

First-Year Immersion in a Lab School: A Comparative Pilot Study of Teacher Preparation

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WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

New teachers are more likely to be effective educators and stay in the classroom when their preparation includes real time in a working school. To give first-year teacher candidates that experience earlier, EKU’s School of Education and Model Laboratory School redesigned the first year of teacher preparation so a pilot cohort of candidates took two courses per semester on-site at Model, while students in control groups took classes on-line or in EKU classroom buildings with paired clinical experiences in P-12 settings both at Model and other schools in our region. The candidates in the Model cohort had both formal and informal opportunities to observe working classrooms built into their classes whereas candidates in the other groups had clinical experiences outside of class time. EKU researchers surveyed students in each group at the beginning and end of the 2025-2026 academic year. Initial analysis from the Fall 2025 semester included a total of 144 students (Model cohort $n= 20$, on-campus cohort $n= 20$, online cohort $n= 104$) and focused on better understanding the impact of having first-year Education courses and clinical experiences at Model.

KEY EARLY FINDINGS

- Candidates in classes embedded at Model had significantly more opportunities to practice both instructional tasks and non-instructional duties (safety drills, school-wide events) than peers in on-campus or online sections.
- Model-based candidates had more opportunities to reflect on whether teaching was the right career fit for them.
- Model-based candidates developed stronger mentoring relationships with their supervising teachers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION

- Placing first-year candidate coursework in a school builds practical readiness earlier.
- Earlier authentic classroom exposure can help candidates confirm their fit for teaching before they’ve invested years in the program, a possible lever for pipeline retention.
- Earlier embedded clinical experiences cover practical educator responsibilities that are rarely covered in traditional coursework, including non-academic duties.
- Stronger first-year mentoring relationships may lead to greater effectiveness in later student-teaching placements.

THE DATA

Candidates were surveyed on how many opportunities they had to observe specific classroom tasks. A checkmark below means candidates at Model reported significantly more opportunities than the comparison group ($p < .05$).

Classroom Task	Model vs. Online	Model vs. On-Campus
Redirect inappropriate behavior	—	✓
Explain classroom rules and procedures	✓	✓
Use de-escalation strategies with a student	✓	✓
Direct students during a safety drill	✓	✓
Monitor students during a school-wide activity	✓	✓
Form small groups for lesson activities	✓	✓

WHAT’S NEXT

- Building on candidate interest, the School of Education added Model-based courses for second-year (sophomore) candidates for the 2026–27 academic year, while expanding to a second cohort of first-year students.
- Data collection continues, tracking candidates through licensure and their first placements as in-service teachers.