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MARKET SCAN

TRAIL BLAZERS



Breaking Down Barriers for Aspiring Nurses

How embedded nursing school partnerships expand educational pathways, strengthen the nursing workforce and improve retention

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Introduction

Many hospitals and health systems offer tuition reimbursement, scholarships and other educational benefits to support workforce development and career advancement. However, maximizing those investments to support additional nursing team members may require additional strategies to help aspiring nurses enter and complete educational programs.

Employees and community residents interested in nursing careers may face several interconnected barriers, including limited program capacity, insufficient financial support and learning models that are difficult to balance with work and family responsibilities. Embedded nursing school partnerships are one approach hospitals and health systems can use to address these barriers by expanding educational capacity, connecting academic and clinical training, and providing structured student support. Addressing these barriers can help organizations create more accessible pathways into nursing careers while advancing broader team growth and retention strategies.

This Trailblazers report from the American Hospital Association's (AHA's) Market Scan examines how embedded nursing school partnerships can expand educational opportunities, support career mobility and contribute to a more sustainable nursing pipeline. It highlights two provider organizations using different models: one focused on current employees and another that includes both current employees and community participants.

180,800 openings

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects an average number of 180,800 annual openings for RNs in the U.S. through 2035.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 2026.



Expanding the nursing pipeline

Hospitals and health systems continue to face significant challenges in recruiting and retaining registered nurses, particularly in communities and regions where attracting clinicians has long been difficult due to geography, economics or workforce shortages.

Many organizations have spent years building nursing pipelines through partnerships with colleges and universities, serving as clinical training sites and offering tuition assistance, scholarships and career-development programs. These investments remain essential, but nursing education capacity constraints, affordability challenges and barriers facing working adults continue to limit the number of individuals able to enter and complete nursing programs.

Embedded nursing school partnerships are emerging as an additional strategy to complement these established workforce-development efforts. The model builds on those efforts by creating dedicated education pathways while adding a layer of academic, financial and personal support designed to help students successfully enter and complete nursing programs. In addition to expanding training capacity, these partnerships provide prospective and enrolled students with guidance on admissions requirements, prerequisite coursework, financial aid, program expectations and academic progress. Ongoing counseling, coaching and persistence support can help students navigate personal, financial and academic challenges that might otherwise derail their progress.

For participating organizations, the value may extend beyond creating additional nursing school seats. Health system leaders interviewed for this report cited the flexibility of the model, the ability to adapt programs to workforce needs and the individualized support provided to students as key differentiators from more traditional academic partnerships.



"Education benefits have evolved from employee perks into workforce stabilization tools. Hospitals are increasingly using them to solve two problems at the same time: reducing turnover and vacancies while building the workforce they know they will need tomorrow."

— **CAITLIN MASTERSON** —
Senior Vice President,
Workforce Solutions, Unitek Learning

75,255

Number of qualified applications turned down by U.S. entry-level RN baccalaureate programs in 2025.

Source: American Association of Colleges of Nursing, May 2026



From workforce strategy to community impact

Hospitals and health systems that develop embedded nursing school partnerships may gain long-term workforce and community value by creating educational pathways aligned with local needs. Depending on the organization, programs may serve employees, community residents or both, with financial assistance, employment expectations and selection processes varying by program.

Under this model, a hospital or health system partners with an accredited education provider to deliver curriculum, faculty and student support. The provider organization supplies clinical learning environments and helps align training opportunities with curriculum requirements and workforce priorities. Programs may include associate degree and accelerated or three-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing pathways, as well as other tracks selected to meet local needs.

For hospitals and health systems, the model can support a more intentional approach to workforce planning. Rather than responding primarily to current vacancies, organizations can use workforce projections, community needs assessments, anticipated service growth and employee demographics to identify future nursing needs and shape educational pathways accordingly. For example, an organization anticipating increased demand for maternity care alongside upcoming nurse retirements could use those projections to inform cohort sizes, clinical training opportunities and skill development.

Workforce planning can be guided by questions such as:

- **Which service lines are expected to expand?**
- **What new or expanded care sites will need staffing?**
- **How many nurses will be needed over the next five years?**
- **Where could retirements or other workforce changes create future gaps?**
- **Which care delivery models are being prioritized?**
- **What nursing skill mix will support those models?**

The answers can help organizations align cohort sizes, program pathways and clinical training experiences with anticipated workforce needs.

For employees, embedded nursing school partnerships can provide a supported path to nursing education and career advancement, with program structures that may help address the realities of working adults. Where community participation is offered, residents may also apply, although eligibility, tuition assistance and post-graduation employment arrangements vary by program.

Over time, these partnerships can help hospitals and health systems develop a more predictable nursing pipeline while strengthening opportunities for education, career advancement and economic mobility in their communities. The case studies in this report illustrate two distinct approaches to putting the model into practice.



> **"A lot of people who work in hospitals want to go to nursing school and become nurses. They see the nurses providing care for patients. They see nurses as heroes on the front line. They want to be like their heroes."**

— **ABDEL YOSEF, PhD, MSN, CNE** —
Provost and Chief Academic Officer,
Unitek Learning





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CASE **STUDY** **Community Health System**



Keeping aspiring nurses on track

Community Health System is a private, nonprofit four-hospital health system based in Fresno, Calif. As the largest employer in California's San Joaquin Valley, Community employs approximately 12,000 people, including nearly 4,000 nurses.

Before launching its embedded nursing school partnership with Unitek Learning in January 2024, Community offered a range of educational benefits, including tuition reimbursement, scholarships and workforce development programs. The health system has also maintained longstanding relationships with local colleges and universities, serving as a clinical training site and supporting traditional nursing education pathways for more than a decade. Yet regional demand for nursing education continued to outpace available capacity, leaving many aspiring nurses unable to secure seats in nursing programs. For Community team members balancing work, family and financial responsibilities, entering and completing a nursing program could be particularly challenging.

According to Mary-Ann Robson, executive director of clinical education, Community partnered with Unitek Learning to create an embedded nursing school to expand nursing education capacity and provide team members with an additional pathway into the profession.

Community's partnership with Unitek Learning provides team members with a more flexible, supported path to becoming registered nurses. Rather than replacing existing partnerships with local colleges and universities, the program complements those relationships by creating another option for team members pursuing nursing careers. The program combines academic

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Graduates from Community Health System, September 2026. The September 2026 first-time NCLEX pass rate was 100%. 100% of the graduates were offered and accepted promotions into nursing roles.

Unitek College of Nursing is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC). The Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) and approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing (BRN).

CASE STUDY Community Health System



The inaugural nursing graduation ceremony at Community Health System

instruction through Unitek with clinical training within the health system. Community subsidizes a portion of tuition, while team members receive discounted tuition rates negotiated through the partnership. Students can continue working while enrolled, with flexible scheduling that helps them balance employment and education.

Support extends beyond financial assistance. Students receive individualized guidance throughout enrollment and the academic program, and Community and Unitek leaders regularly review student progress to identify learners who may need additional support. When personal or family circumstances arise, students can pause their studies and join a later cohort rather than leave the program altogether. In some cases, Community adjusts work schedules or creates part-time positions to help team members continue progressing toward their nursing degrees.

While these accommodations require flexibility, Community leaders view them as an investment in team member retention and workforce development, helping the organization build a pipeline of nurses who are already familiar with the health system's culture, patients and care environment.



"With our embedded nursing school, we can work with students through life changes and help them stay on track toward graduation. If they need to step away temporarily, they can rejoin a future cohort without restarting the process."

— MARY-ANN ROBSON —
Executive Director of Clinical Education, Community Health System

CASE STUDY Community Health System

In September 2026, Community celebrated the graduation of its first accelerated BSN cohort, with 22 team members completing the pathway, including 16 first-generation college graduates. The September 2026 first-time NCLEX pass rate was 100%. One hundred percent of the graduates were offered and accepted promotions into nursing roles.

Community currently offers three pathways for team members pursuing registered nursing careers:

1. **A two-year associate degree track.**
2. **A two-year accelerated Bachelor of Science in Nursing track.**
3. **A three-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing track.**

The program has grown steadily since its launch. As of October 2026, Community is supporting 12 cohorts across its associate degree, accelerated BSN and three-year BSN pathways. Current enrollment includes six three-year BSN cohorts, two accelerated BSN cohorts and four associate degree nursing cohorts, with most cohorts enrolling approximately 20 to 28 students. Enrollment levels fluctuate as students move between cohorts to accommodate life events, work responsibilities and family obligations. The ability to re-cohort students is a key feature of the model and helps learners continue progressing toward graduation without restarting their education. The program currently includes approximately 146 students enrolled in the three-year BSN pathway, 46 students in accelerated BSN cohorts and nearly 100 students in associate degree nursing cohorts, demonstrating strong and sustained demand for nursing education opportunities among Community team members.

One early indicator of success is student retention. Community reports a 95% retention rate across the program, according to Robson. She attributes this performance, in part, to individualized support, scheduling flexibility and re-cohorting opportunities available to students.

The program is also designed to strengthen workforce stability. Graduates are guaranteed registered nurse positions within Community, and participants commit to working for the health system for a specified period after graduation. If they fulfill that commitment, they are not required to repay the financial assistance provided through the program.

While it is still early to assess long-term workforce outcomes, Community plans to monitor measures such as vacancy rates, turnover, first-year nurse retention, graduation rates and NCLEX pass rates as more cohorts graduate and enter practice.



The inaugural nursing graduation class at Community Health System

CASE **STUDY** **Sierra View Medical Center**



Taking a community-based approach to building the nursing workforce

Sierra View Medical Center (SVMC) in Porterville, Calif., is a 167-bed independent, nonprofit public hospital serving California's Central Valley. Unlike many hospitals that are part of larger health systems, SVMC operates as a standalone organization and is one of three acute-care hospitals in Tulare County.

For years, hospital leaders faced a persistent workforce challenge: recruiting and retaining registered nurses in a largely rural region. While nursing programs across California were educating future nurses, many graduates chose to begin their careers in larger metropolitan areas, leaving vacancies that were difficult to fill locally.

Jeffery Hudson-Covolo, former chief nursing officer and vice president of patient care services, saw the challenge firsthand. During his nearly 12 years at SVMC, the average RN vacancy rate was 11.5%.

Hudson-Covolo recalls, "Even before the pandemic, we faced ongoing challenges filling nursing positions. Those workforce pressures continued afterward, not only at our hospital but across the region."

Recognizing the need for a sustainable, locally focused solution, SVMC partnered with Unitek Learning in 2019 to develop an embedded nursing school program, although implementation was delayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative was designed to expand access to nursing education for employees and local residents while strengthening the connection between nursing education, clinical training and career opportunities within the community. "The goal was to create opportunities for future nurses to build their careers close to home and contribute to the health of the communities they serve," says Hudson-Covolo.

In 2023, SVMC enrolled its first two cohorts in a three-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. Each cohort included 15 employees from across the organization. Participants entered the program through either full sponsorship or tuition-reimbursement support and came from a variety of roles, including dietary services, pharmacy,

CASE STUDY Sierra View Medical Center



The 2026 Sierra View Medical Center graduation ceremony

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Graduates from Sierra View Medical Center, March 2026. The September 2026 first-time NCLEX pass rate was 100%. 100% of the graduates were offered and accepted promotions into nursing roles.

Unitek College of Nursing is accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges (ACCSC). The Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program is accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) and approved by the California Board of Registered Nursing (BRN).

patient access and environmental services.

The program was designed to help employees advance into nursing careers while remaining part of the organization. Recognizing that working adults may encounter academic challenges, the program allows students who do not successfully complete a portion of the curriculum to reenter with a subsequent cohort. For example, five of six students who experienced an academic setback in the first cohort later rejoined the program, as did two of four students from the second cohort. This flexible approach supports continued progress toward degree completion.

In spring 2026, nine students from the inaugural cohort graduated. The September 2026 first-time NCLEX pass rate was 100%. One hundred percent of the graduates were offered and accepted promotions into nursing roles. The graduates completed the program while continuing to work within the organization, creating new career pathways for employees and helping strengthen the hospital's nursing workforce.

The program expanded in 2024 to include community members alongside hospital employees. The third cohort enrolled 15 students, including seven SVMC employees and

CASE STUDY Sierra View Medical Center



> "An embedded nursing school creates a more accessible pathway into the profession by bringing education, support and career opportunities closer together."

— **JEFFERY HUDSON-COVOLO** —
Former Chief Nursing Officer and Vice President of Patient Care Services, Sierra View Medical Center

eight community participants. By 2025, the organization was enrolling two cohorts of 15 students annually, creating a consistent pipeline of future nurses for the region.

One of the program's primary objectives is expanding access to nursing education by providing employees and community members with a dedicated pathway into nursing careers and support throughout the admissions and enrollment process. Students receive guidance with prerequisite planning, application requirements, financial aid navigation and academic preparation. Community participants do not receive tuition assistance from the hospital and are not required to work at SVMC after graduation, although they may apply for available nursing positions through the organization's standard hiring process. Employees receiving sponsorship or tuition reimbursement can offset educational costs while pursuing a pathway into nursing roles within the hospital.

The program emphasizes ongoing mentorship and individualized support. Hospital leaders found that many prospective students, particularly working adults balancing employment, family and education responsibilities, benefited from assistance navigating the higher education process.

"Our focus is on helping students understand the process and providing support at each stage of their educational journey," Hudson-Covolo says. Consistent communication, coaching and mentorship are designed to help students remain engaged in the program and successfully progress toward graduation and employment.

Beyond creating educational opportunities, the program supports SVMC's broader workforce strategy. By serving as a clinical training site and developing relationships with students early in their education, the hospital has expanded its pool of nursing candidates and strengthened its ability to recruit locally. Students gain familiarity with the organization's culture, patient care standards and clinical environment, helping support a smoother transition from student to staff member.

Hospital leaders say the program helps create internal career pathways for existing employees while expanding the organization's supply of RN candidates. It also reduces reliance on external recruitment and contingency staffing by developing a pipeline of nurses with existing ties to the community and familiarity with the organization.



The 2026 Sierra View Medical Center graduation ceremony

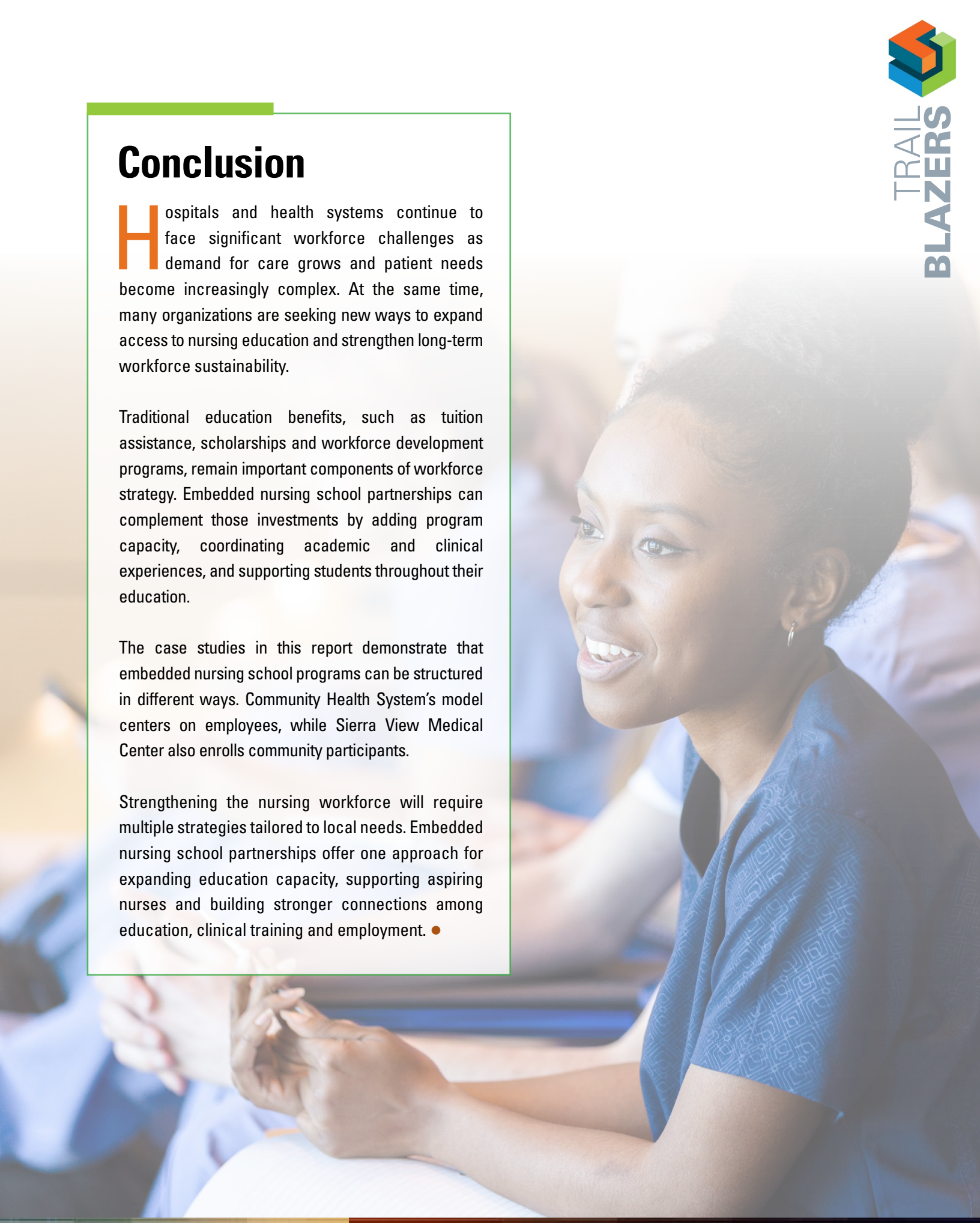
Conclusion

Hospitals and health systems continue to face significant workforce challenges as demand for care grows and patient needs become increasingly complex. At the same time, many organizations are seeking new ways to expand access to nursing education and strengthen long-term workforce sustainability.

Traditional education benefits, such as tuition assistance, scholarships and workforce development programs, remain important components of workforce strategy. Embedded nursing school partnerships can complement those investments by adding program capacity, coordinating academic and clinical experiences, and supporting students throughout their education.

The case studies in this report demonstrate that embedded nursing school programs can be structured in different ways. Community Health System's model centers on employees, while Sierra View Medical Center also enrolls community participants.

Strengthening the nursing workforce will require multiple strategies tailored to local needs. Embedded nursing school partnerships offer one approach for expanding education capacity, supporting aspiring nurses and building stronger connections among education, clinical training and employment.



Contributors

The AHA's Market Scan thanks the following for their insight, support and contributions to this Trailblazers report:



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