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National mission in local classrooms

Teach for America recruits head to high-need schools

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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After nine weeks of training that included teaching over the summer in Philadelphia public schools, 23 Teach for America recruits will be taking over classrooms in six of Delaware's highest-need schools this fall.

This is the first time the Teach for America program -- a national nonprofit group that recruits top college graduates to teach in urban and rural schools to help close the achievement gap -- has come to Delaware.

"I really believe in the mission of Teach for America -- working to better serve those in underserved communities," said Margaretha Ehret, 22, who graduated in May from the University of Pennsylvania with a bachelor's degree in urban studies. Ehret, who started teaching kindergarten at Delaware College Preparatory Academy on Monday, said she wants to have all of her students reading by the end of the year.

Corps members are required to make a two-year commitment and are given their own classroom after completing the summer training program.

A national study suggests the program benefits students. According to a study by the Urban Institute, a Washington-based nonpartisan center focused on social and economic issues, last year, Teach for America teachers were found to be more effective in achieving better student test results than noncorps teachers with three or more years of experience.

Some veteran Delaware teachers criticized the program when it was announced in May. Union leaders said they worried the recruits -- most of whom don't have degrees in education and aren't certified as highly qualified teachers -- would not be prepared.

But now that the corps members are here, Frederika Jenner, president of the Red Clay Education Association teachers union, said she hopes the Red Clay recruits -- who become members of the union -- are successful and decide to stay in the teaching profession after their two-year commitment.

"I hope these corps members are still here 20 years from now," she said.

Delaware's corps members began their summer training in June by spending a week in Wilmington touring the city and meeting with community members.

"We bring folks to the community and help them to understand the reality behind the achievement gap in that specific community," said Mike Wang, executive director of Teach for America's Mid-Atlantic region. "What does it look like in Wilmington for children growing up in low-income families?"

Ehret is among five corps members at the elementary charter school designed to help urban children get into college. Prestige Academy -- the state's first all-boys charter school, serving grades five through eight and targeting low-income and minority children -- will host four corps members while East Side Charter will have three. Two corps members will teach at both Edison Charter School and Kuumba Academy. All of the schools are in Wilmington.

In May, Red Clay officials said they expected to have six corps members in district schools this fall. However, this week, citing the privacy of the teachers, they would not release the number of corps members coming to their district, which schools will employ Teach for America members or the names of the corps members. Red Clay teacher union officials, though, said six corps members will be coming to Warner Elementary School in Wilmington.

Wang said one of the 23 corps members coming to Wilmington has not been hired by a school yet, but he believes the placement will come soon. Teach for America also would not release names or biographical information, such as the ages and college degrees of all of the corps members.

Participating schools were given a chance to interview corps members, and then selected whom to hire.

Recruits then started what Teach for America officials call their "summer institute training." There are six institutes across the country, and Wilmington corps members attended the Philadelphia institute, living in Temple University dorms.

The recruits taught summer school in Philadelphia public schools, while being observed and evaluated by veteran teachers. After teaching, the recruits took professional development classes in areas such as classroom management and instructional strategies. They also worked together in collaborative groups to make tests, discuss teaching strategies and grade papers.

"It really is sort of a boot camp for new teachers," Wang said. "It's a rather remarkable five weeks in terms of the amount of activity and rigor that is compressed into a small time frame."

Ready for the next step

Gabe Ulman, who is teaching at Kuumba Academy this fall, said it was extremely demanding.

"There really was not a minute of my day for those five weeks that I was not working, sleeping or preparing to work," said Ulman, 22, who graduated in May from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., with a bachelor's degree in English.

Sara Kemper, 22, is confident that she'll have success in her third-grade classroom this fall at Warner Elementary because of the training.

"We had a lot of people observing us and critiquing our performance and pushing us to be the best teachers we could be," said Kemper, who graduated from Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., with a major in language culture and cognition.

After training, the recruits returned to Delaware and to create lesson plans and learn their school's curriculum.

Recruits are paid the same way other teachers are paid: About 70 percent of their salary is paid by the state and the district pays the rest.

But there are additional costs. Red Clay and each charter school is required to pay Teach for America \$10,000 per member each of the two years -- something the union opposes. The Rodel Foundation, the Longwood Foundation and the business community also have committed to providing an additional \$10,000 per corps member per year. These fees fund Teach for America's recruitment, selection and professional development, Wang said.

In a few weeks, the recruits will begin classes at Wilmington University and toward their highly qualified teaching certificate. The Delaware General Assembly passed legislation earlier this year that allowed for them to earn their certifications while they teach.

Teach for America will continue to provide professional development and program directors will observe them in class and provide feedback.

Jack Perry, founder of Prestige Academy, said not all teachers believe that every kid, regardless of

income level or race, can perform at a high level.

"But at Teach for America, they recruit folks that fundamentally believe that," he said.

A GLANCE AT THE RECRUITS

Name, Age, Grade/Subject teaching, College/University, Undergraduate major, Hometown:

Delaware College Preparatory Academy

Margaretha Ehret, 22, kindergarten, University of Pennsylvania, urban studies, Philadelphia

Kristen Depp, 22, kindergarten, Ohio State University, communications and criminology, Youngstown, Ohio

Megan Dempsy, 22, kindergarten, Elon University, political science and international studies, Elon, N.C.

Caitlin Gleason, 22, kindergarten, Smith College, government, Hillsborough, N.J.

Ernest Blackwell, 22, second grade and special education, Duquesne University, political science, Pittsburgh

Prestige Academy

Stacey Jacobs, 21, fifth-grade English, University of Virginia, psychology, Long Island, N.Y.

Shaun Murphy, 30, special education, Drury University, general studies, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Brian Yin, 21, sixth-grade English, University of Chicago, economics and political science, Pullman, Wash.

Ezra Temko, 23, sixth-grade math, Overton College and University of Delaware, politics and master's in public administration, Newark

East Side Charter School

Monique Waters, 23, sixth- to eighth-grade English, Pace University, media communications, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Melvin Pretlow, 22, fifth- and sixth-grade math, Seattle University, finance and business economics, Seattle

Matthew Vita, age not provided, media specialist, University of Scranton, English and philosophy, hometown not provided

Edison Charter School

Candice Johnson, 23, third grade, Rutgers University, French, Mount Holly, N.J.

Caroline Strunk, 22, seventh- and eighth-grade math, Bucknell University, Spanish and psychology, Herbon, Conn.

Kuumba Academy

Samantha Connell, 22, fourth-grade English and science, University of Pittsburgh, history and European studies, Pittsburgh

Gabe Ulman, 22, third grade, Carleton College, English, Los Angeles

Warner Elementary

Sara Kemper, 22, fifth grade, Vassar College, language culture and cognition, St. Paul, Minn.

Red Clay Consolidated School District

Joelle Cammarata

Juliann Dutremble

Kaitlin Messina

Kathryn Hiner

Maura McKinley

School to be determined

Aaron Bothner, 23, University of Colorado, history and psychology, Boulder, Colo.

Source: Corps members and school leaders
