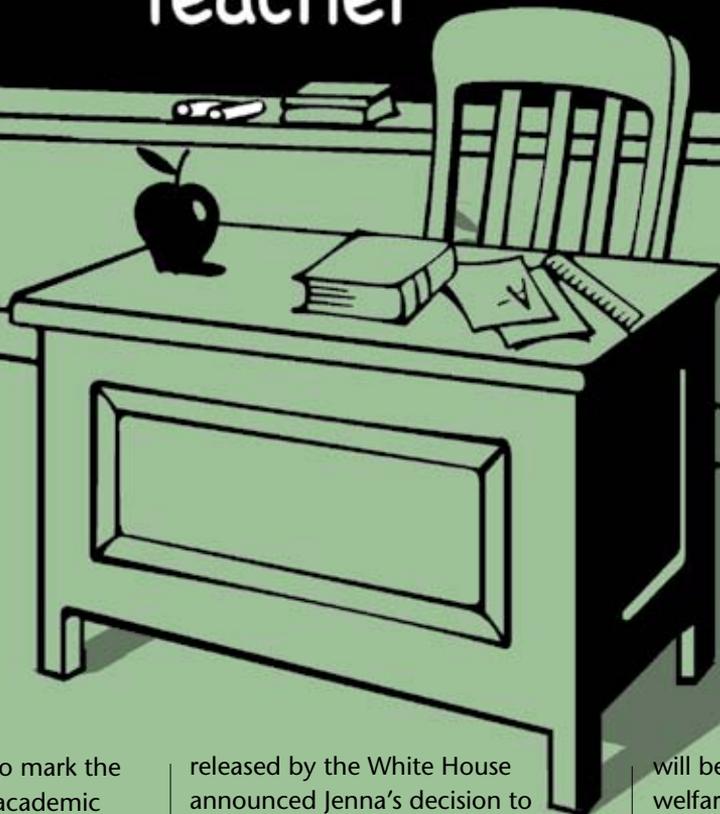


First Daughter Becomes First-Year Teacher

by Molly Ness



When school bells ring to mark the start of the 2005–2006 academic year, the District of Columbia’s Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School will welcome more than 200 elementary students, as well as a new teacher: First Daughter Jenna Bush. Statements



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released by the White House announced Jenna’s decision to put her college degree to work in one of the nation’s neediest school districts.

Jenna’s job choice is both admirable for her and promising for the profession. Our struggling public schools need an influx of young, intelligent teachers who understand the importance of quality instruction and who hold all children accountable to the high expectations of academic success.

The Challenges

Though Jenna will be beginning a rich and rewarding career, she should be advised of the challenges she will undoubtedly face in her first year of teaching. Fresh out of college, she

will be responsible for the academic welfare of an entire classroom of children. Never mind her lack of formal teacher training; she cannot afford to use her inexperience as a crutch. With a handful of chalk and the purest intentions, Jenna must quickly figure out how to teach reading, create a positive classroom environment, and reach students with learning disabilities.

The Environment

Her challenges will be amplified by the student makeup of the Stokes School, with nearly 80 percent of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. Nearly one-fourth of students speak English as a second language. She may find that homework isn’t a priority for

a student who shares a one-room apartment with two siblings and three adults. She may struggle to make a math lesson come alive for a student whose father was just incarcerated.

She will discover that a teacher has many roles that are not in the job description—social worker, mentor, friend, coach, and disciplinarian. She will quickly learn that teaching is not a 9-to-5 job, the bureaucracies of public education often seem like fighting an uphill battle, and we live in a society that undervalues teachers—both in status and in salary.

The **Politics**

Jenna comes to the classroom at a time when politics trump education pedagogy. Her head will swim with the regulations of No Child Left Behind, the pressure of testing, and the push to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The stakes will be high for Jenna. Last year, the Stokes School failed to make AYP, and 21 percent of the student body scored below basic on the Stanford 9 reading test.

While she juggles lesson plans, student discipline, and test preparation, she must pursue professional development in accordance with No Child Left Behind's highly qualified teacher regulations. After all, Jenna must abide by federal regulations regarding teacher qualifications; a college degree is not enough.

Alternative Routes

This is not to say, however, that Jenna should be discounted as a potentially powerful teacher. As the demand for quality teachers skyrockets, particularly in high-need areas, we must look to alternative, creative sources for bright, energetic candidates. Innovative routes into the classroom have gained credibility through promising results in student achievement.

Perhaps the most well-known alternative route into teaching is Teach For America, which places nearly 2,000 recent college graduates from top universities into our country's neediest districts. Of these, about 60 percent remain in education more than two years—some staying in original teaching placements, others following the

By the time I navigated the teaching world of standards and special education regulations, I could hardly focus on the realities of the communities from which my students came. Two years of teaching took its toll, and I left the classroom to pursue the social justice component of education as a doctoral student. In my research

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route of school leadership (Teach For America 2005). Research indicates that even with minimal training, these teachers are able to make significant academic gains with their students. In a study of six urban sites where 95 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, Mathematica Policy Research (Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman 2004) claimed that Teach For America teachers produced slightly higher test scores in math and the same in reading compared to other teachers in their schools—novice and veteran teachers alike.

Expectations

What then will determine Jenna's skill and potential as a teacher? Knowing what she is up against certainly must be a major factor in her battle. I, too, entered the classroom at the age of 22, with no formal training and little more than my idealism and romantic vision of changing the world one student at a time. I knew nothing of meaningful instructional techniques, but more importantly, I knew little of what to expect in my overcrowded public middle school in Oakland, California.

in a graduate school of education, I have come to realize the depth of my naïveté as a rookie teacher. In a sink-or-swim environment, I barely stayed afloat.

I still hold enormous faith in public education and the utmost respect for its teachers. I truly hope Jenna hits the ground running in her first year as a teacher. I hope, for her sake as well as for the collective interest of her students, that she understands the complexities of public education, the enormous responsibility she is about to tackle, and the efforts of our schools to slog through the incongruities of No Child Left Behind.

Though I only had a small glimpse of the abundant rewards inherent in teaching, I hope Jenna experiences a lifetime of them. In any case, she will be surrounded by a reality that is a far cry from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. ■

References

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