



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico
Program Title: Specialization Program
Program Category: Organizational Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Program Overview

Like many school divisions across the nation, Henrico County Public Schools seeks to improve teacher recruitment, retention and recognition. The division's teacher attrition rate spiked from 8% before the pandemic, to above 16% after the pandemic. The division's educators also reported a greater need for more professional recognition, learning opportunities and professional pathways. To meet these needs, the division created the HCPS Specialization Program. The first such program in the commonwealth, the specialization cohorts provide yearlong, job-embedded professional learning on various topics, resulting in a permanent 4.8% salary increase for all participants upon completion of the program — all at no cost to employees. These cohorts meet weekly, enabling educators from across the division's 74 schools to network, collaborate and reflect on their practice. In the program's first year, 48 cohort members graduated, and in just its second year, the program expanded to include 128 employees. Data shows that teachers participating in this cohort are more than three times as likely to stay in the profession, find professional learning very valuable to their daily practice and identify it as a positive source of teacher recruitment, retention and recognition.

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

From 2018 to 2021, Henrico County Public Schools hosted more than 40 separate focus groups about teacher retention. Educators who participated in these groups represented many different professional paths: new teachers, veteran teachers, highly accomplished teachers, retired teachers, educators who had left the profession, school mental health professionals and school administrators. This group was also purposely sampled to represent schools and communities from affluent to low socioeconomic status, minority educators and educators working in the full spectrum of grade levels and subject areas. Overwhelming data points from the qualitative analysis of these focus groups included a need for compensated career advancement while

enabling educators to continue to directly work with students and the need for meaningful and powerful professional learning in addition to preexisting recognized degrees and certifications such as a master's degree or national board-certification.

How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria

In a decade when teacher retention and the training of highly qualified educators are paramount, the HCPS Specialization Program stands as a new way for school systems across the nation to maximize existing resources to effectively grow, recognize and retain the type of professionals communities need working with children in public schools. Every student deserves a teacher who has both the skill set and the core beliefs needed to impact young people's lives and effectively mentor them during their formative years. This is becoming increasingly difficult in the current landscape of high teacher attrition, facing sometimes hostile attitudes toward the education profession and the inaccessibility or rising costs of traditional teacher preparation programs and graduate study. The Specialization Program enables Henrico County Public Schools to provide a new path to nurture powerful educators by tapping into the expertise already present in our division. The program is worthy of a VACo award because compared to graduate study or board certification, it is both affordable and relevant to the exact needs of the division. It is also replicable for divisions both small and large. By recognizing it with an award, this approach can be more easily shared and communicated with other divisions facing similar problems and It can promote the idea of investing in teachers through professional learning to support long-term teacher retention and student success.

How Program Was Carried Out

The HCPS specialization cohorts provide division educators with yearlong, applied professional learning on critical topics that directly benefit our students and schools and are taught by our

HCPS staff. Upon successful completion of a course, participants earn a 4.8% salary advancement along our Career Ladder/salary scale — and they may do this up to three times, resulting in a 14.6% increase over the course of their employment, on top of any longevity or annual raises provided by Henrico County.

Cohorts meet weekly from 4:30-7 p.m., after contractual hours, from January through May and August through November. Each class of 25 participants begins with structured opportunities for the cohort to build connections with one another, forming a robust professional network and opportunities for collaboration across our 73-school division. Content is grounded in research, proven best educational practices and directly aligns with our division instructional frameworks, resources and unique student population — as opposed to traditional graduate-style learning that cannot be targeted to one school division or locality. In addition, all work connects directly to each participant's unique context as an educator. Assignments and demonstration of knowledge ensure new concepts are understood and are directly implemented in each participant's work in schools.

In 2023, there were two cohorts of 25 educators: one focusing on teaching and learning and the other on diverse learners. The Teaching and Learning Specialization Cohort explores research-based instructional design, delivery and assessment while fostering a learner-centered environment, all of which aligns with our division's instructional model, used by all educators. The Diverse Learners Cohort focuses on supporting all learners, with specific consideration given to students identified for exceptional education services, gifted students and multilanguage learners, all grounded in our division's culturally responsive education model.

In 2024, the cohorts expanded. There are now two specialization cohorts for Teaching and Learning and Diverse Learners. HCPS also added a new cohort called the Trauma-Informed Educator Specialization, which focuses on implementing and leading trauma-informed practices to support students.

These cohorts are not just geared toward classroom teachers, though that demographic represents 72% of participants. Also eligible for enrollment are school counselors, social workers, psychologists, librarians and instructional coaches, along with several other position groups. To apply, employees must have five years of experience in education and must have completed two prerequisite microcredential courses in the HCPS Career Ladder, which consist of 20-30 hours of facilitated and applied professional learning.

The goal of specialization courses is to emphasize the application of learning directly in classrooms, as this was a key expressed need during the employee focus groups and is also a practice critical to effective adult professional learning. Specialization cohort participants complete an original portfolio of work throughout the year to show mastery of their learning. Each specialization has its own portfolio requirements, but all require four extensive components within each portfolio based on learning objectives. These portfolios include student work samples, practice implementation videos and deep reflection on professional practice. Other cohort members provide feedback on this work, the adjunct faculty lead the sessions and division leaders assess the portfolio using a rubric. Participants must then defend their portfolios before a panel of division leaders and community members. This shows that the ideas within the specialization were not just taught, but learned, internalized and applied directly to impact schools and students. Each cohort is led by two adjunct faculty members and HCPS employees who apply to lead the groups. In the second year of implementation, three of the adjunct faculty are former specialization cohort graduates. This approach means two things: the program is sustainable, as each cohort yields potential future faculty members, and the adjunct faculty position provides yet another opportunity for employee leadership and career advancement. HCPS adjunct faculty receive a stipend for teaching that is comparable to local university adjunct faculty pay.

The development of the curriculum for each specialization takes a great deal of work, as the “seat hours” of instruction exceed 80 hours, in addition to the creation of portfolio assignments and

rubrics. The HCPS Specialization Program has a budget to pay current educators and employees to develop each cohort's curriculum, lesson plans and materials.

In 2023, 50 educators enrolled in specializations, with 47 completing the work after the year. In 2024, 128 eligible educators applied to the specialization cohorts. They were all accepted into the five cohort classes (two for Teaching and Learning, two for diverse learners and one for trauma-informed educators).

Financing and Staffing

In 2023, the total cost of the program was \$174,000, which includes curriculum development, adjunct faculty salary and salary advancements budgeted for 50 candidates. The cost below represents the total expenditure for the first year of the specialization cohorts, with the planning period from June through November 2022 and the first year of cohorts from January through November 2023.

An important note: while this represents division cost, this program is completely free to employees, which contrasts with other traditional avenues of salary advancement like master's or doctoral degrees and board certifications.

Four employees were paid additional stipends of \$35 an hour for 30 hours each to create the curricula for the Diverse Learners and Teaching and Learning specializations. These employees met regularly to create lesson plans, rubrics, assignment directions and select reading materials for each specialization cohort, enabling all preparatory work to be completed before the courses began and provided for use by adjunct faculty. All curriculum materials are housed in division databases, so this one-time cost allows for the materials to be used continuously each year cohorts are offered.

In 2023, four employees were selected as adjunct faculty, receiving stipends of \$2,500 per semester (\$5,000 total stipend per facilitator), resulting in a total division cost of \$10,000.

Forty-seven participants completed the first specialization cohort and received a salary regrade of a 4.8% increase. While the exact amount varies among employees as this is a percentage based compensation, the median cost of regrades is \$3,200 a year per participant.

Program Results

This is an entirely new program with few comparable examples in other school divisions, so internal data collection and evaluation is a priority. Based on three major data sources, we believe years one and two of this program will be a resounding success, meeting our major goals of improving teacher retention, recognition and professional practice.

One of the primary objectives of this program is to improve teacher retention. In 2023, the divisionwide teacher attrition rate was 13%. In contrast, specialization program participants showed a teacher attrition rate of 4.1%, losing only two participants in the first year; both received job promotions outside of the division but within the field of education. This suggests that the specialization cohorts have a statistically significant correlation to teacher retention, where participants were **three times more likely** to remain in the profession than colleagues not enrolled in cohorts.

Perhaps the most powerful data points gathered from year one participants came from quarterly surveys given to participants. Ninety-five percent of participants indicated that they were “very satisfied” overall with their experience in the specialization (4.5% reported being “satisfied,” with no participants marking “neutral,” “unsatisfied,” or “very unsatisfied”).

When asked to expand on this answer, many said they felt rejuvenated and empowered: “Being part of this specialization allowed me to collaborate with other educators from the county. It was

the most unique professional development course I have ever done and I learned so much about myself and my teaching each week.”

At a rate of 90.9%, participants strongly agreed with the statement, “Participating in the specialization cohort positively impacted my professional practice” (9.1% agreed with the statement with no responses of disagreement or neutrality). Finally, 68.2% of participants strongly agreed with the statement, “I believe the specialization cohorts will positively impact teacher retention in Henrico County Public Schools” (27.3% of participants agreed with this statement and 2.5% were neutral).

The final source of data indicating the success of the program is the interest expressed in the cohorts. In 2023, HCPS budgeted 50 spots and filled all spots with eligible applicants. In 2024, the number of applicants more than doubled to 127, all of whom were accepted. Our employees find this program valuable and have driven its growth to the point where there are now five full-time cohorts meeting in just year two of implementation.

Brief Summary:

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