

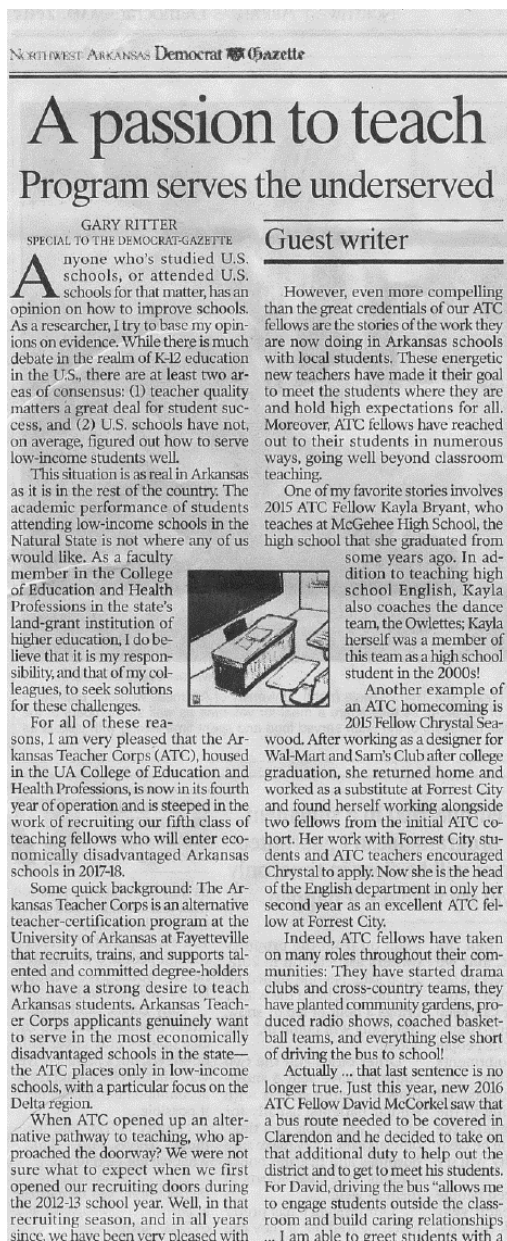
A Passion to Teach: Program Serves the Underserved

By Gary W. Ritter to the Democrat Gazette

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Anyone who's studied U.S. schools, or attended U.S. schools for that matter, has an opinion on how to improve schools. As a researcher, I try to base my opinions on evidence. While there is much debate in the realm of K-12 education in the U.S., there are at least two areas of consensus: (1) teacher quality matters a great deal for student success, and (2) U.S. schools have not, on average, figured out how to serve low-income students well.



GARY RITTER
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

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This situation is as real in Arkansas as it is in the rest of the country. The academic performance of students attending low-income schools in the Natural State is not where any of us would like. As a faculty member in the College of Education and Health Professions in the state's land-grant institution of higher education, I do believe that it is my responsibility, and that of my colleagues, to seek solutions for these challenges.

For all of these reasons, I am very pleased that the Arkansas Teacher Corps (ATC), housed in the UA College of Education and Health Professions, is now in its fourth year of operation and is steeped in the work of recruiting our fifth class of teaching fellows who will enter economically disadvantaged Arkansas schools in 2017-18.

Some quick background: The Arkansas Teacher Corps is an alternative teacher-certification program at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville that recruits, trains, and supports talented and committed degree-holders who have a strong desire to teach Arkansas students. Arkansas Teacher Corps applicants genuinely want to serve in the most economically disadvantaged schools in the state—the ATC places only in low-income schools, with a particular focus on the Delta region.

When ATC opened up an alternative pathway to teaching, who approached the doorway? We were not sure what to expect when we first opened our recruiting doors during the 2012-13 school year. Well, in that recruiting season, and in all years since, we have been very pleased with

Guest writer

However, even more compelling than the great credentials of our ATC fellows are the stories of the work they are now doing in Arkansas schools with local students. These energetic new teachers have made it their goal to meet the students where they are and hold high expectations for all. Moreover, ATC fellows have reached out to their students in numerous ways, going well beyond classroom teaching.

One of my favorite stories involves 2015 ATC Fellow Kayla Bryant, who teaches at McGehee High School, the high school that she graduated from some years ago. In addition to teaching high school English, Kayla also coaches the dance team, the Owlettes; Kayla herself was a member of this team as a high school student in the 2000s!

Another example of an ATC homecoming is 2015 Fellow Chrystal Seawood. After working as a designer for Wal-Mart and Sam's Club after college graduation, she returned home and worked as a substitute at Forrest City and found herself working alongside two fellows from the initial ATC cohort. Her work with Forrest City students and ATC teachers encouraged Chrystal to apply. Now she is the head of the English department in only her second year as an excellent ATC fellow at Forrest City.

Indeed, ATC fellows have taken on many roles throughout their communities: They have started drama clubs and cross-country teams, they have planted community gardens, produced radio shows, coached basketball teams, and everything else short of driving the bus to school!

Actually ... that last sentence is no longer true. Just this year, new 2016 ATC Fellow David McCorkel saw that a bus route needed to be covered in Clarendon and he decided to take on that additional duty to help out the district and to get to meet his students. For David, driving the bus "allows me to engage students outside the classroom and build caring relationships ... I am able to greet students with a

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years since, we have been very pleased with the hundreds of high-energy, accomplished, and passionate people who have applied.

Each year, we have been flooded with more than 100 applicants and have been able to select excellent fellows each year. For example, our 2013 cohort included a fellow with a Ph.D. in chemical engineering seeking to teach upper-level math courses in the Delta. In recent years, we have been lucky to select a Ph.D. in literature from Notre Dame who now teaches high school English, a master of public administration degree-holder turned math teacher, and a social entrepreneur and corporate executive with more than 15 years of experience in business. And so many others. Our ATC fellows are passionate, committed, and smart--the average ACT score of our fellows places them in the top quarter of test-takers across the country.

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At the Arkansas Teacher Corps, we are thrilled that our 50+ current ATC fellows are contributing to low-income communities across Arkansas right now!

At ATC central, our immediate goal is to recruit many more committed future educators for our 2017 cohort. The next application deadline is Jan. 3, and applications will be accepted through March 5. To learn more or to apply for a 2017 fellowship, please visit us online at ArkansasTeacherCorps.org.

***Gary W. Ritter is a professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas and the Faculty Director of the Arkansas Teacher Corps.*