

The background of the page is a collage of three overhead photographs of people working at a white circular table. The top photo shows a man in a maroon shirt looking at a laptop and an open book with a yellow sticky note. The middle photo shows a woman with dark hair and glasses looking at a laptop. The bottom photo shows a man in a light blue shirt writing in a notebook. The photos are separated by white diagonal lines.

# Alabama Teachers Pivot through Crisis with Training from Advancement Courses

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Like many educational leaders in the early days of COVID-19, Susan Hester, director of the Black Belt Teacher Corps (BBTC) at the University of West Alabama, was deeply concerned about the professional challenges facing the teachers under her care.

“When the pandemic caused so many schools to pivot and change, I knew I needed to provide additional training for our teachers,” she says. “Many were unsure and fearful of what classroom instruction would look like.”

The BBTC recruits, trains, and sends new teachers to K–12 schools in the Black Belt, a rural region of Alabama where more than half of households don’t have access to the Internet,<sup>(1)</sup> anywhere from 33% to 41% of children live in poverty,<sup>(2)</sup> and the population is shrinking faster than anywhere else in the state.<sup>(3)</sup>

In addition to low access to technology, schools in the Black Belt region (like many rural areas in the U.S.) struggle to recruit and retain teachers due to the stressors and limited opportunities of living in a poor, rural area.<sup>(4)</sup> The shutdowns and educational disruptions during the pandemic threatened to exacerbate these problems and drive teacher attrition to even higher rates.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Providing Training During a Pandemic

Hester was up against a perfect storm: She needed to figure out how to support new educators, some teaching online for the very first time, and all grappling with the very real technological limitations of a rural setting. “Advancement Courses became the perfect solution to fit our training needs,” she says.

As a leading provider of K–12 professional development, [Advancement Courses](#) offered a robust catalog of online courses that allowed the BBTC program to provide highly relevant PD for the challenges their teachers were facing. For this program, teachers were able to choose one of four courses to help them navigate the sudden spike in blended learning:

- [Designing Online Assessments for Students](#)
- [Using Technology to Support Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Tech Tools for the Math Classroom](#)
- [Integrating Technology into the PE Classroom](#)

According to Hester, by providing teachers with an option, they were much more “invested in the course and chose a course that appealed to their personal professional development needs, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach.”

## Advancement Courses Gives Teachers Direction & Confidence

BBTC teachers reported feeling overwhelmed by the number of options in Edtech—while at the same time facing limitations due to their schools’ lack of funding and their students’ lack of access to certain technologies. For example, Allie M., a special ed teacher, was confident technology would be a great addition to her lessons, but her school wasn’t able to provide resources or training to help her find tools that would work for her classroom.

Because Advancement Courses PD is written by subject matter experts with classroom experience, the courses provide not just general pedagogical principles, but also practical strategies and resources that teachers can use right away. For Allie, that meant a crash course in assistive technology and how to integrate it in her classroom. “I have learned so much,” she says. “This course has given me an abundance of ideas on how to overcome [lack of resources and funding].”

Perhaps equally important to overcoming the technological learning curve was rectifying the emotional toll of the added time demands, low student participation, and other stressors associated with learning an entirely new type of pedagogy. For many teachers, these challenges led to frustration, loss of confidence, and even sleepless nights for both them and their students.

While some professional development simply communicates the logistics of a new teaching technique, Advancement Courses takes a holistic approach, focusing on student outcomes and connecting teachers to one another for ideas and support. High school teacher Heather K. found that the strategies from her PD course not only increased her professional knowledge, but also “brought more life into our lessons. ... [M]y students have all shown improvement and I am now seeing almost 100% participation throughout my lessons.”

ELA teacher Shakendra B. also found her stress levels reduced dramatically when she networked with other teachers across the country in Advancement Courses’ online professional learning community. Teaching in a rural community can be isolating, especially during nontraditional instruction, but Shakendra says, “This course has given me the ability to renew confidence in

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“I knew my students would benefit greatly from more technology, but I felt like I needed more training... **This course has given me an abundance of ideas** on how to overcome [lack of resources and funding]. ... The implementation of more assistive technology has **decreased my students’ stress level and increased their confidence** in their ability to complete classroom tasks and assignments successfully.”

— Allie M., special ed teacher

*Using Technology to Support Students with Special Needs*

myself and my educational practices. It has taught me how to reach out to my fellow educators when I need help or advice about something. ... When educators come together and collaborate, we become a force to be reckoned with, all in an effort to best serve the needs of our students.”

## A Way Forward Into an Edtech World

“[T]his course is making me more confident and less stressed. ... I am able to see, firsthand, how implementing these strategies that I am learning [is] benefiting my students and **bringing more life into our lessons.** ... [M]y students have all shown improvement and I am now seeing **almost 100% participation** throughout my lessons.”



— Heather K., high school teacher

*Using Technology to Support Students with Special Needs*

The pandemic accelerated a reality that school leaders have seen coming for years: Technology is becoming a dominant force in education, and teachers need training to be able to incorporate it into their pedagogy—without adding time, stress, and financial burdens that will tempt them to leave the profession.

However, “technology” is neither a monolith nor a one-size-fits-all solution. Like most issues in education, needs vary greatly depending on teachers’ experience, students’ abilities, and schools’ available resources. BBTC’s experience with Advancement Courses shows that with PD that emphasizes flexible, classroom-focused solutions, teachers can find resources and strategies that work for their specific context.

In the long run, such training leads to lower stress levels for both teachers and students, a higher degree of professional confidence, and improved student outcomes, even in times of great change and increased demands on teachers. As Hester puts it, “Advancement Courses gave me the opportunity to provide meaningful and timely training to prepare our teachers to begin the semester with confidence in their abilities.”

(1) Ramsey Archibald, “Many Students in Alabama Contend with Internet Access Issues,” July 24, 2020, <https://www.govtech.com/network/many-students-in-alabama-contend-with-internet-access-issues.html>

(2) “One-fourth of State’s Children Live in Poverty, Black Belt Counties Fare the Worst, Shelby Best,” August 7, 2019, <https://cber.culverhouse.ua.edu/2019/08/07/one-fourth-of-states-children-live-in-poverty-black-belt-counties-fare-the-worst-shelby-best/>

(3) Ramsey Archibald, “Black Belt Shrinking Faster than Anywhere Else in Alabama, Latest Census Reports,” April 13, 2020, <https://www.al.com/news/2020/04/black-belt-shrinking-faster-than-anywhere-else-in-alabama-latest-census-reports.html>

(4) Trisha Powell Crain, “Teacher Shortage Hits Hardest in Rural Alabama,” March 3, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/03/teacher-shortage-hits-hardest-in-rural-alabama.html>

(5) Madeline Will, “Teachers Are Stressed Out, and It’s Causing Some to Quit,” February 22, 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-are-stressed-out-and-its-causing-some-to-quit/2021/02>

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