
Top maths graduates choose to Teach First

Contributed by Helen Arney, Teach First Graduate Recruitment Manager, harney@teachfirst.org.uk

Forty of the best and brightest British graduates have just embarked on two years as mathematics teachers in some of the most challenging schools in London. Most of them graduated with a 2.1 or above from a top 20 university. Some turned down job offers from prestigious companies for the chance to inspire inner city kids. None of them had seriously considered teaching as a first employment destination before they entered their final year. So how did they find their way into the classroom?

The answer is Teach First (www.teachfirst.org.uk), the independent charity that in just one year has recruited, trained and placed nearly 180 top graduates as teachers in London schools, 40 of them as mathematics teachers.

Teach First addresses a problem that many in higher education understand all too well. Levels of aspiration and achievement of students leaving London schools are often far below what universities and employers would wish for. Many pupils who have the potential to take maths further will not continue to study without the encouragement and inspiration of an excellent teacher; a situation reflected in the falling number of students sitting A-level Mathematics each year.

Research undertaken by management consultants McKinsey & Company showed that the achievement of pupils is critically dependent on getting more great teachers to teach in schools. Perhaps we all remember the one teacher that really made a difference to us personally? Teach First aims to get more teachers like that into challenging schools in London.

The programme works by asking graduates to commit two years to teaching in a challenging London school. After an intensive period of training provided by Canterbury Christ Church University College, graduates on the Teach First programme become classroom teachers. Ongoing training and support ensures that every teacher gains Qualified to Teach Status by the end of the first year. In the second year, they continue to teach full time whilst learning the theory and practice of leadership through a "mini MBA" provided by a leading business school. Extra opportunities include internships and mentoring from some of Teach First supporters, ranging from political parties to investment banks, and from non-profit organisations to law and consultancy firms.

After two years of this development Teach First participants can choose to stay in education or move into business, voluntary or public sectors. Whatever route they choose, their two years on the Teach First programme will have made a significant impact on the lives of many pupils. In addition to this, graduates will have gained practical leadership experience a deeper understanding of the grass roots issues in educational

under-achievement that will stay with them for life, whether they continue in the education sector or not.

Tom Evans joined Teach First in 2003, after graduating from St. Hugh's College, Oxford with a degree in Maths and Philosophy. *"When I read about Teach First last year, it grabbed me straight away. Here was a chance to get real life experience, responsibility and development. It was also the biggest challenge of all the jobs out there... I don't know any of my friends who are going on to do something quite this high impact. Teach First just seems a little "bigger" than the rest. I also felt that this was somehow right. I knew that I had benefited from a great education, while someone close to me had been through a tough time at school. He was really bright, but was getting lost in the system. This is my chance to make a real difference; to change that system."*

During this past year, over 1300 finalists and graduates applied for the 180 Teach First positions. Although about half of the participants are from Oxford, Cambridge or Imperial College London, and they have an overall 29 average UCAS points, good academic result are not enough to get onto the Teach First programme. Those accepted must successfully prove their leadership, resilience, communication skills, ability to work with cultures other than their own, ability to deal with adversity, and humility.

This year, Teach First is collaborating with the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts to develop a new way for mathematics degree students to engage in innovative communication of their subject. The Teach First Challenge is a competition being piloted at five selected university campuses this year, and there are plans to roll out nationally next year.

We are asking undergraduates and postgraduates to think of an innovative new project or tool that will get failing inner city pupils excited about an area of mathematics, science, IT or design & technology. Working as individuals or teams, entrants will submit a project plan and, if selected for the final round, present their idea to a panel of leaders in education, industry and the public understanding of science.

...continued on page 56