



Developing Better Teachers by Training Them Like Medical School Residents

BY Liz Dwyer

July 1, 2011

Can the largest charter school organization in California close the achievement gap by revamping teacher training and ending the massive problem of high teacher turnover? The Aspire Public Schools Teacher Residency Program, a new teacher preparation initiative certainly wants to try. The program is approaching teacher education the way medical schools educate doctors—combining education theory, classroom practice, and intensive coaching and mentorship.

Aspire's theory of change is that in order to get kids to college, they need to be taught by expert teachers. But, says Aspire VP of Education Heather Kirkpatrick, "If you're going to be an expert at anything, you need to dedicate at least 10,000 hours to it. That's at least six or seven years teaching." Given that 46 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years, educators simply aren't reaching that expert level. Kirkpatrick says that since what makes teachers stay in the classroom is feeling that they're effective, at night the residents—which include entrepreneurially-minded recent grads as well as older career changers—attend classes to earn their teaching credential and master's degree from the University of the Pacific. But, what happens during the day is what makes this program truly unique: Residents connect the educational theory with actual classroom practice by spending an entire year shadowing an expert Aspire teacher.

Indeed, the mentorship piece is a key aspect of teacher training in nations where students are scoring the highest on international tests. In Shanghai, China, where students are number one in the world on the PISA test, potential educators must spend a full year student teaching under the supervision of a mentor. The same happens in top ranked Finland. Aspire teacher-mentors certainly know a thing or two about closing the achievement gap. One-hundred percent of the class of 2010—almost all students of color from low income communities—was accepted to four-year colleges and universities.

Katie Kelly-Hankin, who relocated to California from Boston to be a resident, says she applied to Aspire's program "because it is designed with the understanding that it is incredibly difficult to be an effective teacher." And, says Kelly-Hankin, "the opportunity to work for a full year alongside a master educator who has successfully raised student achievement while also earning the respect and trust of her students and colleagues will be invaluable to my own personal and professional growth."

Once the residents graduate, they go on to work at one of the 30 Aspire schools serving nearly 10,000 K-12 students across California. They're asked to commit to each school for at least four years. While the residents do have to pay for their credential and master's degree upfront, if they stay at an Aspire campus for the length of their commitment, the charter organization reimburses the cost.

Kirkpatrick says Aspire would love to grow the program, noting that Aspire is committed to "figuring out how we hone a teacher's practice so they stay for 30 years." But she's honest that they don't yet know for sure if this model of teacher prep will work. "There's no research paper yet on our results," she says. "But the outcomes we'll be looking for are do the teachers stay in the profession longer and are they more successful with their student achievement?—and we won't know for sure for another five years." Eighteen new residents just graduated from the first cohort and a second group of 19 residents started on Thursday.