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Teach for America eyes Wilmington

City schools could get volunteers

By *EDWARD L. KENNEY*
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Teach for America, a nonprofit group that recruits top college graduates to teach in the nation's neediest schools, wants to bring teachers to Delaware for the first time.

The state's leading education reformers are hailing the idea, seeing it as an exciting new tool to help at-risk students and a step in their efforts to revamp Delaware's public school system.

The organization, which this year has 6,200 corps members in 29 areas nationwide, is looking to bring about 20 teachers into Wilmington schools by fall, spokeswoman Kerci Marcello Stroud said.

Teach for America is in talks with officials in the Christina and Red Clay Consolidated school districts, and it also is considering some charter schools, Stroud said. She said she could not yet specify which ones because discussions have just begun.

Teach for America recruits would fill vacancies in the schools and no current teachers would be laid off, officials said.

A decision is expected by early May.

According to an Urban Institute study last year, Teach for America teachers were found to be more effective in achieving better student test results than non-corps teachers with three or more years of experience.

The idea behind the program is to bring some of the nation's brightest and most highly motivated college graduates into schools where the need is greatest.

"It is a program that has been cited by national leaders that is innovative and can lead to improved results. It's a good idea to look at such a program when something like that is a possibility," Red Clay spokeswoman Pati Nash said.

Christina leaders are strong advocates for the program, but they will not take part next school year because they need more time to review the details, district spokeswoman Wendy Lapham said.

She added that Christina could become involved in future years.

Teach for America would need to raise \$2 million to pay for recruitment, training and operation costs.

Based on the financial commitment of the Rodel Foundation, the Longwood Foundation, the Delaware Business Roundtable and other funding sources, raising money should not be an impediment, said Marvin "Skip" Schoenhals, the chairman of the Vision 2015 group that champions education reform in Delaware.

The Rodel Foundation, a major backer of Vision 2015, has urged Teach for America to locate in Wilmington, and that was one of the reasons the group is looking here, Stroud said.

"Teach for America has phenomenal success in inner-city schools," Schoenhals said.

The path only was recently paved for the teachers to come here, Stroud said.

Gov. Jack Markell is scheduled to sign legislation Monday that would allow Teach for America corps members to teach in Delaware and get certification as they teach, Schoenhals said. Prior to the legislation, it would have been more difficult to place corps members here.

"We're always looking for talent and people interested in teaching in high-risk schools," said Rep. Teresa Schooley, D-Newark West, who introduced the bill in the House and chairs its education committee.

A feasibility study to see about bringing Teach for America corps members to Wilmington was requested last year by Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del.

The study determined there is need in Wilmington schools to close the achievement gap between students at low socio-economic levels and their more advantaged counterparts, and Teach for America could be a factor in helping to close that gap, Stroud said.

"My goal is obviously to get the best teachers we can in Delaware," Castle said.

"They go to the best [colleges] in our country and attract students," he said. "And as a matter of fact, a lot of talented young people get turned down by them because there is so much interest. It's a way, I think, to really build the corps of teaching across the nation and in Delaware."

Eleven percent of all Ivy League graduating seniors apply to be in the program, Stroud said.

And interest is growing, Stroud said. The organization received 35,000 applications this year, an increase of more than 40 percent over the previous year.

Among the applicants were more than 100 graduating seniors at the University of Delaware.

"There is a growing interest among young people to invest in public service," she said. "Young people just want to be a part of it. It's an excellent opportunity to take part in educational reform on the front lines."

Corps members, who are paid by the school districts or schools and become members of the teacher unions, commit to teach for at least two years.

But, Stroud said, "We definitely see this as bigger than the two years. We build this pipeline of leaders. They are committed to ending educational inequity."

Many corps members stay in the education field even if they leave the classroom, she said. Of the more than 14,000 alumni of the program, two-thirds work or study full-time in education.

"We're getting better and better at finding the right people," she said.
