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For years, the secrets to great teaching have seemed more like alchemy than science, a mix of motivational mumbo jumbo and misty-eyed tales of inspiration and dedication. But for more than a decade, one organization has been tracking hundreds of thousands of kids, and looking at why some teachers can move them three grade levels ahead in a year and others can't. Now, as the Obama administration offers states more than \$4 billion to identify and cultivate effective teachers, Teach for America is ready to release its data.

by **Amanda Ripley**

What Makes a Great Teacher?

IMAGE CREDIT: VERONIKA LUKASOVA

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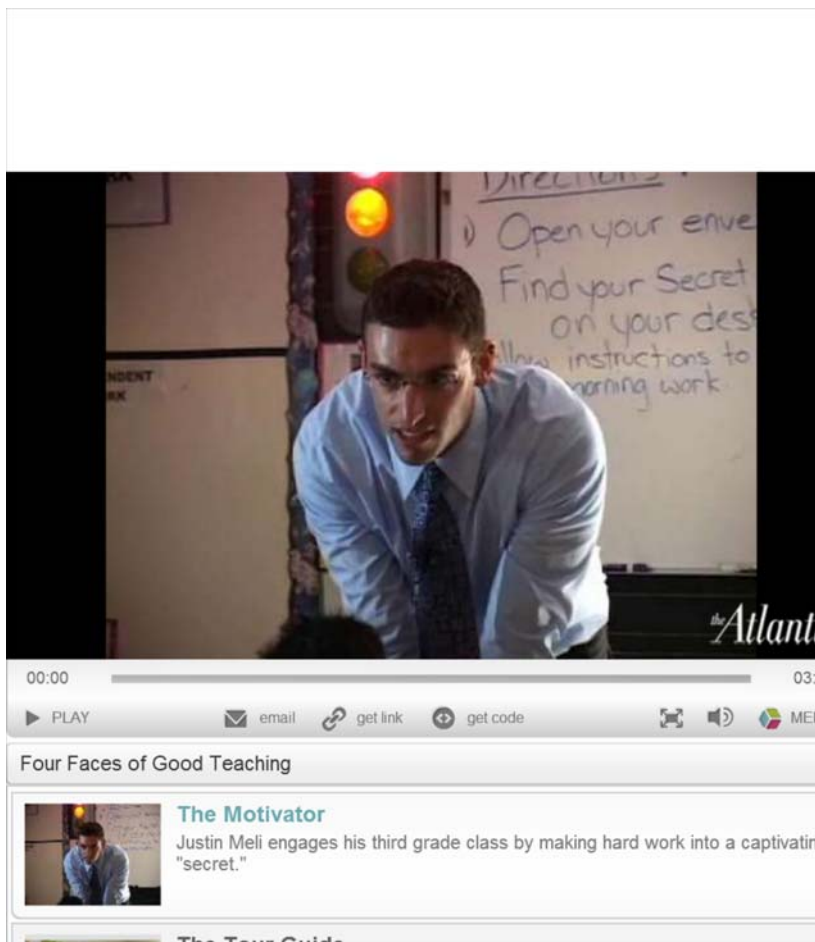
CHART: "THE HAPPINESS INDEX"

Times were tough in 2009. But according to a cool Facebook app, people were happier. By Justin Miller

ON AUGUST 25, 2008, two little boys walked into public elementary schools in Southeast Washington, D.C. Both boys were African American fifth-graders. The previous spring, both had tested below grade level in math.

One walked into Kimball Elementary School and climbed the stairs to Mr. William Taylor's math classroom, a tidy, powder-blue space in which neither the clocks nor most of the electrical outlets worked.

The other walked into a very similar classroom a mile away at Plummer Elementary School. In both schools, more than 80 percent of the children received free or reduced-price lunches. At night, all the children went home to the same urban ecosystem, a ZIP code in which almost a quarter of the families lived below the poverty line and a police district in which somebody was murdered every week or so.



VIDEO: Four teachers in Four different classrooms demonstrate methods that work
(Courtesy of Teach for America's video archive, available in February at teachingasleadership.org)

At the end of the school year, both little boys took the same standardized test given at all D.C. public schools—not a perfect test of their learning, to be sure, but a relatively objective one (and, it's worth noting, not a very hard one).

After a year in Mr. Taylor's class, the first little boy's scores went up—way up. He had started below grade level and finished above. On average, his classmates' scores rose about 13 points—which is almost 10 points more than fifth-graders with similar incoming test scores achieved in other low-income D.C. schools that year. On that first day of school, only 40 percent of Mr. Taylor's students were doing math at grade level. By the end of the year, 90 percent were at or above grade level.

As for the other boy? Well, he ended the year the same way he'd started it—below grade level. In fact, only a quarter of the fifth-graders at Plummer finished the year at grade level in math—despite having started off at about the same level as Mr. Taylor's class down the road.

This tale of two boys, and of the millions of kids just like them, embodies the most stunning finding to come out of education research in the past decade: more than any other variable in education—more than schools or curriculum—teachers matter. Put concretely, if Mr. Taylor's student continued to learn at the same level for a few more years, his test scores would be no different from those of his more affluent peers in Northwest D.C. And if these two boys were to keep their respective teachers for three years, their lives would likely diverge forever. By high school, the compounded effects of the strong teacher—or the weak one—would become too great.

Parents have always worried about where to send their children to school; but the school, statistically speaking, does not matter as much as which adult stands in front of their children. Teacher quality tends to vary more *within* schools—even supposedly good schools—than among schools.

But we have never identified excellent teachers in any reliable, objective way. Instead, we tend to ascribe their gifts to some mystical quality that we can recognize and revere—but not replicate. The great teacher serves as a hero but never, ironically, as a lesson.

At last, though, the research about teachers' impact has become too overwhelming to ignore. Over the past year, President

Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, have started talking quite a lot about great teaching. They have shifted the conversation from school accountability—the rather worn theme of [No Child Left Behind](#), President George W. Bush's landmark educational reform—to teacher accountability. And they have done it using one very effective conversational gambit: billions of dollars.

Thanks to the stimulus bonanza, Duncan has lucked into a budget that is more than double what a normal education secretary gets to spend. As a result, he has been able to dedicate \$4.3 billion to a program he calls [Race to the Top](#). To be fair, that's still just a tiny fraction of the roughly \$100 billion in his budget (much of which the government direct-deposits into the bank accounts of schools, whether they deserve the money or not). But especially in a year when states are projecting \$16 billion in school-budget shortfalls, \$4.3 billion is real money. "This is the big bang of teacher-effectiveness reform," says Timothy Daly, president of the [New Teacher Project](#), a nonprofit that helps schools recruit good teachers. "It's huge."

Despite the perky name, Race to the Top is a marathon—and a potentially grueling one; to win, states must take a series of steps that are considered radical in the see-no-evil world of education, where teachers unions have long fought efforts to measure teacher performance based on student test scores and link the data to teacher pay. States must try to identify great teachers, figure out how they got that way, and then create more of them. "This is the wave of the future. This is where we have to go—to look at what's working and what's not," Duncan told me. "It sounds like common sense, but it's revolutionary."

Based on his students' test scores, Mr. Taylor ranks among the top 5 percent of all D.C. math teachers. He's entertaining, but he's not a born performer. He's well prepared, but he's been a teacher for only three years. He cares about his kids, but so do a lot of his underperforming peers. What's he doing differently?

One outfit in America has been systematically pursuing this mystery for more than a decade—tracking hundreds of thousands of kids, and analyzing why some teachers can move those kids three grade levels ahead in one year and others can't. That organization, interestingly, is not a school district.

Teach for America, a nonprofit that recruits college graduates to spend two years teaching in low-income schools, began outside the educational establishment and has largely remained there. For years, it has been whittling away at its own assumptions, testing its hypotheses, and refining its hiring and training. Over time, it has built an unusual laboratory: almost half a million American children are being taught by [Teach for America](#) teachers this year, and the organization tracks test-score data, linked to each teacher, for 85 percent to 90 percent of those kids. Almost all of those students are poor and African American or Latino. And Teach for America keeps an unusual amount of data about its 7,300 teachers—a pool almost twice the size of the D.C. system's teacher corps.

Until now, Teach for America has kept its investigation largely to itself. But for this story, the organization allowed me access to 20 years of experimentation, studded by trial and error. The results are specific and surprising. Things that you might think would help a new teacher achieve success in a poor school—like prior experience working in a low-income neighborhood—don't seem to matter. Other things that may sound trifling—like a teacher's extracurricular accomplishments in college—tend to predict greatness.

STEVEN FARR IS a tall man with a deep, quiet voice. He is Teach for America's in-house professor, so to speak. His job is to find and study excellent teachers, and train others to get similar results. He takes his work very seriously, mostly because he has seen what the status quo looks like up close.

Farr grew up in a family of teachers in central Texas. When he graduated from the University of Texas, in 1993, he had a philosophy degree and an acceptance letter to Yale Law School, neither of which felt quite right. So he deferred law school and joined a new, floundering outfit, Teach for America.

After a little more than a month of somewhat uneven training, Farr walked into Donna High School in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas—a place he'd never been. Many of the three dozen kids in his classroom were the children of migrant workers; they would disappear for weeks at a time as their families followed the harvests.

Talking to Farr about those two years feels a little like talking to a war veteran. You and he both know that you can never understand what it was like, and the clichés come marching in. "It was the hardest, proudest, all of that," he says, his voice drifting away. Then: "I was not the teacher I want our teachers to be."

Farr lived with three other Teach for America teachers, in a house that had been confiscated by U.S. Marshals in a drug raid. He taught English and English as a Second Language. Texas required that students pass a standardized test before they graduate, and as test day approached, Farr felt a mixture of anxiety and resentment.

About a month afterward, he got the news: 76 percent of his students had passed; 24 percent were told they didn't yet have the skills to graduate. Even though many were only sophomores, some of them dropped out as a result. The principal

congratulated him on his scores, but Farr cried into his pillow that night. “Some of those kids did not pass because I was not as effective as I needed to be.”

After his two years were up, Farr went to law school, as planned. He came back to Teach for America in 2001—this time in charge of training and support. By then, the organization’s founder, Wendy Kopp, had begun to notice something puzzling when she visited classrooms: many Teach for America teachers were doing good work. But a small number were getting phenomenal results—and it was not clear why.

Farr was tasked with finding out. Starting in 2002, Teach for America began using student test-score progress data to put teachers into one of three categories: those who move their students one and a half or more years ahead in one year; those who achieve one to one and a half years of growth; and those who yield less than one year of gains. In the beginning, reliable data was hard to come by, and many teachers could not be put into any category. Moreover, the data could never capture the entire story of a teacher’s impact, Farr acknowledges. But in desperately failing schools, where most kids lack basic skills, the only way to bushwhack a path out of the darkness is with a good, solid measuring stick.

As Teach for America began to identify exceptional teachers using this data, Farr began to watch them. He observed their classes, read their lesson plans, and talked to them about their teaching methods and beliefs. He and his colleagues surveyed Teach for America teachers at least four times a year to find out what they were doing and what kinds of training had helped them the most.

Right away, certain patterns emerged. First, great teachers tended to set big goals for their students. They were also perpetually looking for ways to improve their effectiveness. For example, when Farr called up teachers who were making remarkable gains and asked to visit their classrooms, he noticed he’d get a similar response from all of them: “They’d say, ‘You’re welcome to come, but I have to warn you—I am in the middle of just blowing up my classroom structure and changing my reading workshop because I think it’s not working as well as it could.’ When you hear that over and over, and you don’t hear that from other teachers, you start to form a hypothesis.” Great teachers, he concluded, constantly reevaluate what they are doing.

Superstar teachers had four other tendencies in common: they avidly recruited students and their families into the process; they maintained focus, ensuring that everything they did contributed to student learning; they planned exhaustively and purposefully—for the next day or the year ahead—by working backward from the desired outcome; and they worked relentlessly, refusing to surrender to the combined menaces of poverty, bureaucracy, and budgetary shortfalls.

But when Farr took his findings to teachers, they wanted more. “They’d say, ‘Yeah, yeah. Give me the concrete actions. What does this mean for a lesson plan?’” So Farr and his colleagues made lists of specific teacher actions that fell under the high-level principles they had identified. For example, one way that great teachers ensure that kids are learning is to frequently check for understanding: Are the kids—*all* of the kids—following what you are saying? Asking “Does anyone have any questions?” does not work, and it’s a classic rookie mistake. Students are not always the best judges of their own learning. They might understand a line read aloud from a Shakespeare play, but have no idea what happened in the last act.

“Strong teachers insist that effective teaching is neither mysterious nor magical. It is neither a function of dynamic personality nor dramatic performance,” Farr writes in *Teaching as Leadership*, a book coming out in February from Farr and his colleagues. The model the book lays out, Farr is careful to say, is not the only path to success. But he is convinced it can improve teaching—and already has. In 2007, 24 percent of Teach for America teachers moved their students one and a half or more years ahead, according to the organization’s internal reports. In 2009, that number was up to 44 percent. That data relies largely on school tests, which vary in quality from state to state. When tests aren’t available or sufficiently rigorous, Teach for America helps teachers find or design other reliable diagnostics.

So far, only one independent, random-assignment study of Teach for America’s effectiveness has been conducted. [That report](#), published by Mathematica Policy Research in 2004, looked at the organization’s teachers and found that, in math, their students significantly outperformed those of their more experienced counterparts. (In reading, though, the teachers’ students did the same as other teachers’ students.) Another study is due out in 2012 or 2013.

Mr. Taylor, the fifth-grade math teacher in Washington, D.C., is not a member of Teach for America. He grew up attending D.C. public schools and then joined the profession the traditional way: he majored in education in college and then was certified. But Mr. Taylor has a lot in common with the teachers Farr has found to be most effective.

On a typical Monday, Mr. Taylor’s kids come to class and begin silently working on the Problem of the Day written on the blackboard. They sit in four clusters of desks. Each group has a team leader, who is selected by Mr. Taylor each month.

Mr. Taylor walks in and says good morning. “Good morning!” they answer in kid unison. He is wearing a scarf, a black-

and-white pinstripe cardigan, and small, oval Dolce & Gabbana glasses, and he looks tired. He is taking classes on the weekends to get his master's in education administration. He has a Bluetooth headset in one ear and an earring in the other.

After a few minutes, Mr. Taylor announces that it's time for Mental Math. The kids put down their pencils and grab the orange index cards and markers on their desks. Mr. Taylor begins to walk around the class, reading problems aloud. "How many 5's are in 45?" The kids have to do the math in their heads. All of them write their answers on their cards and thrust them up in the air. With a quick scan, Mr. Taylor can see if every child has written the right answer. Then he says, "What's the answer?" And all the kids call out, "Nine!" When they get an answer right, they whisper-shout "Yes!" and pump their fists. If some kids get it wrong, they have not embarrassed themselves by individually raising their hand and announcing their mistake. But Mr. Taylor knows he needs to give them more attention—or, more likely, have their team leader work with them. Children, he has learned, speak to each other in a language they can better understand.

"Now I'm going to trick you," Mr. Taylor says. "What's 3 times 120?" The orange cards go down—and back up. "Ooh, ooh, ooh!" says one little girl, unable to contain herself. "Ooh? Is that the answer?" Mr. Taylor says, silencing her.

Next, Mr. Taylor goes to the board to teach a new way to do long division. It's a clever method that takes a little longer but is much easier than most other methods, and I've never seen it before. "You want to work smart, not hard," he tells me later. "If you just show them the traditional method, not everyone understands." He actually learned the method last year—from one of his students.

Mr. Taylor follows a very basic lesson plan often referred to by educators as "I do, we do, you do." He does a problem on the board. Then the whole class does another one the same way. Then all the kids do a problem on their own. During the "we" portion of the lesson, Mr. Taylor calls on students to help solve the problem. But he does this using the "equity sticks"—a can of clothespins, each of which has a student's name on it. That way, he ensures a random sample. The shy ones don't get lost.

As the kids move into group work, there is a low buzz in the room. I try, but I can't find a child who isn't talking about math. One little boy leans across his desk to help another with a problem. "What do you add to 8 to get 16?" he says, and then he waits. "Eight," the other boy says. "Then," says the first, "you subtract that and what do you get?"

The activities come in brisk sequence, following a routine the kids know by heart, so no time is lost in transition. In *Teaching as Leadership*, Farr describes seeing such choreography in other high-performance classrooms. "We see routines so strong that they run virtually without any involvement from the teacher. In fact, for many highly effective teachers, the measure of a well-executed routine is that it continues in the teacher's absence."

On the front wall, Mr. Taylor has posted different hand signals—if you need to go to the bathroom, you raise a closed hand. To ask or answer a question, you raise an open hand. "This way, I have the information before I even call on you," Mr. Taylor explains. There is even a signal for when you are having a terrible day and don't feel up to participating: you just put your head down on your desk. I ask Mr. Taylor how often kids exploit that option. "I've never had anybody put their head down," he says, matter-of-factly. "In three years?" I ask. "No."

Next, Mr. Taylor announces it's time for Multiplication Bingo. As Mr. Taylor reads off a problem ("20 divided by 5"), the kids scour their boards, chips in hand, looking for 4's. One girl is literally shaking with excitement. Another has her hands clasped in a prayer position. I find myself wanting to play. You know you're in a good classroom if you have to stop yourself from raising your hand.

Finally, after a dozen problems go by, a small voice from an even smaller boy pronounces, "Bingo!" Kids wail in despair as the tiny boy walks up to collect his prize (a pencil) from Mr. Taylor. "Dang!" one girl says. "Okay, relax," Mr. Taylor says, smiling. "It's just a game." Before they leave, all the kids fill out an "exit slip," which is usually in the form of a problem—one more chance for Mr. Taylor to see how they, and he, are doing.

When I talk to Mr. Taylor after class, I notice that he tends to redirect questions so that they reflect his own performance. When I ask him if his first year on the job was hard, he says, "I found that the kids were not hard. It was explaining the information to them that was hard. You paint this picture in your head about how you will teach this lesson, and you can teach the whole lesson and no one gets it."

Like all the teachers I talked to in Washington, Mr. Taylor laments the lack of parental involvement. "On back-to-school night, if you have 28 or 30 kids in your class, you're lucky to see six or seven parents," he says. But when I ask him how that affects his teaching, he says, "Actually, it doesn't. I make it my business to call the parents—and not just for bad things." The first week of class, Mr. Taylor calls all his students' parents and gives them his cell-phone number.

Other teachers I interviewed spent most of our time complaining. "With the testing and the responsibility and keeping up with the behavior reports and the data, it has gotten so much harder over the years," said one fourth-grade teacher at

Kimball, the same school where Mr. Taylor teaches. “It’s more work than it should be. They don’t give us the time to be creative.”

A 23-year veteran who earns more than \$80,000 a year, this teacher has a warm manner, and her classroom is bright and neat. She paid for the kids’ whiteboards, the clock, and the DVD player herself. But she seems to have given up on the kids’ prospects in a way that Mr. Taylor has not. “The kids in Northwest [D.C.] go on trips to France, on cruises. They go places and their parents talk to them and take them to the library,” she says one fall afternoon between classes. “Our parents on this side don’t have the know-how to raise their children. They’re not sure what it takes for their child to make it.”

When her fourth-grade students entered her class last school year, 66 percent were scoring at or above grade level in reading. After a year in her class, only 44 percent scored at grade level, and none scored above. Her students performed worse than fourth-graders with similar incoming scores in other low-income D.C. schools. For decades, education researchers blamed kids and their home life for their failure to learn. Now, given the data coming out of classrooms like Mr. Taylor’s, those arguments are harder to take. Poverty matters enormously. But teachers all over the country are moving poor kids forward anyway, even as the class next door stagnates. “At the end of the day,” says Timothy Daly at the New Teacher Project, “it’s the *mind-set* that teachers need—a kind of relentless approach to the problem.”

Once teachers have been in the classroom for a year or two, who is very good—and very bad—becomes much clearer. But teachers are almost never dismissed. Principals almost never give teachers poor performance evaluations—even when they know the teachers are failing.

Ideally, schools would hire better teachers to begin with. But this is notoriously difficult. How do you screen for a relentless mind-set?

When Teach for America began, applicants were evaluated on 12 criteria (such as persistence and communication skills), chosen based on conversations with educators. Recruits answered open-ended questions like “What is wind?” Starting in 2000, the organization began to retroactively critique its own judgments. What did the best teachers have in common when they applied for the job?

Once a model for outcomes-based hiring was built, it started churning out some humbling results. “I came into this with a bunch of theories,” says Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel, who was then head of admissions. “I was proven wrong at least as many times as I was validated.”

Based on her own experience teaching in the Mississippi Delta, Ayotte-Hoeltzel was convinced, for example, that teachers with earlier experience working in poor neighborhoods were more effective. Wrong. An analysis of the data found no correlation.

For years, Teach for America also selected for something called “constant learning.” As Farr and others had noticed, great teachers tended to reflect on their performance and adapt accordingly. So people who tend to be self-aware might be a good bet. “It’s a perfectly reasonable hypothesis,” Ayotte-Hoeltzel says.

But in 2003, the admissions staff looked at the data and discovered that reflectiveness did not seem to matter either. Or more accurately, trying to predict reflectiveness in the hiring process did not work.

What *did* predict success, interestingly, was a history of perseverance—not just an attitude, but a track record. In the interview process, Teach for America now asks applicants to talk about overcoming challenges in their lives—and ranks their perseverance based on their answers. Angela Lee Duckworth, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and her colleagues have actually quantified the value of perseverance. In a study published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in November 2009, they evaluated 390 Teach for America instructors before and after a year of teaching. Those who initially scored high for “grit”—defined as perseverance and a passion for long-term goals, and measured using a short multiple-choice test—were 31 percent more likely than their less gritty peers to spur academic growth in their students. Gritty people, the theory goes, work harder and stay committed to their goals longer. (Grit also predicts retention of cadets at West Point, Duckworth has found.)

But another trait seemed to matter even more. Teachers who scored high in “life satisfaction”—reporting that they were very content with their lives—were 43 percent more likely to perform well in the classroom than their less satisfied colleagues. These teachers “may be more adept at engaging their pupils, and their zest and enthusiasm may spread to their students,” the study suggested.

In general, though, Teach for America’s staffers have discovered that past performance—especially the kind you can measure—is the best predictor of future performance. Recruits who have achieved big, measurable goals in college tend to do so as teachers. And the two best metrics of previous success tend to be grade-point average and “leadership achievement”—a

record of running something and showing tangible results. If you not only led a tutoring program but doubled its size, that's promising.

Knowledge matters, but not in every case. In studies of high-school math teachers, majoring in the subject seems to predict better results in the classroom. And more generally, people who attended a selective college are more likely to excel as teachers (although graduating from an Ivy League school does not unto itself predict significant gains in a Teach for America classroom). Meanwhile, a master's degree in education seems to have no impact on classroom effectiveness.

The most valuable educational credentials may be the ones that circle back to squishier traits like perseverance. Last summer, an internal Teach for America analysis found that an applicant's college GPA alone is not as good a predictor as the GPA in the final two years of college. If an applicant starts out with mediocre grades and improves, in other words, that curve appears to be more revealing than getting straight A's all along.

Last year, Teach for America churned through 35,000 candidates to choose 4,100 new teachers. Staff members select new hires by deferring almost entirely to the model: they enter more than 30 data points about a given candidate (about twice the number of inputs they considered a decade ago), and then the model spits out a hiring recommendation. Every year, the model changes, depending on what the new batch of student data shows.

This year, Teach for America allowed me to sit in on the part of the interview process that it calls the "sample teach," in which applicants teach a lesson to the other applicants for exactly five minutes. Only about half of the candidates make it to this stage. On this day, the group includes three men and two women, all college seniors or very recent graduates.

One young woman—I'll call her Abigail—stands up to teach her lesson. She has curly blond hair and wears a navy-blue suit. She tells us she will be teaching a fifth-grade Spanish class. She tapes up a preprepared poster. (Female applicants are more likely to bring props, which is not a bad thing. In fact, women are more likely to be effective in Teach for America, Duckworth found.) Then she writes her objective on the room's whiteboard: to teach the days of the week. Krzysztof Kosmicki, a Teach for America program director, starts the clock.

To me, Abigail's objective seems a little dull (especially compared with that of another applicant, who taught "the five fluids that transmit HIV"). She asks the class to repeat each of the days of the week. "I know it's confusing," she says. So she teaches them a song to help keep them straight, and then has the applicants sing it—twice. "If I don't hear everyone's voice, we're going to sing it again until I do." When she asks what day it is, Kosmicki volunteers the wrong answer. She asks another applicant to help correct him, which he does, and then her time is up.

The last applicant to teach is a young man I'll call Michael. He has been very quiet, but he becomes much more animated when he starts teaching. His objective is to teach the order of operations in a math problem. "Good morning, class!" he says. When someone gets something right, he says, "Correctomundo!" He seems confident. He asks if he can get a volunteer to answer part of the problem on the board, and one of the other applicants steps up. Kosmicki asks him to explain exponents again, which he does. Time's up.

Later, I talk with Kosmicki about his impressions. He liked Abigail's sample teach—but not Michael's. Kosmicki is not very interested in the things I noticed most: charisma, ambitious lesson objectives, extroversion. What matters more, at least according to Teach for America's research, is less flashy: Were you prepared? Did you achieve your objective in five minutes?

"Abigail's sample teach was exceptional," says Kosmicki, who taught for Teach for America in the South Bronx before starting a charter school in Newark, New Jersey. "It was abundantly clear to me that she had practiced." The students successfully learned the days of the week "somewhere between the third and fourth minute," Kosmicki says. He was interested in what Abigail was doing, but he had been more focused on the other applicants, acting as her class.

This summer, those who have been accepted will go to a Teach for America training institute. That's when Steven Farr, the in-house professor, and his colleagues take over. For them, the challenge is not to pick the perfect teacher but to diagnose strengths and weaknesses early and provide intense, customized training to correct them. Farr is more hopeful each year. "When I see not a handful, not dozens, but hundreds of people being successful in a world where most people think success is not possible, I know it can be done," he told me.

Of course, thanks to its mission and brand, Teach for America has been able to draw from a strong recruiting pool. (During the 2008–09 school year, 11 percent of Ivy League seniors applied.) Large, low-income school districts do not get nearly as many candidates per open position, and most of the candidates they do get aren't nearly as high-caliber. Plus, the extreme hours that Teach for America teachers put in—for two years—are not sustainable for most people over the long term.

But if school systems hired, trained, and rewarded teachers according to the principles Teach for America has identified, then teachers would not need to work so hard. They would be operating in a system designed in a radically different

way—designed, that is, for success.

This year, D.C. public schools have begun using a new evaluation system for all faculty and staff, from teachers to custodians. Each will receive a score, just like the students, at the end of the year. For teachers whose students take standardized tests, like Mr. Taylor, half their score will be based on how much their students improved. The rest will be based largely on five observation sessions conducted throughout the year by their principal, assistant principal, and a group of master educators. Throughout the year, teachers will receive customized training. At year's end, teachers who score below a certain threshold could be fired.

The handbook for the new system looks eerily similar to the Teach for America model, which is not a coincidence. The man who designed it, Jason Kamras, is a former Teach for America teacher who taught in a low-income D.C. school for eight years before being chosen by D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee to help fix the schools. Rhee is herself a Teach for America alumna, who went on to run the New Teacher Project.

Washington, D.C., is also applying for Race to the Top money from the Obama administration, along with many states. To qualify, states must first remove any legal barriers to linking student test scores to teachers—something California and Wisconsin are already doing. To win money, states must also begin distinguishing between effective and ineffective teachers—and consider that information when deciding whether to grant tenure, give raises, or fire a teacher or principal (a linkage that the National Education Association, the country's largest teachers union, has criticized as "inappropriate" federal interference in local prerogatives). And each year, states must publish which of their education and other prep programs produced the most effective (and ineffective) teachers and principals. If state and local school officials, along with teachers unions, step up to the challenge, Race to the Top could begin to rationalize America's schools.

By the time the Obama administration begins handing out awards this spring, Mr. Taylor will be finishing up another year at Kimball Elementary. On the mornings his students take their standardized tests, he will cook a hot breakfast of sausage, eggs, and toast for them, as he always does. But this tradition may be coming to an end. He's thinking about quitting in the next few years.

Mr. Taylor wants to become a principal. In just three years as a teacher, he feels that he has already run up against the limits of his classroom. He wants to bring what he has learned to scale. That way, he says, "it won't just stay with me, bundled in Room 204." He is, like many great teachers, well aware that he is not one in a million—or at least, that he should not be.

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