

Tackling the Teacher Shortage in Florida: Hernando School District's Innovative Approach

At the start of the 2023–2024 school year, Florida's Hernando County School District faced a critical shortage of classroom teachers. Of the 1400 student-facing teaching positions across the district's 24 schools, 139 of them—fully 10 percent—were unfilled.

But in just one year, thanks to a program launched in partnership with BloomBoard, the teacher shortage in Hernando County School District is quickly shrinking. With Hernando's Associate Teacher Substitute Program, 56 participants (and more to come) are now working as full-time substitutes while earning their education degrees and certifications on the job.



“Through our partnership with BloomBoard, we found an untapped resource to help fill our instructional openings. Our Associate Teacher Substitute Program enables us to remove the barriers of time and cost and to support people who live in our community in becoming certified teachers.”

– Ray Pinder, Superintendent

In Search of an Accessible Path to Teaching

When Former District Superintendent John Stratton and his leadership team set out to solve Hernando School District's teacher shortage, they knew they would have to get creative. The sources they previously relied on for teacher recruitment were drying up. Job fairs up and down the East Coast weren't yielding many candidates, and even the local college in Tampa was graduating few newly certified teachers.

Ray Pinder, Hernando's current superintendent, was assistant superintendent of business services and operations at the time. He had an idea that the district's paraprofessionals and long-term substitutes could be the perfect pool of candidates to fill Hernando's vacancies. They were already committed members of the community, and many would love to be fully certified teachers. But for this group, a traditional teaching degree program that was costly and required a hefty time commitment in the evenings and on weekends would be a deterrent.

Finding a Solution with BloomBoard

When Stratton and Pinder learned how BloomBoard was helping school districts implement on-the-job teaching degree programs, they reached out to see if there was a solution for Hernando Schools. To work for Hernando's paraprofessionals, it needed to be flexible, relevant, and affordable. And above all else, it needed to help fill the district's instructional vacancies immediately.

Unlike traditional teacher education degrees that require night and weekend coursework, BloomBoard helps districts implement a residency-like approach, allowing educators to earn a university degree by demonstrating their skills through daily classroom work with students. BloomBoard supports districts by helping them identify funding sources, building program support systems, and connecting with higher education partners who deliver the instruction. For Hernando's leadership, this was the solution they needed.

"From the beginning of BloomBoard's partnership with Hernando Schools, we were impressed with the leadership team's determination to not only place qualified, passionate participants into their program, but to also provide unwavering support along the way."

*– Micaela Jones,
Senior Program
Manager at BloomBoard*



Hernando's Associate Teacher Substitute Program

Hernando School District partnered with BloomBoard to create the Associate Teacher Substitute (ATS) Program, which launched in the fall semester of 2023. The ATS program provides the district's associate teacher substitutes—a new long-term substitute role created for this program—the opportunity to earn an on-the-job Bachelor's Degree in Education at no cost to them. In exchange, the program participants commit to staying in the district to teach for four years after they complete their teaching degree and certification.

Hernando's program in either elementary education or special education is offered by Lake Erie College, an Ohio-based higher education institution working with BloomBoard. Through a unique on-the-job delivery format, associate teacher substitutes receive the instruction, coaching, and classroom experience they need to become effective teachers.

According to Jocelyn Fischer, lead mentor at Explorer K–8 School: “The on-the-job format of the lessons and relevance of the submitted artifacts provide teachers in training the ‘why’ while they are performing the ‘what.’ In addition, learners have abundant support from Lake Erie faculty, their school site, and Bloomboard experts.”

Features of Hernando's Associate Substitute Teacher Program:

- **Relevant, portfolio-based learning**
- **On-the-job practice**
- **District mentors and university faculty support**
- **Peer cohort**

Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Gina Michalicka highlights the importance of this innovative pathway: “The Associate Teacher Substitute program is successfully developing new educators in our district, supporting their growth and enhancing classroom instruction. By investing in this program, we are fostering a culture of excellence that benefits the entire school community.”



Major Progress in Closing the Gap

When Superintendent Pinder talks about the early days of Hernando's ATS Program, he recalls thinking that if they could recruit and hire five associate teacher substitutes, he'd feel like it was a success. To his surprise, within two weeks of opening enrollment, they filled the first cohort of 15 and had a waiting list of over 100 aspiring teachers eager for the chance to work and learn in Hernando County Schools.

Now, with 56 participants currently in the program, there's no question this innovative approach is delivering results. From July 2023 to Aug 2024, Hernando Schools' instructional vacancies have dropped by 58% (from 139 down to 59) thanks primarily to the ATS program.

Leaders from across the district have been overwhelmingly positive about the new pathway. "This will be my second year having ATS teachers, and it has been amazing! These teachers have proven to be hard working, willing to learn, and very positive. I am happy to see the program continue to grow," shared Patricia Martin, principal of Moton Elementary School.



“... within two weeks of opening enrollment, they filled the first cohort of 15 and had a waiting list of over 100 aspiring teachers eager for the chance to work and learn in Hernando County Schools.”

Learn more at bloomboard.com

Learn how BloomBoard can help you build a sustainable teacher pipeline through on-the-job, residency-based teaching degree and certification programs.

Contact us today: bloomboard.com/contact-us.