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Homegrown

Desperate for quality teachers who won't flinch at a challenge, educators in one Florida district are offering full scholarships and guaranteed jobs to a local corps of high schoolers.

By Scott J. Cech

Something unusual is being made in Room 266 of Stranahan High School. As you open the squeaky door and poke your head in, nothing seems out of the ordinary at first—it's a classful of teenagers sitting at grouped-together desks, heads bent low over what looks like an art project.

From beneath his short dreadlocks, Eric Lewis mutters, "I never thought I'd be painting puzzle pieces." Hunched over the cardboard shapes in his paint-streaked hands, the lanky 10th grader in the too-big T-shirt is gluing them to an asterisk of popsicle sticks and talking, somewhat abashedly, about his goal of being an elementary school teacher.

"I like small people," he says slightly defensively, as if he knows it sounds unlikely. It *is* hard to picture the 15-year-old, whose relaxed posture and baggy clothes bespeak a careful cultivation of cool, at the head of a classroom. "You've seen that movie, *Kindergarten Cop*? That's me, man, oh yeah." He smiles. "I want to teach the young kids when I grow up."



Urban Teacher Academy Program trainee Elizabeth Noel, who's also a student at Stranahan High, reads to first grader Rayon James.

—Photo by David Kidd

"If you grow up," cuts in Elizabeth Noel from the next table. The 16-year-old, taking care not to get paint on either her dangling black hair or her NASCAR jacket, adds glitter to her project and straightens up to examine her work.

Elizabeth, Eric, and the rest of the class are making snowflakes. Not the real kind, of course—this is Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and though it's December, it's 70 degrees today. Seasonal or not, a glitter-and-glue art project might seem too elementary for high schoolers, but elementary is exactly the point: These 9th and 10th graders are learning how to teach 1st graders about winter. The teens are participants in the Urban Teacher Academy Program, a unique initiative that guides and financially supports high school students through college, then guarantees them Broward County teaching jobs when they graduate and become certified.

That combination of four years' teaching instruction and a full-ride college scholarship makes UTAP stand out from the other "grow your own" teacher-preparation efforts across the country. And although it's just beginning to graduate students, education-policy watchers are taking note of the program, not only because it represents Broward's best hope of eventually reversing its staggering teacher shortage but also because it may serve as a replicable model for other hard-to-staff urban districts throughout the United States.

It's not just snowflakes that are being made in Room 266—it's a new generation of desperately needed local teachers.

Sara Rogers, UTAP's head coordinator, is sitting in what serves as the program's nerve center in Fort Lauderdale. It's at the terminus of Stranahan High's labyrinthine hallways, wedged behind a series of storage rooms stocked with half-assembled skeletons and anatomical models. Dressed smartly in a wool

suit despite the warm sun, Rogers has the ready smile and switchblade-quick tough look of a 13-year principal who's as respected as she is liked.

She's shoehorned into a small room with two assistants, a few old computers, and desks supporting precariously leaning stacks of paper. It doesn't seem like the kind of place where you'd come out of retirement to work, as Rogers has. "We were just grateful for the space," she says in her deep Southern accent. "Everybody who works for me kind of works out of the trunks of their cars."

But as Rogers sketches the complexity of Broward's problems, it becomes clear that administrative accouterments are last on a long list of worries for local educators. In the coming decade, district officials estimate, Broward County Public Schools will need 13,000 new teachers.

The nation's sixth-largest school district is hardly the only one begging. In 1998, the last year the U.S. Department of Education released a teacher-deficit projection, then-Secretary Richard Riley estimated that by 2008, the nation would have 2.2 million fewer educators than it needed. The gap is particularly acute in districts such as Broward's—those with pockets of extreme poverty and high densities of minorities. Even when teachers can be lured from elsewhere to work, they rarely stay long. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the teacher-turnover rate is twice as high at schools with minority populations of 50 percent or above. And a University of Washington study found that schools with poverty levels greater than 50 percent also have significantly higher turnover rates.



Veteran principal Sara Rogers came out of retirement to lead UTAP, which she and other program leaders hope will be replicated by districts across the country.

—Photo by David Kidd

Even compared to other urban systems, however, Broward's staffing problems stick out. On top of the educator shortage and a statewide cap on class sizes approved by voters in 2002, South Florida's proximity to Latin America and the Caribbean means that its demographics are forever fluid. That makes instructing the community's children, many of whom come to school speaking little or no English, akin to hitting a moving target.

"One year, it might be Colombians," Rogers says. "The Cuban wave is about over, but we've had Haiti, we've had Puerto Rico, we've had the Dominican Republic. You never know where it's coming from, but you always know that it's going to come."

Districts in other parts of the country have had some success hiring out-of-state teachers and career-changers to fill staffing shortages, but most educators imported to Broward have proved unprepared for the fact that it's decidedly not Mayberry-by-the-Sea. Unaccustomed to the area's mix of poverty, ever-changing ethnicity, and low educational preparation levels, teacher recruits from outside the area often don't last a year.

"There was one who never made it" to the first day of school, Rogers says, chuckling ruefully. "She was hired, she was driving to school, something happened—somebody threatened her at a stoplight—and that's the last they saw of her."

All the more reason to grow a backyard crop of multilingual educators who are both motivated to teach close to home and familiar with the diversity they'll see filling the rows of desks before them. That's what UTAP is doing: Program-affiliated teachers in Broward recruit promising middle school students, focusing on kids from backgrounds that are underrepresented among the faculty, including males and those students "who are the first in their family to go to college—people who will be dedicated to their neighborhoods when they come back," Rogers explains. Then, from 9th grade to graduation, the students take a steady load of UTAP electives, getting regular doses of theory in the classroom and teaching practice at local primary schools.

Other districts across the country have set up "grow your own" models along similar lines, but what sets UTAP apart is the support the students get following high school graduation. After finishing their senior years with a college-level practicum, students are sent to partnering area colleges on full-ride scholarships to study education and intern at local schools. When they emerge, degree and certification in hand, they're guaranteed first pick of the district's available teaching jobs.

UTAP's inaugural graduating class, in 2003-04, was a small one; just four sophomores joined when

UTAP began in 2000. But the program's officials hope that as word of the college scholarships gets around, the ripples generated by the early graduates will eventually create a big enough wave to help fill the county's teacher gap.

Back in Room 226, Eric, Elizabeth, and the other UTAP students in this combined Exploratory Teaching I and II class are getting a lesson in reading to 6-year-olds. Tonya Brown, a young African American UTAP coordinator, reads aloud from the children's book *Snow Company*, modeling how to hold it aloft so everyone in class can see the pictures. It's preparation for tomorrow, when, as part of their monthly visit to a class of 1st graders at North Fork Elementary School, the high schoolers will read winter-themed books to the children and show them how to make the popsicle-stick snowflakes they've just learned to assemble.

"As you go through your story, you may find vocabulary that you need to clarify," Brown tells the teenagers, stopping the narrative to point out, for example, that the younger kids might not know what a "horse trough" is. It turns out that not all of the high schoolers do, either. "What is that?" Eric asks. "The cage they live in?"

As Brown reads aloud, the students—mainly girls, most of them African American, Caribbean American, and Hispanic—sit in rapt silence. For all their cell phones, lacquered nails, and almost-adult miens, these kids aren't so far removed from story time themselves. Even the small clump of boys in back—the ones who started the class period slumped nonchalantly in their desk chairs, muttering to each other from under their sweatshirt hoods—now lean forward, chins cupped in palms, to listen to the tale of a boy and his mother who find themselves trapped in the house by a blizzard.

As Brown shows the class an illustration of a snowy meadow punctuated with white-dusted evergreens, she reminds them that they may have to explain unfamiliar concepts. "Here in Florida," she says, "some of our kids have never seen snow. ... They don't have a clue what a blizzard is." The high schoolers, many of whom have never been outside Broward County, look on the scene as they might look at NASA photos beamed back from Mars: an interesting landscape, but one completely alien to their experience.

After class, teacher Elizabeth Lee talks about how difficult it is to get even motivated UTAP students, almost none of whose parents got past high school, accustomed to the idea that there's a whole new world of education waiting for them after graduation. Though the students sit in on classes at a local college once a quarter to help demystify postsecondary life, "It takes quite a long time for them to realize that they will go to college," says Lee, who has taught in the Fort Lauderdale area for 25 of her 30 years as an educator. Because of UTAP's scholarship, a benefit that became tangible for the first time when the program's four graduates walked away with diplomas this past June, "they know that it's going to happen," Lee says. "But their actual understanding of it and their point of identity with it is not always as strong."

Well before the bell rings to start the next period, Brian Dassler's dozen seniors have already filtered into class, arranging their chairs in a seminar-style circle. Dassler, a baby-faced 26-year-old with shined shoes, pressed khakis, and a slightly loosened necktie, sits informally at one of the desks, starting the class with a short summary of who's reading what. The students rattle off the big names in professional pedagogy—Parker Palmer, Deborah Meier, Ted Sizer—as easily as they can their classmates'. And with good reason: Each has to read three of the dozen or so education books available to them—all of which are college level or beyond—then write an abstract of one, orally present another, then refer to the third on the final exam.

The collegiate feel and curriculum of Exploratory Teaching III are no accident—it's Dassler's job to turn these kids into confident college-students-in-waiting. From all appearances, it's working. "Six more months," says 17-year-old Ange Etienne with a dreamy, anticipatory smile, as if she were talking about summer vacation.

In fact, the students speak so fluently about postgraduate-level education concepts that it's easy to forget that none has ever had a family member graduate from college. But as the class breaks into pairs to work on individual projects, it becomes clear that this is not the only psychological hurdle these students will

face next year.

Even with UTAP's promise of a scholarship, several of the seniors say they've had to answer pointed questions about why they'd want to be a teacher. Jesaenia Rodriguez, a native of Puerto Rico, says of her father, "He was like, 'Why become a teacher if they have such a low salary?'"

"My parents are not for me becoming a teacher," confides Crystal Carter, a poised African American with short dreadlocks. Given the salary she'd be making, "they think I would have to work too hard in teaching," she explains.

Such questions come even from teachers themselves. Shannon Duffy, a white 17-year-old with deep-set, serious eyes, says her parents support her decision—even getting up before 5 a.m. to make sure she gets to Stranahan on time. "But when I went back and visited some of the teachers at my middle school, one of them—my math teacher—was like: 'Don't be a teacher. You can do better than that,'" she recalls.



UTAP 9th grader Carmel Silveira, 14, helps 1st grader Mia Valentin, 6, with her snowflake art project.
—Photo by David Kidd

The money question isn't just a matter of social status for these kids. In Broward County's tumescent real estate market, it's a matter of economic survival. The district's starting teacher salary begins at \$32,600, but the Realtor Association of Greater Fort Lauderdale pegged the average price of a single-family Broward County home at \$390,948 in February 2005. For the students, though, money worries still seem secondary.

"I want to learn and grow with the kids," says Jesaenia, who works after school in a veterinarian's office cleaning up animal waste. "I look at myself in the future, and I can't be cleaning. I like this better," she adds with a smile, indicating the buzz of her fellow students conferring about their projects. And though she knows the money will be tight for her in Broward, that won't sway her from doing what she wants to do. "It doesn't affect me," she says resolutely.

Later that afternoon, the eternal problem of money crops up again, only on a much wider scale. To an outside observer looking out at the county's smoggy sprawl from school board member Robert Parks' 14th floor office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, the district's problems—time, space, and funds, or the lack thereof—seem at once clear and clearly intractable.

Without a steady stream of resources, even demonstrably successful teacher-recruitment programs have found themselves bounced along the blacktop. This past summer, California lawmakers perfunctorily closed the state's six centers. Their three-year track record of significantly increasing the state's percentage of fully credentialed teachers—particularly in high-poverty areas—didn't spare them the ax, and neither did the shortage projected for the state. Linda Gubman, who directed one of the shuttered centers, predicted that 225,000 teachers will be needed in the next decade.

Parks, who's sitting with Rogers and Broward Community College administrator Donna Henderson, isn't just a veteran board member, however; he's also the director of the Teaching and Leadership Center at Florida Atlantic University and founder of the Broward County Educational Consortium. For UTAP's purposes, though, you could just call him the Rainmaker. And after listening to him connect all the financial dots that feed money into the program, it all begins to sound possible.

"It became so obvious," Parks is saying. With his jolly smile, his red-checked oxford shirt, and his thinned white hair, he looks a little like a Sun Belt Santa Claus. Gesturing to Rogers, he continues, "Here she was, taking students who really wanted to be teachers and preparing them in collaboration with Broward Community College." He nods over to Henderson. "And the only thing that was missing was ... the financial commitment in order to guarantee that they would go to college."

After Rogers won a couple of grants, including one that provided the blueprint for the program, Parks started a foundation—the Broward Teacher Fellowship—with \$31,000 in surplus money from his own campaign. That was in 2000. Since then, he's been steadily hitting up local companies for contributions,

as well as leveraging state coffers and the education consortium he formed—a round table of presidents from local colleges and universities, plus the Broward school district superintendent. With friends like those, Parks was able to help negotiate a multiplier effect for the money he brings in.



Sheryll Lubitz, the 1st graders' teacher, says the boys in her class, several of whom come from large families or single-parent homes, stay focused longer when their teenage mentors visit.

—Photo by David Kidd

“We can buy, for \$8,500, a Florida Prepaid 2 + 2, which is tuition for two years at a community college and two years’ upper level,” Rogers says. “Broward buys one, the state matches it for a second kid, and then the universities have agreed to come in and match those—they make sure two more kids get to go, so we get four for one.” The consortium, she adds, has also put the UTAP kids first in line at colleges’ financial aid queues. Also steered their way are work-study jobs and recently replaced computers—little extras that can make all the difference for students on a lean budget.

UTAP’s comprehensiveness and its independent, dedicated funding source have gotten the program noticed by those who are tracking efforts to improve city schools. “They’ve got a very well-developed and carefully thought-out program,” says Shirley Schwartz, director of special projects for the Council of the Great City Schools, a coalition of 65 of the nation’s largest urban public school systems. Mildred Hudson, CEO of Belmont, Massachusetts-based Recruiting New Teachers, calls UTAP’s leaders “pioneers,” adding that she knows of no other program that draws in urban students as early as middle school and sustains them throughout college.

Of course, it takes more than just effort and money to pull a district’s teacher-retention rate out of a nose dive—it takes time. And UTAP has had time so far to produce only four graduates, all of whom are now freshmen at Broward Community College. Next year, however, Dassler’s 12 seniors will join the group, followed in successive years by more students from the five high schools under UTAP’s umbrella. “Our goal is, five years from now, to have 150—30 at each school,” Rogers says. “And the ultimate goal is that it becomes competitive, that those 30 places are like a jewel to be had. It takes a while to build that, but that’s what we’re going for.”

Still, the program’s leaders know that even if they manage to accomplish these ambitious goals, they won’t have solved the larger problem. “If we really want to make an impact, it needs to be replicable” elsewhere, Parks says. “It’s a simple model, but it takes a lot of commitment. ... If you can get that quality teacher on the front end instead of waiting for them to come out of the colleges of education, you’re ahead of the game, and that’s where these kids are.”

It’s another school day, and Eric, Elizabeth, and the rest of Lee’s high school kids are again assembled in class. Only this morning, at North Fork Elementary, they don’t look like kids. Like yesterday, they’re grouped together in circles. Popsicle sticks, white paint, glitter, and puzzle pieces are again set before them. But now, wearing their UTAP polo shirts and hulking over the pint-size chairs they’re perched on, the students are the teachers.

Hanging nearby is a sponge painting of a tree in full fall foliage signed by Rayon James, one of the class’s 201st graders. Next to the tree Rayon, has written: “My buddy Elizabeth and I drew a fall tree together. We painted using paint and sponges. We had a super time. I love you!” Underneath, there are two sketched happy faces—one with short hair, and one with Elizabeth’s distinctive long curls. Rayon and a tide of his classmates foam into the room around hip level, filling the chairs left open between the teenagers.

Observing from the back of the class a few moments later, Lee discreetly points out the table where Eric and other young men are earnestly showing the little boys assigned to them how to glue puzzle pieces to wooden sticks. “The [teenage] boys are always more reluctant at first,” she says quietly. But once they experience what it’s like to teach someone something, she adds, smiling, they’re hooked. Even on days they’re not feeling well and would ordinarily miss school, “they’ll drag themselves out of bed to make sure to get here.”

According to Sheryll Lubitz, the 1st graders' teacher, her charges respond in kind. "My little boys really gravitate toward the older boys," she whispers, looking at Eric, who has tucked in his shirt and straightened his slouch. Not quite all of yesterday's paint has flaked off his own palm, but the teenager is showing 6-year-old Casey Habersham how not to get the pigment on his hands as the boy creates his own snowflake. Lubitz adds that Casey often has trouble focusing in class, but never when he's with Eric, who also mentors him at the local Boys and Girls Club.

As she casts her gaze across the room, she smiles at Mia Valentin, a 6-year-old Hispanic girl with wisps of hair escaping her ponytail. "And Mia—Mia also has the attention span of a nanosecond. Now she's rapt." She's working with Carmel Silveira, a 14-year-old 9th grader originally from India. It looks as if Mia is diligently painting the palm of her hand, but on closer inspection, there's a puzzle piece in the center—the final piece, which she glues to the end of one of the popsicle sticks and coats liberally with glitter. When she's asked if she's ever seen a real snowflake, she looks up confidently and says, "This is a real snowflake."

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

"**Greener Pastures**," March 1, 2005.

"**Trading Places**," January 1, 2005.

"**Hooking New Teachers**," May 1, 2001.

"**'Teacher Prep' Charter School Seen as a First**," October 9, 2002.

"**Burgeoning Nevada District Concentrates on 'Growing' Its Own**," March 24, 1999.

"**Hooked On Teaching**," January 1, 1995.

"**Trends: Growing Their Own**," May 1, 1994.

"**'Homegrown' Bilingual-Ed. Teachers Take Root**," March 23, 1994.

"**In Houston Magnet, District 'Grows' Its Own Teachers**," May 11, 1988.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read **Teacher Quality**.

See other stories on education issues in **data** on Florida's public school system.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The Teaching and Leadership Center, a joint project of Florida Atlantic University, Broward Community College and the School Board of Broward County, offers information on its **teacher-development programs**.

Scholastic.com posts an **interview with Frank Till**, superintendent of the Broward County Public Schools, highlighting retention and recruitment issues facing the Florida school district.

Recruiting New Teachers Inc. provides an overview of "**grow-your-own**" programs.

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