

GEER FUNDING PROPOSAL

Degree Pipeline and Supports for Critical Occupations



OKLAHOMA STATE REGENTS
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Improving our future by degrees



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PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

Oklahoma's Critical Occupations

The workforce landscape is changing, prompting the need for more skilled labor and individuals with the essential skills to compete in a changing global society. To meet this growing demand, it is critical that higher education focus on the quality and effectiveness of individuals who matriculate through institutions and ensure their effective preparation to meet the expectations of today's employers.

To address the challenges of an evolving workforce, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) developed a new strategic plan titled [Blueprint 2030: Innovating and Elevating Oklahoma Higher Education for Tomorrow's Workforce](#). Its purpose is to increase Oklahoma's educational attainment, align higher education with state workforce needs, and leverage system resources. A key goal outlined in the plan includes the production of workforce-ready graduates for the state. Data from *Unlocking Career Success*, an initiative of the U.S. Departments of Education, Commerce and Labor, forecasts that 70% of jobs across the country will require education beyond high school by 2027. In Oklahoma, more than half of our 100 critical occupations – and all of the top 29 highest-paying professions – require an associate degree or higher.

This proposal recommends support for critical occupations in teaching, child care, nursing, computer technology and engineering. Three projects are recommended for funding:

1. Increasing teaching credentials:
 - a. Micro-credentials for alternatively and emergency certified teachers to address the teacher shortage;
 - b. Funding to support accelerated teacher education credentials;
2. Increasing the number of credentialed child care professionals to address the shortage of child care workers; and
3. Increasing credentials in nursing, computer technology, and engineering among those who stopped-out during the pandemic (2019 to present).

Use of Funds

Funds will be used to implement the above initiatives, as further detailed in exhibit A.

Amount of Funding Requested

\$11,348,455

Scope of Impact

Statewide projects benefitting all Oklahomans through support of the teacher pipeline, child care, and high need fields of study.

Project Timeline

Project funds will be obligated by September 2024. Project funds will be expended by January 25, 2025.

PROJECTS

1. Teacher Credentials

A. Micro-Credentials for Alternatively & Emergency Certified Teachers

Scholarships – \$2,750,000

Participants – 1,018 (\$300 per credit hour x 9 credit hours = \$2,700 each)

Oklahoma's Teacher Shortage

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a pre-existing teacher shortage in many states across the nation, with the U.S. Department of Education reporting that the majority of states experienced critical teacher shortages in special education, math and science during the 2020-21 academic year ([Learning Policy Institute](#)). In Oklahoma, shortages in these essential areas of learning persist, and meeting the demand for qualified teachers has become increasingly difficult ([Oklahoma State Department of Education Supply and Demand](#)). Currently the state of Oklahoma has over 4,451 alternatively or emergency certified teachers ([Oklahoma State School Boards Association](#)) teaching out of their certification area or teachers who are teaching without certification at all.

Multiple factors contributed to the teacher shortage, including low pay, lack of professional support and respect, and limited opportunities for career advancement ([Southern Regional Education Board](#)). As a result, Oklahoma faces significant challenges to its teacher pipeline in the areas of:

- enrollment among college students in educator preparation programs,
- reliance on underprepared, alternatively or emergency-certified teachers to meet workforce needs,
- high teacher attrition and turnover, and
- an aging teacher workforce.

Enrollment in Educator Preparation Programs

The most recent Teacher Education Admission Study produced by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education indicates that overall admissions to educator preparation programs at Oklahoma public universities in the past 5 years has

decreased by 6.7 percent, from 1,080 in 2018-2019 to 1,008 in 2021-2022. Over the past 5 years, for both public and private teacher education admissions combined, the decrease in admissions has also been 6.7 percent. Despite this decrease, the overall trend of decreasing admissions is diminishing, due to improved recruitment efforts and increased student support. (*In the previous year, the 5-year decrease was 7 percent*). In the last three years, admissions within both public and private institutions has increased by 8.8 percent; however, enrollment in educator preparation programs is still not sufficient to meet the state's teacher workforce needs.

Recent initiatives, such as the [Inspired to Teach](#) (I2T) and [Paid Student Teaching](#) (PST) programs, have addressed teacher education pipeline challenges. Inspired to Teach is a scholarship and incentive program that provides financial support to students majoring in teacher education as they matriculate through their program of study and encourages their employment and retention in an Oklahoma public school through a \$20,000 incentive payment (\$4,000 per year for five years). Currently, 3,607 participants are enrolled in the I2T program, and well over 650 of them are transitioning into the workforce this year.

The Paid Student Teaching program is a temporary program funded through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. This program invests federal relief dollars to compensate pre-service teachers for their work as student teachers in K-12 classrooms. Each teacher receives funds prior to and following graduation, and in return, agrees to teach in an accredited Oklahoma school. Currently, 2,650 individuals have participated in PST. Funding for PST will be exhausted following the Spring 2024 semester.

Reliance on Emergency-Certified Teachers

Across the nation, many school systems report fewer applicants for open teaching positions. Subsequently, schools increasingly rely on uncertified teachers, adjuncts, and long-term substitutes to fill school vacancies. The number of emergency-certified teachers approved by Oklahoma's state Board of Education significantly increased over the last decade, from only 32 in 2011-12 to 4,451 in 2023-24 (academic year not complete).

Additionally, analysis of initial teacher certification pathways conducted by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (OEQA) shows that approximately 53 percent (1,280) plan to seek initial certification via an approved educator preparation program, whereas 47 percent (1,130) are seeking certification via an alternative route (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2023 Teacher Education Admission Survey). Three years ago (2019-2020), approximately 50 percent (1,322) of OGET test-takers were getting their initial license/certification via a traditional educator preparation program and 50 percent (1,318) through alternative certification, indicating that the support systems at the state level are having a positive impact. Still, more is needed to ensure this trend continues.

Teacher Attrition and Turnover

Approximately 90 percent of open teaching positions are created by teachers who leave the profession, with two-thirds of those leaving the profession before they are eligible for retirement ([Learning Policy Institute](#)). In Oklahoma, teacher retention improves with standard certification (non-emergency or non-alternative certification), with a three-year retention rate of 39 percent compared to those teachers with emergency or alternative certification whose three-year retention rate is 19 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic increased teacher turnover, as more than 18 percent of public-school teachers did not remain in the same position from the 2019-20 to 2020-21 school years. Teacher turnover is highest in urban school districts and in schools with high concentration of low-income students ([Oklahoma Educator Supply & Demand Report 2021](#)).

Aging Teacher Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to increased teacher retirements in Oklahoma as the number of teachers retiring increased between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years in terms of both quantity and rate, with more than 200 additional teachers retiring earlier than otherwise expected ([Oklahoma Educator Supply & Demand Report 2021](#)). Moreover, the average age of Oklahoma's teachers is 45, and as the state's teacher workforce ages, retirements will significantly increase, further straining Oklahoma's teacher workforce ([Southern Regional Education Board](#)). This becomes especially dire considering there is a limited pool of future educators to step into those vacant roles.

Teacher Education in Oklahoma

Increasing the number of students choosing to major in teacher education is a critical component to addressing Oklahoma's teacher shortage. The State Regents address this need through several programs, such as Teach Oklahoma, Lead Oklahoma, Educators Rising, the Teacher Shortage and Employment Incentive Program (TSEIP), and the Inspired to Teach scholarship and incentive program.

In addition to these supportive measures, many educator preparation programs have now established micro-credential pathways that provide the required coursework for emergency or alternatively certified teachers. In Oklahoma, the State Regents coordinate educator preparation programs at the following 21 public and private universities:

- Cameron University
- East Central University
- Langston University
- Mid-America Christian University
- Northeastern State University
- Northwestern Oklahoma State University
- Oklahoma Baptist University
- Oklahoma Christian University
- Oklahoma City University
- Oklahoma Panhandle State University

- Oklahoma State University
- Oklahoma Wesleyan University
- Oral Roberts University
- Randall University
- Southeastern Oklahoma State University
- Southern Nazarene University
- Southwestern Oklahoma State University
- University of Central Oklahoma
- University of Oklahoma
- University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma
- University of Tulsa

Use of Funds

These funds will be used to provide scholarships to cover the costs of micro-credentials that will assist participants in obtaining teacher certification. Currently, over 4,450 teachers have alternative or emergency certification and need a permanent teaching credential. Requirements for teachers who fall into this category include 6-18 hours of course credit to establish the foundational content necessary to help support them in classroom instruction. Supporting teachers in this area will help offset costs associated with their education as they matriculate through the necessary teacher education coursework. Additionally, reducing financial barriers serves as a strategy to increase the pipeline of teachers entering Oklahoma classrooms. Funding from this initiative will support approximately 1,018 teachers during the 2023-24 and 2024-25 academic years to cover the cost of obtaining a micro-credential.

B. Accelerated Teacher Education Programs

Funding - \$2,750,000

Participants – 150 (five educator preparation programs enrolling a minimum of 30 students each)

Negative Impact of Teacher Shortage

Given that the average teacher impacts over 3,000 students during their career, the importance of having well-qualified teachers in the classroom cannot be overstated ([Southern Regional Education Board](#)). Moreover, teacher quality is estimated to have 2-3 times the effect of any other school factor, including services, facilities and leadership, on student performance ([RAND Corporation](#)). Teacher shortages negatively impact student achievement as schools often cancel courses due to vacancies or staff classes with substitutes and underprepared teachers. Underprepared teachers exhibit higher turnover rates, leaving the classroom at rates 2-3 times greater than those who enter the teaching profession through an educator preparation program.

Lack of access to well-prepared teachers presents significant challenges as schools struggle to address learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In March

2020, more than 700,000 students and 54,000 educators were impacted by pandemic-related school closures and transitions to online learning. Research demonstrates that pandemic-related learning loss among K-12 students is significant, with students averaging 5 months behind in math and 4 months behind in reading ([Curriculum Associates](#)). Additionally, the pandemic widened pre-existing opportunity and achievement gaps for students, with learning loss greatest among those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds – students in high-poverty schools and students of color ([NWEA](#); [Department of Education: Disparate Impacts of COVID-19](#)). Alternative pathways that incorporate as much educator preparation program instruction as possible are extremely impactful. Additionally, quicker entry into the classroom with educator preparation program support is one viable solution to help address teacher shortages.

Use of Funds

These funds will be used to develop programs that expedite the certification process for holders of non-education bachelor's degrees seeking to enter the teaching profession, with a focus on shortage areas in teacher education, including math, science and special education. Educator preparation programs will provide streamlined pathways and comprehensive support to enable participants to complete the necessary requirements for teacher certification.

Each participating educator preparation program will receive \$550,000 to support students through an expedited pathway toward teacher certification. Use of funds will vary by institution but could be applied toward tuition payments, certification testing reimbursements, teaching faculty, and administrative support. A minimum cohort of 30 students must be served in the educator preparation program's accelerated pathway program. Such programs will expedite the process of providing classroom-specific professional skills for prospective and/or emergency-certified teachers.

2. Child Care Credentials

Gap Funding – \$114,000 (\$76,000 + \$38,000)

Participants – 1,415

Pandemic's Impact on Child Care

The child care industry was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Oklahoma, approximately 23 percent of child care facilities permanently closed, with another 15 percent only open to provide care for children whose parents were essential workers. According to [Child Care Relief](#), 84 percent of child care facilities were open in July 2020. However, most of the facilities were not operating at capacity and, therefore, served fewer children than prior to the pandemic. On average, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reports a 36 percent decline in child care enrollment in Oklahoma. Furthermore, more programs were certain they would have to close if additional financial assistance was not provided. Of facilities that stayed open during the pandemic, 82 percent experienced increased costs for cleaning supplies, 65 percent incurred increased costs for

protective equipment, and 35 percent had increased staffing costs. The Center for American Progress reported that 63,599 licensed child care slots were at risk of closure due to funding issues, representing approximately 60 percent of the licensed child care slots in Oklahoma (<https://childcarerelief.org/states/oklahoma/>).

Oklahoma has worked to stabilize the child care industry. The state received \$50 million dollars in Community, Assistance, Recovery and Empowerment (CARE) Act funding. The funds were utilized to provide free child care to individuals who were re-entering the workforce after the pandemic. Oklahoma offered multiple rounds of funding by issuing stabilization grants to child care centers. As of December 2022, approximately 2,625 child care programs received American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) stabilization support, impacting approximately 107,000 children in Oklahoma. Of the 2,625 facilities receiving funding, 1,250 were child care centers and 1,380 were family child care homes. The ARPA funds were used to help with operating costs, wages and benefits for the child care staff, rent and utilities. Child Care Desert Grants were also offered and available to start up new facilities or to increase the capacity for additional child care slots ([CCDBG Fact Sheet](#)).

Scholars for Excellence in Child Care Program

Another strategy to support the child care industry was an increase in the funding to pay for scholarships for child care professionals pursuing higher education. In 2021-2022, the Scholars for Excellence in Child Care Program paid 100 percent of tuition, fees and books after all federal and private aid was applied to eliminate the student debt owed for child care providers working to increase their child development knowledge and raise the overall quality of child care. In Fall 2022, the Scholars program continued to pay 100 percent towards a college certificate program as well as the National Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and coursework. However, those professionals pursuing an AA/AS or BA/BS in Child Development are required to pay 10 percent of their educational costs. Although 10 percent may not seem like a significant amount, it can be a barrier toward earning a higher-level credential for child care professionals whose wages are on average \$12-\$15 per hour.

Use of Funds

It is estimated that approximately 515 child care professionals will pursue a higher level of education at 90 percent paid by the Scholars program in Spring 2024. Those who are being paid at this rate will owe an aggregate amount of approximately \$38,000 to the higher education institutions for the 10 percent remaining cost. Supporting these students by eliminating the gap in funding would assist in retention of these scholars and the completion of the child development degrees.

By Fall 2024, the funds to support the college certificate and National CDA credential will decrease to 90 percent paid by the scholarship and 10 percent paid by the scholar. This change will increase the amount owed to higher education institutions by future child care professionals. The number of child care professionals who will continue to pursue an AA/AS, BA/BS, and college certificate is approximately 900 for Fall 2024. The gap funding for those still pursuing their education is approximately \$76,000.

Providing financial assistance to these scholars will continue to stabilize the industry and impact retention rates of turnover in the child care industry. The funding will also support efforts in Oklahoma to increase the quality of child care received by young children and assist in preparing them for kindergarten. Providing financial assistance for child care professionals removes barriers to college attendance and helps offset out-of-pocket costs for obtaining the CDA, associate, and bachelor's degree credentials.

3. Adult Degree Completion

Scholarships – \$5,514,455

Participants – 551 (each receiving an amount of up to \$10,000 to assist with tuition, fees and books)

Pandemic's Impact on Oklahoma's Workforce

Disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative impact on Oklahoma's workforce and economy. Even prior to the pandemic's onset, the [Governor's Council on Workforce and Economic Development](#) (GCWED) concluded that Oklahoma faces a sizable skills gap in the state's key industry sectors and that Oklahoma's current educational attainment levels do not meet the state's current and future workforce demands. According to Oklahoma Works, more than half of Oklahoma's "100 critical occupations" will require an associate's degree or higher by 2030. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated existing workforce trends related to automation. Research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated automation potential in Oklahoma by 5 years ([Southern Regional Education Board](#)). Workers most vulnerable to automation in the future are also those most impacted by pandemic-related work disruptions. Adults with lower levels of educational attainment experienced the most severe economic impacts of the pandemic and are more vulnerable to technology advancements in the workplace.

Despite the need for a well-educated workforce, just 28.5 percent of Oklahomans over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 35.7% nationally. Of surrounding states, only Arkansas has lower educational attainment. Increasing the number of Oklahomans with a college degree is critical to ensuring that business and industry have the skilled workers needed for continued economic growth in the state.

Oklahoma's Workforce Needs

Critical work occupations, including nursing, computer science, and engineering, play a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of states, and Oklahoma is no exception. Nursing professionals form the backbone of healthcare systems, providing essential patient care and contributing to the overall well-being of communities. In parallel, computer science and engineering experts drive innovation and technological advancements, shaping the future of industries and fostering economic growth. Recognizing the critical nature of these occupations, aligning them with higher education institutions becomes imperative to ensure that professionals entering these fields are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills.

Oklahoma Works, the state's workforce development initiative, maintains data on the top [100 critical occupations](#) in the state. Adding additional support to students pursuing a major related to one of these occupations, including nursing, computer science, and engineering, presents a significant opportunity to support critical industry needs.

The impact of aligning critical work occupations with higher education extends beyond individual career trajectories; it plays a crucial role in fostering economic development. A state with a well-educated and skilled workforce in nursing, computer science, and engineering is better positioned to attract investments from industries seeking a knowledgeable and capable workforce. This synergy between education and industry contributes to a dynamic economic ecosystem, driving innovation, productivity, and ultimately, sustained growth. In essence, the strategic alignment of critical work occupations with higher education institutions is a cornerstone for meeting the evolving needs of a state, ensuring the prosperity of its citizens, and fortifying its position in the global economy.

Use of Funds

The National Student Clearinghouse reports that approximately 418,000 Oklahomans have earned some college credit but never obtained a degree. Adult students face unique challenges in attending college, whether it's navigating the initial enrollment process or returning to college to finish a degree. Common barriers to adult degree attainment include lack of disposable income to cover college costs, thereby increasing reliance on student loans; child care and family obligations; and part-time or full-time employment obligations. As Oklahoma's adult students contend with these barriers, prioritizing educational expenses is difficult.

Research shows that scholarships lead to higher rates of college enrollment, persistence and degree completion ([State Higher Education Executive Officers Association](#)). As such, the funding will facilitate scholarships to adult students to assist with tuition, fees and books. This support will help increase degree completers in the state of Oklahoma.

All adult students pursuing majors in one of the [top 100 critical occupations](#) will be eligible to apply for this scholarship. Students pursuing majors in the nursing, engineering, and computer science fields will be prioritized.

**Degree Pipeline and Supports for Critical Occupations
Detailed Budget**

Expenditure	Amount Requested	Impact
Micro-Credentials	\$2,750,000.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding from this initiative will provide approximately 1,018 teachers with scholarships toward obtaining a micro-credential to help facilitate their certification and preparation for classroom instruction.
Accelerated Teacher Education Programs	\$2,750,000.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding from this initiative will support approximately 150 students to obtain the necessary education to facilitate degree attainment in teacher education and, ultimately, address the teacher shortage by preparing a pipeline of teachers for Oklahoma classrooms.
Child Care Credentials	\$114,000.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gap funding for child care professionals to cover tuition, fees and books at 10 percent after all financial aid has been applied. This funding will facilitate professional credentials for approximately 1,415 child care professionals.
Adult Degree Completion	\$5,514,455.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships will lower the tuition cost burden and increase the likelihood of degree completion for more than 500 students.
Indirect Costs	\$220,000.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2% OSRHE administrative indirect costs
Total	\$11,348,455.00	Total Participants Impacted – 3,121