Learn to Teach

When aspiring teachers choose the College of Education at Michigan State University, they begin a personal and academic journey proven to produce outstanding careers in education.

They master subject matter and the most effective teaching methods through courses under the guidance of leading research faculty.

And they truly experience the K-12 classroom. MSU’s teacher preparation program gradually immerses students in schools, revealing crucial lessons through practice, before they reach the post-bachelor’s degree internship.

Then, during this final year, they can fully fine-tune their skills supported by a mentor and surrounded by the realities of school life. It remains a model for teacher preparation today.

Now, the college’s long history of innovation continues with an emphasis on urban and global education infused throughout the program. Students can begin preparing for specialized teaching careers in under-resourced and multicultural settings as early as their freshmen year.

Inside, learn how five young educators found their paths toward promising futures at different stages on the journey through MSU.
Christopher Waston has been flying heart first toward his future career path. Since arriving at Michigan State University, the aspiring math teacher mentored struggling readers at a local elementary school. He traveled to Chicago to tour urban school settings. He even co-founded a student group that inspires young men to pursue teaching.

And freshmen year is barely behind him. The Urban Educators Cohort Program (UECP) gives participants the jump-start they will need to teach in under-resourced communities, typically exposing them to hands-on learning experiences much earlier than other future teachers.

Waston, a member of the second UECP cohort, says his commitment to the profession is already unchangeable.

“It took me from wanting to be a teacher to feeling it’s something I need to do,” he said of the group’s discussions. “My eyes were opened to more than just math.”

That was the subject area he excelled in as a high school student, and the basis of an extracurricular tutoring position that first showed the Detroit teenager how powerful pupil-teacher connections can be. When he encountered teacher education faculty members from MSU’s College of Education, during an on-campus summer program and later with UECP, he wasn’t sure what to expect.

Soon, through specialized courses and activities, they showed the open-minded and successful graduate of Detroit’s Renaissance High School an educational perspective beyond subject-matter mastery – the social justice side of teaching.

“It’s a tragedy that we have so many school districts that don’t have adequate resources,” Waston said, and counted the controversial issues on his fingers: low-income housing, bias in standardized testing, school closures, intolerance…

After growing up in an urban environment, he realized he had been surrounded by the risks but undeterred. He hopes to return there as a teacher.

“For a lot of students, even a lot of my friends, these issues affected them and I think they affect them to this day. That really keeps them from achieving to their highest potential… But I’ve seen that this isn’t just a Detroit problem.”

Like all UECP students, Waston was placed in a Lansing, Mich. school near MSU’s campus once weekly for an early field experience. He ended up helping one boy, Ramadhani Musa, move up several reading levels through one-on-one tutoring. He also, unfortunately, sometimes witnessed the kinds of unproductive adult behaviors he learned about in his courses.

“Those types of things just happen over and over. People talk terribly to kids,” he said. “I see that and I think, that’s how I will never be.”

For now, Waston plans to “soak up as much about urban education as possible,” continuing through a program that will inevitably expose him to more inspirational – and advantageous – experiences.

This summer, Waston served as a supervising mentor of high school students (and their elementary-age mentees) during a pilot research project. He was invited to participate by MSU graduate students and faculty members with whom he has developed relationships.

“They see the potential in me,” Waston said. Similarly, “I want to be there for my future students, to do as much as I can to make sure each of them has the opportunity to really excel.”
Kristin Guina is still on a “placement high” as she joins a friend to catch up one spring morning. She has just learned, after four years of studying and preparing, where she will spend the crucial final year fine-tuning her teaching skills before helming her own classroom.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” she tells fellow future educator JoAnne West, who, by all accounts, was equally as excited when she received her internship details – on March 26, to be exact. “I love that you remember the date,” Guina says, and they laugh together.

The young women, who were honored by Michigan State University’s Board of Trustees for high academic achievement, have just graduated from the College of Education’s baccalaureate program. They thrive on seeing children grow and, like many MSU teacher candidates, found their niche for content-area interests and peer camaraderie early on. By senior year, their “TE family” (including two other students) got together for a girls movie night every Wednesday. More than a funny film, it was a chance to talk about lesson plans to try and life goals to reach.

“That started second semester, when things got a little more stressful,” West explains. The social ritual was among many available extracurricular activities, organized or otherwise, they sought out to enrich their experience in MSU’s already dynamic, high-quality teacher preparation program.

Guina volunteered for Friendshop – an after-school program run by MSU students – during fall of her sophomore year. By spring, she was supervising all daily activities for about 40 elementary kids.

“The opportunity to be in front of a lot of kids and be a leader was really valuable,” she said. “There are so many extra things you can do here to help yourself get prepared.”

Meanwhile, West, through an assistantship for a research faculty member, landed permission to observe a local teacher’s classroom all day once weekly. It was only freshmen year and the particular professional she watched, in her words, demonstrated an amazing ability to successfully integrate all students.

West and Guina attended panel presentations and service-learning excursions as part of Kappa Delta Pi, the international honor society in education, and the Student Michigan Education Association (SMEA). They spent a summer immersed in urban teaching challenges through the Broad Partnership with Detroit Public Schools. They added Honors College projects to their teacher education classes.

Why do so much?

For the same simple reason they chose to attend MSU.

“We both really want to be great teachers,” West says. “You can set high standards for yourself and reach them.” Likewise, “you need to set the bar high for your students.”

So, add substitute teaching and field experiences they encountered as requirements of coursework – spending nearly as much time in local schools as in on-campus classes – and both West and Guina say they stand prepared for the job.

Well, at least for the fifth-year internship, during which they will most likely share post-B.A. courses and definitely the continued bonds of colleagues. Guina is headed to Midway Elementary in Holt, Mich., West to Bennett Woods Elementary in Okemos, Mich. But they are both going to teach second grade.

“We get to co-plan again.”
Pam Arnold couldn’t regroup with fellow teaching interns during the school day. There wasn’t a Target around the corner, a familiar Meijer or OfficeMax selling materials for last-minute lesson ideas. English was the native language of only three kids in her class. For some, it was their third or fourth language. And they were only 5 years old.

She loved it.

All challenges included, spending the year at 3e International Kindergarten was the valuable foreign adventure she dreamed about. Guiding children from the alphabet through their first sentences cemented her fascination with young language learners.

Arnold experienced an unusual teaching internship abroad, thousands of miles from MSU’s placement sites near Detroit, Grand Rapids and Lansing, Mich.

“It’s been an eye-opening experience, to see the growth take place in learners from all different levels and walks of life,” she said. “The diversity there is so prevalent it’s impossible to ignore.”

3e sits in the heart of Beijing, China and the students come from 18 nations. Under an innovative model developed by MSU’s U.S.-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence, the students split days between learning in the Mandarin and English languages and, likewise, through both Eastern and Western teaching styles and cultures. Speaking in English right away, Arnold knew, wouldn’t be effective for the varied group of tiny pupils.

“I had to model and imitate everything,” she said, remembering how she relied on body language and facial expressions foreshadowed in her courses. “I think I would have felt more awkward if I hadn’t just gone in and done it.”

Arnold took that just-do-it approach to the entire excursion. As an undergraduate, the child development major admired the diversity among her classmates. She spent spare time tutoring English learners and soon decided that she must, in her future career, do her part to prepare students for global citizenship.

“It’s an art really. It’s not something that can be taught in one class or one semester,” Arnold said. “Professionally, this internship has helped me really understand the importance of teaching global citizenship and valuing other people, places and cultures.”
Callie Sullivan and her class

With fresh confidence from her internship year, Callie (Clausnitzer) Sullivan told the principal she wouldn’t regret hiring her. She was in Harlem, New York and, for some reason, she felt an “instant connection” when she walked into upbeat and colorful Public School 185.

The MSU elementary education graduate’s first full-time teaching position, especially in this urban setting, wasn’t going to be picture-perfect, however.

Her first-graders cursed and kicked. Supplies were sparse. Family involvement was practically non-existent.

When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, Sullivan, who grew up in suburban Brighton, Mich., sat petrified and prepared for the worst.

Until the parents started showing up.

Nearly all of them.

Many came to thank her for a difference in their children they had not seen before: a child now reading grocery signs and everything else he can find, a girl who created a behavior chart for her household.

“I’ve learned is that kids are kids wherever you go and the major thing they need is love,” said Sullivan, who saw the stark contrast of different cultures and the damage of condescending language in South Africa. She first foresaw the potential power of quality teaching through her own childhood learning struggles, and she glimpsed how supportive and effective a U.S. school can be during her internship year in affluent Novi, Mich.

MSU’s teacher preparation program facilitated her diverse trajectory, ensuring that she knew the content, curriculum and methods to be an effective educator at each step. More importantly, Sullivan says, the faculty nurtured in her a desire to truly and equally guide all learners toward higher expectations.

“We were constantly reminded, as education students, of the honor we have in teaching our youth,” she recalled over the phone one afternoon while the school year, her first in the “real world,” began to wind down. “As emotionally draining as it can be, knowing that I can be a positive influence in these students’ lives and that these are the students who really need that influence, makes it all worth it.”

Her class of 18 children, with faces from foreign countries and nearby impoverished neighborhoods, with academic and social struggles and, now, with stories of lasting victories, represents the accumulation of a productive professional education and the beginning of a promising career ahead.

“I’m confident that I can get through anything after this year,” she said. “I know I can teach anywhere.”
The teacher preparation program at Michigan State University:

- Combines a baccalaureate degree, many available teaching majors and/or minor concentration areas, and teacher certification courses; followed by a full-year teaching internship in a public school
- Requires undergraduate field experiences (about 175 hours) that connect theoretical principles with real-life practices; supports the use of technology in teaching; and requires interactions with special-needs students in regular classrooms
- Provides graduate-level professional instruction from MSU faculty while completing the internship (about 900 hours) with an experienced mentor teacher, with some credits eligible for application toward a master’s degree
- Prepares graduates to achieve state-mandated certification as entry-level teachers

Go urban

The Urban Educators Cohort Program (UECP) prepares committed students for the important and rewarding challenge of teaching in under-resourced communities. Admitted as freshmen, participants spend their first two years sharing specialized course sections and field experiences that emphasize skills for meeting the needs of all learners.  
www.education.msu.edu/urbancohort

Go global

The Global Educators Cohort Program (GECP) prepares educators to teach in a variety of multicultural and international settings. For their first two years at MSU, participants experience coursework and activities that demonstrate how to teach students to be global citizens and to infuse teaching with global content, regardless of student characteristics or content area.  
www.education.msu.edu/globalcohort

“Those who aspire to work in urban contexts must understand issues of social justice, power, privilege and poverty, and the critical role that educators play in addressing those issues for youth.”

Sonya Gunnings-Moton  
Assistant Dean for Student Support Services & Recruitment

“We want our graduates to be globally competent and that means understanding other cultures, internationalizing the curriculum and being able to work with a diversity of people and families.”

Carole Ames  
College of Education Dean