

Teach for Ohio: editorial

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In his State of the State address this month, Gov. John Kasich pledged to bring the Teach for America program to Ohio. Last week, the General Assembly approved legislation needed to fulfill that promise and breathe new life into chronically under-performing urban and rural school districts.

In 1989, Princeton University senior Wendy Kopp had an idea: getting students from the nation's top colleges and universities to volunteer to teach for two years in poor, hard-to-staff school districts. Research suggests that the 20,000 recent college graduates who have taken part in Teach for America in the past two decades have made a difference, especially in math and science classes.

This year, more than 8,000 Teach for America teachers, including 300 from Ohio, are working in 250 school districts in 31 states and the District of Columbia. Many come from elite universities such as Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Michigan, and North Carolina. They are among the best of the best.

These novice educators have youth, enthusiasm, creativity, and knowledge of their subjects on their side. What they don't have -- teaching certificates -- keeps them from working in struggling Ohio schools. The companion bills that have passed the state House and Senate will create a new teaching license that will allow Ohio school districts to take part in Teach for America.

Critics -- often teachers unions -- complain that Teach for America teachers are unqualified because they get only a five-week training course before they are thrown into the classroom. But as Stanford University's Eric Hanushek, an expert on education policy, told Ohio lawmakers, there is little evidence that college teacher-training programs make anyone a better teacher.

Others say the two-year commitment means Teach for America teachers aren't serious educators, and that their presence will lead to increased turnover and students feeling abandoned. But last-hired, first-fired policies and seniority rules that place young teachers in the least desirable schools already have made revolving doors of those schools. Teach for America members have chosen to work in the neediest schools and are focused on changing students' lives.

Teaching is an art as well as a science. Longevity and credentials are not consistent predictors of success. Far more important are bright, engaged teachers who know their subjects and can inspire students to focus on their goals rather than the roadblocks in their paths.

This year, more than 48,000 college seniors applied for 5,300 openings at Teach for America. They are not a cure-all for what ails Ohio's poorest schools. But they are another useful tool in the task of building a better future for thousands of at-risk students.

Michelle Rhee, a former Teach for America recruit and ex-chancellor of the public schools in Washington, D.C., told the Atlantic magazine: "I'd rather have a really effective teacher for two years than a mediocre or ineffective one for 20 years." Teach for America is a resource worth tapping for Ohio's children.