

## *A Promising Solution to Teacher Recruitment Woes*

*by Jeanne Storm*



One of the most pressing challenges in public education today is the recruitment and retention of high quality teachers for America's schools. Research shows teacher shortages exist nationwide but vary by geographic area, content area, demographics, and individual schools. These studies confirm teacher shortages are most prevalent in urban and rural settings and in the disciplines of math, science, and special education. New shortage areas are now appearing in bilingual education, speech pathology, hearing impaired, visually impaired, and foreign language instruction. Additionally, shortages in middle and

high school principals, superintendents, and school psychologists are now reported (American Association for Employment in Education, 2006).

Students deserve access to highly qualified educators in all American schools. It is critical to examine new and current programs designed to recruit prospective educators who have an interest in serving in high-need areas and who come from varying backgrounds, geographic areas, and under-represented populations.

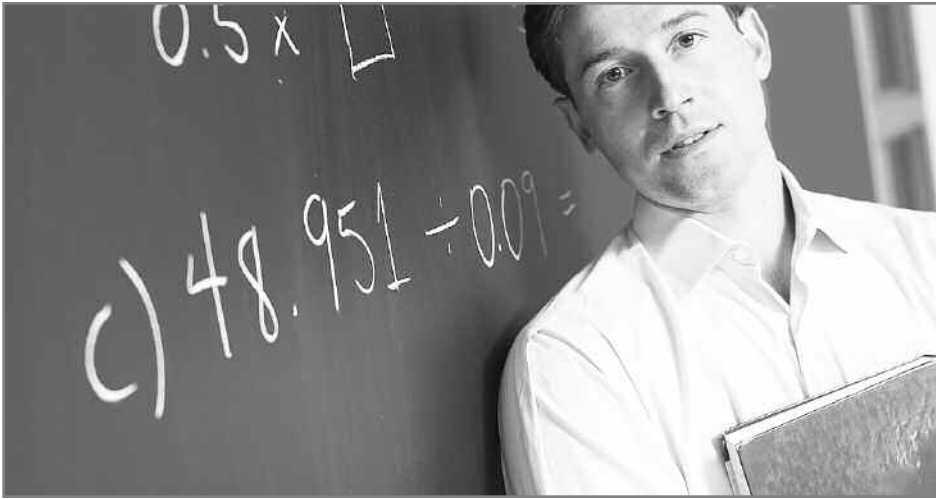
While alternative certification is an option for filling classrooms, a recent study by Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) found no instance where alternatively certified teachers performed as well as teachers with standard certification of comparable experience levels who were teaching in similar settings. Darling-Hammond, et al., encourages the development of strong, efficient, and affordable teacher preparation routes that enable teachers to be competent when they enter teaching and that retain teachers as they become more effective. One such promising program is grooming our current middle and high school students to become the next generation of great educators.

### *Defining the Issue: Teachers for Urban Schools*

Schools of education report difficulty in producing substantial numbers of teachers from racial, ethnic, and language minority groups (Burbank & Dynak, 2005). Because of the low number of teachers of color entering the profession, and because new teachers from the majority population select suburban and rural school settings over inner-city districts, the problem of staffing urban schools continues to intensify.

Recent research has linked not only pedagogical and content knowledge with effective urban teaching, but also certain teacher attributes and background factors (Stotko, Ingram, Beaty-O'Ferrall, 2007). Haberman (2005) reports that the set of background factors that are predictive of effective urban teachers include people who:

- Live in or were raised in urban settings;
- Attended schools in metropolitan areas as a youth;
- Are members of a minority group or from a working class white family;



- Earned a bachelor's degree from a state college;
- Are part of a community in which teaching is regarded as a relatively high-status career;
- Have experienced a period of living in poverty or have the capacity to empathize with the challenges of living in poverty; or
- Have engaged in activities with diverse children who are living in poverty.

Background factors alone will not determine the effectiveness of an urban teacher. A critical component to the equation is the prospective teacher's disposition. Successful urban teachers possess a strong desire to help at-risk students and to make a contribution to society. Many see urban teaching as fulfilling a sense of duty and giving back to the greater good. They are aware of their own personal beliefs and philosophies, they have clear expectations and a belief that all children can learn regardless of the environment, and they are determined to modify their teaching practices to ensure that all students do learn (Gehrke, 2005; Salyer, 2003). These talented teachers solve problems through persistent yet flexible avenues, work with a sense of urgency, understand the power of col-

laborations, are cooperative, and have a love of lifelong learning (Stotko, Ingram, & Beaty-O'Ferrall, 2007).

If cultural understanding is a key to successful urban teaching, metropolitan settings should be targeted as a source for future urban teachers. Those future educators should experience the joys, rewards, and challenges of urban teaching in their precollegiate years, and they need to examine and assess their own dispositions. Partnerships between the urban district and local colleges of education will pave the transition to collegiate life and complete the circle, turning the precollegiate prospective educators into promising new teachers who have the background factors, skills, content knowledge, dispositions, and clear expectations of what teaching is like in the urban school district, increasing the likelihood they will stay.

### *A Promising Solution*

In a recent study of the Future Educators Association® (FEA) initiative in Jefferson County Public Schools (Louisville, Kentucky), cultivating and grooming the district's future urban teachers from within the ranks of the students themselves is working (Storm, 2008).

To heighten awareness about careers in education and to begin the process of recruiting future teachers, in 2002 the Kentucky state legislature passed a joint resolution requesting that the state Department of Education set aside teacher recruitment funds to assist local school districts in organizing FEA chapters. The initiative was embraced by the Kentucky Department of Education, and the program was established in the Division of Educator Quality and Diversity in the Office of Leadership and School Improvement. Kentucky holds the distinction of having the most chartered FEA chapters in the nation. Additionally, Kentucky's public universities and two private colleges are active partners in the FEA initiative.

The Kentucky Department of Education promotes the establishment of new FEA chapters by providing the charter fees for any middle or high school where educators want to start the program. Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) took the offer. More than 400 students are involved in the FEA program, with active chapters in every middle and high school within the district. Additionally, the district has partnered with the University of Louisville to form the Minority Teacher Recruitment Program. A district representative oversees the program and coordinates such events as the district FEA conference, tours of Kentucky universities, teacher shadowing experiences, and school-based and community-level service projects. The district sends the prospective educators to the state-level and national FEA conferences. Additionally, the Education Magnet Career Academy for students in grades 9-12 has been established. The program provides students with opportunities to participate in the educational community. Teaching skills are developed through job shadowing, an internship, and a paid co-op

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*—High school business and technology teacher, teaching for more than seven years*

teaching experience. Students can earn college credit hours for courses taken in the program. The overarching goal is to strengthen the district's efforts in recruiting prospective minority teachers by establishing a career track that cultivates their interests, channels their efforts, and guides their path. By doing so, the district will fill its many teaching vacancies with educators who understand teaching and learning in an urban setting.

### *Current Urban Teachers, Former FEA Students*

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2007) reports that the national teacher turnover rate has risen to 16.8 percent. In urban schools it is over 20 percent, and in some schools and districts, the teacher dropout rate is actually higher than the student dropout rate. The National Center for Education Statistics reveals that nearly 20 percent of the teachers in high-poverty schools have three or fewer years of teaching experience, compared to 11 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools. Breaking the national norm, more than 70 percent of the teachers within Jefferson County Public Schools who identified themselves as former members of a district-sponsored FEA chapter have been teachers within the district for more than seven years; 60 percent have taught there for more than 10 years.

Former FEA students who are now practicing teachers were asked how FEA impacted their decision to pursue

a career in education. Consider their comments:

- *I learned to respect the work that teachers are required to perform both inside and outside the classroom.* (High school business and technology teacher, teaching for more than seven years)
- *I encountered many mentors. I had a wonderful diverse experience and I learned about the many opportunities in education.* (Elementary school counselor, teaching for more than seven years)
- *Visiting other schools helped prepare me for college. One of the schools we visited happened to be the university I graduated from. FEA was a stepping stone to my career in education.* (Middle school physical education teacher, teaching for less than three years)
- *It showed me the positive side of teaching, especially from educators that were the same color as me.* (Elementary exceptional childhood education resource teacher, teaching for less than three years)

Additionally, the same teachers were asked how their FEA experience specifically prepared them for teaching within the district.

- *It was helpful in preparing me in the nature of dealing with disadvantaged students.* (Elementary computer teacher, teaching for 10 or more years)
- *Real life experiences opened many doors. It was an excellent opportu-*



*nity for me to work with students and understand the feeling of being an educator.* (Elementary principal, teaching for more than 10 years)

- *It helped me get to know contacts for future reference.* (Kindergarten teacher, teaching for less than three years)
- *Since I had gone to Jefferson County Public Schools, it just naturally followed that I wanted to teach in Jefferson County Public Schools.* (Middle school science teacher, teaching for more than 10 years)

### *Current FEA Students, Future Urban Teachers*

Within Jefferson County Public Schools, the middle and high school students participating in an FEA chapter were asked about their experiences in FEA and their future career aspirations. Of the students surveyed, nearly 100 percent live in and attend school within the urban setting, 81 percent are of a

racial or ethnic minority, and 95 percent confirmed that their family would be proud of them if they became a teacher. The background factors researchers found promising in recruiting urban teachers are clearly strong within this district.

When precollegiate students were asked why they are interested in a teaching career, a common theme emerged. The students hold a noble view of the teaching profession.

- *One of the best things about being a teacher is knowing that you have made a difference in someone's life.*
- *I would be giving back to the community.*
- *The feeling you get from turning 'I can't' into 'I got it.'*
- *Teaching kids new and interesting things about life and the world.*
- *I would be molding the future generation.*

And what of these aspiring teachers' future plans? Ninety-three percent intend to earn an undergraduate degree, with nearly 50 percent of them planning to earn a degree in education. And of those 50 percent who aspire to teach, 71 percent indicated they hoped to one day teach within Jefferson County Public Schools.

The Jefferson County Public School system is making solid progress in successfully solving its own teacher shortage issue. The district has established a strong partnership with the Kentucky State Department of Education, the local university, and the international FEA headquarters. FEA teacher advisors and district support personnel are ensuring a rewarding experience for the prospective educators who will one day become their colleagues.

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## MORE ABOUT FUTURE EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION®

The Future Educators Association® (FEA), sponsored by PDK International, is a professional organization that supports more than 20,000 junior high/middle school, high school, and collegiate students who are interested in education-related careers. The mission of FEA is to foster the recruitment and development of prospective educators worldwide through the dissemination of innovative programming and relevant research.

Through participation in an FEA chapter, students gain a realistic understanding of the nature of education and the role of the teacher. In addition to exposing students to careers in education, one of the expressed goals of FEA is to increase the number of qualified teacher candidates from diverse ethnic, racial, social, and economic backgrounds.

## MORE ABOUT PDK INTERNATIONAL

PDK International is a member-based association for professional educators. The mission of Phi Delta Kappa International is to promote high-quality education, in particular publicly supported education, as essential to the development and maintenance of a democratic way of life. This mission is accomplished through leadership, research, and service in education.



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