

# Chicago Tribune

## More teachers take nontraditional path to class

By the Associated Press  
October 4, 2009

INDIANAPOLIS - An increasing number of teachers without traditional education degrees are poised to enter Indiana's classrooms.

Supporters argue that such teachers bring expertise in subject areas that education schools don't always provide. But critics question whether they're equipped to handle special cases such as helping children who struggle with reading.

The programs are enjoying strong political support from Gov. Mitch Daniels, a Republican, and President Barack Obama, a Democrat.

Indianapolis Public Schools Superintendent Eugene White is a believer in the nontraditional teachers. He points to the example of a retired Navy submarine commander who taught for two years at Howe High School, inspiring students to love science and also coaching its science team to two state titles.

"If we get more teachers and young teachers like that," White told The Indianapolis Star for a Sunday story, "I think it will be a great thing for public education."

The Indianapolis district, which has struggled to fill its teaching vacancies, has hired an overwhelming number of teachers in Indiana from two of the nontraditional teaching programs -- Teach for America and The New Teacher Project.

Prospective Indiana teachers can join those programs, which offer a few weeks of summer training, or go through a Wilson Fellowship or a transition-to-teaching program at the state's colleges, which provide a year of training.

Some educators question whether the teachers, especially those who have had only fast-track five-week training courses, are equipped to handle situations that require detailed knowledge of child psychology or to work with struggling students.

"The kids may get a teacher who is enthusiastic and is a nice person, so they may feel good about the year," said Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University. "But if you have not already learned to read and you're a second-grader and you have any challenges in learning to read and don't have support at home, your odds of cracking the code and becoming a fluent reader are going to be less."

Teachers who complete a four-year program are better prepared to reach students with learning disabilities and deficits, she said.

Michele McLaughlin, Teach for America's vice president for federal and state policy, said that in recent years the program has put in place new lessons in teaching reading as part of its training.

"Every two years we do a principal satisfaction survey, and it's very high," she said. "They like our folks; they like having them as a pool of people to choose from. They do like having them as a pipeline of teachers."

A 2008 study by a team of economists led by researchers at the State University of New York at Albany looked at New York City teachers and found that programs such as The New Teacher Project drew smarter teachers and that students benefited.

Teachers who came through the New York Teaching Fellows program for career-changers were more likely to have passed a state test to become a teacher on their first try, more likely to have come from a stronger college and more likely to have a higher average SAT score -- 541 in math compared with 493 for teachers who had gone to education schools.

The economists concluded that test scores rose for elementary school students because they were getting better-educated teachers, in part because of the alternative paths to teaching.