

Teach for America program places 95 instructors at Newark, Passaic schools

Posted by [mdowling](#) August 31, 2009 10:44AM

NEWARK/PASSAIC -- Ryan Post graduated from American University last spring and was accepted at Rutgers, Seton Hall and Brooklyn law schools.

Wenimo Okoya earned a degree in kinesiology at the University of Maryland and had an offer to work as a research assistant at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

And Chris Keating was the student government president at Rutgers College who also had his eye on attending law school.



Ed Murray/ The Star-Ledger Rebecca

Cassidy and Ashley Fischer get their skates on for a skating activity for Teach for America at the Prudential Center in Newark on Friday.

But all three passed on those education and career options in favor of teaching in Newark when school opens this week.

"I'm very passionate about education, and I think it's pretty appalling that the city you grow up in determines the quality of the education that you get," said Post, 22, of North Brunswick.

Post, Okoya and Keating are among the 95 recent college graduates who will be teaching at public and charter schools in Newark and Passaic this year under the Teach for America program that places instructors in impoverished urban and rural districts for two-year teaching commitments.

Across the nation, 7,300 Teach for America instructors, known as corps members, will be placed in schools in 35 low-income communities.

The program attracts graduates of some of the most prestigious colleges and has become highly competitive, accepting barely 4,000 people this year out of some 35,000 applicants.

Conceived by a Princeton undergraduate, Wendy Kopp, who developed the idea as her senior thesis in 1989, Teach for America is devoted to closing the achievement gap between rich and poor school districts.

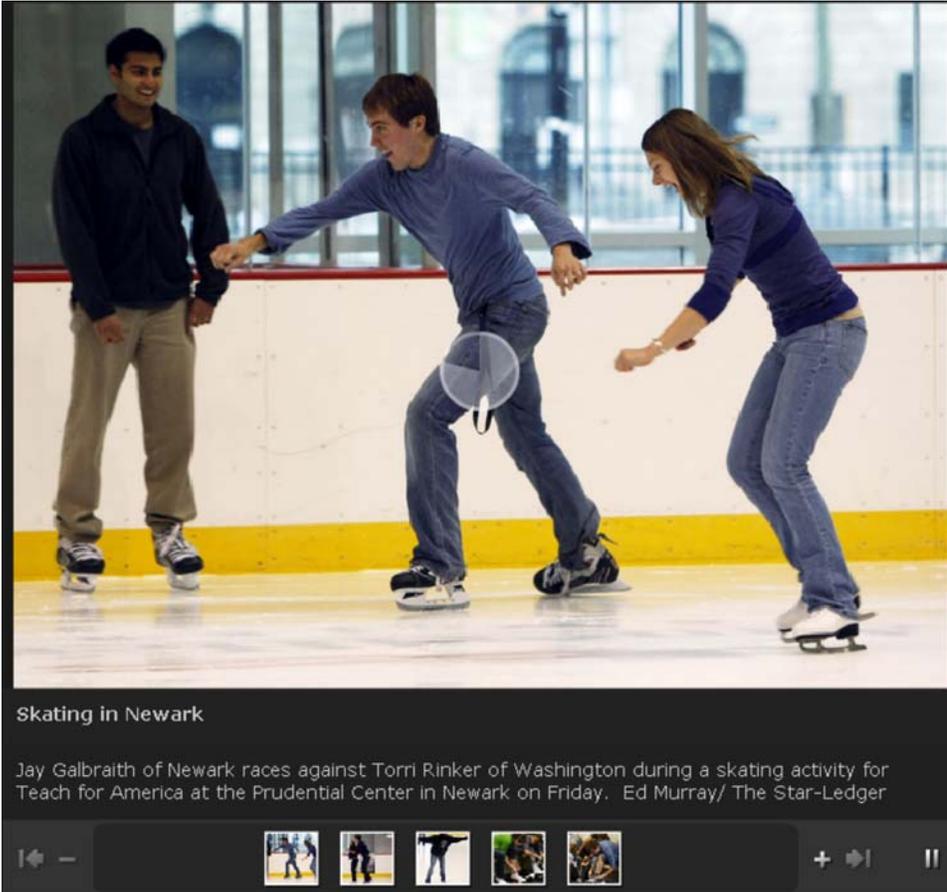
"I grew up so close to Newark, but it might as well have been a different universe as far as education is concerned," said Jay Galbraith, 23, of Chatham, a graduate of Kenyon College in Ohio who postponed plans for medical school to teach in Newark this fall.

"I realized that 20 minutes away people were not getting a good education, and it was insane," Galbraith said.

The incoming Teach for America instructors have spent the summer student teaching and were invited for an evening of ice skating, refreshments and camaraderie Friday at the AmeriHealth Pavilion in the Prudential Center in Newark.

Andrea Khan, 22, of Eastampton also is passing up law school to join Teach for America.

"I was really inspired by the fact that teachers can make such a difference in people's lives," the Montclair State University graduate said.



But none of the new teachers is under any illusion the work will be easy.

"I feel it's really going to be a challenge, but I'm up for the challenge. The harder it gets, the harder I'll work," said Okoya, 21, of Avenel, who chose Teach for America over the research assistant's post.

"This just seemed like the better option for me -- to make a difference in these kids' lives and give them what I have been given," she said. "Because education is a gift and with that you can do anything."

Keating, 21, of Bayonne said he was attracted to Teach for America by the program's mission of closing the educational gap between students in rich and poor school districts.

"If you dedicate the time and the energy and motivate these students, they will learn," he said, adding he also welcomed the opportunity to teach so close to his hometown.

"The fact that I was able to stay local and make a difference in a community I grew up around was very attractive to me," he said.

Michael Larson, development director for the Newark office of Teach for America, said about 60 percent of the program's participants continue with careers in teaching and education.

He said the program attracts teachers who not only want to make a difference in the classroom, but also in the communities where they work.

"Our corps members are people who want to go above and beyond teacher expectations," he said. "Yes, they're teaching, but they really want to be involved in the community."

Larson said Teach for America closely monitors the performance of its teachers and has achieved marked success in improving student achievement levels.

"We really attack the problem of educational inequity from every angle," Larson said, espousing the organization's belief that equal educational opportunity is a fundamental civil right.

"It's not going to happen overnight. It's very complicated," he said. "But I truly believe that is the way we can fix this problem. Ultimately at the end of the day, we want to see to it that every student in a low-income community has a quality education."

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Comments

paveparadise says...

I am really pissed. I was retrained to be a K-5 teacher and can't find a job anywhere in NJ. I have student teaching experience, substituting, etc but was turned down at the very few interviews because I don't have the experience. These kids have their whole lives ahead of them, no experience teaching or real-world and they get jobs? I thought of this program but was told that I might need to relocate where the job is. Damn it!!! I'm less than 20 minutes from Newark AND Paterson. Only in America.

Posted on 08/31/09 at 11:13AM

danthaman says...

After a few months they will have their eyes opened. The NEA will crush their spirit. Trust me, I've been there. Look at the teachers who are in the system over 5 years-most are just punching the clock.

Posted on 08/31/09 at 11:13AM

eyesotp says...

paveparadise...

Sorry to hear that. They also have Teach for NY too. Check that out. I have moved for jobs but that is not for everyone I guess. Even if you have to do Staten Island or western PA to build your resume up so that you can come back to Jersey.

Posted on 08/31/09 at 11:27AM

mdag says...

Teach for Am are the best and the brightest. Good luck, esp in Newark.

Unfortunately, I heard horror stories about TFA in ghetto areas of Newark, where the kids and administrators hate white people coming in the schools.

Posted on 08/31/09 at 11:29AM