

Cutting Teachers Learning Curve *Aspire's Program Offers Masters and Mastery*

BY John Fensterwald
July 18, 2011

A bipartisan bill before Congress that's drawing considerable attention would provide federal funding to states that establish academies and residency programs to train the next generation of high-striving teachers and principals in low-achieving districts. A residency program launched last year by Oakland-based Aspire Public Schools illustrates the type of program the legislation is intended to support.

The Aspire Teacher Residency Program trains and mentors teachers for placement in the charter network's 34 schools in California. It offers a stipend to novice teachers the first year, while they are studying for their master's in education, and builds in loan forgiveness to those who stay in the classroom.

Aspire, California's largest charter school organization, reports that the program is showing promise as it heads into its second year. All 18 teacher residents have been hired to teach in Aspire schools, with 15 in the schools in which they were trained. This year, 19 new residents will start the program.

Like Teach for America, which draws top college graduates who commit to two years in the classroom, Aspire's residency program is selective; it has accepted about one in seven applicants. But unlike Teach for America, which throws its corps members into the classroom after five weeks of summer training, Aspire's residents had a full year of preparation before they went solo. And they're asked to make a four-year commitment.

If the program proves to be a success, Aspire's primarily low-income, minority students ultimately will see the benefits. "Great teachers have to be trained well," says Heather Kirkpatrick, Aspire's vice president of education, who said that Aspire expects it will see improved student achievement from teachers in their early years. Improved results, in turn, will reinforce to teachers that they should stick with teaching as a career. "Teachers stay when they feel effective," she said.

Aspire's teacher credentialing program is affiliated with the University of the Pacific. For four days every week, the teacher resident works in the classroom with a mentor teacher. (The biggest lesson from the first year, Kirkpatrick said, is that "being mentor teacher and sharing with a new person everything you do is an intense endeavor emotionally and physically.") On the fifth day, Southern and Northern California cohorts of residents meet in all-day seminars with their UOP instructor. They also take online courses during the year. For Aspire, the program has the advantage of preparing teachers in the Aspire culture and pedagogy, with its focus on sending all students to a four-year college; traditional degree programs, preparing teachers who won't know where they'll be working, cannot do this.

At the end of the year, teacher residents receive a preliminary teaching credential – either a multiple subject credential for elementary and middle school or a single subject credential for high school – at a discounted UOP rate.

In the second and third years, now full-time teachers will continue to be guided by Aspire instructional coaches. For each year they teach, they receive \$1,500 of reimbursement for tuition; it's nearly 100 percent covered after six years.

In their first year, teacher residents get medical benefits and a \$13,500 stipend. This is less than some well-established programs, such as the Boston Teacher Residency, offer, which means that residents will still have to take out loans or borrow money the first year. But Aspire, which established the program with grants from the Gates and Stuart foundations, budgeted assuming no outside help after five years. It will mostly pay for itself through reduced expenses for recruitment and training, Kirkpatrick said. Aspire also pays mentor teachers a stipend of \$3,500.

Congress takes notice

Programs like these may get a new underwriter if Congress passes the Growing Excellent Achievement Training Academies for Teachers and Principals Act (GREAT Act), either as a stand-alone bill or as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The bill is sponsored by education's heavy hitters in the Senate: Democrat Michael Bennet of Colorado and Republican Lamar Alexander of Tennessee; San Francisco-based NewSchools Venture Fund helped develop it.

The federal government is currently underwriting about two dozen residency programs, primarily through \$100 million in one-time stimulus money. The new bill would create competitive state grants, open to traditional university and alternative credentialing programs, for academy/residencies in high-needs areas that meet three criteria:

- They're selective in their admissions;
- They provide hands-on, in-the-classroom training so that teachers are ready for the classroom the first day;
- In order to graduate, students must demonstrate, through their clinical work, they have the skills to raise student achievement (states will have to define how).

Aspire's residency program appears to embody what the bill would demand: training that cuts the learning curve in schools that need excellent teachers from day one.