

GROW YOUR OWN

NIET's partnership with the New Caney Independent School District and Texas Tech University takes on the teacher shortage – by honing talent from within.

From as early as he could remember, Raul Briones wanted to help people. A product of Texas' New Caney Independent School District (ISD) from elementary through high school, Briones headed to nearby Lone Star College to prepare for a career as a biomedical engineer. But shortly after he started his coursework, he realized that he wasn't cut out for the medical field. Briones visited a career counselor to talk through his options.

"I told the counselor about my goals of making a difference in the lives of others," Briones explains. "She said, 'Why not become a teacher?' That was an amazing turning point for me. I discovered that I could help people become successful in life."

Briones switched his major to multidisciplinary studies at Lone Star and then entered the teaching program at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD). One day during his first semester, some students in his class were abuzz about a new opportunity through Texas Tech's TechTeach program. It was described as an intense, yearlong residency program that put students on the fast track to earning a teaching certification.

Participating districts were actively recruiting members of their communities to join the program and give back to the places they called home. Briones was intrigued. UHD's program offered only a semester of student teaching, and Briones was eager to experience a full year in the classroom. Already passionate to work in his community, Briones was fulfilling his student-teaching requirement as an instructional aide at Bens Branch Elementary School in New Caney ISD, his alma mater. Those few short weeks were eye-opening and rewarding.

"It's a great feeling to give back," he reflects. "It's only right."

The more Briones learned about TechTeach, the more he wanted to enroll. The residency program is implemented through a partnership among Texas Tech, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and network districts involved in NIET's TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement. The TAP System is a comprehensive model for advancing educator effectiveness through teacher leadership and mentoring, job-embedded professional development, educator observation and evaluation, and performance-based compensation.

Driven by hands-on experience and performance-based assessments, TechTeach assigns each candidate to a participating school during the day to student-teach alongside the faculty. At night, candidates complete coursework online. The core of TAP lies in its instructional rubric of best practices, which university, school and district staff use as a foundation for their training and performance evaluations. Candidates are graded on the delivery of their lessons, submitted by video, which are measured against the rubric indicators.

These future teachers receive layers of support throughout the process. They are paired with mentors in the school buildings as well as a district Texas Tech site coordinator. The coordinator meets with the candidates weekly as a group to address their instructional needs and provide meaningful feedback to take into the classroom. In addition to receiving their certification at the end of the year, they have the opportunity to be hired by the district for a full-time teaching position.

The partnership, funded by the federal Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program, reaps benefits for all involved. With its focus on outputs and the specific needs of schools in the state, Texas Tech is pioneering a model for the nation



to follow. Producing effective teachers ready on day one, in turn, better prepares students to be productive citizens and contribute to the economy.

Bilingual Teachers Bridge the Gap

Pumping talent into the school systems yields a huge boon for districts, particularly those of high-need such as New Caney ISD. At a time when many states are facing teacher shortages, New Caney has an added challenge to find bilingual teachers. Those like Briones can “bridge the gap” between faculty members and the high population of bilingual students they serve, notes Monica McCann, Texas Tech site coordinator for the district.

“There’s a difference between a bilingual teacher and a quality bilingual teacher,” McCann says. “Quality teachers are hard to find. Getting TAP-ready teachers is a big benefit.” McCann directly refers to the advantage of being versed in the rubric, which she sees as a “lifelong learning tool.”

With experience as a TAP teacher in the district, she knows firsthand the value of seamlessly transitioning into an environment in which everyone is working

towards the same goals. “It’s so much easier to teach TAP from the beginning,” she explains. “Everyone is learning together.”

Briones was so enthusiastic about the prospects of TechTeach that he joined the program after finishing his first semester at UHD. He was placed at Tavola Elementary School on the bilingual track, then hired by the district after completion of the program. He hasn’t looked back.

“I have received the best training a student teacher can receive,” he says. “Learning the rubric is a game-changer. It completely details what a successful teacher needs to do in the classroom.”

Experiencing the full cycle of a school year has benefits, too, Briones adds, as it allows you to “dig down into everything you need to know as a teacher.” Besides instruction, this involves trainings, meetings and paperwork.

The program has also strengthened his ties to the community that helped shape him into the teacher that he is today. An English Language Learner himself with parents from Mexico, Briones learned



English mostly from attending ESL classes in the district. His parents only spoke Spanish, and to this day, speak little English. These experiences help Briones empathize with his students on a personal level.

“I am at the best place where I can be at this moment, remembering what it was like as a kid struggling to learn another language,” Briones says.

Briones is currently pursuing his master’s degree in educational leadership at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, where he is specializing in diverse language learners to maximize his impact on students in New Caney ISD. He says, “The best part is knowing that this is the beginning of my career.”

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RAUL BRIONES

The Student Track

*Catching Up with Allison Denise Scott
Special Education Teacher Candidate
TechTeach Cohort 2016-17
New Caney ISD, Texas*

Allison Denise Scott is a TechTeach candidate performing her yearlong residency at Porter Elementary School in Texas’ New Caney ISD. She is currently on the special education track teaching under the Positive Accommodations, Curriculum, and Emotional Support (PACES) behavioral program. She speaks with NIET about her experiences in TechTeach and the impact the program has made on her budding career.

NIET: When did you know that you wanted to become a teacher?

AS: I was interested in teaching in kindergarten or first grade at Shepherd Primary School, located in Shepherd ISD, 35 minutes north of New Caney. It was Career Day and my mother, who was a teacher at the time, gave me her apple book bag and let me borrow an old gradebook. After graduating from Shepherd High School, I studied mass communications at Lone Star College-Kingwood. I started teaching Sunday School at church and thought that maybe I would go into teaching as a career.

NIET: How did you learn about TechTeach?

AS: I heard about TechTeach at Lone Star College, where I received my AAT [Associate of Arts in Teaching]. We were told that through the program, candidates would be able to complete courses online and student-teach for a year. I was hooked. It was exactly the program I needed.

NIET: Many teacher preparation programs offer a semester or less of training in schools. Why do you think a yearlong residency is so beneficial?

AS: You get to experience the school year from beginning to end. We are there for the very first day of school and for the professional development a week beforehand. This allows us to see it and live it. We experience the first-day jitters right along with the other teachers—not being able to sleep the night before! Then we go through



Christmas and Spring Break to the end of school. Along the way we learn how to work with students and parents, addressing any concerns that they have, in addition to learning how to teach. This program is overly preparing me for what to expect!

NIET: How have you and your students grown since the beginning of the year?

AS: Lesson pacing and structure were identified as my areas of refinement. I've noticed that my lessons are more organized. Student growth is everything to me, both academically and personally. I started the program teaching second grade here and two of my second-grade students are in PACES. I learned how to provide extra scaffolding in my lessons to help

them progress, and I'm seeing gains made across the group of the five students in the program. I've also developed meaningful relationships with them. I am learning what makes them mad and happy. There was a resistant student in the beginning who is now warming up to me! I consider that a success.

NIET: What have you discovered about yourself in TechTeach and working in a TAP school that you may not have known otherwise?

AS: I didn't know that I was meant to be a teacher. I'm told that it looks like it comes easily, but it's hard! I've learned a lot about my own personal growth.