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CLASS ACTS

People are searching for meaningful career change – and finding it in public schools.

By Julia Dahl

Last fall, Mary Wasiak went back to high school. On her first day, the former attorney felt like a nervous kid. By year's end, she was named the “Teacher of Promise” at Crockett High School in Austin.

“In law school, I had volunteered as an AIDS educator for teenagers,” says Wasiak, 48. “I loved the interaction with the kids, and even when I started practicing, I wondered if I’d missed my calling.” In early 2008, Wasiak decided to find out: She applied to the Texas Teaching Fellows program. After six weeks of full-time classes and student teaching, she took over a classroom of special-ed teens.

Across America, midcareer professionals like Wasiak are trading the private sector for public schools, thanks in part to alternative certification programs aimed at placing teachers in high-need schools—fast. The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a nonprofit that runs teaching fellows programs in 14 states, attracted almost 44,500 applicants in 2009, a 29 percent increase over the previous year (a rise partly due to the economic downturn).

Founded in 1997 by Michelle Rhee (see page 194), TNTP is highly competitive (the acceptance rate is 15 percent) and concentrates on career-changers—unlike TNTP’s better-known counterpart, Teach for America, which targets recent college graduates.

TJ McManus, 37, was an educational technology developer but craved the chance to work with young students directly. She applied to the Denver Teaching Fellows program last year; now she has a kindergarten classroom of 25 in a low-income neighborhood. “It’s so fun to get up and actually want to go to work,” she says.

Margarita Acosta, 34, stepped into a bilingual third-grade classroom in El Paso last autumn and knew she was home. “I’ve been a teller, a temp; I’ve worked for a shipping company,” she says. “But I’ve only felt a strong sense of purpose when I’ve trained other employees. So when I heard about the fellows program, it was like destiny.”

New teachers often take pay cuts (salaries start in the \$35,000-to-\$45,000 range), but they gain the security of a job with guaranteed benefits – a rarity in this economy. A few months after Acosta started teaching, her husband lost his job; suddenly, her dream profession became their safety net.

“I leave every day knowing I am helping my students become whatever they want to be,” Acosta says. “This is what I was meant to do.”

To find out more about the New Teacher Project, go to tntp.org.



Mary Wasiak in her Austin classroom.