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Teach for America touches local schools

Idealistic recruits fill need for specialized instructors in poor districts

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DURHAM - When he graduated from college, Andrew Doyle walked away from an investment banking job that promised long hours and a comfortable salary. He instead chose an even harder job for about half the pay -- teaching high school math.

"My whole life, I've been drawn to teaching," said Doyle, 24. "That moment where you help someone understand something they didn't get before -- that's why I come back every day."

Doyle is in his second year at Southern High School, a job he landed through Teach for America. The national program trains top college graduates to teach in the country's poorest school districts.

The group this year has placed more than 5,000 fledgling educators in classrooms, nearly 150 of them landing in its district for Eastern North Carolina, which covers Durham and Johnston counties. An additional 130 teachers work in the Charlotte area.

Though the nontraditional teachers commit to only two years in the classroom, principals say these young, energetic workers are filling a need. They take jobs at tough schools. They teach math, science and students with special needs -- positions that have become notoriously hard to fill.

In Durham, 22 people from Teach for America are working in middle schools and high schools. Four Johnston County schools have nine teachers from the program. Halifax, Vance and Northampton counties each have more than 20 workers trained by Teach for America, said Alex Quigley, director of the program's Eastern North Carolina operations.

"I wouldn't mind having a whole school with them," said Betty Bennett, principal of Corinth-Holders Elementary in Johnston County, which has four such teachers.

The organization was founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, dreamed up in her undergraduate thesis. Since then, it has grown into a nonprofit company with an operating budget of more than \$100 million, and one of the most competitive post-graduate programs in the country. Last year, more than 18,000 college graduates competed for spots in Teach for America, including 10 percent of the graduating class at Duke University.

The company's aim is to bring equal educations to children in low-income communities, where overburdened school districts often can't provide the same education as wealthy districts or attract the same caliber of teacher.

Motives for signing up



Andrew Doyle, left, helps Jamal Bullock with ninth-grade algebra at Southern High School in Durham, where Doyle teaches three math classes. This is his second year of a two-year stint with Teach for America.

Staff Photos by John Rottet

Applicants are chosen based on talent and leadership experience, among other factors, and undergo five weeks of intense training right after graduation. The members, the majority of whom majored in something other than education, soon land a classroom of their own. The experience is challenging, daunting, frustrating and satisfying.

"My best friend from college is on Wall Street," said Bailey Cato, a teacher at Durham's Githens Middle School. "The disparity in our incomes is rather large, but I'm happier than he is."

These new graduates give up their track records of success to do something they're not sure they'll be good at. Many are attracted to helping underserved groups. Others use Teach for America as a launching pad for other careers. In past years, the program has even paid off \$9,000 in student loan payments for each participant.

Ups and downs

Doyle is halfway through, familiar now with 12- and 14-hour days. He teaches three math classes, helps with the parent-teacher-student organization and coaches the cross-country team.

He pores over spreadsheets to track what lessons his students understand and where they've made progress. Often, his students' moods can determine whether the day goes well.

"I'm giving all I have, and to not be successful is very different," said Doyle, a graduate of Marquette University who grew up in Iowa. "But success is all about where you look."

There's a long list of people Doyle is accountable to, including mentors from his school and from Teach for America. His program also requires him to attend monthly professional development sessions.

The program has some outspoken critics who are uncomfortable with the fact that Teach for America teachers start their jobs as uncertified teachers, earning an alternative certification during the first year, sometimes through online programs.

Studies have compared student test results for Teach for America members and their traditionally educated counterparts. A 2004 study by Mathematica Policy Research shows that students taught by Teach for America teachers perform well on state standardized tests that measure yearly progress in reading and math; on average, the students exceeded state growth expectations, the study said.

But another study, released a year later by a Stanford University researcher, took shots at the program, pointing to results that show students of certified teachers performed better on reading and math tests than students of uncertified educators.

'Doing heroic things'

Quigley insists the teachers in the program excel in their talent, commitment and expectations.

"Our teachers are truly doing heroic things," said Quigley, who before becoming a regional director taught in the Mississippi Delta.

"I do feel like we're beginning to ... make an impact."

Most teachers in the program move to districts that struggle to land highly qualified teachers. Often, more attractive school systems land the educators with more desirable resumes.

And for principals in some of those struggling districts, knowing a teacher will likely leave in two years isn't an obstacle to hiring from Teach for America.

"I'd much rather have a great teacher for two years than not at all," said Emmett Tilley, principal of Githens, which employs seven teachers from the program, including eighth-grade language arts instructor Justine LaMantia.

Upon arriving at Githens last year, LaMantia started a literary magazine and helped take five middle schoolers on a tour of Harvard.

"It was to show these students that no matter where you come from, you can still make it," LaMantia said.

The program's ultimate mission is not necessarily to create lifelong educators, Quigley said, but lifelong advocates. Even after their two-year stints, alumni shape policy through other work, from courtrooms to board rooms, he said.

Still, many -- more than 60 percent, Quigley said -- stay in education, whether in a classroom or in an office. Wherever they go, their classroom experiences influence their work and their causes, he said.

"A big part of making change ... is about getting more people committed to this issue."

(Staff writer Peggy Lim contributed to this report.)

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