

**Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee**

Testimony: Craig Baker, Chief Education Officer, DOMUS, Stamford, CT

Good afternoon. My name is Craig Baker and I am the Chief Education Officer of DOMUS in Stamford, CT. DOMUS is a non-for profit educational and social services agency whose mission is to serve the underserved. We operate after school programs, group homes for boys and our two charter schools, Trailblazers Academy Middle School and Stamford Academy High School. I have been with our organization for ten years and in this role at DOMUS for the last three. I came to work at our middle school as an 8th grade social studies teacher in 1999 and then went on to direct the school and now oversee both our charter schools.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the legislation that would allow the State Board of Education to establish a resident teacher certificate, which would enable schools in Connecticut to continue to attract and hire Teach For America corps members and additionally allow corps members to teach in Stamford.

There are currently seven corps members teaching at our two charter schools this year. I have personally hired our seven corps members this past year, and many of them are among the strongest and most capable teachers that we currently employ. Teaching is a difficult job to begin with. That is more so true at our schools, which purposely attract those students in the city of Stamford who have struggled in their traditional schools academically, socially and behaviorally. Because of our mission, it is often difficult to

recruit and attract the type of teachers our students so richly deserve. The Teach for America program has given us that elusive opportunity. Core members not only have high-level content knowledge, but most important to me as a school leader, they continually reflect, analyze, and seek feedback on their work to improve instruction and raise student achievement.

I know that many other principals in Connecticut and throughout the country have had similar positive experiences with Teach For America corps members in their schools. According to a 2007 study by Policy Studies Associates, Inc., an independent research firm in Washington, D.C., 96 percent of principals surveyed¹ reported they are satisfied with the Teach For America teachers working in their schools. In addition, 95 percent rated Teach For America teachers as effective as other beginning teachers in terms of overall performance and impact on student achievement.

But beyond the statistics, I am here to tell you in person that after only one year of employing corps members, but after several years of employing teachers, these young men and women have been the most able to handle our very steep learning curve. You see, in trying to find quality teachers who fit our mission, it is of paramount importance to me that we attract professionals who understand what we are trying to accomplish. Our students come to us on average, reading 3.5 grade levels behind. They have often time become disenfranchised with schooling. We need teachers who understand the challenge and embrace it. The analogy I use all the time is that a person doesn't sign up

¹ A total of 785 principals in 25 regions during the 2005-2006 school year were surveyed.

for the Peace Corps to help people in a remote village in Africa and complain that there isn't a fancy bathroom.

I have been extremely impressed with the preparation, training, and support that Teach For America provides to its teachers. Before they begin their first year of teaching, all corps members' complete independent work, attend an intensive training institute during the summer, and participate in local orientations held in the communities they will be teaching. During the institute, they not only gain the knowledge and skills they need to be effective teachers, but they also are given the opportunity to teach in summer school classrooms. Throughout the school year, Teach For America provides its teachers with personal, one-on-one support and professional development – this is in addition to what the schools and district provide – to foster their growth.

As Chief Education Officer for DOMUS, one of my goals is to staff my schools with the best, most effective teachers. It makes no difference to me how they entered the profession. What matters is what type of results they produce in the classroom. Teach For America has proven to be an important resource for me in staffing my schools. The core of experienced teachers on my staff, continues to drive the success of my schools. However, I also believe that the school benefits from the high energy and laser like focus on student achievement that Teach For America teachers bring to bear. I am deeply concerned that if the State Board of Education does not establish a resident teacher certificate, Teach For America corps members will not be able to teach in the neediest schools in Connecticut.

Up until this time, the Connecticut Department of Education has permitted Teach For America corps members to enter the classroom on a 90-day temporary certificate during which they fully meet all accreditation standards in its teacher certification program. The Connecticut Department of Education intends to rescind the use of the temporary certificate to provide a 90-day grace period. Without this grace period, I am told that Teach For America may not be able to place teachers in Connecticut in the future.

I therefore strongly urge you to pass the legislation that is before you that would establish a resident teacher certificate, which would guarantee that Teach For America teachers in Connecticut to earn their full certification over the course of a year during a “residency” period. This model, I believe, allows Teach For America to deliver its professional training so that the teachers get the most of it, which clearly benefits their students as well.

Secondly, currently there is some language in the existing law that only allows corps members to teach in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven. As a charter school organization in Stamford our schools serve students 80% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. These are some of the neediest students in the state. I need this language changed so that we can continue to attract these highly motivated corps members to our schools.

That is what I am here today, and that is why I ask you to support this new bill. Thank you for your time.

