

From Teach For America to Obama's Camp

By David J. Hoff

Michael Johnston and Jason Kamras have a lot in common. The thirtysomethings both graduated from Ivy League universities, did two-year stints with Teach For America, and now are using the lessons from their TFA experiences to change educational practices in their new hometowns.



They're also taking Teach For America's message into another realm as volunteer advisers to Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

Both Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras characterize their roles in the Illinois Democrat's campaign as informal. They point out the final decisions about what education policies to propose and emphasize are made by the candidate himself and senior staff members in the campaign's Chicago headquarters.

But their contribution to a presidential campaign shows one of the ways that alumni of the New York City-based TFA are continuing their involvement in the world of education policymaking.

"TFA is front and center in the emerging generation of policy leaders," said Thomas Toch, a co-director of Education Sector, a Washington think tank. "This is sort of the logical extension of the work on reform that TFA has been committed to for nearly two decades."

That influence is going to continue to grow, said Heather McLeod Grant, the co-author of *Forces for Good*, a book examining how TFA, Habitat for Humanity, and other nonprofit groups are influencing social policy.

"These are Rhodes Scholars par excellence," Ms. Grant, a consultant for the Monitor Institute, a firm with offices in Cambridge, Mass., and San Francisco that advises nonprofits, said of TFA alumni. "These are the future leaders of our country."

Teachers to Leaders

Since 1990, Teach For America has been placing recent college graduates—many of them from highly selective colleges—into hard-to-staff schools for two-year tours of duty as teachers. The number of working "corps members," as the organization calls its teachers, has grown dramatically. In 2000, there were 500 new recruits, while for the 2008-09 school year, there were 3,700. (And they join their colleagues who are working the second year of a typical two-year commitment.) TFA now has more than 14,000 alumni.

One of TFA's goals is for those alumni to help shape policy based on their experiences teaching children from low-income

families, said Kevin Huffman, the executive vice president of the organization. Of the alumni, about two-thirds are working in education or pursuing advanced degrees in the field. Of those, 360 are school principals.

Probably the highest-profile former TFA corps member is Michelle A. Rhee, who became the chancellor of the District of Columbia public schools last year. Other alumni have worked as congressional aides and in President Bush's administration, while still others have taken on other leadership and entrepreneurial roles in education policy. (See *Education Week*, April 25, 2001.)

Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras fit that mold. Mr. Johnston, a 1997 Yale University graduate, is the principal of the Mapleton Expeditionary School of the Arts in Thornton, Colo., just north of Denver. In June, Sen. Obama visited Mr. Johnston's school to highlight his education agenda.

Mr. Kamras, a 1996 Princeton University graduate, taught middle school in the nation's capital as a corps member in the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years. After that TFA stint, he continued teaching in the Washington school system through the end of the 2003-04 school year.

He was named the National Teacher of the Year in 2005, and enrolled in Harvard University's graduate school of education. After earning his master's degree, he rejoined the District of Columbia school system as the director of human capital, where he is helping negotiate a new teacher contract that would introduce a pay-for-performance plan to the 50,000-student district.

While both TFA alums have direct influence over school policies in their day jobs, Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras say they have less sway over the education platform of the Obama campaign. Most of their work has been responding to the campaign staff's requests for ideas and information.

"When issues are being thought about, they will seek information and feedback," Mr. Kamras said.

In July, though, both men began taking roles speaking on behalf of the campaign. In interviews, Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras said the Obama campaign invited them separately to advise it last year. Both said they decided to support the senator because they believe he has made the biggest commitment to improving the quality of teachers and principals.

They also said that Sen. Obama is willing to listen to a variety of points of view and doesn't always side with teachers' unions and other interest groups that traditionally have sup-

ported Democrats.

“He obviously seeks input from a broad variety of people,” Mr. Johnston said of the presumptive Democratic nominee. “He’ll take ideas from all sides, and it’s his job to provide a synthesis of them.”

Promoting Pay Plan

The issue of merit pay is one area where Sen. Obama differs from the national teachers’ unions and many other Democrats. Shortly after entering the U.S. Senate in 2005, he introduced a bill that would create competitive grants for innovative school districts. He reintroduced the bill in 2007, but it hasn’t advanced in the legislative process.

Under the bill, the grants would support experiments that paid teachers based on their performance as measured by the academic growth of their students. Such experiments would need to be negotiated between the districts and teachers’ unions.

Even though Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras weren’t instrumental in seeding such ideas, they have promoted them in their appearances on behalf of the campaign.

As a participant in a July 15 panel discussion in Washington organized by the Business Roundtable, an organization of top corporate executives that is active on education issues, Mr. Kamras said Sen. Obama’s proposal to experiment with paying teachers extra for producing student-achievement gains is an example of the candidate’s willingness “to challenge the orthodoxy on both the left and the right in the best interest of children.”

Mr. Johnston offered a similar endorsement when he met with reporters at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a Washington think tank, last month.

By contrast, Linda Darling-Hammond, a prominent teacher-policy expert advising the Democrat’s campaign, and a fre-

quent critic of Teach For America, initially was evasive about whether Sen. Obama would endorse linking teacher pay to student achievement at a July 23 forum in New Orleans organized by the National Conference of State Legislatures.

After Lisa Graham Keegan, an education adviser to the presidential campaign of Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the presumptive Republican nominee, asked her directly where Sen. Obama stood on the issue, Ms. Darling-Hammond said the Democrat would endorse experiments with increasing teacher pay based on test scores, as long as the additional compensation was not based on a single test score.

Although Mr. Johnston and Mr. Kamras may prove to have influence on policy ideas within the Obama campaign, any part played by TFA alumni in the 2008 presidential season seems likely to be overshadowed by that of the 3.2 million-member National Education Association and the 1.4 million-member American Federation of Teachers.

Staff Writer Michele McNeil contributed to this report from New Orleans.

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