

On the frontlines of reform with writer Sunny Schubert

## Fresh take on urban schooling

Teach for America finds success in training nontraditional teachers like Tom Schalmo

It is just minutes before the bell rings to end Tom Schalmo's eighth-grade reading class at Milwaukee's Burbank Elementary School, and the first-year teacher is trying hard to keep the 29 kids in his room focused.

He is reviewing the answers to a test on the book *Holes* by Louis Sachar. But a warm breeze floats through the window, carrying the sounds of kids on the playground three stories below. Schalmo's students are restless, and he has to tell them to "Sit down" repeatedly. He does it firmly, without saying "Please," and without raising his voice.

A tall, gangly kid in the second row keeps getting to his feet and edging toward the door. In the third row, another boy and a girl poke and slap at each other. Schalmo holds his hand up and says in a flat, warning tone, "Five, four, three..." The kids settle.

"These grades are important to you," he says, holding a handful of test papers aloft. "I have recorded them. Now pay attention."

The students take turns answering the questions aloud, until Schalmo asks what offense Kissin' Kate Barlow had committed that caused her to be cursed. The answer: "She kissed a Negro." This causes about half the class — the black kids — to burst into giggles.

Schalmo ignores them.

The bell rings, but still Schalmo does not release his students. He orders them to straighten their desks. They align them with military precision, then jostle out to the hallway, where they align themselves just as neatly: boys on one side, girls on the other.

And they wait, patiently, until Schalmo escorts them to the lunchroom.

It's a startling display of discipline, not what an observer accustomed to the free-wheeling chaos of a suburban Monona middle school expects to see in a Milwaukee Public School. The Milwaukee schools, after all, are

among the worst in the nation, with a black-white achievement gap to match.

But Burbank Elementary is not typical. "Burbank has to be one of the best schools in the city," Schalmo says, even though the building itself is an ancient brick pile, and 80% of its 575 students are from low-income families. Still, it's located in a pleasant west-side neighborhood, right near the West Allis border.

Landing at Burbank was a lucky break for Schalmo, since, as a "Teach for America" teacher, he had just six weeks of teacher training under his belt when he walked through the doors last fall.

"I was mortified by my own ignorance in the beginning," he says, "but I've found I really like teaching."

Teach for America was founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, a Princeton grad who was convinced that many young college grads wanted to make a contribution to society and would do so if a national teacher corps existed that would place them in inner-city schools.

Initially, TFA's emphasis was on choosing graduates from top-tier universities, especially those who had majored in math or science. But over the years, Teach for America's own research has proved that other attributes, including enthusiasm and organization, are just as important as subject mastery in the making of a good teacher.

The program, which operates under the auspices of AmeriCorps/VISTA, remains highly selective. Last year, TFA received more than 30,000 applications nationwide, including 854 from Wisconsin, but only 15% were selected.

Studies have found that TFA teachers are often more effective in the classroom than teachers trained in university programs. This may, in part, be because TFA teachers and their students are constantly being evaluated.

The students are monitored for academic progress, and the teachers are appraised for effectiveness, mentored and offered concrete suggestions on how to teach better.

TFA's focus on the craft of teaching is in contrast to the theory-heavy curriculum of most schools of education. The success of TFA's teachers is seen by many in the school-reform movement as an important chink in the monopoly on teacher licensure held by education schools.

Today, Teach for America has 7,300 teachers placed in inner-city schools across the country, including 38 in Milwaukee. This is the first year TFA has operated in the often change-resistant MPS.

Schalmo has a second year to fulfill on his two-year contract. If he leaves education after fulfilling it, he would be bucking the trend: Nationwide, 63% of TFA's 17,000 alumni are employed full-time in education.

Schalmo, 23, grew up in suburban Elm Grove, and majored in communications at UW-Madison. But with journalism jobs getting scarcer by the day, he began considering other options, and applied to Teach for America.

"I was up for a new challenge — and this certainly has been!" he says with a laugh. His formal teacher training consisted of a week in a Milwaukee classroom, followed by five weeks in a Chicago school. At the end of the summer, he was assigned to Burbank.

"I was under the impression I'd be teaching reading, but when I got here, they said I'd be teaching science and health, too," he says. He teaches his three subjects to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders, and has an eighth-grade homeroom.

This past fall, Burbank began operating under a new behavior system. For example, students line up and are escorted to lunch by their teachers. Schalmo likes the system a lot.

"It saves times and creates more order. It makes teaching easier and learning easier," he says.

Burbank teachers are also encouraged to get creative in devising ways to keep their students on task. In Schalmo's room, a big day-glo orange poster lists "Room 35 Rules of Themselves" for his eighth-graders.

"The kids wrote those rules," he says proudly. "It was a day last fall when I was having

a hard time getting them to settle down and work. Finally I said, 'I'm going to leave the room and let you come up with rules that you think are important.' And it's worked!"

The rules are extensive and about what you would expect — "Listen" and "Pay attention" and "Don't interrupt" — but a couple are aimed at specific students, as in "Jasmine and Andre have to shut up."

Jasmine — not her real name — is one of the students Schalmo is particularly proud of.

"At the beginning of the year," he says, "she just wouldn't sit down and shut up. Her grades were terrible, and so was her behavior. To tell the truth, I didn't have very high expectations for her."

But, as a brand-new teacher, Schalmo was careful not to let his expectations determine his relationship with Jasmine. "I worked with her, the other kids worked with her, and she worked really hard, too," he says.

As a result, her grades have improved dramatically, and so has her behavior, he says.

Another student, a boy, started the year with a grade-point average south of C, but he was determined to make the honor roll. "I remember thinking to myself 'That's not gonna happen,' but I helped him, and he worked hard, and this quarter he made a 3.0 [B] average — good enough for the honor roll."

The year has been a life-changing experience for Schalmo as well as his students.

"I'm surprised at how much I've changed as a person," he says. "I'm more patient. When I go to bed at night, I think about my students, about what I can do to help them. They can all be successful — I know that."

"I've learned to trust my instincts, and to be a part of the school — to help other teachers, to sign up for committees. The day doesn't end when the last bell rings. We have to be a community."

He also has newfound respect for his fellow teachers.

"I have met a lot of good, talented, motivated people here," he says of Burbank. "I don't think we can blame the teachers for the mess in the Milwaukee schools."

As part of his contract with Teach for America, Schalmo is working on a master's degree from Marquette University. He's enjoying the classes.

“I won’t pretend that a six-week crash course made me completely prepared to be a teacher. I have a lot to learn,” he says.

Schalmo hopes he will be back at Burbank in the fall, although it is not a sure thing. The Milwaukee School District has the right to place him in another school.

That would be a blow to Schalmo — and to Burbank Principal Angela Serio as well. “I just love Tom,” she says. “He has worked out so well, he’s so good, I wish I had a dozen like him.”

Sunny Schubert is a Monona freelance writer and a former editorial writer for the Wisconsin State Journal.