

April 23, 2014

Good evening

I am a Special Education Teacher and HEA President

I have a couple of topics tonight: **appreciation and integrity.**

### **Appreciation and Integrity**

I hope that every school board in the US is in the process of acknowledging their teaching staff as we approach “Teacher Appreciation Week”. It would be insensitive not to. I had an amazing teacher leader at one of our schools say to me just yesterday – “I knew I was accepting a dangerous job and I entered anyway.”

I know that many of you and many in the Highline community sincerely do appreciate everyone working in our schools. Yet, this is a bit difficult to reconcile given the new landscape that Highline Schools has entered into a contract with Teach for America. Wendy Kopp, founder of TFA, states, **“We are a leadership development organization, not a teaching organization.”**

Highline needs teachers to commit to teaching our Highline students and teachers who want to build relationships with families, Not individuals who want to use our students as career builders.

This leads me to integrity.

Integrity is one of my core values as an individual. Teach for America demonstrates the absence of integrity to me on so many levels. I have a story of a first year teacher to share. This story demonstrates how TFA preys on young bright college students to carry out their agenda rather than actually care about the students in my classroom. This is a teacher I know. To protect identity, I’ll name this teacher Mr. Romanelli.

Mr. Romanelli knew he wanted to be a teacher, went to Gonzaga, earned his credential and developed his awesome leadership skills through the 4 years at Gonzaga by being a strong student who was actively involved in activities and organizations that are available there. Last spring this young talented teacher

was recruited by TFA. No, let me correct that – hounded by TFA. Mr. Romanelli declined participation 2 or 3 times. But the recruiter kept returning with bigger and better offers about how TFA was going to shape his future. When offered assistance to earn certification, Mr. R replied, “I have certification. I don’t need your help.” Then the offer of financial assistance to pay off student loan debt came. When you are 20 something, how do you decline loan payoff? You don’t! In addition to his K-8 certificate, Mr. R wanted a special ed certificate. TFA – lied to him stating that they could help him with this, but indeed TFA cannot do that at this time. Mr. R learned this after agreeing to join. TFA lied in order to get Mr. R to say yes. Oh, and Mr. R is a person of color. TFA promises school districts to help with recruitment of teachers of color. Mr. R. would have been recruited at any one of the job fairs here in WA likely by many school districts here in the state of Washington. Mr. R didn’t need TFA to secure a job. And in fact, secured a job without TFA’s assistance.

TFA has promised \$5500 in assistance for student loan pay off and if he stays a second year, he will receive an additional \$5500 for loan pay off. TFA is recruiting students who are leaving university, nervous about getting a job. There are many college graduates without jobs. They are staring at tens of thousands of dollars of debt. TFA- assures them of a job, offers financial incentive and 5 weeks of training immediately before throwing them into a classroom. What TFA did NOT do was also educate this young college student about how there are federal programs already set up for any teacher who commit to teaching at our high needs schools for THREE or FIVE years – NOT TWO YEARS. Their loans are forgiven. A personal friend of mine recently earned her Masters at Evergreen College and now teaches in the Clover Park School District and her loans will be paid. If TFA had any integrity, they would share that information with the bright young college students that they are recruiting. There are many teachers here in Highline that have had loans paid through the federal program because they chose long term careers working with our high needs students here in Highline.

Mr. R attended the TFA 5 week Institute in New York last summer. I quote, “It was awful! No way can you teach after 5 weeks of training.” The program was what I learned my first semester of my freshman year at Gonzaga. I had 3.5 more

years of preparation.” When Mr. R considered leaving the training after being shamed, TFA responded, no, please don’t leave. You see -TFA wants, no needs this person, because this person TRULY is talented, is a leader, actually chose teaching long before he knew about TFA, and almost the worst part to me –is that TFA is using his race to boost TFA stats. TFA is going to claim success around a teacher of color who IS already successful because he knew from an early age he wanted to teach young people, attended Gongaza, sought full training, earned the certification and to quote him- “I’m livin’ the dream.” How dare TFA take credit for any part of that! Mr. R tells me “I could to it over again. I would not do it.”

I will finish by referencing a couple of article - an article in The Atlantic written by Olivia Blanchard. She is a writer based in Oxford, England. She taught elementary school in Atlanta Georgia with TFA . She describes her experience in detail during the school year 11-12. She quit during that year – as titled – I Quit Teach for America. She ends her article with:

*“I have just been hired at a private company whose vision statement says nothing about closing the achievement gap, and the time has come to send TFA an e-mail announcing that I am leaving the program. I have only completed one year of my two-year commitment, knowing full well that this kind of mission-shirking is seen as a very serious, selfish betrayal within TFA. However, the reality is that my employer has been Atlanta Public Schools, my contract with the district was only for one year, and most of my teaching experiences have been defined by the messy struggles of Atlanta Public Schools, not the comfortable mantras of TFA. I steel myself against the possibility of criticism, against accusations of apathy, inability, or lack of leadership.*

When I hit the Send button, I am flooded with relief rather than dread. Because the truth is, by finally showing I don’t believe that American education can be saved by youthful enthusiasm, I feel more like a leader than I ever did inside the corps.”

**From the Center for Education Policy Analysis - Pam Grossman, Professor of Education at Stanford University writes:**

“Teaching is at serious risk of becoming nothing more than a short-term, public service opportunity. A study produced by Univ. of Michigan, Stanford and Univ. of Virginia found that student achievement in math and English in grades 4-6 was negatively impacted by high teacher turnover. She states – The crossroad is clearly marked. We can invest in the development of highly skilled and well-prepared teachers and create incentives and working conditions to keep them in the profession. Or we can continue to fill schools, particularly high poverty school with students most in need of high quality teaching with short-term teachers. To pursue the latter path would only increase the disparities in educational opportunity and achievement that are growing in our society.

Let’s talk more about supporting teachers to help them stay in the profession and improve their craft. As one bumper sticker reads: **You can’t put children first if you put teachers last.”**

Please reconsider moving forward with Teach for America.

Thank you for listening.