

ABQJournal Online » Guidance From the Back

CHURCH ROCK, N.M. — How is a teacher like a quarterback?

There are probably several ways to answer that question, but at numerous schools in the Gallup area, novice teachers wear an earpiece so they can get real-time feedback from a coach at the back of the classroom — á la football.

The strategy, called real-time coaching, is part of a pilot program for Teach for America teachers in select regions of the country. The idea is to accelerate the learning curve for teachers, helping them master classroom management strategies early in the year so they can focus on teaching content.

“So much of the way teachers are coached and trained is after-the-fact,” said Landon Mascareñaz, director of Teach for America in New Mexico. “There’s something really powerful about being in the classroom with them.”

On a recent Friday morning, first-year teacher Nadia Abraibesh taught math to her third-grade class at Church Rock Academy. She got out small dry-erase boards for students and was getting ready to pass them out when Jesse Heaton whispered into a radio, “Make sure you give direction for the boards before you pass them out.”

Heaton, manager of teacher leadership and development for Teach for America, acts as a real-time coach for novice teachers. Stationed at the back of the room, Heaton whispered his instructions into a radio.

“What do we do with our boards?” Abraibesh asked the class after hearing Heaton’s cue. She called on a student, who replied that they were to write down the assigned problem quietly and not draw or doodle.

The aim of real-time coaching is to help new teachers with classroom management, not with teaching content.

Heaton said managing behavior and classroom culture is a major challenge for many novice teachers. Even if they are excellent at teaching content, that excellence can go to waste in an out-of-control classroom.

He said teaching is like any leadership position, where getting buy-in and cooperation can be the hardest part of a task. “That’s difficult in all contexts — I think more so with 10-year-olds,” Heaton said.

Abraibesh, who was on her third coaching session, said she found the feedback helpful. She requested the coaching, knowing classroom management wasn’t her strongest skill.

She said it helps her notice when half the class gets off task as she’s giving help to an individual student. Heaton tells her how to correct behavior, and she said she starts forming the right kinds of habits for keeping the whole room on-task.

Teach for America is funded through a mix of public and private money. In New Mexico, the teachers are paid by their school district at the same salary and benefits as any novice teacher. The organization gets \$400,000 in state funding, and the rest comes from private foundations and Americorp, a network of programs that recruits workers into high-need jobs in education, public health and other sectors.

Real-time coaching is one part of Teach for America’s broader training program, which has a rigorous application process that takes only about 11 percent of applicants. Those accepted attend a five-week summer institute, which includes student teaching.

Afterward, New Mexico teachers essentially receive a provisional teaching certificate, which allows them to teach but requires they attend classes at the University of New Mexico and work toward a degree. They do so while they are teaching full-time.



First-year teacher Nadia Abraibesh is wearing an earpiece and getting real-time feedback from a coach in the back of the room. (dean hanson/journal)

Teach for America staffers then work with teachers to develop their “big goal,” which is usually based on standardized test results. Many teachers base their goal on tests other than New Mexico’s Standards-Based Assessment, so they can get results before the year is over and can celebrate or debrief with their students.

Abraibesh’s “big goal” is that 85 percent of her students will be proficient on the assessment she uses for reading, math and writing. Those scores do not affect students’ grades.

Lindsey Cross, managing director of teacher leadership and development, said these goals may seem unrealistic, but it’s important to set a high bar. She said staffers help teachers develop manageable steps toward that goal and look at benchmark data throughout the year.

“We have to not only have this big, audacious goal, but also a clear path to get there,” Cross said.

Critics of the program say it sends inexperienced teachers into the country’s neediest schools and causes high turnover since the teachers commit to only two years.

However, Mascareñaz said more than half of the teachers in New Mexico stayed beyond their two-year commitment this year.

And although critics elsewhere have said Teach for America does not significantly affect achievement, the program was recognized in March by New Mexico Secretary of Education-designate Hanna Skandera. Of the 13 middle and high school classrooms in the state that achieved the most single-year growth on the Standards-Based Assessment, four were Teach for America classrooms.

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-- Email the reporter at hheinze@abqjournal.com. Call the reporter at 505-823-3913