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New breed of teachers created by fellowships

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On this Monday of reckoning, the high school seniors in Matt Coates' class who missed their ACT test during the weekend faced their teacher and offered their excuses. One couldn't get out of work. One had lost an ID. One was on meds after a surgery.

Coates got in their faces about it.

"I'm really surprised you weren't able to get there," he said, gently but sternly, as the kids stared at their shoes or grinned sheepishly. "You had a lot of notice. Clear your schedule next time. Find your ID. Get out of work. Do what it takes."

As teacher-adviser to 13 seniors at **Mapleton Preparatory High School**, in a largely urban Adams County district where six out of 10 kids qualify for subsidized school lunches, Coates is all about getting his kids into college -- and taking the ACT is a key step.

"In this community, the kids aren't naturally inclined to go to college," Coates said later. "There's a lot of fear about going to college -- 'My parents didn't go to college; I don't know if I can survive college.' So we put a ton of support behind convincing them that 'Yeah, you can do college.'"

Bolstering his get-to-college message is Coates' own background: five years as a recruiter for international accounting firm **Deloitte & Touche**.

Like dozens of other Colorado teachers in the last four years, Coates has jumped from the world of business to the classroom with help from an unusual residency fellowship supported by the **Boettcher Foundation**.

The Boettcher Teachers Program covers the cost of earning a teaching license and a master's degree from the University of Denver College of Education, and provides fellows with a \$10,000 living stipend through their first year of coursework.

The fellows learn skills needed in urban districts, including methods of teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds and who are still learning English.

In exchange, Boettcher fellows commit to teaching for five years in either the Mapleton Public Schools or the Adams 12 Five Star Schools. The first year is served as a "teaching resident" working under the supervision of a mentor teacher.

Anyone who leaves before the five-year commitment ends has to repay the cost of the program subsidy. So far, no one has.

"It's the gentle approach to becoming a teacher," said Andra Brill, professor and co-director of the Boettcher program. "And we're really making a difference because we're putting teachers into urban, high-needs districts."

It's one of three education-residency programs of its type in the nation; the others are in Chicago and Boston. New York City and Philadelphia soon will launch their own versions.

The Boettcher program operates under the wing of the Public Education & Business Coalition, a nonprofit partnership of Colorado education and business leaders focused on improving public schools. Leanna Clark, principal at public relations firm Schenkein, is its chairwoman.

Launched in 2003 as a pilot effort, the Boettcher Teachers Program now has a new lease on life. Boettcher Foundation President Tim Schultz has announced it will continue to support the program at \$1 million per year into 2014.

While a few of the 55 current and former Boettcher fellows signed on straight out of college, "It's geared for career changers who can use their skills and talents from their previous career," Brill said. Fellows have ranged from their 20s to their 50s. One was an automotive engineer for 13 years; another was an optometrist; a third came from IBM.

Coates said his business background gives him "a broader perspective about what's out there and helping kids figure out possible career paths than I would have otherwise. This school is a lot about getting kids out into the real world, through internships and so on, and I feel like I have more connections."

Many of Coates' business skills apply directly to his new job, he said.



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Matt Coates, a teacher and adviser at Mapleton Preparatory High School in Adams County School District No. 1, helps student Laura Nielsen apply to college online.

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"He's a really good teacher," said student Tasha Morrison, who hopes to study nursing and help people in Third World countries. "He's a good listener. He's more of a friend that we can talk to about things."

"He talks about how it's important to get into college. With college, you can have a good job and not just work at McDonald's," said student Bobby Montez, who loves cars and wants to become a mechanic.

The Mapleton district where Coates teaches has gained national attention in recent years for its sweeping "reinvention campaign" in which schools have been reorganized around different themes and teaching approaches. In some cases, large campuses have been split into two or more smaller schools.

The campus where Coates teaches, the former **Mapleton High School**, houses both his school -- Mapleton Prep, which emphasizes a personalized learning plan for each student -- and **Front Range Early College**, offering students community college courses while in high school.

Under Mapleton Prep's nontraditional approach, Coates has been with most of the 13 kids in his class since he started three years ago. "It's intense," he said. "You really get to know the kids, their families, what's going on in their lives."

Coates said he had an interest in teaching since he studied English at the University of Kansas years ago, but at first didn't take it seriously as a career option.

"But then, as I was working at Deloitte, I did some volunteer work with Junior Achievement, going out into classrooms and teaching some business curriculum. ... And I thought, wow, I really like this, I'm really good at this.

"But the big obstacle for me was, I'm married, I own a house, how do I just stop and go back to school and make this happen?"

The Boettcher program made it possible, he said. "They support you financially. You get through that first year quickly so you're in the classroom, earning a salary by the second year," Coates said.

His advice to those thinking of following in his footsteps: Do it because of what you're getting into, not what you're getting out of.

"If you think you're ditching the high-pressure business world for a more relaxing career, it's not that," he said. "I work way harder than I ever did at Deloitte, and the stress is way more intense.

"So make sure you're really committed to it. Go sit in some classrooms and observe teachers at work. Learn as much as you can beforehand. It takes everything that you have to give, so make sure that you really, really want it."