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Student teacher Ebelia Mucino with fourth graders at Darwin Elementary School in Chicago

ADULT EDUCATION

Grow Your Own Teachers

Many of the best candidates already live in the neighborhood

By Eddy Ramírez

A few years ago, Chicago public schools would have taken a pass on Anita Sanders's job application. A 42-year-old mother of three, Sanders aspired to become a teacher but lacked the credentials. Even though she had worked for four years as a teacher's assistant, she nevertheless was a college dropout. Maria Marquez, 40, also would have failed to make the cut. She set her sights on teaching after mentoring English-language learners in a neighborhood school, but she, too, didn't have a college degree. Neither did Ebelia Mucino, who fell in love with teaching as a volunteer in a classroom with bilingual students. A native of Mexico, Mucino had barely a high school education.

Today, these women are just the type of teachers the city's schools are looking for. Tired of seeing first-year teachers flee to suburban schools, Illinois is spending \$7.5 million to help people like Sanders, Marquez, and Mucino become teachers in underperforming schools in neighborhoods like their own. The initiative is called Grow Your Own Illinois

and aims to prepare 1,000 such teachers by 2016. Candidates, mostly women of color from low-income communities, receive forgivable college loans of up to \$25,000 in exchange for a minimum five-year commitment to teach in underserved schools.

"These teachers pass the ZIP code test," says Anne Hallett, director of Grow Your Own. "They are people who already know the kids, who love the kids, and who want to make their neighborhood

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schools better." Similar initiatives have sprouted in urban school districts across the country. In Broward County, Fla., schools give college scholarships and guarantee jobs to high school students who return as certified teachers. In

Seattle, the emphasis is on developing teachers from immigrant groups while schools in Long Beach, Calif., work with local colleges to produce teachers in the hard-to-staff areas of science and math.

The success of such programs hinges on funding from private donors and the state and ongoing collaboration among neighborhood groups, universities, and school districts that work as teams to recruit, train, and place teachers in class-

rooms. For the Illinois candidates, the biggest challenge has been juggling the responsibilities of schoolwork, jobs, and family life. Nearly all of the 587 recruits—most started last year—have at least a high school diploma. But it has been years since they set foot in a classroom. Already, the stress has proved too much for some: Since 2006, 43 have quit.

Neighborhood groups and schools work closely with local colleges to screen applicants. The candidates have to show promising ability based on transcripts, an interview, and performance on a test in order to qualify for loans and gain entrance into a university. There

they must meet the same graduation requirements as any other student pursuing a teaching degree. But the Grow Your Own candidates receive additional mentoring support and financial aid for child care and transportation.

"They don't feel sorry for poor kids," Madeline Talbott, a community organizer who lobbied for passage of the Grow Your Own state law, says of the recruits. "They know what it takes to succeed, and they're willing to help, and they understand it takes love, but they don't think love is any more important than hard work."

Maureen Gillette, dean of the College of Education at Northeastern Illinois University, is examining if the Grow Your Own approach can work where others have failed. Few minorities choose teaching as a career, and the number has been declining. "Students today are looking at pay and benefits. It makes it tough for us to compete [with other professions]," Gillette says. "This program will have a lot to say about how to help adults, community-based folks, enter the career of teaching."

For Mucino, a mother of three who used to work as a salesperson, the journey to become a teacher has taken seven years. Though she has one more semester at Chicago State University, she is a student teacher at Darwin Elementary, where her fourth-grade students have been learning about fossils and how geometry is useful to engineers. "This was the opportunity I was looking for," she says. "It's like I won the lottery." ●