

## Creativity From Necessity: A Practical Toolkit for Leaders to Address Teacher Shortages

By Nick Allen, Shirley Appleman, Anson Jackson, and Katie Vivalo Rouse  
JANUARY 2023

### Case Study

#### Sponsoring and Supporting J-1 Visa Exchange Teachers

##### Context

At YES Prep Public Schools in Texas, the most pressing talent challenge affecting schools is the lack of teaching candidates applying for open positions. Like many schools, districts, and networks across the country, YES Prep has faced shallow applicant pools, especially in hard-to-fill roles, such as math, science, bilingual, and special education.

Amid these hiring challenges, YES Prep embraced the idea of recruiting J-1 Visa teachers to work in its 25 school campuses across Texas. The U.S. J-1 classification is a non-immigrant visa category for individuals approved to participate in work-based exchange visitor programs for one to five years, with the possibility of extensions. YES Prep is currently in its second year of hiring J-1 teachers and has hired 20-25 teachers each year, with plans to expand to 30-35 beginning in the 2023-24 school year.

##### Value Proposition

- For J-1 teachers, this opportunity allows them to travel to an international country, earn a salary in a full-time teaching position, and gain exposure to new teaching methods while experiencing a new culture.
- For host schools, J-1 teachers bring new ideas, viewpoints, and cultural backgrounds. Hiring J-1 teachers also gives schools access to a different teacher pipeline that can lead to more teaching candidates while reducing the burden on the recruiting team.

##### Advice From YES Prep

###### Carve Out Planning Time

If you are interested in recruiting J-1 teachers, take time up front to develop a meaningful plan. This includes finding a sponsoring organization, identifying host schools and buddy teachers, creating onboarding and professional development plans, and brainstorming any additional support needed to ensure a successful recruitment and onboarding process for new teachers. When planning, reach out to schools who are doing this work already to avoid reinventing the wheel.

###### Start With a Pilot

Start with a small, manageable group of J-1 visa candidates, ideally no more than 20 teachers, depending on the size of your school community. This will allow you to create a successful experience while also providing an opportunity to improve your systems and processes for future cohorts.

###### Recruitment and Hiring Timing Matters

Like the process for recruiting traditional teaching candidates, your timeline for finding and hiring J-1 teachers should start early. “The earlier, the better” we’ve heard, with YES Prep’s recruitment process starting August-September. By January, you should aim to have J-1 candidates interviewed and selected. This should provide ample runway to work with candidates to finalize placement details and gradually start the onboarding process remotely, focusing on curriculum, culture, and relationship building.

## Setting Candidates Up for Success

It is important to empathize with the J-1 candidate experience. “They are moving internationally to support your students, so you have to be ready to support them,” a YES Prep leader advises. As part of the onboarding process, provide resources for ensuring their basic needs are met, such as housing, transportation, and access to grocery stores, as well as guidance around monthly budgeting as they adjust to a new country. “Sponsoring and recruitment organizations can help navigate a lot of these pieces, but for the most part it falls on the employer,” says a YES Prep leader. Additionally, consider placing J-1 teachers in cohorts to create intentional connections to ensure they have lifelines with other teachers in their position.

## Approach

To effectively implement a J-1 program, YES Prep recommends partnering with a sponsoring company and a recruiting company.

### Sponsoring Company

A sponsoring company manages the application process to successfully hire a J-1 teacher. The sponsoring company is responsible for supporting international candidates and the hiring school through the visa process. They ensure state-specific requirements around teaching certifications, language fluency, and background checks are met. Many states require candidates to demonstrate English fluency by passing the TOEFL test; however, there are instances where this requirement and others can be waived based on local and state regulations.

### Recruiting Firm

Sponsoring companies can often recommend a recruiting organization to work with. A recruiting firm is responsible for recruiting qualified teachers who wish to travel to the United States for a full-time position. Schools typically work with the recruiting firm to create a candidate profile, which includes desired qualifications, geographic location, and previous experience. At YES Prep, the recruiting team has focused on identifying candidates who have either visited or lived in the U.S. in the past. “I look for candidates who have experience living in the U.S.,”

says a senior leader at YES Prep. “There are people who came here for college or worked as an au pair, which can help solve for some of the cultural barriers these teachers often face.”

## Funding

Currently, YES Prep utilizes ESSER funds to pilot its J-1 program. One early lesson learned is to ask sponsoring companies and recruitment firms how they balance the fees and costs between the school and its candidates. This will allow you to make a decision about your school’s fees, as well as have transparency into what candidate fees are.

To support J-1 candidates, YES Prep contributes \$3,000 toward the roughly \$7,000 visa fee that would otherwise be covered entirely by the candidate. Additionally, YES Prep offers to offset some relocation costs utilizing ESSER funds.

YES Prep is exploring avenues to sustainably continue this program in the future. For now, the network plans to continue contributing \$3,000 toward candidate visa costs and \$2,500 for relocation expenses, with all J-1 candidates also maintaining eligibility for all other relevant signing bonuses or stipends.

## Early Results

While YES Prep is only in its second year of implementing the J-1 visa program, early returns are promising. Anecdotally, we heard retention rates for J-1 teachers are strong, with many international teachers performing similarly to or better than local teachers with comparable experience levels.

### Resources for the Field

[Visiting International Teaching Position One-Pager](#)

[Visiting International Teachers Project Plan](#)

[Leadership Team VIT Meeting Agenda](#)

[Visiting International Teacher Feedback Survey](#)