

Teach for America a model for the rest of us

By Sandra Deal

Nearly every week, I bring the Read Across Georgia initiative to schools around the state. Recently, I helped celebrate Teach for America Week by reading to Pre-K and kindergarten students at Brookview and Hamilton E. Holmes elementary schools in East Point and Kipp Strive Primary in Atlanta.

The students were quiet and orderly, eagerly awaiting a story. As I read “Who I’d Like to Be” by Elizabeth Brown, I encouraged them to interact, to ask questions, to think beyond the book and relate the story to their experiences. They responded enthusiastically, already in love with reading. That excitement about learning springs from the efforts of dedicated teachers committed to helping students develop the skills necessary to read independently.

Teach for America brings this expertise to schools across the state and nation. In the metro Atlanta region alone, Teach for America sponsors 260 teachers who challenge young Georgians to strive for excellence.

Those involved with Teach for America commit to serve in underserved areas, both rural and urban. They make a difference in the lives of children who are eager to learn but might not receive the educational support at home needed to excel in the classroom. Since 1991, Teach for America has recruited, trained and supported top college graduates and professionals to commit to teach in our schools for two years, alongside other dedicated educators, and become lifelong leaders in the movement to expand educational opportunity.

Teach for America Week is a good time to focus on a goal that my husband, Gov. Nathan Deal, and I share: having every third-grader reading on grade level. Prior to third grade, students are learning the basics of how to read. After third grade they are reading to learn and they will need to be skilled readers to extract the information necessary to succeed in higher grades.

Reading can be fun, but it also requires hard work. The preparation for reading begins with conversations and exposure to language while children are babies. The more words they learn, the more prepared they will be to learn to read. The more books read to them, the greater their vocabulary.

Sadly, those opportunities are not readily accessible to every child growing up in Georgia. That puts the burden on communities and schools to break the cycle of illiteracy. Education is the great equalizer, and we as caring people of Georgia and America must supplement what great teachers provide in classrooms with educational support outside of schools.

Our children need people to read to them and ask thought-provoking questions. They need people to listen to them read, help them sound out words and make sense of the sentences. This requires lots of patience and a commitment of time. Not every child has parents who are capable, willing or able to listen and help. Teachers need the support of caregivers and mentors to assist students with practice.

Our children are our most valuable asset. We want them to dream big and work toward those goals. Regardless of students' economic backgrounds, they can excel academically and become "who they would like to be" if we teach them how to read at a high level. They will have the confidence to own their own businesses, lead our state or

nation in the political arena, or become teachers who change lives and help generations of children rise above all expectations.

Alongside the thousands of great teachers who spend an entire career in the classroom, Teach for America is a critical partner in our community's effort to realize this vision. You can be too.

Sandra Deal is the first lady of Georgia.