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Teach For America grows in Ariz.

By 2008, 400 corps members will aid poor kids

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The Arizona Republic

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Angelica Cruz thought about leaving her Phoenix classroom when she believed the challenge ahead of her would be too hard.

The 2004 Tufts University graduate faced the test of preparing a class of kindergarteners for the first grade.

"It was rough and really hard," Cruz said because she said she was asked to make huge achievements for kids already well below average.

Cruz committed two years with the Isaac Elementary School District under the national Teach For America program of recent college graduates who agree to teach in low-income urban and rural communities.

The goal is to minimize the gap along socioeconomic and racial lines present throughout the country.

"It's really empowering after you do it," Cruz said.

In the 2006-07 school year, 170 Teach For America members directly impacted the lives of 14,500 students in Phoenix area schools, according to Andrea Stouder, executive director of the Phoenix region for Teach For America.

The national program began in 1990 and started in 1994 in Arizona.

Arizona influence grows

Teach For America's influence on Arizona is growing. By fall, there will be 300 Phoenix corps members teaching 25,000 Valley elementary and high school students.

And by 2008, the corps will grow to 400 members influencing the lives of 34,000 Arizona students, Stouder said.

Stacia Bourne, a first-year teacher with Teach For America and a Seattle University graduate, teaches special

education for kindergarten through third-grade students at Bicentennial South School in the Glendale Elementary School District.

"I didn't realize how attached I'd get to the students," she said. "You don't see the big picture very often, it's a slow process but I've seen how far students have come academically and personally in just a couple months."

Bourne said once she is done with her contract she will stay in education but may pursue law school so that she can make a difference on a policy level.

Many continue teaching

About 60 percent of Teach For America alumni continue their careers in education even after their time with the program ends.

This year's Arizona "Teacher of the Year" Kristin Bourget is a Teach For America alumni. The Marana High School biology teacher had participated in Teach For America in Louisiana nearly a decade ago.

After Cruz's commitment to Teach For America expired last year, she moved to the Creighton Elementary School District in Phoenix.

She recently completed her master's degree in education from Arizona State University.

She said is glad to make a difference in her students' lives.

"They make me so happy it's hard not to be happy," she said.

Damon Twist, who is Cruz's principal at Excelencia Elementary school in Phoenix, is also a Teach For America alumni.

He committed to Teach For America 13 years ago in Washington, D.C.

Twist said Teach For America members are naturally a culture of high expectations.

"We do believe we can develop an example," he said, adding that he would like to accomplish what corps members can in a classroom but on a schoolwide level.

"All our kids will learn by whatever means necessary."