

WHO'S NEXT

Ahnna Smith, Executive Director, Teach for America, D.C. Region

PHOTO BY BEN DROZ



“I am confident we can and will improve public education in the region,” Ahnna Smith says about one of the most complex tasks imaginable. Her passion is at the very center of what’s happening — and changing for the better — in the nation’s educational landscape. An alumna of the University of Maryland, College Park, and former senior advisor to the deputy mayor for education in Washington, Smith knows the stark lines that divide our communities and feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility to ensure that all children have the educational opportunities they deserve.

WHAT DOES TEACH FOR AMERICA DO? We’re the leadership pipeline for the education sector, developing great teachers and leaders to serve and improve the nation’s lowest-performing schools, both within and from beyond the classroom.

WHAT KIND OF LEADER DOES TODAY’S AMERICA NEED? For myself, it’s about passion for whatever I’m doing. If you care deeply about accomplishing whatever goal you set for yourself, you will find a way.

WHAT NEEDS REFORM? To see growth and development in the District and region more broadly, education is the key. We have taken great strides in improving access to high-quality school options, but still face the reality that almost one in three residents in Washington, D.C. are functionally illiterate.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR JOB IS MOST CHALLENGING? It’s easy to become overwhelmed by the many challenges that face our students inside and outside of the classroom. Children need great

teachers and school leaders to provide them with the ability to tackle and pursue any opportunities in their lives.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO IMPROVE EDUCATION? Holding ourselves and our leaders accountable for what’s best for kids. In my mind, they are setting high expectations, ensuring all students receive a high degree of rigor, and great people — teachers, administrators, community partners — who have the willingness to move forward, try new things and take risks.

WHAT WAS BEST AND ABOUT BEING A TEACHER? It becomes so personal. You build relationships with your students, their families and in the community and become incredibly invested — equally in their successes and failures. Failure simply isn’t an option.

WHAT’S YOUR OTHER PASSION? Playing basketball is my escape. I would love to challenge President Obama and Secretary of Education [Arne] Duncan to a game. **WL**