

Teaching Fellows Program Fails to Deliver

By Ewa Bronowicz Feb 11, 2009

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“You remember your first grade teacher’s name. Who will remember yours?” says one of the ubiquitous ads for the NYC Teaching Fellows Program on the city’s subway.

A rhetorical question? Yes, but not for long. Following the \$770 million budget cuts to NYC’s Education Department proposed by Governor Paterson this past Friday, which would result in an estimated 14,000 teachers being laid off, the children will not remember the name of their first grade teacher due to the likely overcrowding of NYC classrooms.

The NYC Teaching Fellows Program was created in 2000 to “recruit and prepare high-quality, dedicated individuals to become teachers who raise student achievement in the New York City classrooms that need them most.”

The program is an alternative certification route founded to address the largest shortage of teachers in NYC schools in decades. As an incentive, each fellow receives a subsidized master’s degree in education in exchange for filling positions in high-needs areas that no one else wants to fill. In short, the program offers a fast-track, if bumpy, path to a teaching career.

So I took a closer look at the subway ads. Another one said, “Go make a difference.” I was sold. In fact, the more I read about the program, the more inspired I became about teaching English as a second language (ESL).

After all, I would be helping people like myself—immigrants on their way to make their American Dream come true. I imagined working in the Bronx, trying to get the attention of thirty rowdy teenagers from Africa and Porto Rico, and I beamed. Ready to make a difference I was.

Having been accepted into the program on July 30th, 2008, I was to begin an intensive 7-week training session in November and start teaching full-time in January 2009. I had promptly notified my employer that I would be leaving and held a party to celebrate my new life. That this new life would come with health insurance and three months paid vacation just added icing to the cake.

Over a month later, on September 5th, I received an e-mail with “difficult news.” Due to a smaller number of vacancies than previously expected, the Midyear Program was

being cancelled. Things were not so bad though: a place in the June 2009 program would be reserved for me.

I was disappointed but luckily could remain at my current job, even if the pay was, by comparison, low. In the meantime, I took and passed the required tests, the LAST and CST-Multi-Subject, and indulged in planning my new life yet again.

But not for too long. Last Thursday, January 29th, another e-mail came. It read: “As you are undoubtedly aware, the NYC Department of Education is facing budget cuts for the next school year that will in turn impact teacher hiring. These changes will likely affect the size and subject area assignments of the June 2009 Teaching Fellows cohort. While we had originally anticipated opening enrollment to the June 2009 program around this time, we are now deferring that process until uncertainties in the hiring landscape are resolved and we are better able to project the need for new Teaching Fellows.”

In other words, the DOE did not know if there would be a place for me in the government-sponsored program for which I’d been accepted over half a year earlier. It was not clear when they would know, either.

In the face of a crippling economy and people losing jobs by the tens of thousands, my personal drama may seem of lesser importance. But my personal drama foreshadows a tragedy for everyone—the public education in America, from elementary school through high school, will be hit right at its heart: the teachers. Ultimately, it is not the number of educators required that’s declining. Nor is it the number of students. What the budgetary cuts translate into, sadly, is far fewer teachers per student and, consequently, a smaller chance for success.

Last November mayor Bloomberg announced a large, \$180 million for this and \$385 million for next fiscal year, budget cut to the Department of Education. In one of the five so-called “buckets” was a notice about the NYC Teaching Fellows Program—“reduce size of next cohort of teaching fellows.”

Why the DOE didn’t notify us then and waited until the end of January to break the news is a mystery. Yet another troubling fact is that the DOE continues to lure people into enrolling in the program knowing that the spaces are, to say the least, scarce. The deadline for the June 2009 program ends on February 9th, even though, together with the cancelled Midyear Fellows Program, they surely have more than enough aspiring teachers to fill projected vacancies.

In fact, the June 2008 fellows have recently been given an ultimatum: those who didn’t secure a full-time position by February 2nd will lose their salary and benefits but are welcome to stay in the system as substitute teachers. The 8,000 fellows currently teaching in New York City’s public schools will, no doubt, be the first ones to go.

The other day on the subway, I spotted yet another NYC Teaching Fellows Program ad. “Your spreadsheets won’t grow up to be doctors or lawyers,” it promises. I’d seen it before. But this time, instead of inspiration, I saw deception and helplessness. A

new batch of fellows, perhaps myself included, will begin training in June, only to learn that, even though they are desperately needed, schools cannot afford them.
Ewa Bronowicz is a columnist for The Post Eagle, a Polish-American newspaper.