



The quality of teachers

Those who can

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Education reforms will never work unless teaching attracts more high-fliers



“I SET up a Fantasy Football competition between some of my toughest pupils,” one young man explains. “They get goal-keeping points for good attendance, and defence points for behaving well. Good punctuation and spelling translate into their midfield performance, and coming up with good ideas, into attack.” Around the room, pens scribble furiously. “Pupil X hated me,” a woman tells the group; she describes how she changed that with weekly phone calls to his parents and postcards praising his (intermittent) good behaviour. More notes are made.

This is the Teach First summer institute: six weeks in Canterbury, a southern cathedral city, at the end of which nearly 500 new university graduates will teach full-time, for £15,000 (\$24,500) a year, in some of England’s toughest schools. The 360 who started the programme last year are here too, handing on to the raw recruits their tips for coping with bad behaviour and keeping lessons fresh, and demonstrating to their tutors what they have learned. In another year, those old hands will be qualified teachers, trained on the job and in tutorials and summer schools.

Recruiting the right kind of teachers has been difficult in England for some time, and though recession has brought temporary relief, the task is getting bigger as those hired to teach the baby boom near retirement. Head teachers, worn down by constant official policy changes and an avalanche of paperwork, are retiring early. A study in 2007 by McKinsey, a consultancy, concluded that countries whose students perform well tend to recruit teachers from the top of the class. But a recent report by Politeia, a think-tank, found that the bar for getting into teacher training in England is, by international standards, unusually low. Trainee teachers can resit basic literacy and numeracy tests as often as they like—and 13% need at least three goes at the latter. Around 1,200 each year graduated with the lowest class of degree, a third.

The result is a general sense that the country’s teachers have been scraped from the bottom of the barrel. That makes it unlikely that ambitious graduates will consider joining the profession, or stay in it if recession persuades them to do so briefly.

Modelled on Teach for America, a programme founded in 1989 that now trains 4,000 teachers a year, Teach First aims to reverse this vicious cycle by creating a route into teaching for high-fliers. Applicants are screened for leadership and communication skills, and the successful ones promise to teach for two years in “challenging” schools: those where few pupils get good exam

results or where more than 30% are poor enough to receive free school meals. Such schools tend to have the least qualified teachers and to suffer from high turnover. One summer-school participant is about to start teaching mathematics to 15-year-olds who have had 22 teachers in the subject in the past three years.

Unlike government recruitment drives, which tend to present teaching as appealing, even easy, Teach First describes the job as tough and demanding because the right people are those who are attracted by the most daunting tasks. Few at the Canterbury summer school think they would have considered teaching without that approach: the standard one-year postgraduate course is, they say, “too slow”, “too theoretical” and “boring”. Strong links with businesses, including prestigious graduate recruiters who often scoop up those who decide not to stay in teaching, help bring them in too. Some employers, like HSBC, a bank that is one of the charity’s biggest donors, guarantee those who leave after their two years a first-round interview.

Since 2003, when it received 1,300 applicants for just 200 places, Teach First has grown fast. Nearly a tenth of Oxford’s class of 2009 will be Teaching First this autumn. The programme already has its first head teacher, Max Haimendorf, hired to lead a new school in London after just three years teaching. It expects to take on 850 recruits in 2012, making it one of Britain’s largest graduate recruiters. To date almost three-fifths have stayed on after their two-year stint, which means that retention of teachers is almost as good as with traditional routes into the classroom.

Around 40,000 people train to teach each year in England. Making Teach First the main way to do so would dilute the programme’s prestige—and there probably aren’t enough adrenalin junkies out there, anyway. Rather, the programme hopes to change the profession less directly. As Teach First becomes better known, teaching will start to be seen as a job for ambitious go-getters. It should help with the shortage of school heads, too. And if the Conservative Party wins the next general election, as seems likely, Teach Firsters may help to make its slightly half-baked plans to open hundreds of new schools a reality. Brett Wigdortz, the charity’s founder and chief executive, says that many participants tell him they would be keen to set up and lead new schools.

Those who do not stay in education will also be influential. Business leaders are apt to bemoan the awfulness of Britain’s school-leavers, but since few went to sink schools themselves, or send their own children to them, the remedies they prescribe are not notably informed. That should change as more executives are drawn from the programme’s ranks.

Teach First’s most important contribution, though, may be to shake up education research and policy. “New teachers bring fresh eyes to education,” says Mr Wigdortz. “Our chair of trustees, Dame Julia Cleverdon, often tells participants to keep a notebook and write down everything that strikes them as crazy in the first few months—because a year in, those things will seem normal. And two years in, when they have gained in experience and confidence, they should get that notebook out and start changing those things.”

Almost all education-policy documents and research papers these days start with a reminder that a child’s family background is by far the strongest influence on his educational achievement. This evident truth could spur teachers to greater efforts to lean against that wind; instead, it is generally used to explain away poor children’s weaker performance. Teach First challenges such defeatism. “We believe educational inequity is a solvable problem,” says Mr Wigdortz, “and that the way to solve it is to get the best people teaching in the most challenging schools.”