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Business

Alternative pathways to the front of a classroom

By Jay Fitzgerald | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 14, 2013



JESSICA RINALDI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Laura Mansfield took part in a teacher residency program and has been offered a job.

As a PhD candidate in mathematics, Laura Mansfield was tutoring high school students to help pay

bills when she had a career epiphany.

“I realized I really liked teaching high school students,” said Mansfield, who was studying at Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia. “I found that I connected with them.”

So Mansfield gave up her doctoral studies and plans to become a college professor, applying last year to the [Boston Teacher Residency](#) program, an intensive 13-month program that trains teachers for the Boston public schools. This week, Mansfield, 26, will receive a master’s degree in education and a Massachusetts teacher’s license, allowing her to start teaching math this fall.

Mansfield is among many aspiring teachers who have taken an alternative route to public school classrooms. Traditionally, teachers study education in college, do their student teaching, and take the state licensing exam. But for career changers, like Mansfield, there are other paths.

Alternative licensing programs such as Boston Teacher Residency here or Teach for America and the New Teacher Project in New York are among the ways. Teach for America, for instance, provides courses and partnerships with colleges to help train future teachers and prepare them to get their teaching certificates.

There’s also the national Urban Teacher Residency United network — created in 2004 by the founders of the residency programs in Boston, Chicago, and Denver — which helps school districts and higher-ed partners establish residency programs in their own cities.

The Boston Teacher Residency, which marks its 10th anniversary this month, has been among the most successful in training teachers. The retention rate of residency graduates after their first five years is about 75 percent, compared with 50 percent for other new teachers. The program has been so successful that at least 20 to 25 percent of the approximately 275 new teachers hired each year by the school department come via the Boston Teacher Residency program.

The program borrows from the medical profession’s use of postgraduate residencies to train young physicians in hospital settings. In the case of the Boston Teacher Residency program, postcollege training is conducted in the classroom.

“So often people come in unprepared for the complexity and difficulty of teaching actual classes,” said Jesse Solomon, executive director of the Boston Teacher Residency and its parent organization, the nonprofit Boston Plan for Excellence.

During summer orientation classes, residents are taught how to analyze test scores and student grade data, as well as perform less empirical assessments of how students are faring. They also are taught how to prepare classroom lessons and adjust teaching methods to circumstances, Solomon said.

During the school year, residents are assigned to a mentor teacher at a Boston school and effectively act as teaching assistants during the first few months of the school year. The residents help prepare curriculums, tutor students, and occasionally take over front-of-the-class instruction.

They take on more and more responsibilities as the program progresses. They sit in on parent-teacher conferences, learning how to interact with and encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education.

During the 13-month residency, the vast majority of participants are enrolled in a parallel master's degree program in education through a partnership with the University of Massachusetts Boston. The \$3 million budget for the Boston Teacher Residency is funded through the federal government's AmeriCorps public service program, the Boston schools, and private donations.

Residents receive a stipend of about \$12,000. If they decide to leave Boston schools within three years after their residency, they have to repay \$10,000 to cover the cost of their instruction during the program.

Competition for the 50 to 70 annual slots is fierce, with as many as 600 people applying each year, said Solomon. About half of residents have college math or science degrees, consistent with the program's goal of attracting more math and science teachers.

Mansfield, the onetime PhD candidate, said the residency program was grueling, as hard as any educational experience she has gone through, including her doctoral studies. But it was worth it, she said.

"I've learned more this past year than I think I've ever learned in the past," said Mansfield, who has already been offered a job teaching math at a Boston high school this coming school year. "The residency can be stressful, but it's also very inspiring. I'm positive I did the right thing. I'm positive I want to be a teacher. Now I will be."

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