



# Dan Sellers, Executive Director, Teach for America - Twin Cities

## Sarah Kemper, Teach for America, Associate

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

*July 8, 2011*

**Present :** Verne Johnson (chair), Janis Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Sallie Kemper, Tim McDonald, Wayne Popham (phone), Clarence Schallbetter

***Summary of meeting:*** Teach for America ("TFA") is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates who commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools in the effort to expand educational opportunity and eliminate educational inequity. Drawn to Minnesota by the disturbing statistics on the minority achievement gap here, Teach for America will soon support 95 corps members teaching in the Twin Cities. Their efforts were bolstered by the recent enactment of legislation in Minnesota that will make it easier for all prospective teachers, including Teach for America teachers, to pursue alternative pathways to their licensure.

*Executive Director for Teach for America - Twin Cities Daniel Sellers and Associate Sara Kemper describe Teach for America's strategy in creating a new culture of achievement inside teachers' classrooms, and the impact this can have on students' lives.*

**A. Welcome and introductions** - Daniel Sellers is the founding Executive Director of Teach For America - Twin Cities. Sellers, a graduate of South High School in Minneapolis and Gustavus Adolphus College, joined Teach For America in 2006 as a corps member with a two-year teaching assignment in Eastern North Carolina. During his first year in the classroom he increased the percentage of his students who passed the North Carolina state standardized math exam from 40 to 75. The following year, he led 97 percent of his students to pass and was a finalist for Teach For America's Sue Lehmann Excellence in Teaching Award. He single-handedly opened the TFA-Twin Cities office in 2008, and now oversees 95 corps members here who collectively impact over 5,000 Twin Cities students.

Sara Kemper is Associate, Development, District, and School Partnerships for Teach for America - Twin Cities. She is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Vassar College having earned a BA with honors

in Language, Culture and Cognition in 2009. For the past two years she was a Teach for America fifth grade teacher at an inner city elementary school in Wilmington, DE, while earning a Master's degree in Education. A native of Saint Paul and a 2005 graduate of Saint Paul Central High School, Sara is the daughter of Civic Caucus consultant Sallie Kemper.

## **B. Discussion**

"The Teach for America approach to preparing teachers is very different from what we're used to seeing in the education field," Sellers opened. And the goal is different, too—to enable teachers to change the shared values of their classroom and their schools in an effort to overcome the "culture of compliance" that pervades public education.

Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, as a Princeton student in the late 1980's saw a lot of her classmates being recruited by top corporations and financial institutions. She asked herself, What if there were a top-notch social service program that directed these people into classrooms to help improve the education of "at-risk" students? She proposed such a program in her senior thesis and in 1990, with \$2.5 million she raised for start-up funding, she launched the effort that recently celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> year of bringing talented leaders into the most challenging classrooms. In its first year, Teach for America recruited 500 men and women to teach in participating schools in six low-income communities. Today Teach for America continues to attract top graduates of highly ranked colleges and universities to undergo rigorous training prior to accepting two-year teaching jobs at the nation's most struggling schools.

Last year Teach for America received applications from just over 50,000 young men and women—most of whom came from the top 5-10 percent of their class and held leadership positions within their universities. The program accepted just fewer than 10 percent of those applicants. Recruits, or "corps members" as they are known, are asked to relocate and serve as the lead classroom teacher of record in a low-income community school, where more than 70 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-rate lunch. They go through a rigorous summer institute, which includes student teaching, prior to starting their teaching job. They also receive training and guidance from Teach for America staff throughout the two years of their commitment and attend graduate courses in education in order to earn a Master's degree. They are hired by a partnering school district or charter school, receive a standard first-year teacher's salary, and if required, join the local teacher's union.

### **Changing from compliance-based to achievement-based culture for teachers.**

A common approach to teaching, the speakers said, is often to stand at the front of the classroom and deliver information. With this approach, as long as you cover state standards and do it reasonably well, you have done your job. The goal is compliance with prescribed standards. Whether the students pick it up—and whether they retain it—is up to them.

The strategy of Teach for America is different, they said. Instead of this compliance approach they ask teachers to go beyond mere compliance and focus on actual student achievement. The organization asks TFA teachers to:

- Create a plan to achieve that goal—including unit and lesson plans.

- Invest others in that plan—do what is necessary to get students to "buy in" to the goals, which often requires getting parents invested in accomplishing the plan as well; maintain high expectations.
- Execute every day—make the necessary executive decisions based upon each day's results; adjust plans as necessary to assure each student's academic progress.
- Reflect on your experiences—continually think about what's going well and what you can improve upon.
- Work relentlessly—never stop pursuing achievement, no matter how long or hard the job. "Our teachers are often the first to arrive and last to leave; that's what it takes to make progress. There are no excuses."

### **Creating a culture with 'no excuses'.**

When a teacher first starts out in TFA, the speakers said, something you would likely notice if you sat in on a meeting between the teacher in the classroom and a TFA instructional coach is that the teacher will often begin by making excuses-saying what an observer could reasonably expect them to say: the student didn't have a quiet place last night to do homework; the family is having problems; the teacher is not supported within school, etc.

The coach will then say, "That's fine, but what's within your locus of control?" The teacher is re-focused on what specific things need to be done in the classroom in order to get the student back on the achievement track. Sellers went on to explain: "This approach leads to dramatic student achievement. And that is a transformative experience for the student as well as the teacher as they both see proof positive that the old idea that 'poverty is destiny' is simply false. For the teacher this reinforces the TFA core belief that the achievement gap is ultimately solvable."

Achievement data is tracked with almost obsessive attention to detail, so teachers regularly get clear, unadulterated feedback on student progress. "Every study we've seen shows that our teachers are effective, often considerably more effective than their peer teachers-and when our teachers see tangible results it is inspiring."

It is a sort of bait and switch, he joked-the teachers are attracted to the program for many reasons, but once they see that students can learn and that as teachers they can close the achievement gap, it is enormously motivating. They stay interested and involved in education forever, even if not always as classroom teachers. About two-thirds of TFA alumni work longer term in some area of education or in government positions that deal with education policy.

### **The other part of their strategy: Influencing public policy.**

Teach for America can't solve the nation's education problem by pumping 10,000 new teachers into the system, the speakers said. The ultimate solution resides beyond the individual classroom, but will likely stem from the longer-term influence of the TFA alumni. The program boasts among its former corps members many education leaders including 400 principals, 15 superintendents (in Washington, DC, Newark, New Orleans, Tennessee, and elsewhere), and 12 elected officials and policy makers.

"In communities where we have seen the needle move," Sellers said, "TFA alums have had an impact." Their immediate goal in Minnesota is to provide students with a talented teacher, who is

energetic, excited about getting kids to achieve big goals and not jaded by the "compliance culture" and the low expectations so often entrenched in the school system. In the long run however, TFA - Twin Cities' goal is to be the talent pipeline for education reform in Minnesota.

### **Question and Answer**

**Q:** How does a TFA teacher work within a school?

**SK:** When I was working in the classroom the past two years in Wilmington, Delaware, I was working under an "emergency certificate," and earned my standard teaching license during those two years through ongoing teacher education. In the position of lead teacher I was responsible for everything that any other first-year teacher is responsible for.

Many districts mandate a curriculum. As a TFA teacher I took this mandated curriculum and figured out how to work with it to produce the exceptional achievement results we are trained to expect from our students. I used the training I received in our intensive summer institute, which stresses leadership and planning, but also covers classroom management, diversity issues, learning theory, and literacy.

One of the biggest challenges of teaching, of course, is to figure out how to best get information and ideas across to students. Much of it is traditional direct instruction, standing in front of the class and talking or demonstrating; sometimes it helps to make learning into a game; often it is helpful to introduce some form of technology into the lesson. On average, in one hour of classroom time I might have used a 'lecture' format for around 20 minutes, although that will vary quite a bit depending upon subject and grade level.

**Q:** Take us through your year teaching.

**SK:** I often structured my fifth-grade classes using the 'I-do/we-do/you-do' format. Something is always needed to grab their attention and you need to plan accordingly. You need to be able to articulate to students why the lesson is important, to tell them what they will be able to do by the end of the day, and tell them why it's important to their future. I would spend no more than 20 minutes an hour lecturing before moving on to other activities to reinforce the topic.

I learned quickly, especially about classroom management issues. In my first year I sent students to the behavior specialist a lot. Then I realized that some students like being sent out because then they don't have to do the work in the classroom.

While it is hard not to get discouraged sometimes, keeping your sights set on TFA's high standards is essential. Teachers must begin by setting a goal and vision. If you can get to 100 percent passing a test, it can do remarkable things to the spirit of the whole class.

**Q:** Are the teachers too constrained in bringing a new approach to a traditional school?

**SK:** It depends on the school. Some districts have a prescribed curriculum with varied degrees of flexibility.

I think that what you would see generally when you put a Teach for America teacher into a classroom is someone who has created a new environment within his or her classroom walls. The teaching will consist of some direct instruction to a whole class, then breaking them into differentiated groups: individual students on computers, small groups, some doing book work, all depending on the individual needs of the students.

**Q:** Can TFA teachers contribute to entrepreneurship in education?

**DS:** I think that's the role our alumni play. When they come into teaching they are operating for two years in a compliance culture-and spending two years creating an achievement island in a compliance sea.

This gives the teachers the experience, which is critical. Almost all of the schools making headway today are run by people who themselves have the experience of working in a classroom of poor kids and making progress with them. I'd estimate that there are 200 really good life-changing schools in this country for poor kids. Of these 200, it is difficult to find a school that is making progress with poor kids that is not run by a former teacher, one who was once an incredibly successful teacher in a classroom doing the hard work.

**Q:** You've started with the assumption that kids learn through involvement-you're setting up teams so students have to work together. Is that the key to success?

**DS:** I think truly it's not about what the teaching approach is. What really matters is the quality of the teacher -the average TFA teacher graduates from the top 10 percent of their class.

My perspective on technology is this: do whatever works. Does that mean that giving every student a laptop will bring them to where they need to be academically? No. In many districts there is a lot of money spent on technology without any real, effective implementation.

In her new book, TFA founder Wendy Kopp describes the Philadelphia School of the Future that had everything that \$100 million could buy in state-of-the-art educational facilities and technology. In three years the school was underperforming the average Philadelphia Public School. Four blocks down the street was Mastery Charter School, which ran on comparatively few funds, and was in the basement of a church. It blew them away on achievement test scores.

**Q:** How did TFA get into Minnesota in the first place?

**DS:** This is the statistic I'd like to share about Minnesota: if you're an African American fourth-grade student you're likely to perform academically at a higher proficiency rate in Alabama or Georgia than you would in Minnesota. This was the impetus for our coming to Minnesota.

Minneapolis Superintendent Bernedia Johnson had a great experience with TFA in Memphis before coming here as deputy superintendent. She was encouraged by then-Superintendent Carol Johnson to bring TFA in to the Minneapolis schools. Governor Pawlenty was helpful in the effort as well by getting the Board Of Teaching to change some restrictive rules. Hamline University went out on a limb, took a lot of heat, and decided to partner with TFA to provide ongoing teacher certification coursework. Since Minneapolis would only take 10 teachers I had to put on my salesman hat and get

14 charter schools to agree to take TFA teachers as well. So we started in 2008 with 40 TFA teachers. We are now up to 90 teachers in two districts, Minneapolis and Brooklyn Center, and in more than 20 charter schools and are shooting for 180 teachers by 2015.

### **C. Conclusion**

This year Governor Dayton enacted legislation that makes it easier for alternative licensure programs to train teachers to teach in Minnesota schools, Sellers said. Teach for America-Twin Cities is looking forward to expanding their presence in the state and helping in the schools most in need of the competent talent TFA can recruit and prepare for this demanding and meaningful service to the community.

Thanks all around to the speakers for joining us today.