

Guest Commentary: Teacher Corps Creates New Education Opportunities

By Sarah McNeal

Tuesday, I start my third week as an eighth-grade English teacher at Robert F. Morehead Middle School in Pine Bluff. Already, I love my students, and already they have exceeded my expectations and broken my spirit in ways my training could never have prepared me for.

As a Fayetteville native with degrees in Spanish and Latin American Studies from the University of Arkansas, my placement in southern Arkansas to teach English is surprising to most. "But, why?" I'm asked.

Simply put, I'm here because I believe in the power of education, and even more so in the power of effective classroom teachers. I believe that with my steady spirit, hard-work, and passion for learning, I can be an effective teacher. Moreover, I believe in programs such as the Arkansas Teacher Corps and their ability to train such teachers.

Of course, alternative certification programs have received a great deal of criticism. At the forefront of the debate is the legitimacy of an educator that has not received an education degree. Critics ask, "how could they possibly know how to teach?" Opponents are quick to declare that non-traditional programs like the Arkansas Teacher Corps can't fully prepare teachers for the classroom. Not to speak ill of the program that has offered me an alternative route to my chosen career, but I agree. My six weeks of training in El Dorado did not completely prepare me for the classroom.

I would argue, however, that no program -- alternative or traditional -- can accomplish this task. Nothing can totally prepare you for the first year in your own classroom. I may be slightly underprepared, but the Arkansas Teacher Corps has prepared me as much as any program could hope to prepare a first-year teacher.

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Though I have received only six weeks of pedagogical training, it was developed and implemented in such a way as to make it incredibly meaningful. Intense training in classroom management, lesson planning, diversity sensitivity and awareness have better prepared me for the classroom. And, unlike traditional teacher certification programs, the Arkansas Teacher Corps is unique in that it will continue to provide intense training and support the duration of my three-year fellowship.

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While the majority of my colleagues-turned-friends in the Arkansas Teacher Corps did not receive four-year degrees in education, they instead earned their degrees in their teaching content areas. These new teachers will undoubtedly face numerous challenges, yet I am confident those struggles will not revolve around an understanding of the subject they

teach, be it math or science. In the end, students will greatly benefit from my colleagues' extensive knowledge and understanding in their content areas.

Another popular criticism is that programs such as the Arkansas Teacher Corps place novice teachers in school districts most desperate for highly-qualified educators. Unfortunately, traditionally trained and highly qualified educators simply do not flock to these locations. Instead, year after year, school districts in these geographic areas face extreme teacher shortages. The Arkansas Teacher Corps provides an opportunity for high-achieving and service-oriented individuals to fill these vacancies so that highly-qualified teachers already in these areas are not forced to stretch their talents across a multitude of subjects and/or grade levels in one academic year.

I can already speak of the small, slow victories I've experienced. Toward the beginning of the week, I asked students to write a mock college application essay. Unsurprisingly, I was met with groans and eye rolls. The prompt was simple enough -- it asked who they would have dinner with if they could have dinner with any person. One student, who had thus far proven particularly difficult to engage, wrote the most remarkable essay. Grammar and usage mistakes aside, her content was beyond anything I could have anticipated. She wrote of having dinner with herself, so that she can see what she looks like, hear how she sounds, and understand what she feels from the other side of the table. My eighth-grader wrote that. I was floored.

With each small, slow victory, my excitement to teach students in Arkansas grows.

If you are interested in serving students in the state of Arkansas, or know someone who is, I highly encourage you to apply to join the 2015 cohort. The Arkansas Teacher Corps is now accepting applications from graduating college seniors and graduates looking for a career change.

Commit. Serve. Teach. Apply today!

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Sarah McNeal is a first-year English teacher at Robert F. Morehead Middle School in Pine Bluff and a member of the 2014 cohort of the Arkansas Teacher Corps (www.arkansasteacher corps.org).

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<http://www.nwaonline.com/news/2014/aug/29/guest-commentary-teacher-corps-creates-/>