

A Difference Made: Better-quality teachers vital

By Gary W. Ritter Special to the Democrat-Gazette
This article was published October 16, 2015 at 1:56 a.m.

<http://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2015/oct/16/a-difference-made-20151016/>

Everyone who pays any attention to schools knows the unfortunate truth that, on average, students in poverty do less well in school than their more affluent peers. Education insiders often refer to this stubborn condition as the “achievement gap”. While this phrase is thrown around often in education circles, that should not diminish its importance. The fact that lower-income students in Arkansas have access to lower-quality education experiences is a big deal. It matters a lot for our state and it matters even more for these young people.

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS Democrat & Gazette

A difference made Better-quality teachers vital

GARY W. RITTER
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Guest writer

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While this phrase is thrown around often in education circles, that should not diminish its importance. The fact that lower-income students in Arkansas have access to lower-quality education experiences is a big deal. It matters a lot for our state and it matters even more for these young people.

In Arkansas, achievement gaps are visible on both standardized assessments and on real-world indicators such as graduation from high school and college. On the most recent national math exam (NAEP), only 16 percent of our state’s economically disadvantaged students earned scores of proficient or better in mathematics as compared to 43 percent of their more advantaged peers.

Not surprisingly, these gaps are also substantial between geographical regions of the state. In recently published results of last spring’s statewide biology assessment for high school students, 56 percent of students from the Northwest region earned scores of proficient or better. In the Delta districts, only 30 percent were able to earn such marks.

Our first reaction to these troubling gaps might be to think about school spending—that is, perhaps poor students struggle because they are in under-resourced schools. However, since

recognize at least two truths: Relying on traditional recruitment strategies will not attract enough new and talented teachers for the students who need them most, and teachers working with disadvantaged students need unique and specialized training as well as consistent on-the-job guidance.

The Arkansas Teacher Corps (ATC) is one such program that was developed just three years ago with these exact realities in mind. The program provides an avenue to classroom teaching for those with a passion for students, social justice, and the state ATC recruits committed individual



from a variety of educational or occupational backgrounds. Fellows have degrees ranging from engineering to English literature, from biology to business, and from art history to journalism to elementary education. Several current fellows have Ph.D.s or M.A.s, but the strong and diverse academic preparation of its members is really not the defining element of ATC. Rather, the single characteristic that unites ATC teachers is a genuine commitment to providing equal educational opportunities for students in distressed communities across Arkansas.

Right now, there are nearly 50 ATC fellows teaching in schools from Hop to Blytheville who have committed three years in their schools to teach courses including calculus, English II, physics, social studies, algebra, an even art and band. Last year, three of our 30 ATC fellows won teach

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Not surprisingly, these gaps are also substantial between geographical regions of the state. In recently published results of last spring’s statewide Biology assessment for high school students, 56% of students from the Northwest region earned scores of proficient or better. In the Delta districts in the Southeast corner of the state, only 30% were able to earn such marks.

Our first reaction to these troubling gaps might be to think about **school spending** – that is, perhaps poor students struggle because they are in under-resourced schools. However, since approximately 2000, students in our poorest schools receive greater levels of funding per student than their peers across the state. Indeed, as of 2014, Arkansas was one of only 23 states in which the school funding formula was inequitable *in favor of* poor students.

If not spending, then what? Many policymakers are becoming convinced that inequities in **teacher quality** are playing an important role in inequitable student results – and they are likely on to something. A 2014 study from the Institute of Education Sciences at the US Department of Education found that, on average, disadvantaged students across numerous states received less effective teaching in reading and math and were less likely to have access to the highest performing teachers.

The origins of this problem are easy to understand. Generally, teachers take jobs in close geographic proximity to either their University or to their home town. In economically depressed regions, there are fewer University graduates and many of those who do earn University degrees understandably choose to pursue careers elsewhere. Federal policymakers realize this is a problem and have responded by requiring that each state education department develop and submit a teacher equity plan.

Arkansas has a plan to respond to the federal call, and the plan describes some innovative strategies. In my view, if Arkansas is to make any progress in this area, we must grow programs that recognize at least two truths:

- (1) Relying on traditional recruitment strategies will **not** attract enough new and talented teachers for the students who need them most.
- (2) Teachers working with disadvantaged students need unique and specialized training as well as consistent on-the-job guidance.

The Arkansas Teacher Corps, or ATC, is one such program that was developed just three years ago with these exact realities in mind. The program provides an avenue to classroom teaching for those with a passion for students, social justice, and the state of Arkansas. ATC recruits committed individuals from a variety of educational or occupational backgrounds. ATC Fellows have degrees ranging from engineering to English literature, from biology to business, and from art history to journalism to elementary education. Several current ATC Fellows have PhDs or MAs; but the strong and diverse academic preparation of the members of the Arkansas Teacher Corps is really not the defining element of ATC. Rather, the single characteristic that unites ATC teachers is a genuine commitment for providing equal educational opportunities for students in distressed communities across Arkansas.

Right now, there are nearly 50 ATC Fellows teaching in schools from Hope to Blytheville who have committed to three years in their schools to teach courses including Calculus, English Lit, Physics, Social Studies, Algebra, and even Art and Band. Last year, three of our 30 ATC Fellows won teacher of the year awards in their respective districts – in only their second year as a classroom teacher!

How do these ATC teachers succeed with their students, and how did these second year teachers already garner enough respect to win teacher of the year? I think it is partially because ATC provides a distinctive preparation targeted for teachers in challenging schools along with steady stream of much-needed in-classroom support. But it is mostly because ATC fellows are passionate about improving the lives of young people in Arkansas.

As awareness spreads of the teacher quality inequities that are holding back low-income students from achieving academically, the Arkansas Teacher Corps (www.arkansasteachercorps.org) is recruiting potential Fellows for the 2016 cohort to increase the number of Fellows serving deserving students across the state. ATC is beginning to make a difference in economically disadvantaged schools from Southwest to Northeast Arkansas; we are looking for many more passionate and talented college graduates and career-changers so that we can enhance the overall quality of schools for students across the state.

*** Gary W. Ritter is a Professor of Education Policy at the University of Arkansas where he, along with Tom Smith, Dean of the College of Education and Health Professions, founded the Arkansas Teacher Corps in 2012.*