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Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Teaching at the Grass Roots

Drew Snodgrass '07 found the ideal place for him to make a difference: in the classroom.

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan in 2007, Drew Snodgrass joined Teach for America (TFA), a not-for-profit organization that recruits and trains college graduates to teach in low-income communities across the United States. He spent three years teaching second grade in the Mississippi Delta, staying on even after he had earned his teaching certificate and fulfilled his two-year commitment to the program. This year he moved to Washington, D.C., to teach at DC Prep, a public charter school founded in 2003 to serve as a positive example for urban educational reform.

As issues of school funding and reform continue to make national headlines, we asked Drew about his experiences working on the front lines of American public education.

What made you decide to join the Teach for America corps?

I believe all children deserve an equal opportunity to go to college and reap the benefits of a high-quality education. After studying political science and religion at IWU, I knew that equal opportunity didn't exist for everyone, and I wanted to do something about it. I had an academic understanding of inequality; after college I wanted to get my hands dirty working to fix it. Teach for America offered me the chance to work on the front lines of that battle. Teaching really personalizes the struggle for equal rights. When you're teaching, you're not just standing up against the idea of injustice; you're fighting for actual children and their actual futures.

How do you respond to critics who say that TFA corps members are often unprepared for the challenges they face and that they are displacing experienced teachers?

TFA corps members, by and large, do not displace veteran teachers. TFA corps members fill openings in distressed districts that can't find qualified candidates. There aren't enough qualified ed-school graduates out there to fill all the teaching vacancies, especially in troubled schools.



During Homecoming Week, Snodgrass (above) shared his IWU experiences with students. The event is designed to inspire DC Prep students to attend college by learning about their teachers' alma maters.

Teach for America is a very tough program, and it is definitely not for everyone. I agree that it throws fresh college graduates headfirst into some of the most difficult classroom situations imaginable. It is an extreme challenge, but TFA's selection process and training program are specifically tailored for that purpose. The training institute is not simply a shortened version of teachers' college; it's intensive training for a very specific kind of triage teaching. I think in the end it should be judged by its results, and the evidence is quite clear that the organization's impact on the students it serves is positive.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done, but I had amazing people supporting me through the whole experience, and the program succeeded at making me an effective teacher. It also succeeded in turning me into a lifelong activist for educational equality.

What was it like to teach in the Mississippi Delta?

I worked in Coahoma County in northwestern Mississippi, a region I studied in Dr. [Tari] Renner's "The American South and the Politics of Race" class my senior year. It is one of the most economically depressed and racially segregated regions in the country. After *Brown v. Board of Education* forced resistant Delta school districts to integrate, private "academies" sprang up throughout the region where white parents sent their children to avoid

integration with African Americans. To this day the vast majority of white schoolchildren in the region attend private schools, while the majority of African American children attend struggling public schools.

I taught in a very small school among the cotton fields near three tiny rural towns. The school was a great place to work. My colleagues treated me like part of the family and encouraged me through my rough first months of teaching. The school was struggling to meet its academic goals — most of my students came to me one and two years behind grade-level — and schoolwide disorganization caused many frustrating challenges, but the people I worked with were truly wonderful to me.

My students were also a constant inspiration. They worked extraordinarily hard and accomplished great things in spite of the unbelievable challenges they faced.

Which of those students most inspired you?

Many of them did, but one in particular stands out for me. At the beginning of my second year, I got phone calls from teachers warning me about an incoming student. One of those teachers told me that, in 30 years of teaching, she'd never dealt with a more challenging, hyperactive child. She had been labeled by adults her whole life — a "behavior problem" whose parents "didn't care" and whom "you just have to deal with." She came to me far behind grade level in reading and even worse in math, but I noticed in the first week that she was a quick learner. I worked hard to earn her respect and reached out for help from friends with experience in behavioral disorders to teach her strategies to control her behavior. I spent a lot of energy building a respectful relationship with her parents, encouraging them to make sure she was on time every day, and letting them see her success. I held her to a high standard, which by the middle of the year she was rising to meet. By year's end, her reading level had grown by a year and a half and she mastered more than 80 percent of the second-grade math standards. I loved telling her third-grade teacher that she was a great kid and an excellent student.

What made you decide to take your current job with DC Prep?

When I moved to D.C., I knew I wanted to continue teaching students from low-income communities, but I wanted to know what that work looks like at a very high level. I wanted to be a part of a school that was producing impressive academic results across the whole school, even with economically disadvantaged populations. I also wanted to be surrounded by outstanding teachers so that I could observe their practices and improve my own. DC Prep was really a perfect fit on all counts.

Washington, D.C., is reputed to have one of the nation's most dysfunctional school districts. How is DC Prep an exception?

There are a few key elements that many high-achieving urban schools have in common. First, our students spend more hours in school, from 7:30 to 4:15. Second, we use an outcomes-oriented, data-driven approach to instruction. We use teaching approaches that work, and if the evidence we collect indicates that they don't, we change and tweak them until we find a way that does work. Third, our school maintains a coherent culture of very high expectations across the entire school environment, emphasizing hard work, cooperation, diligence and constant messaging that the students are headed to college. Our students thrive and excel because they know that it is expected of them.

By what measures is DC Prep successful?

Our school has three campuses serving students from preschool through eighth grade. Last year, 100 percent of DC Prep's eighth graders scored proficient in math, compared to 50 percent of all D.C. eighth graders, and 92 percent scored proficient in reading, compared to 49 percent citywide.

Even more important than test scores is the fact that 100 percent of DC Prep graduates have gone on to college-preparatory high schools, and 80 percent have been accepted into competitive-enrollment high schools. The inaugural DC Prep class is currently in its senior year of high school, and the school's goal is 75 percent of our graduates enrolling in four-year colleges and universities. DC Prep really is providing a path to college for a population of students who otherwise would have fallen through the cracks of the system.



Snodgrass works with second-grade students at DC Prep, a public charter school in Washington, D.C.

necessary work and, when done effectively, is incredibly rewarding.

In terms of the quality of education in this country, we are definitely in the midst of an educational crisis. Recent data indicate that the achievement gap between African Americans and white or Asian students is growing, especially among males. But my experiences have taught me that this situation is not inevitable. I know that the problem is not the students, who can and will rise to any challenge. There are examples of outstanding schools all over the country where poor students consistently outperform their peers at more affluent schools. I have seen for myself what is possible when low-income students are motivated, challenged and rewarded for academic excellence — even when all the odds are stacked against them.

There are encouraging signs that things are moving in the right direction. In the Delta, I was struck by how badly people wanted the situation to change, on both sides of the racial and economic divide. Even white citizens whose children attended the private academy wanted to see high-quality public schools and wanted to see true integration happen.

I don't think funding and "resources" are the biggest problem. My school in Mississippi was awash in grant money and technological gadgets. We had pricey technology collecting dust in cabinets. What's missing in most struggling schools is leadership and human resources. We need excellent teachers to teach in the poorest regions, which will require drastic changes to the way teachers are compensated. We also need innovative and dedicated leaders to make the necessary structural changes to our school systems.

I can say anecdotally that the second graders who come to me having been at DC Prep since preschool are the most well-prepared students I have ever taught in terms of foundational skills and learning habits. Roughly a quarter of the second graders in my class this year are two years ahead in both reading and math — that is to say, they are performing on a fourth-grade level. That is the direct result of having two or three very effective teachers in a row, which is exactly what our communities need if all kids are going to have the option of going to college.

What are the biggest lessons you've learned as a teacher, both in terms of yourself and the quality of education in the United States?

The biggest lesson I've learned about myself is that it's not good enough to have the right opinions. Teaching isn't glamorous, and often it doesn't feel like you're doing something big and world-changing. But I learned that it is absolutely