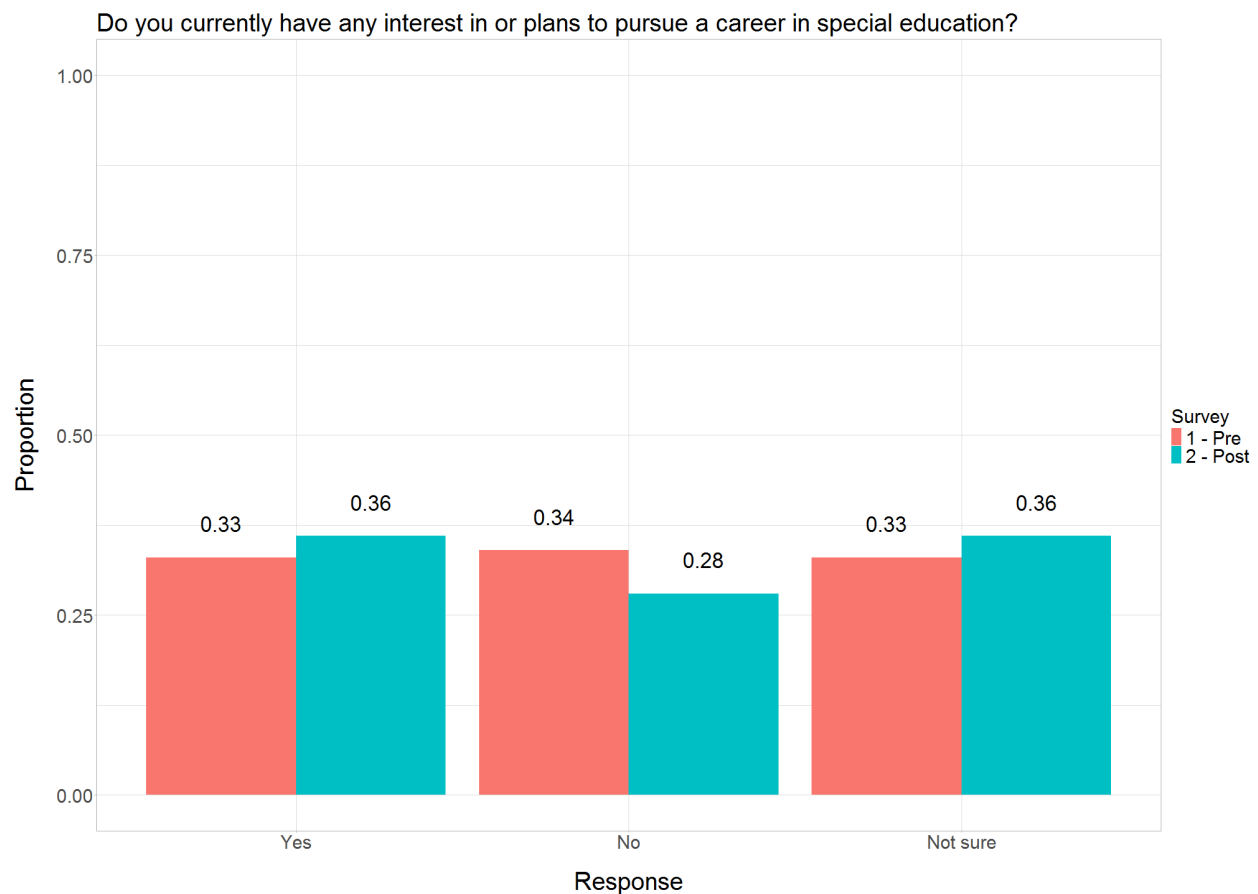


Figure 3.1. Participants' reported interest in or plans to pursue a career in special education

Figure 3.2 shows that when we asked interested respondents about the type of job they were considering, the majority of respondents said they were interested in PK–12 special

education teaching roles, and we did not see significant differences in role interest between the pre- and postsurveys conditional on overall interest shown in Figure 3.1.

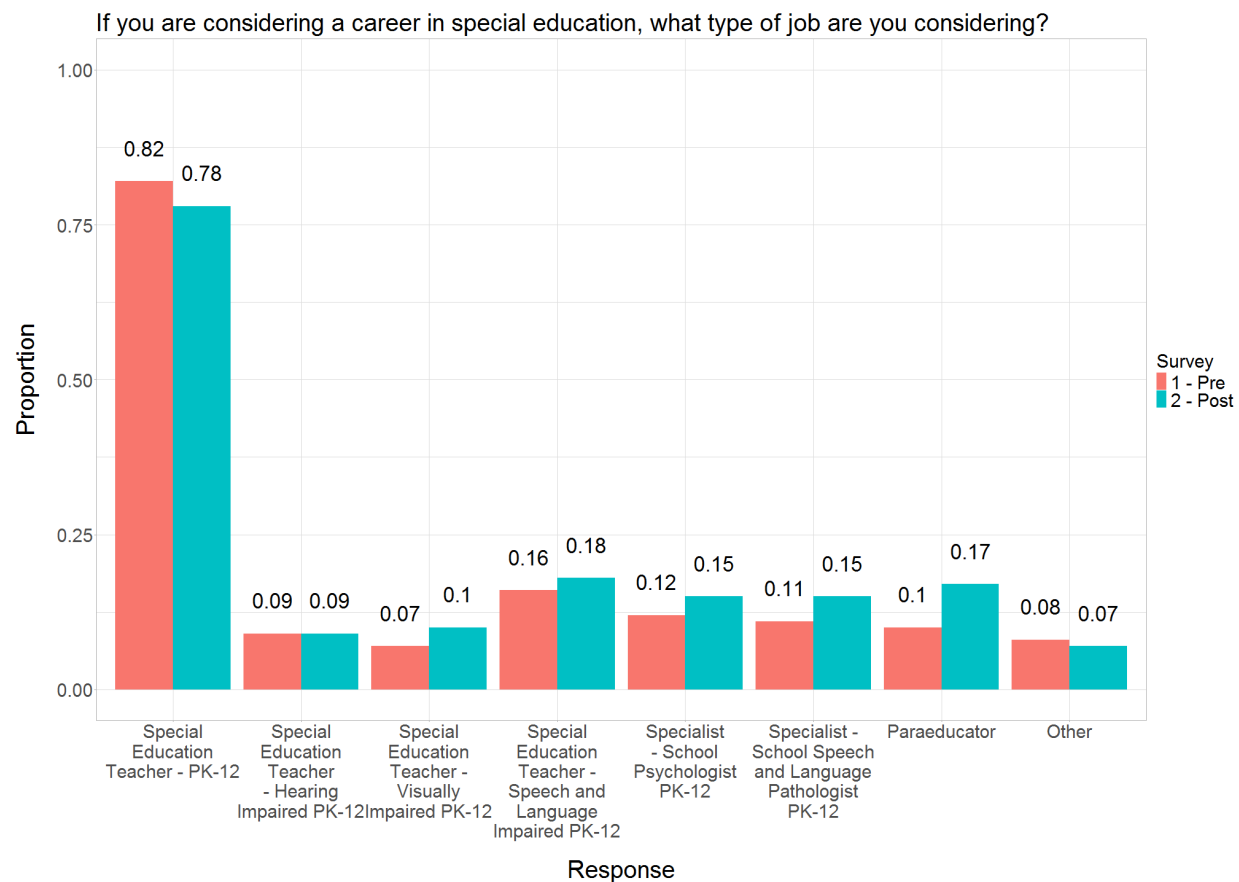


Figure 3.2. Participants’ interest in specific special education roles

We also asked parallel questions on the pre- and post-surveys about participants’ familiarity with topics related to colleges that prepare students for a career in special education: specific colleges, admissions requirements, and financial aid options. As shown in Figure 3.3, a higher proportion of postsurvey respondents reported being extremely familiar with these options, and a lower proportion reported being “not at all familiar” with these options relative to respondents to the presurvey. As above, all of these differences are statistically significant at conventional levels.

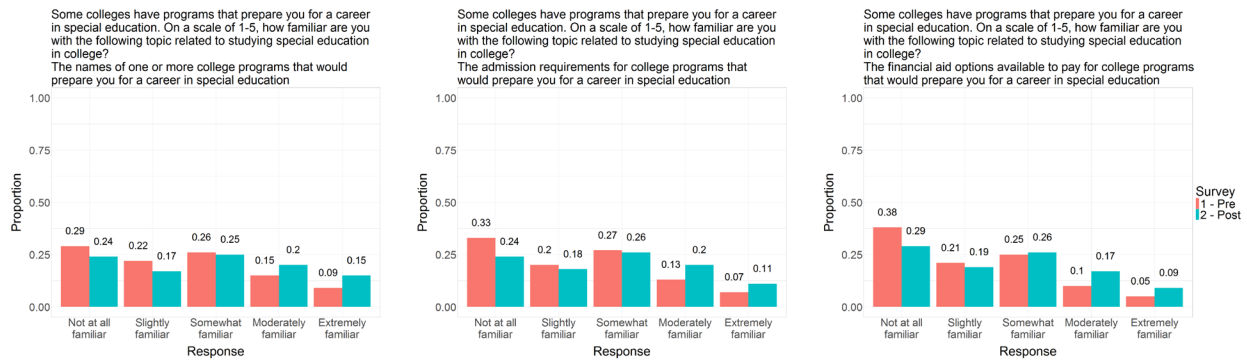


Figure 3.3. Participants' familiarity with topics related to studying special education in college

We also asked participants about their familiarity with specific special education roles. As shown in Figure 3.4, a higher proportion of respondents on the postsurvey reported being “extremely familiar” with all seven of these special education teaching roles, and a lower proportion reported being “not at all familiar” with these options relative to respondents to the presurvey. As above, all of these differences are statistically significant at conventional levels.

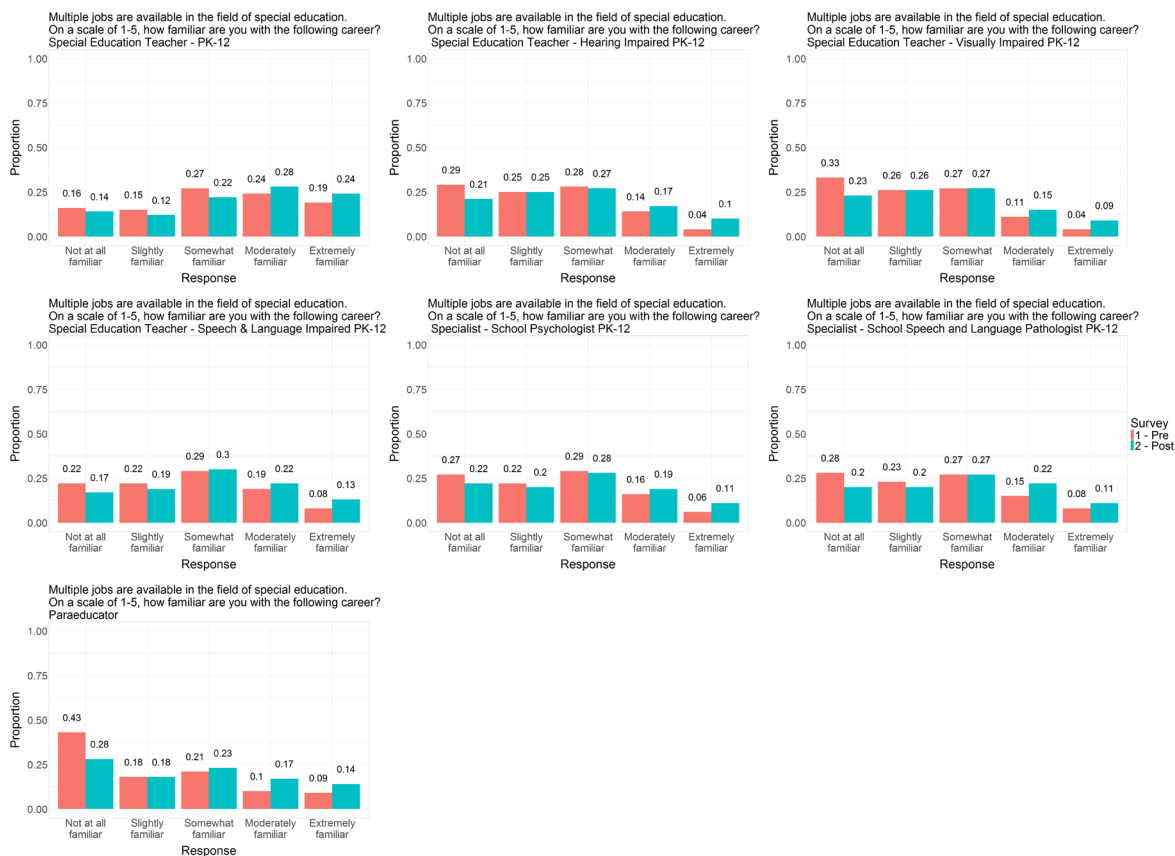


Figure 3.4. Participants' familiarity with specific special education teaching roles

We also asked a series of questions of postsurvey respondents about their experiences in these ELOs. We first asked about the extent to which three topics—available career pathways and career clusters, career options, and eligibility requirements for admission into educator preparation programs—were discussed during this opportunity. As shown in Figure 3.5, about 38% of postsurvey respondents said career options were discussed “to a great extent,” compared to 32% for available career pathways and career clusters and 23% for eligibility requirements for admission into educator preparation programs. Only 11% to 17% of survey respondents, depending on the topic, said these topics were discussed “not at all” during their ELO.

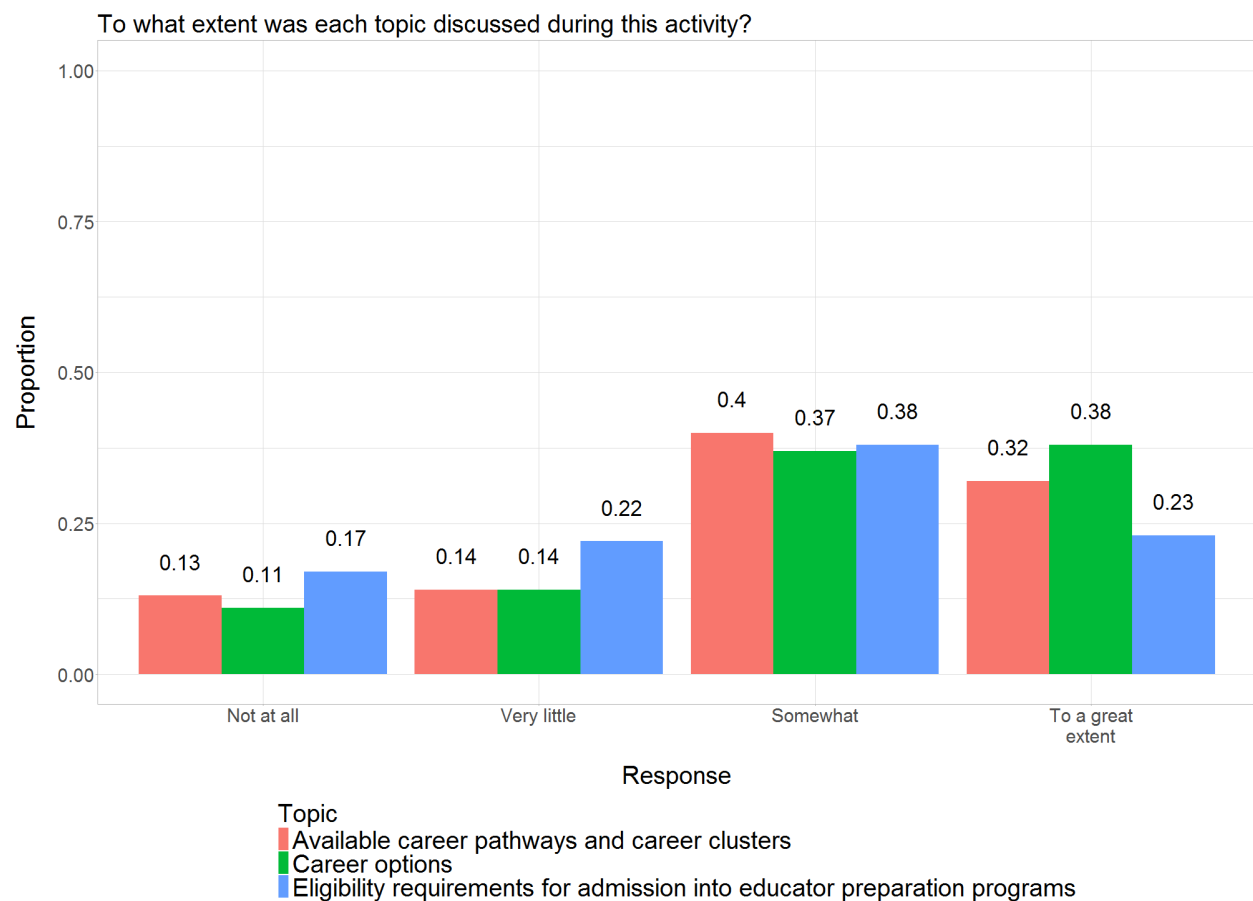


Figure 3.5. Extent to which topics were discussed during activity

Finally, we asked how, if at all, participants’ understanding of these topics improved as a result of this opportunity. As shown in Figure 3.6, more than two thirds of postsurvey

respondents reported that their understanding of each topic improved “somewhat” or “to a great extent” as a result of their participation in the ELO, with the greatest reported understanding related to career options and the lowest related to eligibility requirements for admission into educator preparation programs.

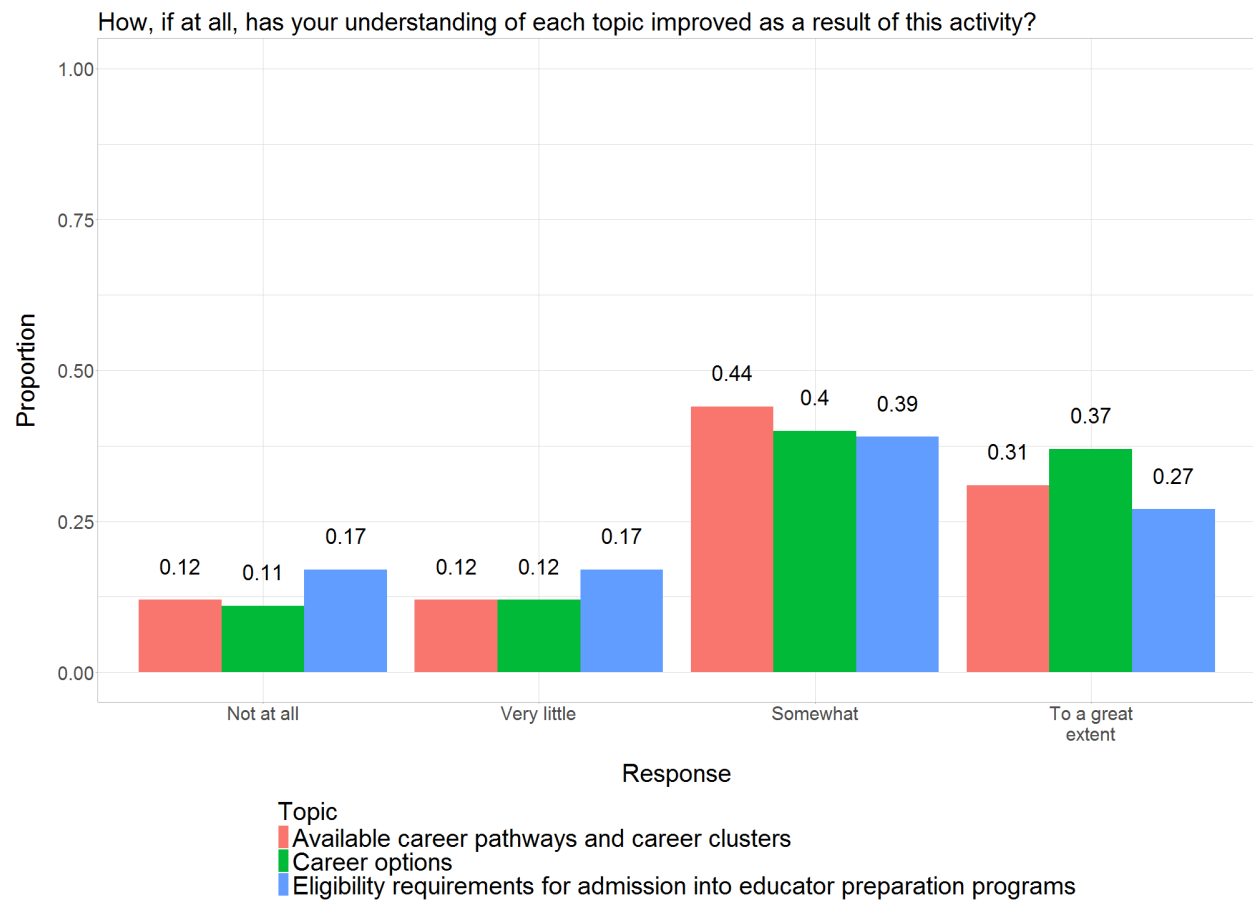


Figure 3.6. Extent to which understanding of topics improved as a result of the activity

APR Mentoring Project

As described in prior reports (Theobald et al., 2023, 2024), the purpose of the APR Mentoring Project is to retain special education personnel and provide additional support to facilitate their growth as professionals. The intended program design paired novice Pennsylvania special education administrators, teachers, school psychologists, teachers of the deaf, teachers of the visually impaired, and speech-language pathologists with 3 or fewer years of experience with mentors who had 5 or more years of experience. The mentors were expected to meet with their mentees for at least 30 minutes once a month to discuss educational practices and processes. Each month, mentors were provided with recommended topics and resources by PA Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) consultants. Mentors received a stipend at the conclusion of the project.

For this year's report, we connected data on the first cohort of mentees (i.e., from the 2022–23 school year) to administrative data provided by the state to provide a quantitative look at the characteristics, school and district settings, and attrition rates of mentees from this first program year. As in prior years, we again surveyed both mentees and mentors during the 2024–25 school year—to collect formative data on their experiences in the mentoring program.

Administrative Data Analysis, First Mentee Cohort

We first summarize the personal characteristics of mentees as observed in the state's administrative data, first overall and then by role type (teacher, administrator, and school psychologist). As shown in Figure 4.1, about three quarters of all mentees had an advanced degree, one fifth were male, one tenth were non-White, one third were inexperienced in the state's public school workforce (i.e., observed in 3 or fewer previous years in the state data), and two thirds were inexperienced in their role (i.e., observed in 3 or fewer previous years in the

same role in the state data). But there is considerable variation across roles, as mentees who were teachers are more likely to be inexperienced both overall and in their role, while administrators and school psychologists were more likely to have an advanced degree.

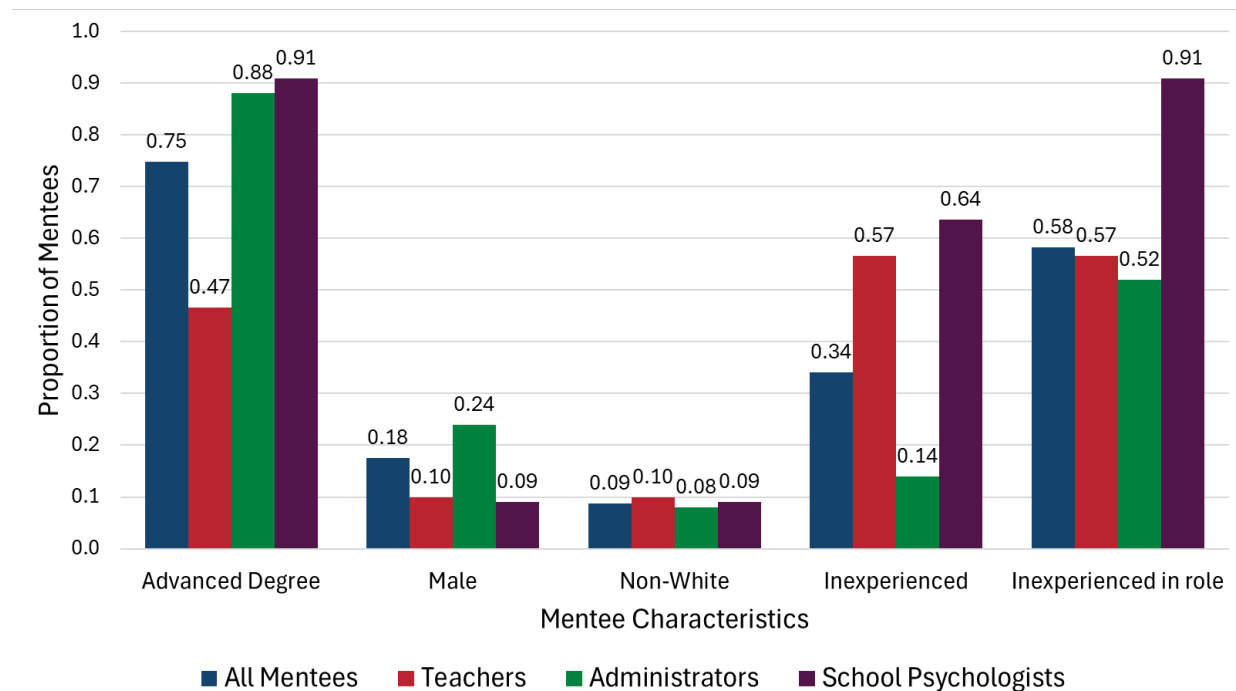


Figure 4.1. Characteristics of mentees by role type

We then consider the observable characteristics of the local education agencies in which mentees were working. Sixty percent of mentees were employed in a traditional public school district, 29% were in a charter school, and 11% were in an intermediate unit (IU). Teachers were disproportionately in charter schools, administrators were disproportionately in IUs, and school psychologists were disproportionately in traditional school districts.

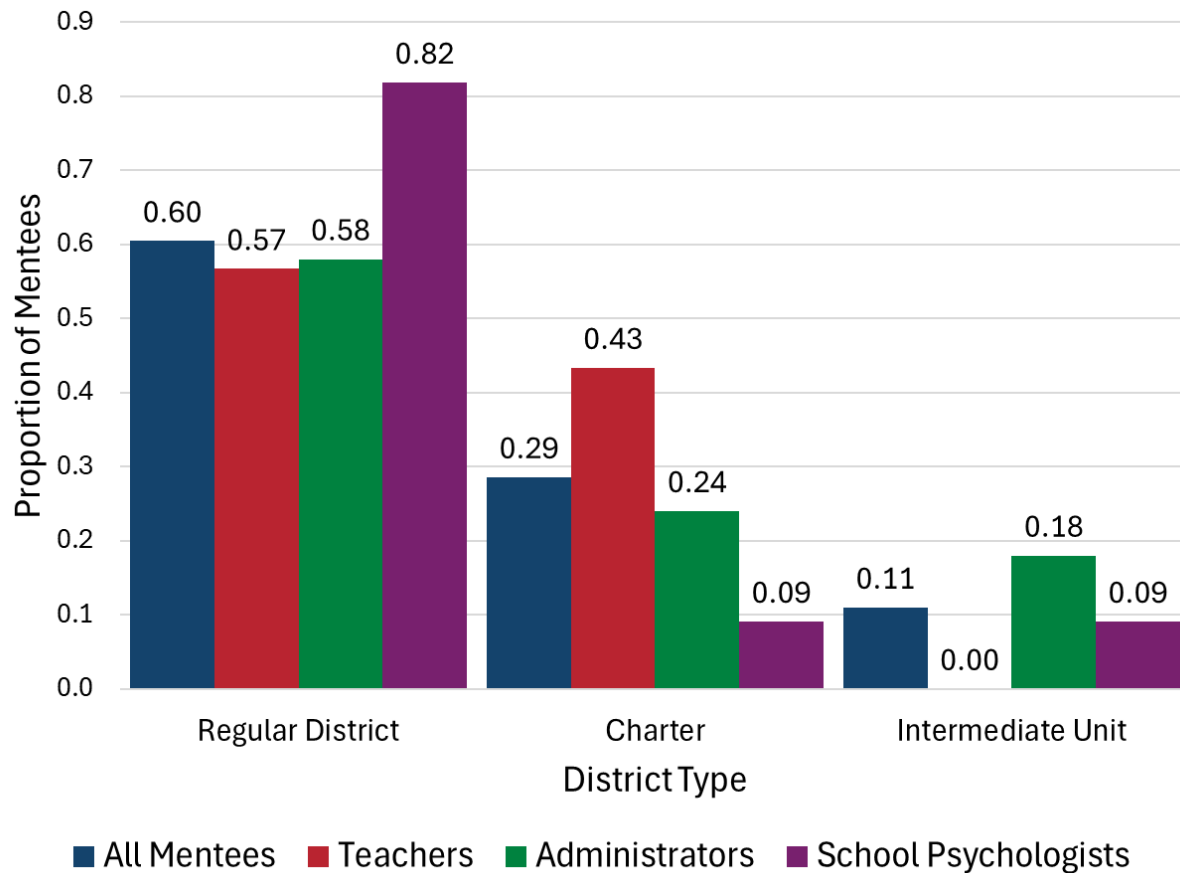


Figure 4.2. District characteristics of mentees

Turning to the observable school characteristics of mentees, Figure 4.3 shows that over 40% of mentees work in schools in the top quartile of non-White students in the state; this is driven by administrators, over half of whom teach in these schools.

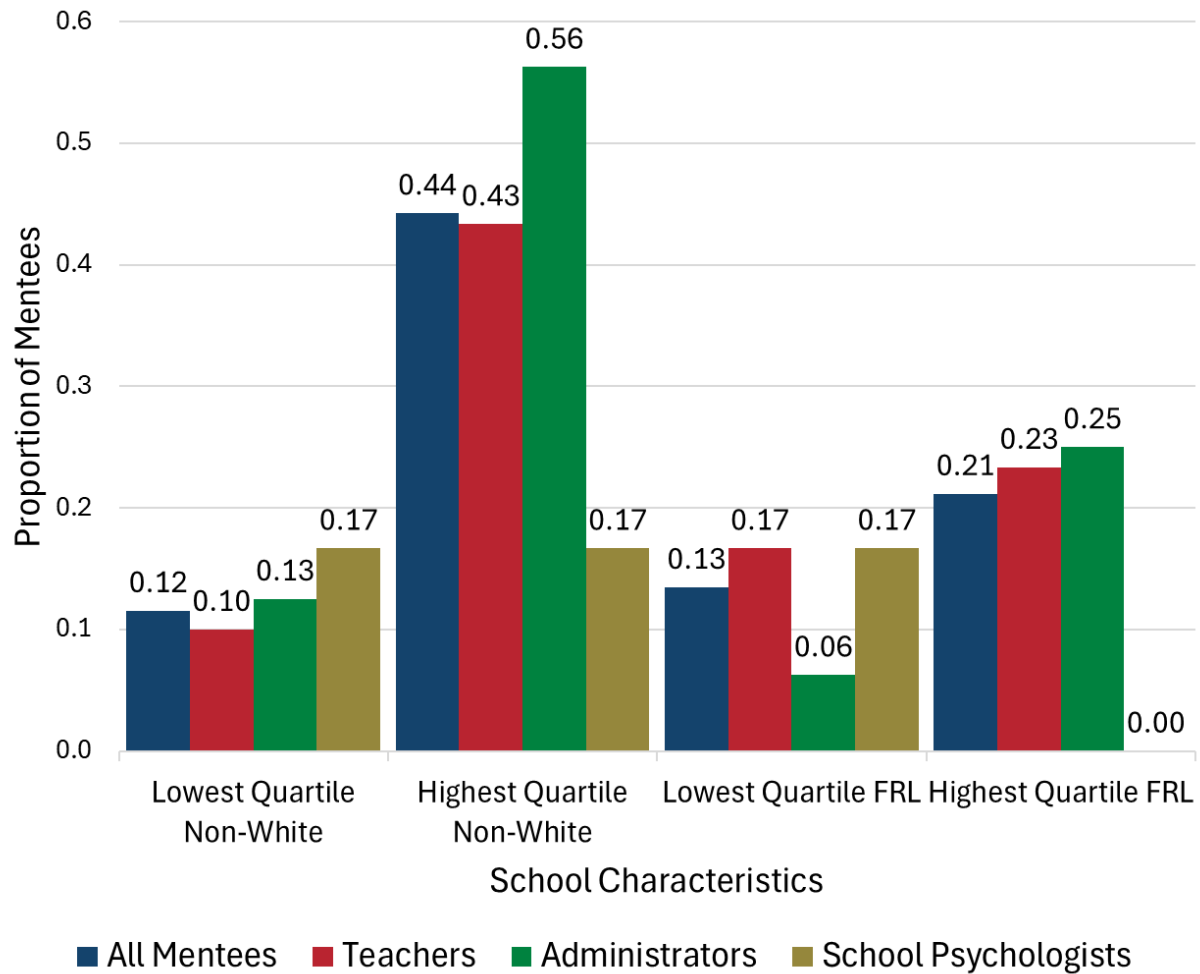


Figure 4.3. School characteristics of mentees

Finally, Figure 4.4 shows retention rates of mentees in the broader state school workforce the year after they participated. Eighty-nine percent of mentees returned to the state’s workforce the following year, with 83% of teachers, 90% of administrators, and 100% of participating school psychologists retained. Given small sample sizes, we do not find significant differences in retention rates between mentees and observably similar non-mentees in the state.

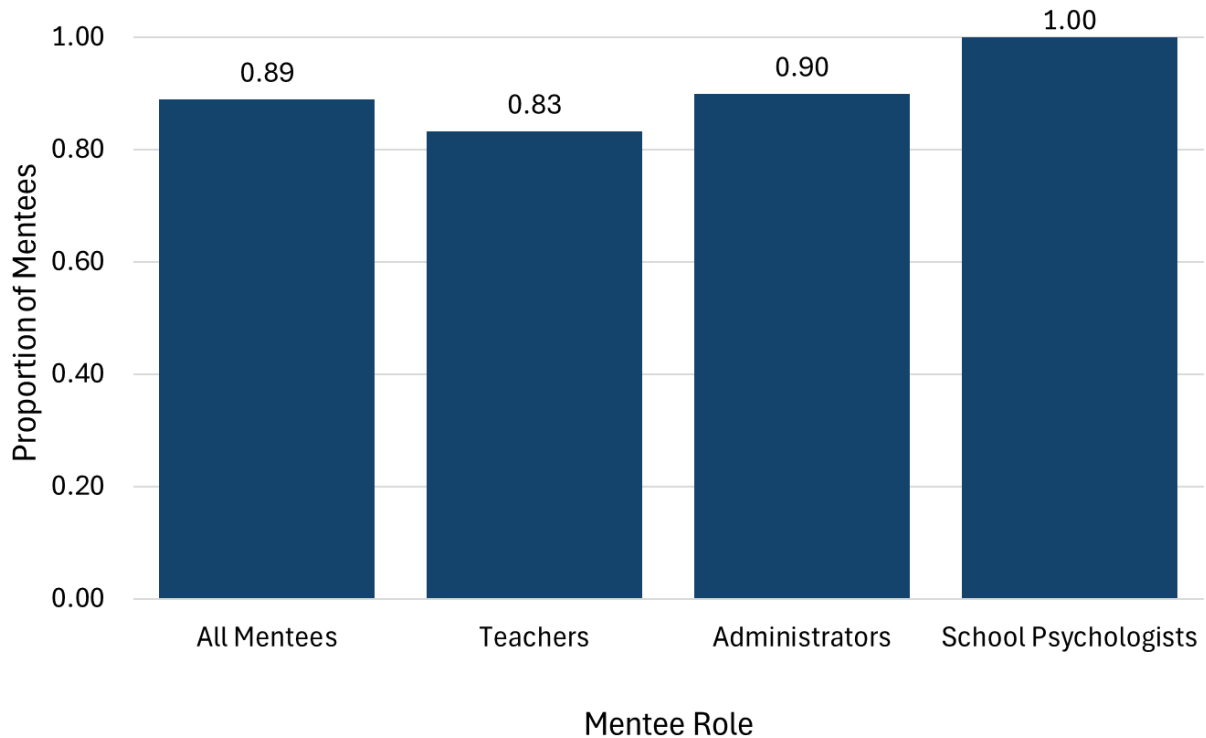


Figure 4.4. Retention rates of mentees

Mentee/Mentor Surveys, Third Cohort

As in prior reports, we collect formative data on mentors' and mentees' perspectives on their experience in the mentoring program by surveying mentors and mentees after their participation in the program. IRB approval for the surveys was provided by AIR, and surveys were distributed by PaTTAN staff to participating mentors and mentees. We received survey responses from 231 of the 296 mentees who participated in the program for a response rate of 78%. Despite this high response rate, this formative analysis comes with the important caveat that the sample of survey respondents may not be representative of all participants in this program.

We begin by summarizing mentors' special education roles. As shown in Figure 4.5, about 45% of mentors were special education administrators, about 25% were special education teachers, 15% were school psychologists, and the remainder were speech-language pathologists,

teachers of the deaf, or teachers of the visually impaired.

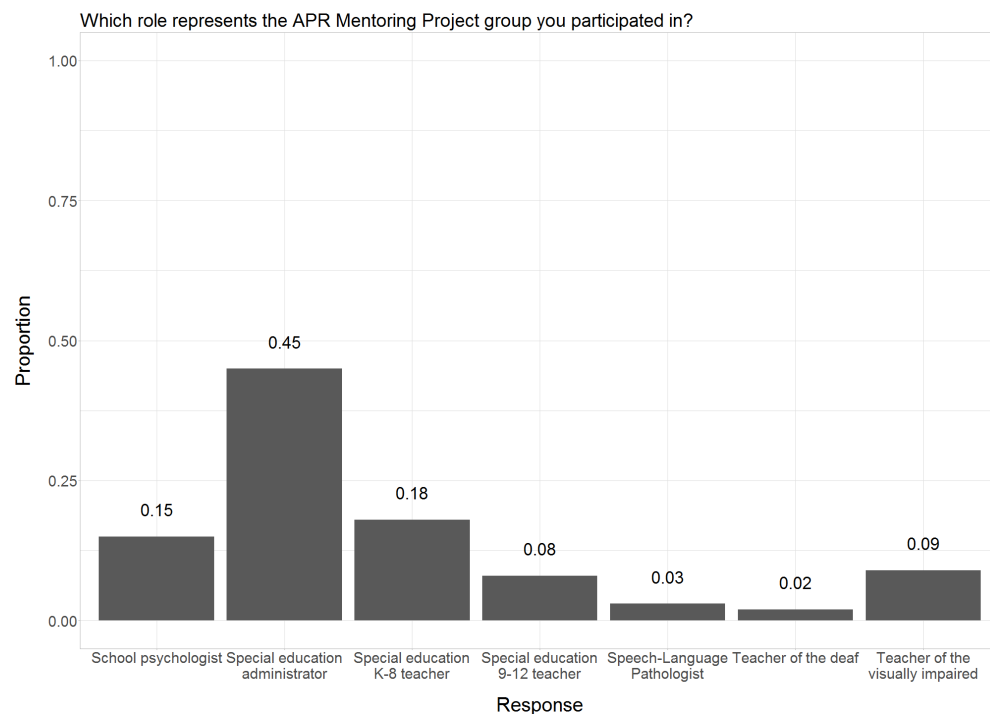


Figure 4.5. Mentor roles

We now summarize the perspectives of mentors about their mentees. As shown in Figure 4.6, 92% of responding mentors reported that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that participating in the APR Mentoring Project positively impacted the professional growth of their mentee(s); 74% reported that their mentee’s engagement in the project was “excellent” or “very good,” compared to 12% who said their engagement was “fair” or “poor.”

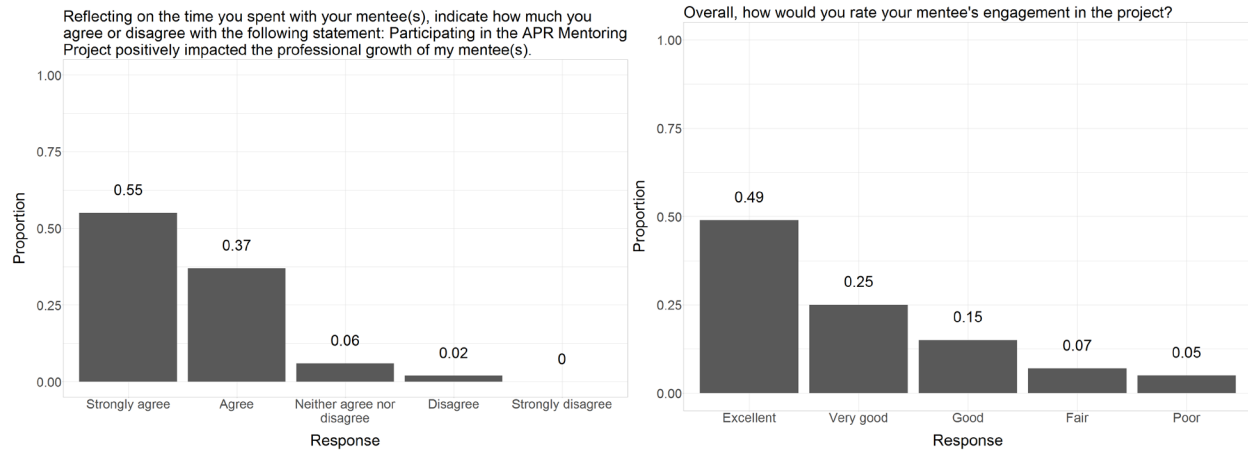
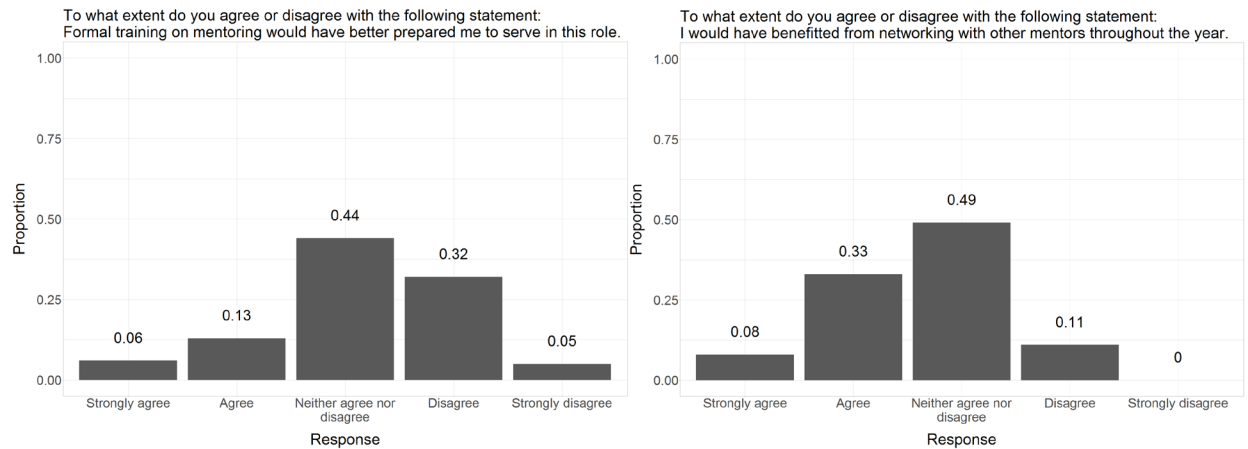


Figure 4.6. Mentors' perspectives on mentees

Finally, when we asked mentors about their perspectives about different parts of the program (Figure 4.7), only about 20% said they would have benefited from formal training for the mentoring role, and 41% said they would have benefited from networking with other mentors. Finally, more than 95% of responding mentors “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they would like to serve as a mentor again next year, and 76% said the amount of time they spent with their mentee(s) this year was “just the right amount.”



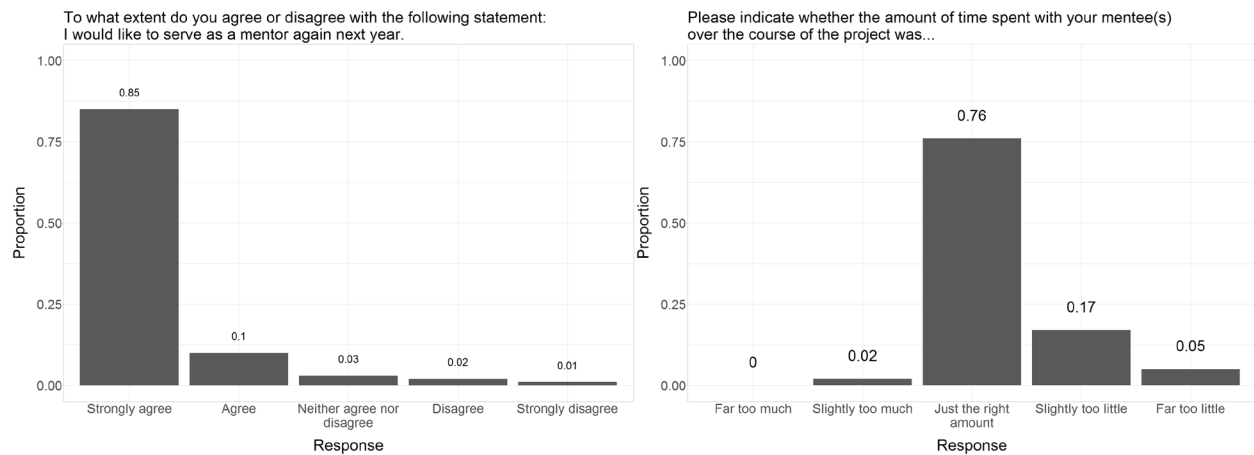
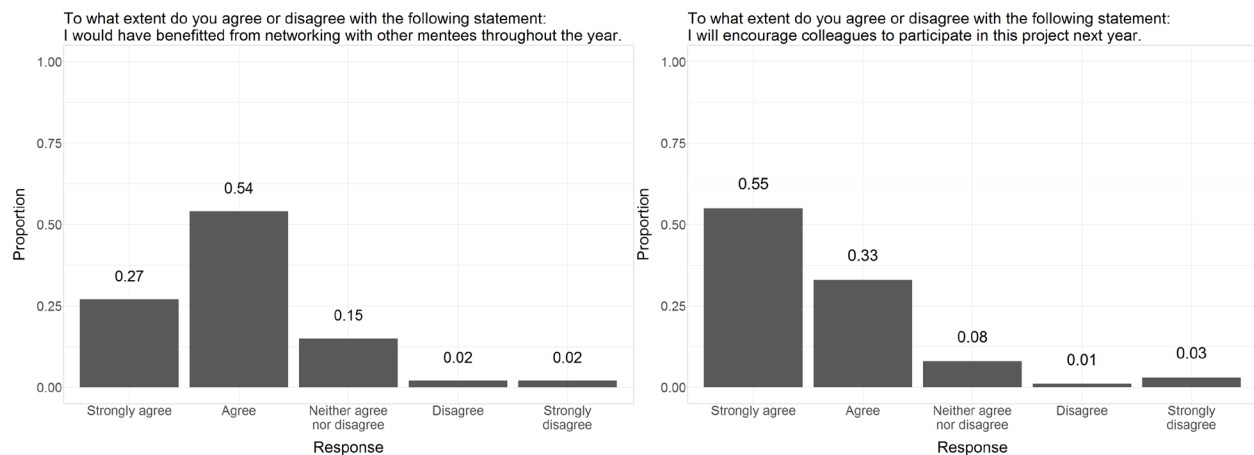


Figure 4.7. Mentors' perspectives on program

We now turn to the responses to the mentee survey. As shown in Figure 4.8, 71% “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they would have benefited from networking, and 88% reported that they would encourage colleagues to participate in the project next year. Ninety-four percent of mentees “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with the statement that participating in the APR Mentoring Program positively impacted their growth as a professional, and 81% of mentees felt that the amount of time they spent with their mentor was “just the right amount.”



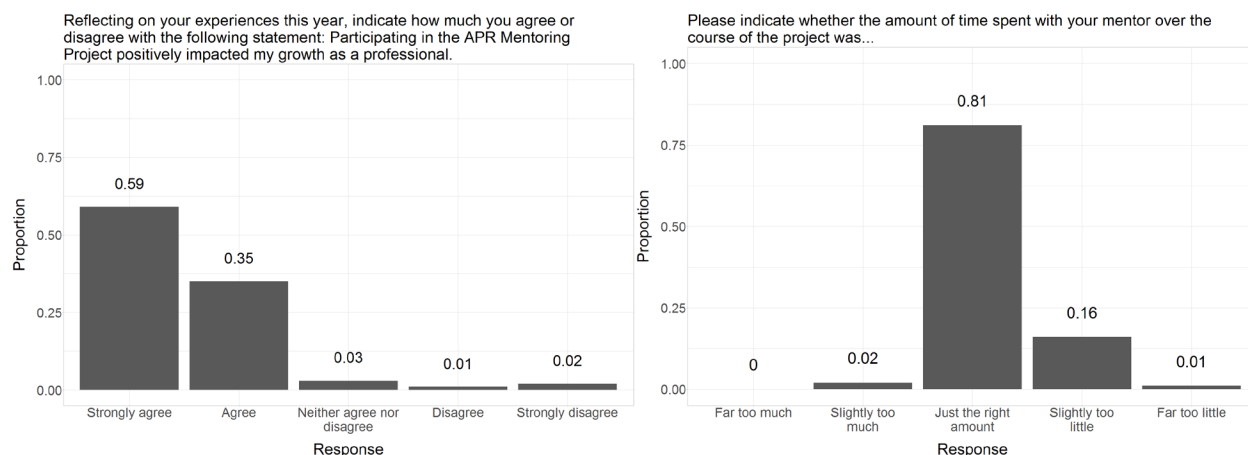


Figure 4.8. Mentees’ perspectives on program

Networking and Learning Communities and K–2 Learning Institutes

The purpose of the Networking and Learning Communities, introduced in the 2022–23 school year, is to facilitate opportunities for special educators to engage in conversations with others who share similar job responsibilities as a means of providing ongoing support and receiving professional development. The K–2 Learning Institute was an in-person workshop held at the PaTTAN central office to support general and special education teachers in inclusive classrooms.

As with the previous surveys, we distributed surveys to participants in these networking sessions and the K–2 Learning Institute. IRB approval for the surveys was provided by AIR, and surveys were distributed to participants at the end of each session. We received survey responses from 2,019 participants in Networking and Learning Communities sessions, and 106 participants in the K–2 Learning Institute. We do not have access to data on all participants in these sessions, but to the extent that this does not represent all participants, subsequent analyses are limited in that this sample may not be representative of all participants in these sessions.

We begin with basic descriptive information about participants in the networking sessions. As shown in Figure 5.1, these sessions provided networking opportunities for

individuals within a large range of special education roles during the 2024–25 school year. The most common job roles were school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, paraprofessionals, and special education teachers.

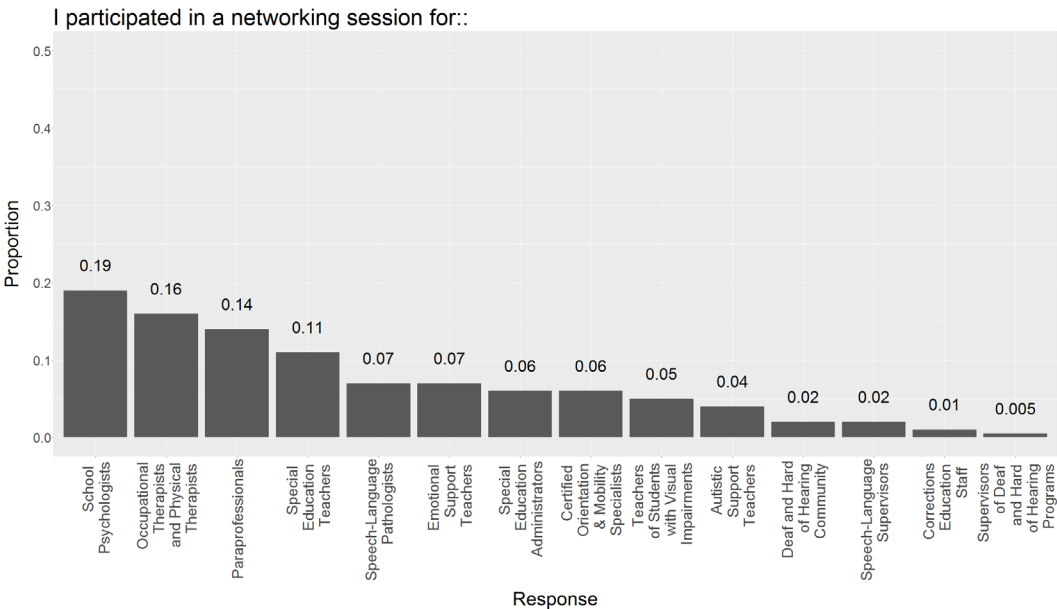


Figure 5.1. Participants’ roles in Networking and Learning Communities

Likewise, participants in the K–2 Learning Institute represented a wide variety of roles (Figure 5.2), the most common of which were regular educators, special educators, and other.

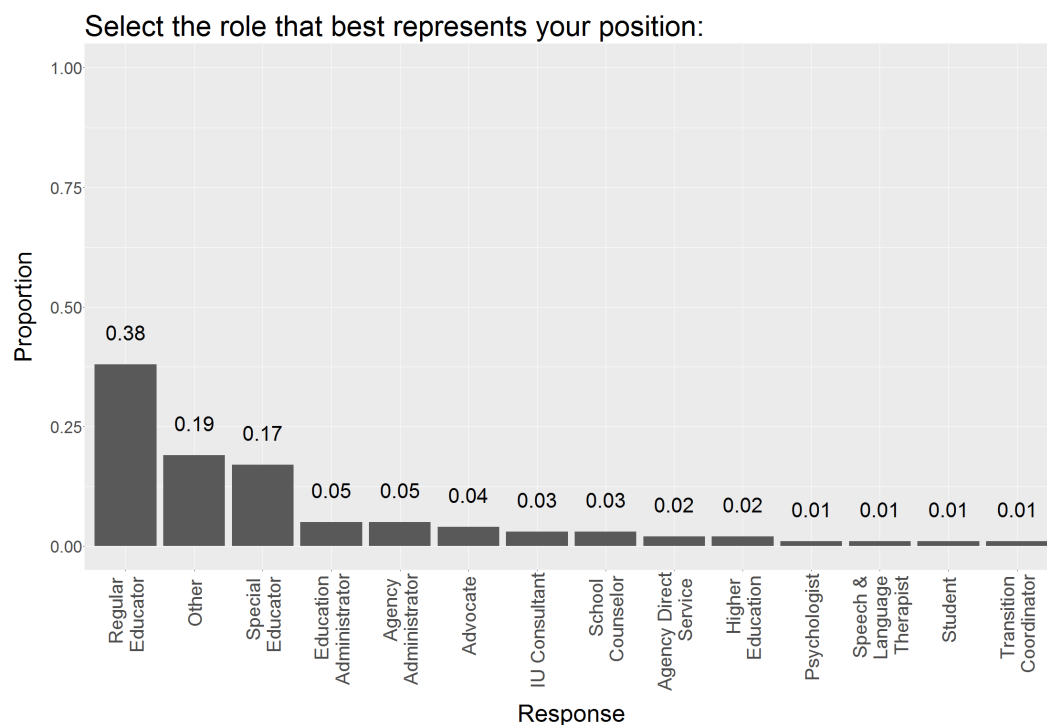


Figure 5.2. Participants' roles in K-2 Learning Institute

The remainder of the questions on this survey asked participants about their perceptions of the networking session they attended. As shown in Figure 5.3, among survey respondents, the proportion who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the session was relevant to their needs was 96%. By the same metric, 93% reported that the session met their expectations, 95% said the information shared will be useful in their work, and 93% said time in the session was well spent. Finally, 90% of respondents reported that the overall quality of the session was “excellent” or “very good,” and 90% of respondents said there was an “excellent” or “very good” chance that they would recommend the sessions to a coworker or colleague.

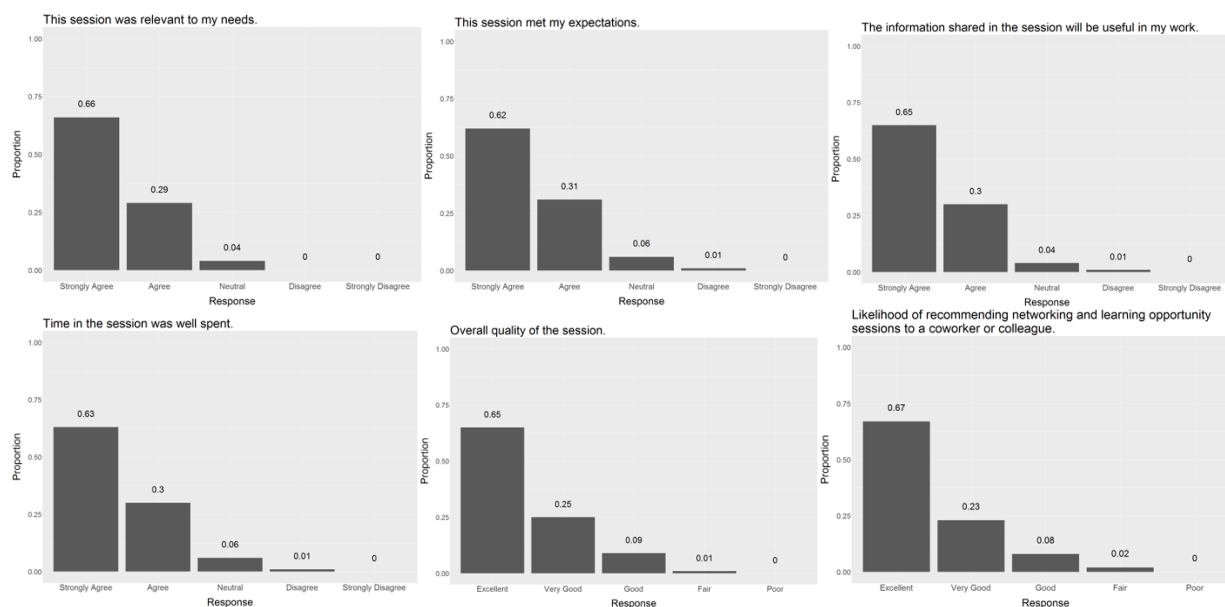


Figure 5.3. Participants' perceptions of Networking and Learning Communities sessions

Finally, we provide similar information for the K–2 Learning Institute. As shown in Figure 5.4, similarly high proportions of participants provided positive feedback about each question (i.e., more than 90% “strongly agree” or “agree”).

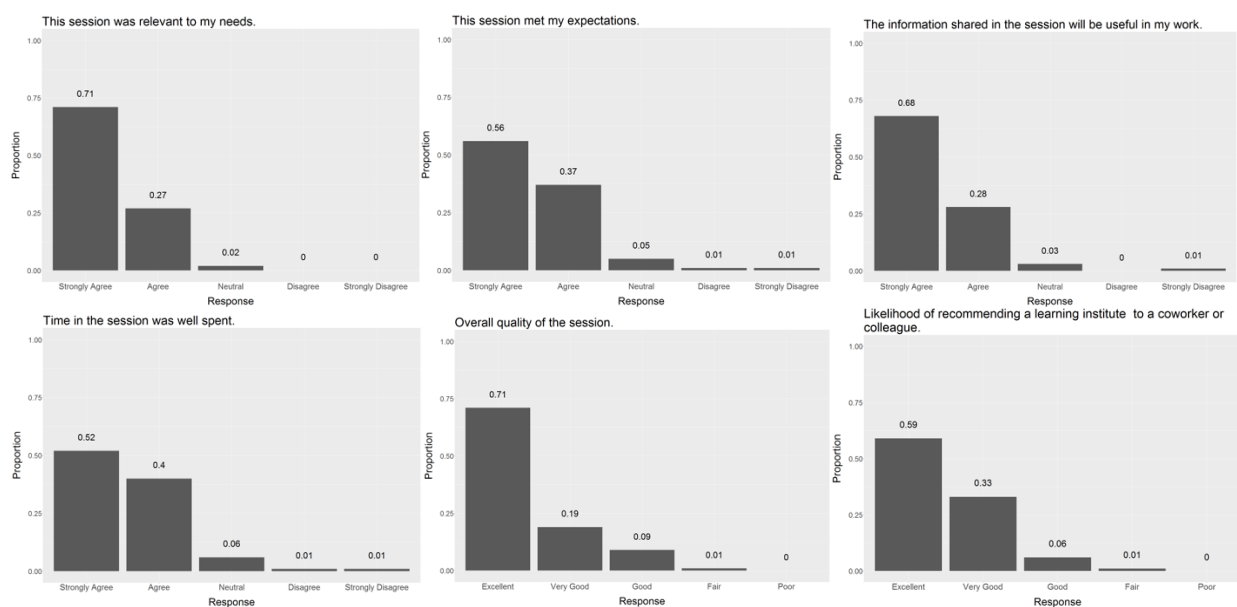


Figure 5.4. Participants' perceptions of K–2 Learning Institute

World of Learning (WOL) ASL Courses

ASL courses offered to high school students in Pennsylvania through WOL began in September 2023 and were included in last year's report (Theobald et al., 2024). This project aims to attract students to the field of special education through participation in ASL courses. Much like last year, participation in these surveys was relatively modest, with only 41 students responding to the presurvey and postsurvey administered to participants. That said, a key difference is that unlike last year, when we found that students were *less* likely to express an interest in using ASL in a future career after their participation in the program, we find the reverse in the 2024–25 school year: 22% of participants reported an interest in using ASL in a future career after participating, compared to 17% before the program.

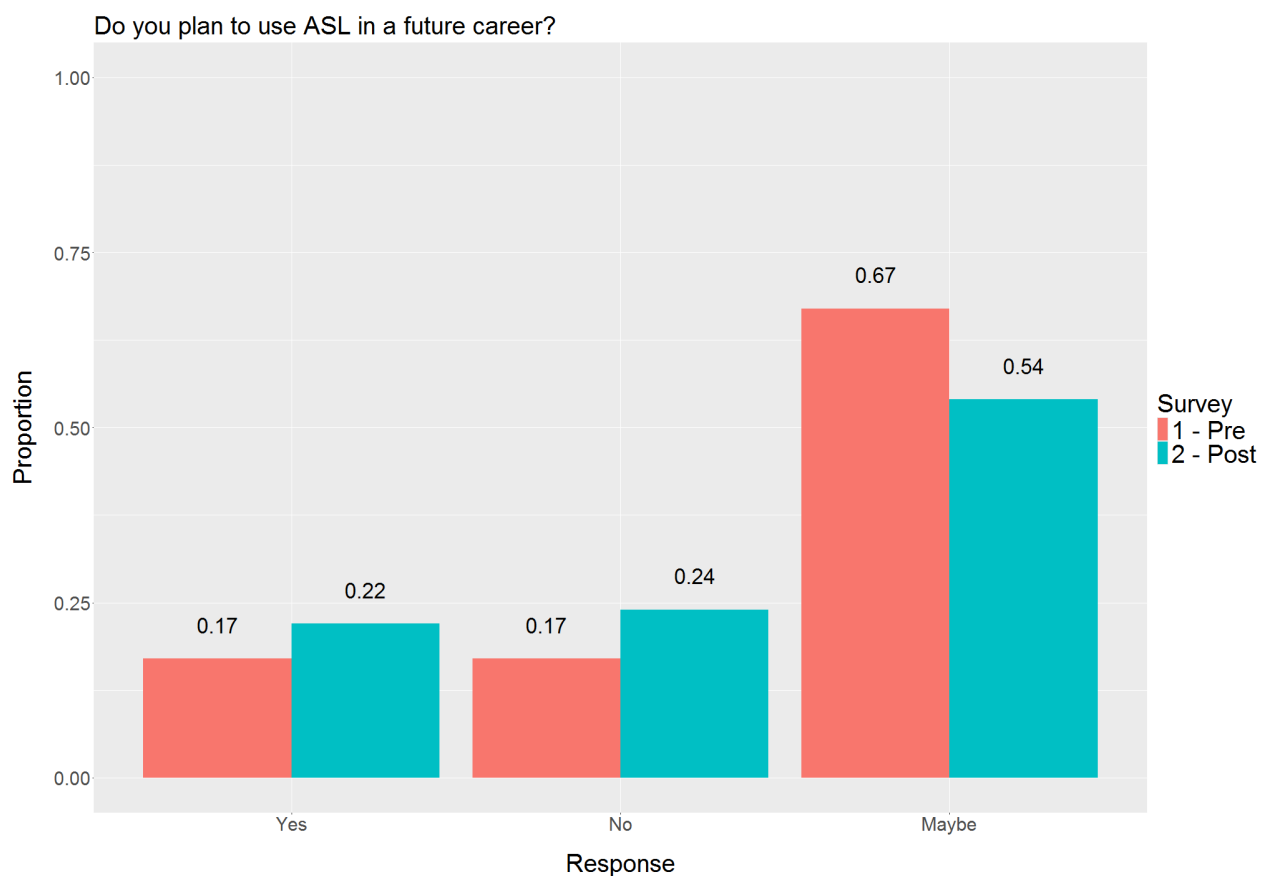


Figure 6.1. Participants' reported plans to use ASL in a future career before and after program

Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant

We collected data on participants in Pennsylvania’s Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant from two sources: fifth-quarter reports submitted to the Pennsylvania Bureau of Special Education, and interviews with grant coordinators at each of the 10 participating intermediate units (IUs).

Reporting Data

Reporting data showed that more than 100 paraeducators were participating in these programs as of the most recent reporting date (Figure 7.1).

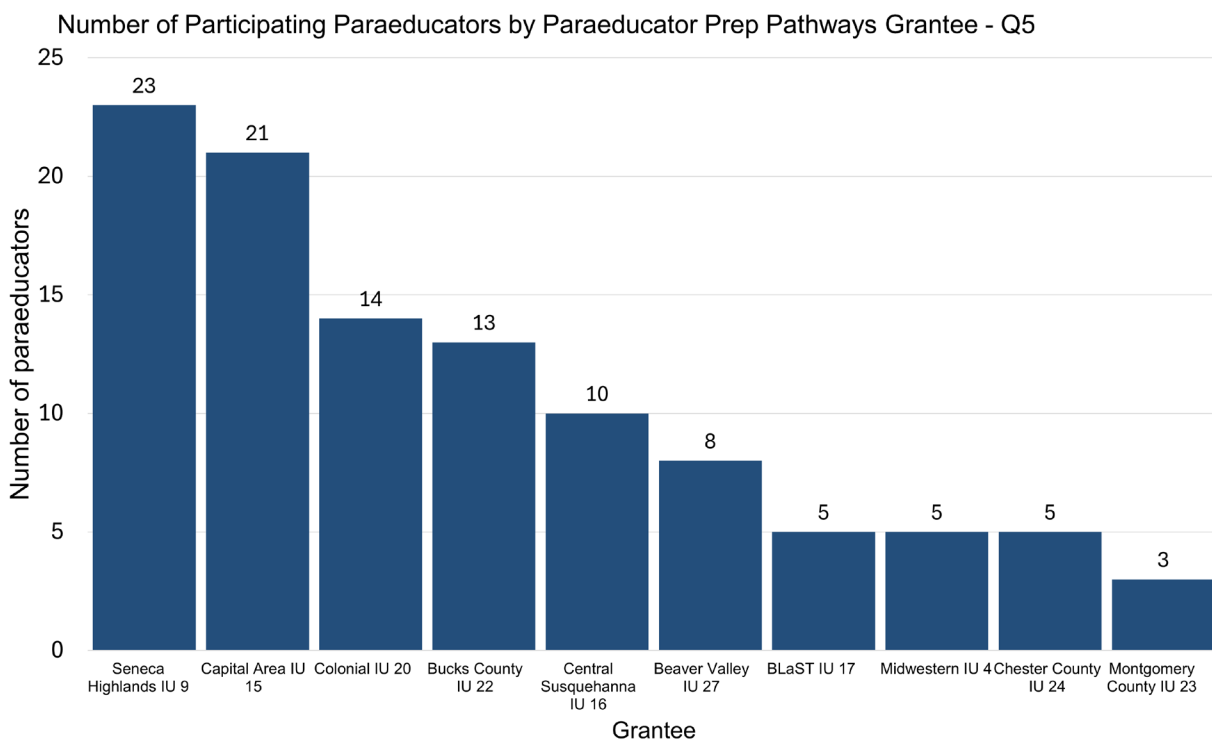


Figure 7.1. Participants in the Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant Program

Reporting data also showed that the number of participating local education agencies (LEAs) also varied by IU, with IUs working with anywhere from one to eight LEAs as part of this program (Figure 7.2).

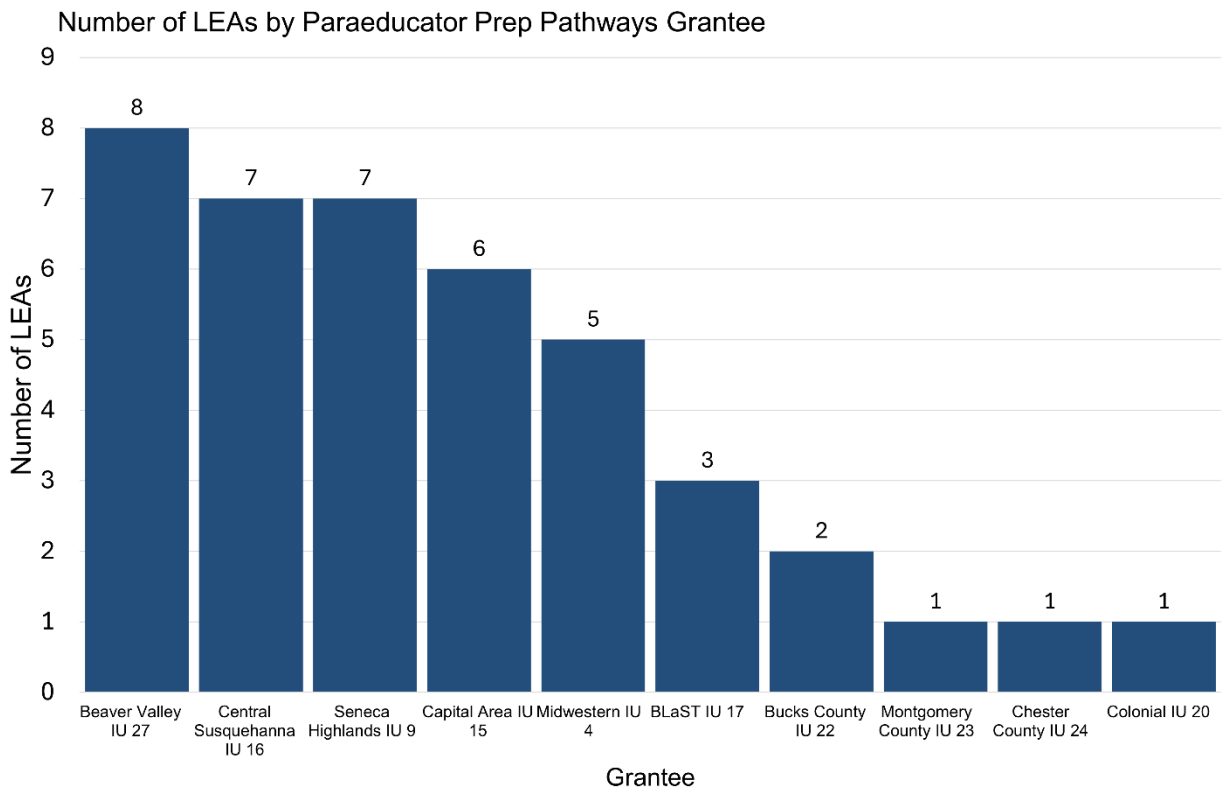


Figure 7.2. LEAs in Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant Program

The number of courses offered by grantees also varied considerably across IUs, with one grantee offering only two courses and three others offering 12 (Figure 7.3).

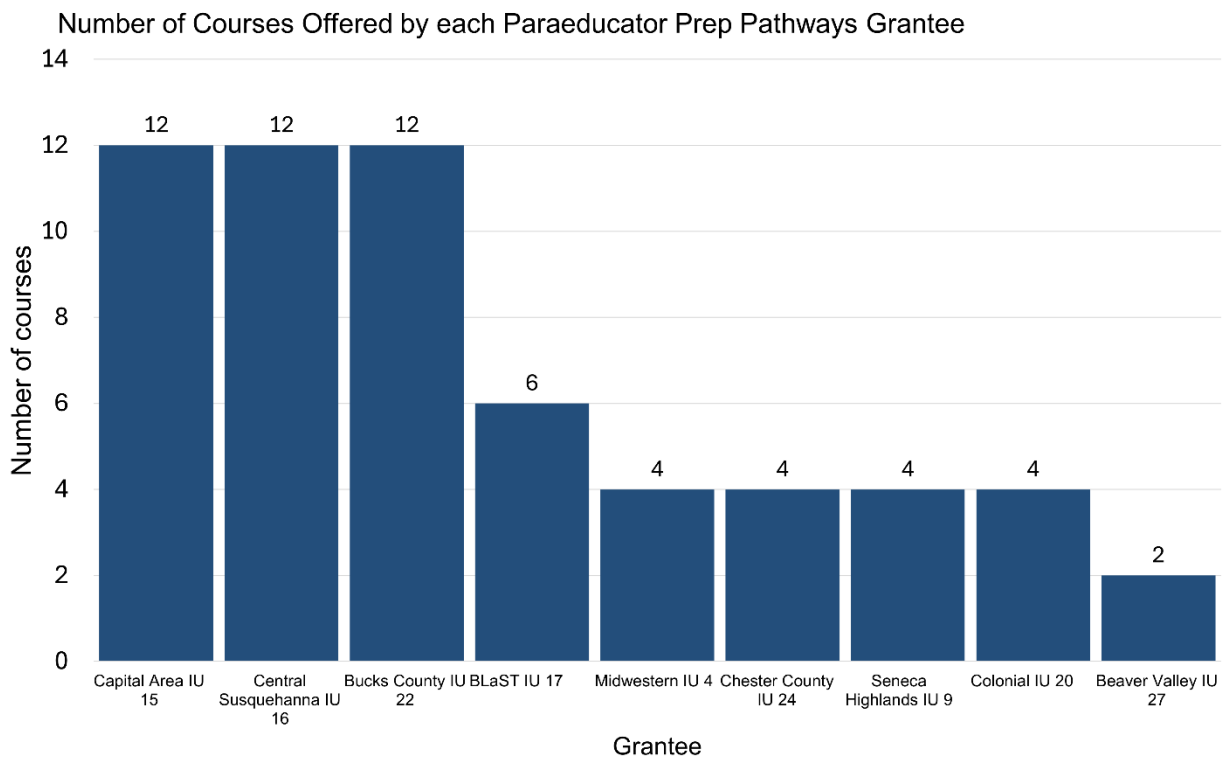


Figure 7.3. Number of courses in Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant Program

Finally, course modalities were evenly split between grantees, with half the IUs offering virtual-only courses and the other half offering hybrid courses. No grantees offered in-person-only courses.

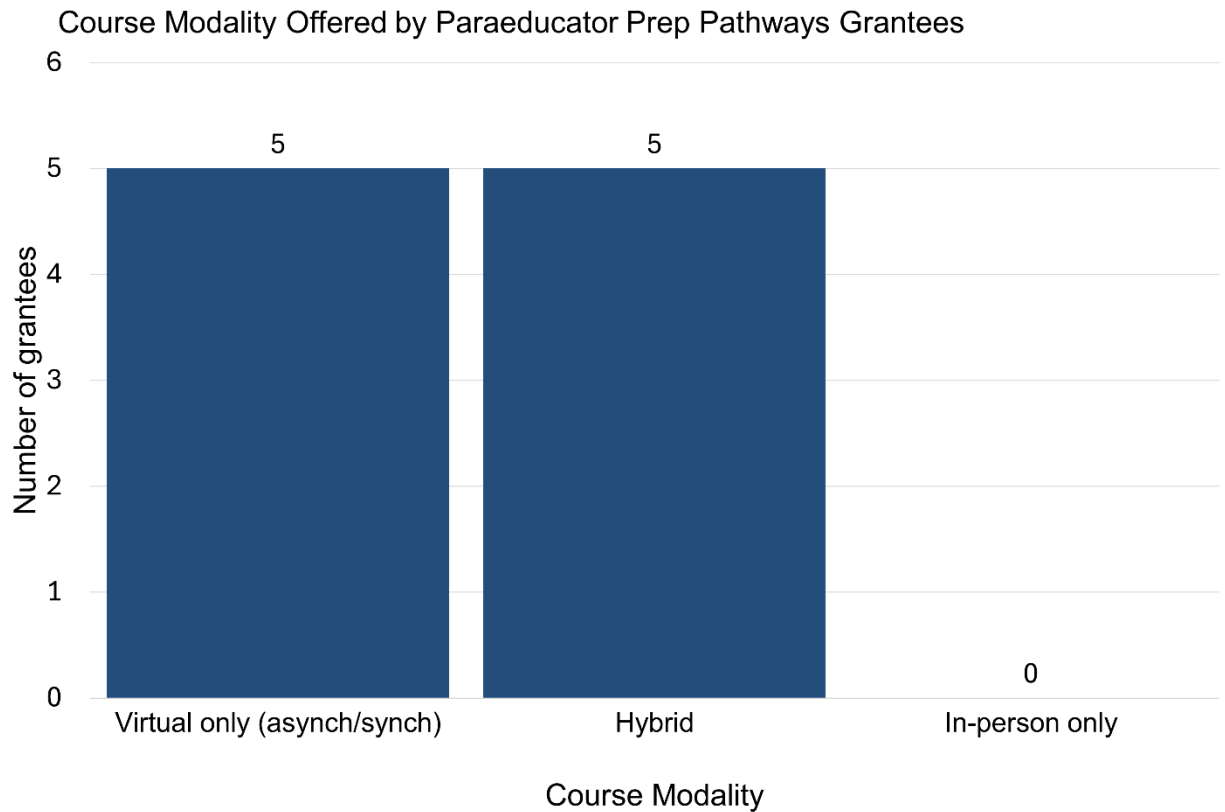


Figure 7.4. Course modality in Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant Program

Grant Coordinator Interviews

We also interviewed grant coordinators from each of the 10 participating grantees in the Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant. The goal of these interviews was to collect insights into program implementation, successes, challenges, and sustainability to inform future efforts to support paraeducators transitioning into certified teaching roles, particularly in special education. Below we outline some common themes from these interviews. We indicate below when we found 100% agreement on a comment/theme.

Motivation for Applying to the Grant

All of the grantees (100%) articulated that their motivation was to help address the shortage of special education teachers. All grantees mentioned that the grant enabled them to:

- Establish structured pathways for paraeducators.
- Provide financial aid to overcome economic barriers.
- Build the special education workforce from within existing school communities.

Program Design and Implementation

Professional Development

All the grantees (100%) indicated that they offered basic professional development prior to being funded on this grant. These existing foundations supported program expansion.

Sustainability

All grantees (100%) viewed their program changes as sustainable, *provided financial support remains available*. Key sustainable features included course offerings, support systems, and transfer pathways.

Recruitment

All grantees (100%) conducted outreach activities with LEAs that included personal contacts with administrators, flyers, and email announcements. Two grantees specifically mentioned targeting current paraeducators nearing program completion to better meet the requirements of the grant. However, all grantees mentioned how the tight timeline constrained recruitment strategies.

Coursework Alignment

Programs offered coursework aligned with certification requirements in special education or early childhood education and emphasized Associate of Arts (AA)-level coursework to build

foundational skills.

Credit Transfer

While all grantees were required to coordinate their grant with degree-granting institutions, many grantees strengthened articulation agreements with 4-year colleges, easing the transition to bachelor's degree programs.

Mentoring and Support

All grantees (100%) characterized mentoring for this grant as focused primarily on administrative logistics (e.g., financial aid and registration). With the exception of one grantee, pedagogical mentoring was handled by course instructors or cooperating teachers. There is room to expand and formalize mentoring systems, especially in instructional guidance.

In-Depth Feedback on Program Strengths and Challenges

Key Strengths

- Accessible Career Pathways: Allowed paraeducators to advance while maintaining their employment. (100%)
- Financial Assistance: Reduced economic barriers to enrollment and persistence. (100%)
- Homegrown Teacher Pipeline: Promoted workforce stability by cultivating educators from within communities. (100%)
- Flexible Structures: Scheduling accommodated the unique needs of working adults. (100%)
- Community-Relevant Design: Programs were tailored to local needs and contexts.
- Focus on Equity: Addressed systemic inequities by serving a traditionally underserved population.

Key Challenges

- Excessive Course Loads: High credit requirements strained participants balancing work and family. (100%)
- Compressed Timelines: The 2-year limit limited program planning and participant success. (100%)
- Resource Constraints: Paraeducators face time, financial, and institutional navigation challenges. (100%)
- District Variability: Differences in district support and resources hindered uniform implementation.
- Recruitment Gaps: Some districts lacked infrastructure or incentives to recruit effectively.
- Target Population Fit: Some questioned whether paraeducators were the optimal focus group, suggesting high school students might face fewer barriers.

Recommendations

- Increased and Sustained Funding: Greater investment is essential for long-term program viability. (100%)
- Extended Timelines: A longer program duration would improve planning and completion rates. (100%)
- Manageable Course Loads: Capping course requirements would enhance retention. (100%)
- Stronger AA Pathway Support: Reinforced advising and resources are needed for associate degree programs.
- Streamlined Credit for Experience: Simplified, accessible procedures are recommended for recognizing prior learning.

- Innovative Program Models: Competency-based and apprenticeship-style approaches may better support this population.
- Enhanced Partnerships: Deeper coordination between IHEs and LEAs is vital for success.

Conclusion

The Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant represents an important first step toward diversifying and stabilizing Pennsylvania’s educator workforce. The initiative successfully opened access to degree progression necessary for teacher certification for paraeducators by offering structured, locally responsive, and financially supported pathways. However, realizing its full potential will require improvements in program flexibility, mentoring support, funding continuity, and inter-institutional collaboration. Thoughtful refinement and sustained investment will ensure the continued growth and impact of this promising pathway into the teaching profession.

Overall Conclusions and Next Steps

The findings from this third-year analysis emphasize the initial motivation for and successes of the state’s APR initiative. Specifically, while historical data from years prior to these APR initiatives show that special educator attrition is particularly high for special educators of color and special educators serving more students of color (Gilmour et al., 2024), and only about one third of emergency-permitted special educators transition to a full special education license within 4 years (Gilmour et al., 2025), feedback from participants and grantees in the state’s APR projects suggest that the state has identified promising mechanisms for attracting and retaining special educators in the state. For example, and echoing findings from prior reports (Theobald et al., 2023, 2024), feedback from participants involved in the Developing Future Special Educators Grant, APR Mentoring Project, Networking and Learning

Communities, K–2 Learning Institute, and American Sign Language programs suggest that these programs continue to be relevant and beneficial to prospective and current special educators.

But perhaps the most policy-relevant findings—both in terms of initially promising findings but also potential scope-for-change in improving these programs—are related to the state’s Accelerated Programs for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant and Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant. In the case of the Accelerated Programs for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant, surveys of a sample of 142 program completers suggested that completers had largely positive perspectives on the program and, importantly, that most of these completers would not have pursued full special education certification in the absence of this program. This suggests that the program represents a promising avenue for increasing the rates of transition from emergency to regular licensure documented in ongoing work (Gilmour et al., 2025). On the other hand, interviews with grant coordinators who opted not to apply for a second round of funding emphasized the potential that expanded financial investment could lead to greater participation. Thus, the Accelerated Programs for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant represents one APR project that could potentially benefit from greater financial investment from the state to ensure long-term impact and sustainability.

Likewise, initial reporting data from the state’s Paraeducator Preparation Pathways Grant showed high rates of participation—with more than 100 paraeducators working toward the degrees necessary to pursue teaching certification. But interviews with grant coordinators of these programs also suggested some limitations, including some skepticism about the impact of a program that targets individuals who are relatively far from being able to obtain a teaching certificate. Thus, further work will be necessary to investigate the impact of this program on

special educator shortages in the state.

While this report summarizes the work from the third year of a long-term project on the special educator pipeline in Pennsylvania, several planned next steps will expand this evaluation of the APR initiatives. First, while administrative data analyses of special educator retention (Gilmour et al., 2024) and transitions from emergency to regular licensure (Gilmour et al., 2025) provide a baseline from which we can evaluate the impact of these APR initiatives on special educator shortages, work planned for the next year of this project will be able to connect these initiatives to subsequent rates of teacher retention and licensure to begin to quantify the impacts of these programs. Perhaps most relevantly, any changes in the rates of transitions from emergency to regular licensure by special education teachers (relative to general education teachers that did not have access to such a pathway) after the introduction of the Accelerated Programs for PK–12 Special Education Teacher Certification Grant will provide causal evidence of the impact of this APR project on certification *transitions*. This will complement recent work on changes in *initial production* by Fuller (2024) by focusing on the impact of this specific program. Likewise, the other APR projects studied in this report will be expanded to include both new cohorts and new categories of special educators, so subsequent analyses of these projects will continue to provide formative data about prospective and current special educators’ perspectives about their experiences in these projects.

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