

# Dedicated to disruption: A thank you note to abolitionist-oriented teacher residency faculty and staff

In 2012, a faculty member from Georgia State University (GSU) and a principal from Atlanta Public Schools (APS) initiated a two-year partnership to reimagine teacher learning and support via a multi-year teacher residency program that was mutually beneficial for universities, schools and new and experienced educators [1]. Initially funded by a state innovation grant, GSU's CREATE teacher residency project has grown to support preservice teachers across multiple teacher preparation programs at GSU, alongside new and experienced educators in over 26 APS schools. With clearer aims over time, the project is currently designed to support a community of thriving, *well-trained* educators who embody justice-centered practices, challenge oppressive schooling structures and remain fiercely committed to working alongside students and the communities they serve to reimagine classroom spaces for deep joy, liberation and flourishing.

With just over 200 new teacher residents served since 2015 and more than 500 experienced educators impacted by CREATE professional development since 2021, program evaluation reports that highlight the impact of this program on Black teacher retention [2] and qualitative studies that document experiences within and across this work [3]. CREATE's teacher residency faculty and staff are undoubtedly *key to the success of this project*. In the letter that follows, we offer a sincere gratitude to our team for their full engagement in this work, dedication to disruption, and continued commitment to reimagined futures for teachers and youth as they navigate complex, third-space [4] teacher residency work.

To the faculty and staff of GSU's CREATE teacher residency project:

First, thank you for signing up for the work that requires *constant* navigation of third-space tensions. As you know well, engaging in teacher residency work necessitates collaboration across institutions and has required you to work alongside others with varied professional commitments and onto-epistemological orientations to this work. We know your commitment to this work means you understand that teacher preparation solely rooted in university spaces or in districts falls short. Beyond *knowing* this truth, CREATE work over the last decade has required your unwavering commitment to vulnerability, shared learning alongside others on our staff, and continued patience with and grace for others as we *all* mess up and aim to do better along the way. Teacher residency third-space work has also required that you grapple with larger tensions in this work; as a university-based teacher residency project, we are a part of the state's certification, surveillance and regulatory apparatuses, and you have shown commitment to understanding how we necessarily engage



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as both freedom workers *and* oppressors. We see the moves you make as you attend to the important grant numbers game while at the same time resisting traditional notions of success like teacher retention as you consider instead how to support residents who leave because the moral injury is simply too great. We see you grappling with your own ways of knowing, being and doing impacted by years of schooling as you consider how increases in resident and experienced educator creative insubordination are likely a better measure of success than traditional evaluation practices required by the various institutions shaping this project. Finally understanding the complicated and time-intensive nature of third-space work, we are deeply appreciative of your commitment to developing relationships with community partners who are often absent from conversations about what is best for youth.

Second, thank you for remaining unapologetically committed to justice-centered, anti-racist work, even as our state – among 42 others – enacted laws that aimed to limit how teachers and teacher educators discuss racism and other “divisive” concepts. You faced this challenge *with us*, trusting the grant leadership team to navigate complicated outward-facing conversations and mandates while remaining fiercely committed to our mission and vision in your daily work. You challenged each other and your fellow educators to think deeply and critically about the relationships between education and society(ies) at large, question educational assumptions and arrangements and identify contradictions and inconsistencies among social and educational values, policies and practices. This effort was and is *your most important work*, and we thank you for doing what is best for youth, especially historically marginalized youth and communities who are most decidedly *not* “protected” by these policies.

Third, a huge thank you to our full-time faculty and staff for the initial leap you took to join this limited-term grant-funded project and for your decision to stay even as we navigated precarious funding situations from year to year. Like most teacher residency programs, we have depended almost exclusively on federal funding with yearly grant reports that determine our ability to move forward, alongside constantly changing grant structures and RFPs that demanded shifts in our work. You have been patient as we have tried – and often failed – to transition from grant funding to more stable and sustainable funding models. Understanding that we all serve at the mercy of bureaucratic and complicated university systems and structures, you *stayed* despite delays in hiring processes, cumbersome reimbursement practices and – in some cases – interruptions to your pay. We are in awe of your dedication to this work despite all of this, and just as you do for those you serve, we are working behind the scenes to demand new systems and structures that are humanizing and ethical for you and other sponsored-funded project employees moving forward.

Finally, thank you for modeling what vulnerability looks like in this work. The majority of you are engaged in our collaborative research as *participants*, opening up your courses, professional development spaces and resident coaching sessions to ensure we are not replicating the very thing we tell others we are aiming to push against. This stance facilitates *critical* shared learning across our faculty and staff and supports us to collectively lean into our non-negotiables in this work. We are forever indebted to you for your full engagement in this project and for all that you have taught us along the way. We cannot wait to see the continued impacts your collective work has within and far beyond the bounds of Atlanta.

In solidarity,

Stephanie Behm Cross, Project PI Thomas Albright, Research Director.

LaCretia Plane, Sustainability and Operations Director.

**Stephanie Behm Cross, Thomas Albright and LaCretia Plane**  
*Department of Middle and Secondary Education, Georgia State University,*  
*Atlanta, Georgia, USA*

Notes

1. See Underwood, Hearn, Cross, and Tanguay (2017) and Cross, Underwood, Hearn, Taylor, and Parrish (2017) for early program history and context.
2. See Jaciw, Wingard, Zacamy, Lin, and Lau (2021) for more on the positive impacts on retention for Black educators within CREATE.
3. See Albright, Cross, and Davis (2023); Albright, Cross, and Davis (2023); Albright (2023), Cross and Thomas (2017) and Davis and Cross (2024).
4. Third-space theorizing emerging from cultural theory (see Bhabha, 1994), which recognizes that when differences (e.g. cultures) intersect, there is space for opening the negotiating of meaning. Within the context of teacher residency work, third-spaces are spaces that move beyond privileging one form of knowledge (e.g. university, school-based and community knowledge) to integrating all stakeholders' ways of knowing and being to find new and innovative ways forward (Albright, 2024; Beck, 2016, 2020).

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**Further reading**

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**About the authors**

Stephanie Behm Cross is Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Center for Equity and Justice in Teacher Education at Georgia State University. She is the PI on several federal grants that support the design, enactment and research of a justice-centered teacher residency program between GSU and Atlanta Public Schools.

Thomas Albright is Research Assistant Professor at Georgia State University. Albright's research at Georgia State is focused on a university, community and school-based teacher residency to explore structures that support racial justice in teacher education. Other lines of inquiry focus on schooling, resistance and school-university-community entanglements.

LaCretia Plane is the Director of Sustainability and Operations for the CREATE Project at Georgia State University. She manages several federal grants and is the PI on several private foundation grants that support a justice-centered teacher residency program between GSU and Atlanta Public Schools.