



Christopher Powers/Education Week

**Terrell Williams, center, works with fellow first-year teachers Dawn Fowler, left, and Renee Fisher at a new-teacher institute in Baltimore. Mr. Williams entered The New Teacher Project's Baltimore City Teaching Residency program after 20 years in retail management.**

## The New Teacher Project Brings Holistic Style To Urban Districts

By VAISHALI HONAWAR

*Baltimore, MD*

It's tough to get teachers for urban districts. Not so in Baltimore anymore.

Since 2002, The New Teacher Project has been finding at least 10 applicants for each teaching job it fills for the once hard-to-staff Baltimore district.

Armed with unorthodox recruitment strategies, the group targets midcareer professionals who are looking for a career change and are willing to consider teaching.

The Baltimore City Teaching Residency, as the program is known, has been so successful that the city now hires almost one-fifth of its new public school teachers through it.

"We have realized that the traditional way of recruiting teachers is not going to meet our demands," said Gary Thrift, the director of human resources for the 82,000-student Baltimore schools, who points out that Maryland colleges produce fewer than a third of the total number of new teachers required in the state each year.



**Terrell Williams, right, is part of this year's crop of teachers in Baltimore from The New Teacher Project.**

"There are many individuals who want to teach and are looking for some kind of alternative pathway that will afford them the opportunity to teach," he said.

Since spinning off from Teach For America in 1997, The New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization led mostly by former teachers, has partnered with more than 200 districts, including Atlanta, Chicago, the District of Columbia, and New York City.

Experts attribute the organization's success to its holistic approach: Besides recruiting and training, it helps districts streamline and update antiquated hiring practices that, the project's officials say, keep new teachers away. It also offers certification programs in content areas in three states: Louisiana, Maryland, and Texas.

The project has also partnered on a multidistrict basis with Arkansas, Texas, and Virginia to provide teachers for both urban and rural schools.

"What I think is interesting and valuable about The New Teacher Project is the work they do with districts to help them understand their systemic problems," said Tom Carroll, the president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, a Washington-based research and advocacy group. "They have done a real service by going beyond recruitment to focus on what districts need to do in terms of their hiring policies."

### Groundbreaking Research

The New Teacher Project officials often point to district hiring practices as one of the biggest hurdles that prevent schools from hiring good teachers.

In a study of Chicago released last month, for instance, the project found a late hiring timeline was keeping well-qualified teachers from coming in.

The project also found deep flaws in the teacher-evaluation system for the 415,000-student district. For instance, of 87 schools that were identified as "needing improvement" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2005, a majority did not issue a single unsatisfactory rating against a teacher between 2003 and 2005.

The project has also made itself hard to ignore at a national level, with two groundbreaking reports identifying reasons for the difficulties urban districts face in finding good teachers for their most troubled schools. The first, which had similar themes as the Chicago study, scrutinized the policies of school systems that led to delays in hiring new teachers, and often the loss of good candidates.

The other blamed collective bargaining for standing in the way of hiring the most effective teachers for hard-to-staff schools. It spurred a new law on teacher-transfer policies in California, and was used by the Bush administration to recommend changes to the pending No Child Left Behind reauthorization.

Michelle A. Rhee, who founded The New Teacher Project, said research was not on her mind when she started trying to work with teacher-strapped urban districts.

"We thought one has to go out and aggressively recruit," said Ms. Rhee, who quit her job as chief executive officer of the project in June to become chancellor of the 55,000-student District of Columbia schools. "But that was not actually an accurate portrayal of what the problem was. You can find lots of people who were interested but couldn't get hired because of bureaucratic barriers," she said.

### Long-Term Partnerships

In its 10-year history, the project has grown rapidly. Started by Ms. Rhee with Teach For America founder Wendy Kopp, the New York City-based project now has 130 staff members and \$20 million in annual revenue.

Although Ms. Rhee conceived of The New Teacher Project as a consultancy that would help schools recruit and retain teachers, the focus has moved to building long-term partnerships, said President Timothy Daly. A former Baltimore teacher, he first joined the project in 2000 to help with the rapidly expanding program in New York City. Mr. Daly has since held five different jobs at the project—a testimony to its quick evolution.

"Our strategy over the years has shifted away from going in and starting a program and leaving," he said. "We now partner with [districts] in long-term and meaningful ways."

Observers say one of the reasons The New Teacher Project has succeeded in forging fruitful partnerships with initially skeptical districts is that project leaders do not try to impose change. Project staff members work shoulder to shoulder with district staff members, tailoring the partnership to the district's needs.

"From day one till now, they have worked [with us] in a very collaborative way," said Vicki Bernstein, the executive director of recruitment and policy for the 1.1 million-student New York City schools. "No one knows who they are. They don't have that kind of ego about them."

About a fourth of the new teachers New York City hires each year come through The New Teacher Project, most of them in high-need subjects.

C. Emily Feistritzer, the president of the Washington-based National Center for Alternative Certification, a clearinghouse for information on alternative routes to teacher certification, said the project has done a "brilliant" job of working itself into a district and fulfilling its needs.

"There have been lots of efforts to go into school districts and implement reform efforts, but The New Teacher Project is by far the most successful," she said. "They went to the districts and said this is what we can do for you, ... and part of their demand was to meet with district personnel and get offices in the district.

"So I think the brilliance was the design that they created initially," Ms. Feistritzer said.

### Services Menu

Districts can choose from a host of services the project offers, from helping identify and resolve problems in hiring systems, to training and recruitment programs, to certification.

In Baltimore, the partnership covers the spectrum, but the program is tailored to meet more specific needs here as well. The project, which has used unusual ways of finding candidates like leafleting at coffee shops and bookstores in other districts, placed ads in local newspapers, such as the Baltimore *City Paper*, an alternative weekly, to reach potential teachers.

Teachers are recruited before the start of the school year, and again for winter, said Ami Magunia, the program director of the Baltimore City Teaching Residency.

A new math-immersion program seeks to find teachers in that subject, for which the district has had trouble recruiting. Another program finds and trains teachers specifically for high-poverty schools.

Consultants from the project have also been working with the district to streamline its recruitment process.

“There were things they knew, lessons they had learned, that they could share,” said Mr. Thrift, Baltimore’s human-resources director. The district has now modified questions that administrators ask candidates who come in through traditional programs, created an online application process, and provided a system by which principals can go online, read résumés, and initiate contact with applicants.

### Recruiting Diversity

Since its founding, The New Teacher Project has recruited more than 23,000 teachers for the districts the organization has partnered with. Nearly a third of the recruits are men, and nearly a third belong to racial or ethnic minorities, according to Mr. Daly, the president.

In Baltimore this year, 45 percent of the recruits are men, and nearly 35 percent are members of minority groups.

Teachers in the Baltimore program have two years to acquire their certification from either Johns Hopkins University or the College of Notre Dame, with the district reimbursing 50 percent to 75 percent of the costs. Those earning certification in a high-needs area have all tuition and certification costs remitted. Meanwhile, the recruits teach in the city’s schools as full-fledged teachers.

Still, as with most alternative pathways into teaching, questions about the effectiveness of the teachers prepared through The New Teacher Project linger.

The limited research that exists about the project is positive. A 2006 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, Mass., found that teachers coming in through Teach For America and the project’s New York program do worse, as measured by their students’ reading-test scores, at first than their counterparts who enter via traditional routes. But by the third year, students of alternatively certified and uncertified teachers perform as well as those of traditionally certified teachers.

The study also found that the project’s recruits in New York had attrition rates similar to those of traditionally certified teachers.

Teacher-quality experts such as Mr. Carroll say the success of such pathways should be a “wake-up call” to teacher colleges that they need more programs to prepare teachers for urban districts.

“We have evidence that the better prepared the teacher is, the more likely they are to stay. The longer they stay, the more experienced they get, and the more effective they are,” Mr. Carroll said.

### A New Philosophy

In Baltimore, a five-week institute run by the project this summer put new hires through intensive training in a variety of topics: classroom management, student discipline, and differentiated instruction for students with special needs, among them. Candidates also co-taught at city schools.

This year’s recruits include Terrell Williams, 45, who worked 20 years in retail management; James Latimer, a 54-year-old physician; Carla Blackwell, 26, a vocational-rehabilitation counselor; and Deborah Alleman, 46, a private school teacher.

Mr. Williams said he went back to school and earned a degree in political science last year, but began considering teaching after volunteering at his son’s school and noticing the dearth of male African-American teachers.

He heard of the teaching residency through a friend. “It was rigorous; it was unlike anything I had done before in my life,” Mr. Williams said. But at the end, he said, while he was a bit nervous about opening day, he also felt prepared enough to tackle the job, partly because he had spent years in the workforce.

“The idea is to be absolutely responsible to the customer. ... The concept is still the same [as in management],” Mr. Williams said.

Mr. Thrift, the district’s director of human resources, said The New Teacher Project have been so effective that Baltimore hopes to reduce the number of vacancies at its hardest-to-staff schools when school begins this week to almost zero, from 150 two years ago.

“They’ve affected every aspect of our philosophy, our organization, how we recruit, how we screen, our interviewing techniques,” Mr. Thrift said. “The New Teacher Project has changed the way we do business in Baltimore City Public Schools.”

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