

Teacher training program uses rigorous preparation to produce great instructors

By Ben Velderman

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BOSTON – The Match Education organization has developed a reputation over the past 12 years for operating several high-quality charter schools throughout the Boston area.

Now the organization is garnering national attention for its approach to training future teachers.

It all began in 2008, when Match officials opened a two-year teacher training program for graduate students, known as Match Teacher Residency (MTR).

The MTR program only recently graduated its fifth group of students, but it already has a reputation among school leaders for producing the best and most effective first-year teachers in the nation.

“Their teachers are the best from any graduate school of education in America,” says Scott Given, CEO of Unlocking Potential, an organization dedicated to turning around failing schools. “When we have teacher resumes from the grad schools at Harvard, Stanford and Match, we move fastest to consider the Match candidate. It’s not even a close call.”

Other education leaders apparently share Given’s enthusiasm for Match-trained teachers. According to Match officials, all MTR graduates get hired by a high-performing school (usually a charter school) immediately after they complete the program.

School leaders seek out MTR graduates not only because they’re well-prepared for the classroom, but because they’re likely to stay there. Of the 110 individuals who have completed the MTR program, 90 percent of them are still in the classroom.

That’s a stunning accomplishment – especially in light of new National Council on Teacher Quality analysis that concludes most teacher colleges constitute “an industry of mediocrity” that cranks out thousands of graduates unprepared for the classroom.

The traditional approach to teacher training



So how is Match succeeding in producing effective teachers when so many other programs are failing?

To understand that, it's necessary to understand how the typical teacher prep program is designed. The problems begin with the selection process. Most university-based schools of education will accept almost anyone as a student, as long as they meet modest academic requirements and have a valid student loan account.

Once enrolled, the typical teachers-to-be spend the first couple of semesters reading books and writing papers about the various theories behind classroom management, instructional techniques and discipline.

They also spend an alarming amount of time learning how to bring left wing social justice causes into the classroom.

After that, they serve part of a semester as a practicum in an actual classroom. This practice mostly involves observing and journaling about how a professional educator handles a classroom. If they're lucky, the future teachers will eventually be asked to help out with various tasks, such as grading papers or helping struggling students.

It's only during their last semester that the future teachers are allowed to actually lead a classroom on their own. During those few months, the student teachers get to practice the various theories they've been learning about in class.

Once they pass their student teaching experience – as determined by feedback from their supervising teacher and observations from their professors – they'll receive their teaching certificate.

As a result of their limited hands-on training, most of these beginning teachers will stumble and fumble their way through their first years on the job. Nearly half of them will become so frustrated and overwhelmed that they'll walk away from the profession within five years.

'The only program that kicks people out'

Compare that to Match Education's approach.

Like other leaders of elite organizations, Match officials are extremely selective of whom they let into their program. Match Teacher Residency applicants are carefully screened to ensure they possess the academic skills and mental toughness necessary to become successful, "no excuses" teachers.

Despite attracting interest from some of the nation's top college graduates, Match officials invite less than 10 percent of all applicants to join the MTR program.

Immediately upon entering the program, the future teachers (called "residents") serve as tutors at one of Match Education's Boston-area charter schools. Four days a week, the trainees work closely with a small group of struggling students.

On Fridays and Saturdays during that first year, the residents also take graduate-level classes in which they're provided with very specific ways on how to best manage a classroom, teach math and English, and use student data to improve their teaching.

These classes also help to advance Match's vision of social justice, which is to help disadvantaged students flourish academically.

Match residents also participate in weekly teaching simulations.

The Match website explains this unique practice: "Residents take turns teaching short lessons to one another, with a (professor) watching. As one resident teaches, the others act as students. They answer questions (sometimes correctly, sometimes not), try to pay attention (but sometimes fail), sometimes misbehave intentionally, and do other things that 'real students' tend to do."

After each six-minute practice session, the resident receives very specific feedback from the professor and their peers about areas in which they need to improve. Residents participate in 80 of these practice sessions.

Halfway through their first year, MTR students' skills are put to the test in one final high-stakes classroom teaching simulation. If a resident demonstrates a basic level of competence in managing a classroom and instructing students, he or she is allowed to move on to the student teaching phase of the program.

And if a resident doesn't meet expectations?

"This is the only program that kicks people out for not having adequate skills," says Scott McCue, MTR's chief operating officer, "though it's never been more than 10 percent who are asked to leave."

Another 20 percent may leave the program, for various reasons.

The majority of Match residents move on to student teaching, which lasts from January through May of that first year, and resumes in July for a special summer school session. Each student teacher is observed on a daily basis by their MTR instructor.

By the end of their student teaching and the simulations, Match trainees have received hundreds of hours of experience in the classroom – and a full-time job offer from a high-performing, high-needs urban school.

In a promotional video, one MTR graduate explains how her extensive training prepared her to handle whatever comes her way.

“Because of that, I know there is nothing that can go wrong in a classroom that can throw me off my guard,” the unidentified teacher says. “I’m like, ‘Seen that, done that. What’s next? Bring it on.’”

‘Obsessively data-driven’

Landing a paid, full-time teaching position doesn’t mean residents are finished with the MTR program.

Before MTR students are awarded their Master’s Degree in Effective Teaching from Match, they must first demonstrate their effectiveness over the course of a full school year.

To determine this, Match Education officials rely heavily on multiple forms of data – from student growth (as measured through test scores), feedback from student surveys, and performance scores given by school principals.

“We are obsessively data-driven,” McCue says.

According to McCue, the biggest source of data comes from “blind evaluations” conducted by third-party observers. The observers visit multiple classrooms in a school and rate each teacher’s performance. The evaluations are considered “blind” because the observer doesn’t know which teachers are from Match and which aren’t.

Once an MTR-trainee passes all the quality checkpoints, he or she receives a degree – and their employer receives an educator who can be counted on to produce strong academic results from students.

‘Everything is replicable’

The Match Teacher Residency is undeniably intense, but the program’s rigorous demands serve a greater purpose – namely, to close the achievement gap that exists between America’s white and minority students.

The Match website notes that “MTR graduates are expected to teach for two years in a school that serves a majority of high-poverty students.”

Graduates can choose to work in a traditional public school setting, but Match officials purposely gear the training “for a specific type of urban charter school that tends to offer a very different experience for teachers and students than the surrounding district schools.”

“Because of that, we strongly believe that our graduates will be most effective in these types of charter schools,” the website reads.

But could the Match approach be adopted by traditional teacher colleges?

Kate Walsh, president of National Center on Teacher Quality, thinks so.

“Everything is replicable to some degree,” Walsh tells EAGnews.

She especially likes Match’s practice of having future teachers “ease into the profession” by serving as tutors.

“Those teachers are learning in a responsible way how to enter a classroom,” Walsh says.

Match’s “how-to” approach to teacher training won’t appeal to those who believe teaching is an art, not a science.

McCue understands that criticism, but firmly believes “there’s more science behind becoming a really effective first-year teacher” than art.

“But we’re not experts on becoming a master, 10-year teacher. Maybe there’s more art to that,” McCue says.

“Our baseline is that nobody is especially good at this job when they start. But with a data-driven approach, teachers can get real good, real fast.”