



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your 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: Henrico County, Virginia

Program Title: Specialization Cohort Program: Attracting and Keeping Great Teachers

Program Category: Organizational Development

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Dr. Tracie Weston

Title: Director of Professional Learning and Leadership

Department: Henrico County Public Schools Department of Professional Learning and Leadership

Telephone: 804-335-5382 **Website:** _____

Email: taweston@henrico.k12.va.us

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Eileen Cox

Title: Chief of Communications, Henrico County Public Schools

Signature: *Eileen M. Cox*

1. Summary

One of the primary strategic goals of Henrico County Public Schools is to improve teacher recruitment, retention and recognition. The division's teacher attrition rate spiked from 8% before the pandemic to above 16% post-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 Cohorts Program beginning in January 2023. 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 73 schools to network, collaborate and reflect on their practice. In the program's first year, 48 cohort members graduated; in year two 124 employees completed the specializations and in year three the specializations expanded to 179 participants. Data show that teachers participating in this cohort are four 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.

2. The Problem or Need for the Program

Beginning in 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. Data points from the qualitative analysis of these focus groups included (1) a need for compensated career advancement that allowed educators to continue to directly work with students and (2) the need for long-term professional learning beyond preexisting recognized degrees and certifications such as a master's degree or national board-certification.

3. Description of the Program

The HCPS specialization cohorts offer yearlong, applied professional learning for division educators, focusing on critical topics that benefit students and schools. Taught by HCPS staff members, these cohorts provide participants with practical, research-based strategies aligned to the division's instructional frameworks and unique needs. Successful completion of a course earns a 4.8% salary increase, up to 14.6% total across three courses, in addition to any annual or longevity raises.

Cohorts meet weekly from January to May and August to November, outside contractual hours and include 25 participants per class. Sessions foster professional networks and emphasize applying learning directly in schools. Participants create portfolios with student work samples, videos and reflections, assessed by division leaders. Portfolio defense before a panel ensures mastery and impact.

Since 2023, five cohorts have been offered, addressing topics like Teaching and Learning, Diverse Learners, Trauma-Informed Instruction, Adult Learners and Instructional Leadership for school administrators. While 72% of participants are classroom teachers, other eligible roles include counselors, social workers, psychologists, librarians and instructional coaches.

The program is sustainable, with seven adjunct faculty being former participants. Adjuncts, paid competitively, develop and lead sessions, contributing to a growing leadership pipeline. Each

specialization requires 80+ instructional hours and rigorous curriculum development, supported by a dedicated budget.

Enrollment in the program has grown significantly, from 50 participants in 2023 to 179 in 2025, with an average completion rate of 97% each year. The program exemplifies HCPS' commitment to meaningful professional development and direct school impact.

4. Responding to Economic Downturn

The planning stages of this program occurred in the wake of post-pandemic public education. Regionally, a teacher shortage began increasing vacancies from 5%-15%. The Specialization Cohort Program was specifically designed to aid teacher retention and serve as a powerful recruiting tool for passionate career educators. Participants in the program are four times more likely to remain in the teaching profession and with the school division when compared with similarly experienced peers. Additionally, 94% of participants agree or strongly agree with the statement "I believe the specialization cohorts serve as a powerful retention tool for Henrico educators." Over the past two years, HCPS' teacher attrition rate has declined by 5%. The fact that the rate has been reversed is even more impressive during a statewide teacher shortage. This shows the impact of this program as a response to an economic downturn in the form of retention challenges.

5. Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Diversity, equity and inclusion are critical objectives of this program and that lens and perspective were incorporated in its development from the beginning. This program advances these concepts in our community in two ways: how the specialization cohorts help advance diversity, equity and inclusion in HCPS schools and how they advance diversity, equity and inclusion among HCPS employees.

All specialization cohorts use the division's culturally responsive education model as part of their guiding curricula and include readings, theories and practical strategies to support diversity, equity and inclusion while working with students and other school-based stakeholders (including parents, leaders and other employees). Every cohort member receives at least six hours of explicit training on diversity, equity and inclusion and must demonstrate mastery of HCPS' culturally responsive education model in their practice as educators. One of the cohort options focuses primarily on diversity, equity and inclusion for the entire year (the Diverse Learners specialization), giving its participants a full year to demonstrate mastery of diversity, equity and inclusion practices in schools through the culturally responsive education model.

The cohorts also help advance diversity, equity and inclusion among our employees in several ways. First, the cohorts enable educators from across Henrico County to collaborate weekly with each other, sharing unique perspectives from their communities within the division. Henrico is a very diverse county: 50% of residents identify as white, 30% as black, 10% as Asian and 6% as Hispanic or Latino, but it is not uncommon for a given school to have more than 80% of its student be from the same race/ethnicity, because of the historic residential patterns within communities. The specialization cohorts include employees working in all five of Henrico County's magisterial districts and provide the opportunity to share perspectives, experiences and ideas in a structured and safe environment. Ninety-one percent of year three participants strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel like my voice was valued by other cohort members and my adjunct faculty." Nine percent agreed and no participants marked "neutral," "disagree" or "strongly disagree."

6. The Cost of the Program

In 2023, the total cost of the program was \$174,000, which included 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 the school division's cost, the 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.

7. The Results/Success of the Program

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 2024, the divisionwide teacher attrition rate was 13%. In contrast, specialization program participants showed a teacher attrition rate of 3%. The specialization cohorts have a statistically significant correlation to teacher retention, where participants were **four 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 cohort 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. In 2025, the program again expanded to 179 candidates, with an additional 22 placed on a priority waitlist for

the following year. HCPS employees find this program valuable and have driven its growth: there are now five full-time cohorts meeting in just year two of implementation.

8. Worthiness of Award

In a decade when teacher retention and the training of highly qualified educators are paramount, the HCPS Specialization Cohort Program stands as a new way to maximize existing resources to effectively grow, recognize and retain the type of professional 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 Cohort 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 addresses one of the school division's critical needs. It is also replicable for small and large divisions. 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.

9. Supplemental Materials

- [December 2024 Update for School Board- Testimonial for Specialization Cohorts](#)
- [Example Course Syllabus for a Specialization](#)
- [Example Course Flyer for the Trauma Informed Educator Specialization](#)