



# Young educators in spotlight

## Schools, state leaders evaluate need for Teach for America

By NICHOLE DOBO • The News Journal • April 27, 2010

WILMINGTON -- When it became clear that her fourth-grade students needed a refresher on subjects and objects in a sentence, Samantha Connell went back to square one.

She was teaching a grammar rule at Kuumba Academy Charter School in Wilmington that befuddles many adults: Is it "him and I" or "him and me?" Because many people don't use perfect grammar in everyday conversation, getting that answer right on a test isn't as simple as choosing what sounds right.

After some eager, but incorrect, answers from her students, Connell swiped her smartboard and started with a blank screen. She wrote the word "subject" on the top, then "subject pronoun" and "object pronoun." As they filled the columns with words, students started answering her questions correctly.

A first-year Teach for America educator, Connell, 23, says most of her students are more interested in math, so getting them excited about reading and writing has been a challenge. But, she says, students are now eagerly raising their hands to participate in class, and some have told her they've learned to love reading.

"That's a totally rewarding moment," Connell said.

As Connell and 20 other Teach for America educators finish up their first year in Delaware, state and school leaders are deciding how many more recruits should enter Delaware classrooms next year.

Teach for America, a national nonprofit now in its 20th year, recruits top college graduates from any field of study to teach in high-need schools. While some in Delaware laud the program for bringing top graduates into the classroom, others argue their high-need students need more highly qualified teachers.

The state's largest teachers union, the Delaware State Education Association, opposes programs that don't include rigorous training and mentoring before a teacher is alone in the classroom, a spokeswoman for the union said.

"My concerns continue," said Frederika Jenner, a teacher and the president of the Red Clay Education Association.

Red Clay Consolidated was the only district to participate this year. "We are providing employment for people who are not coming to the job with the full background of training that our other teachers have received," Jenner said.

Teach for America is included in the state's \$100 million federal Race to the Top plan, and the state pushed expansion through financial incentives for schools that take part. The state is also considering allowing other programs that help recruit nontraditional teachers, such as the Brooklyn-based New Teacher Project, to come into the state.

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"What we are trying to do, in many different ways, is to increase and diversify our [teacher] applicant pool," said Dan Cruce, the state's deputy secretary of education.

Those in the program make a two-year commitment. In turn, they receive a regular teacher's salary, professional training and a stipend at the end. The decision to hire the teachers is made at a school district or charter school level.

Fifteen of the 21 Teach for America first-year educators in Delaware are working in one of five participating charter schools, which are not represented by a teachers union. The other six work in Red Clay's Warner Elementary.

State leaders anticipate that with Race to the Top, more schools will opt in to similar programs. The state will use some of the \$100 million in funding to pay the district's or charter school's share of hiring expenses.

No other districts or charter schools have announced plans to hire these teachers for next school year. But, Cruce said, it's still early.

In the meantime, the number of people applying to work in Delaware schools through Teach for America has increased, mirroring a national trend. There were 121 applications in Delaware this year, up from 84 last year. Nationally, applications are up about 30 percent.

Jenner, who has visited Teach for America training programs at the invitation of the group, says they are "lovely people" but that hasn't changed her opinion that educators need more training before they are sent out as first-year teachers. She remains unconvinced that the program is needed in Delaware or that it's creating a new pool of teachers.

"I hate the idea that we are trying this out to see what we think of it," she said. "This is a profession for us, and we want professional teachers."

In Delaware, two of the original 23 teachers left the program midyear because of "extenuating personal circumstances," said Rebecca Neal, a spokeswoman.

Being a first-year teacher is difficult for anyone, said Jenner, who has 38 years of classroom experience.

Studies show that even teachers who come from a traditional training background are most likely to leave the profession in their first few years. Attrition rates at low-performing schools tend to be even higher. A 2008 study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education of more than 2,000 Teach for America participants found that teachers are most likely to stick with it if they are teaching a single grade level in a subject that they are well-prepared to instruct.

At Prestige Academy Charter School, Shaun Murphy, 30, said he faced challenges his first few months as a special-education teacher at the all-boys school in Wilmington that caters to students in fifth through eighth grades.

Looking back, there are certainly some things he would do differently, he said, like be a little stricter. But he now believes he is making a difference in their lives academically and personally.

On a recent day, Murphy weaved in and out of a classroom studying "Hatchet," a classic young-adult book. As the regular classroom teacher worked on concepts such as hyperbole, Murphy paused at certain desks to work with his special-education students.

Murphy leaned down and looked at one boy's worksheet.

"Good," he whispered, and turned away.

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The child grinned and pumped a fist silently under his desk.

Different versions of the scene repeated as Murphy made his way around the room carrying a clipboard emblazoned with the phrase "Live the Dream."

Murphy, who lives in Wilmington, frequently sees students and their parents out of school. He gave his cell phone number to all his students and their parents and responds to student **text messages** outside work. He meets after school with students to play video games as a reward.

He is more than a teacher, he said. For a lot of the boys, he's the only positive male figure in their lives. And he can relate. His own father wasn't around when he was growing up in Brooklyn.

After he completes the two-year Teach for America program, Murphy isn't sure what he'll do. He does know one thing: He'll make sure his Prestige Academy students graduate.

"I am here to see them cross the stage," he said. "I expect three things from them: graduate from here, graduate from high school and graduate from college."

Three graduates of the Teach for America program are working at Prestige Academy, a school where 75 percent of students are living in poverty and almost all are black. Principal Jack Perry says he likes to hire these educators at his school because they "buy in" to the school's culture. They are willing to work longer days and take on extra work to help students.

"The Teach for America folks are hardworking and they get what we do here," Perry said. "They understand the achievement gap should not exist. They are doing all they can do to make sure the students are working to the best of their abilities or more so."

Parent Shanita Dickerson, of New Castle, said she didn't know Murphy came to the school through Teach for America. What she did notice is that he was different than any teacher she's ever interacted with. Murphy spends a lot of his personal time connecting with the children. He takes her son to the YMCA to work out. He hosts movie nights.

But it's not all about fun, Dickerson said. He is a firm teacher who will call her to report if homework isn't done or expectations aren't met.

Her son adores Murphy, said Dickerson, a single mother.

"He wants to be just like Mr. Murphy," she said. "The best thing in his life used to be talking about video games. Now he's talking about his future."

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Sixth-grader Ilias Miller, 12, gets reading help from Shaun Murphy, who teaches at Prestige Academy through Teach for America. (The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT)



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Shaun Murphy, who teaches special education at Prestige Academy through the Teach for America program, carries a clipboard embossed with the phrase "Live the Dream." (The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT)



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Samantha Connell, who teaches fourth grade at Kuumba Academy through Teach for America, gets students raising their hands in a recent grammar class. (The News Journal ROBERT CRAIG)

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