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INTERVIEW

Creating a "Relay" of Highly Effective Teachers: An Interview with Norman Atkins

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Creating a “Relay” of Highly Effective Teachers:

An Interview with Norman Atkins of Relay Graduate School of Education

Norman Atkins established the Relay Graduate School of Education (Relay) in 2007 to fundamentally change the way the United States educates teachers. Recently cited by the U.S. Department of Education as an organization “demonstrating vital leadership in improving teacher preparation,” Relay strives to create a “relay” of exceptional teachers to close the opportunity gap—an idea based on research showing that three successive years spent with highly effective teachers can eradicate the achievement gap for low-income and other at-risk students. Relay’s mission and approach was born from Atkins’ active involvement in anti-poverty efforts as well as firsthand experience founding and leading Uncommon Schools, a growing network of high-performing charter public schools in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts.

Relay turns the traditional teacher-training model on its head. At Relay, aspiring teachers spend the majority of their time working directly with students in the classroom while receiving coaching and feedback from experienced educators. Relay focuses on providing the practical knowledge and skills needed to be effective in the classroom; about 40% of Relay courses are accessed online, with video lessons demonstrating practical techniques that can be immediately applied to engage students in learning. Success at Relay is defined not by passing exams, but by demonstrating student growth in the classroom. Initial evidence indicates this groundbreaking model is working—more than 90% of those who participated in the two-year Relay Master’s program effected at least a year’s worth of student growth in one year’s time.

Now in its fifth year as an independent institution and accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education and by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Relay has over 2,750 alumni and 2,400 current students. There are Relay campuses in 10 states and counting, and Relay student-teachers are teaching in more than 50 school districts and charter networks across the United States. As Relay continues to grow, Atkins hopes to encourage more district and school leaders to invest in strengthening their greatest asset—their teachers—in order to give all students the greatest opportunity to succeed.

In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim and DMC Associate Melissa Donaher, Norman Atkins explains the inspiration and strategy behind Relay’s innovative teacher-training program, and discusses how school districts can create a highly skilled and effective teaching force.



At Relay, we believe that becoming a great teacher or principal is much like becoming a great musician or surgeon: it takes continuous practice, feedback, and dedication.

—Norman Atkins
Co-founder and President
Relay Graduate School of Education

How has your personal experience shaped your views about the U.S. education system?

I grew up north of Chicago in Evanston, Illinois, in a predominantly white community. But when I was five years old, I was put on a bus to attend a lab school, a public school, across town in a black neighborhood. As a child of *Brown v. Board of Education*, I feel that going to school in a diverse community and being surrounded by diverse teachers was essential to my educational experience. I had phenomenal black women teachers who not only taught me how to read and do math, but welcomed me with open arms and open hearts, and instilled in me a love of school and a desire to be a lifelong learner.

But by high school, even in this pioneering district, I was troubled to see that the white and black kids were living very separate lives and were on divergent paths. Not only were the black kids sitting at separate lunch tables and participating on different sports teams, but the Advanced Placement and advanced-track classes were predominantly white, while the lower-level and special education classes were predominantly black. After high school, white students were going off to attend four-year colleges in great numbers, but this was less true for the black students.

Even today in the most strongly integrated districts around the country, we are not seeing the outcomes for African American and Latino children that we should be. And it isn't just going to happen automatically. Having African American, Latino, and Asian students sit next to white

students is not going to erase the opportunity gap, as psychologist and theorist Kenneth Clark argues. One needs to be incredibly conscientious and purposeful to ensure a high quality of instruction and to create opportunities so all students are able to succeed.

Was it this experience of attending an integrated school that brought you to the education sector?

Early in my career, this experience led me to be interested in fighting poverty more broadly. In my work with the Robin Hood Foundation in New York, I visited countless homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and programs for people with AIDS. But I kept coming up against this idea that the best way to combat poverty was with education. I became increasingly convinced that improving public schools was the most efficient and effective way to create opportunities for low-income kids.

I was living in Montclair, New Jersey—I had moved there for the public schools for my own kids. And then, in the 1990s, New Jersey passed a charter school law, and it seemed like a lofty invitation to people like me to make the magic of a small mission-driven school for low-income kids work. I raised my hand to start one of the first charter schools in Newark, New Jersey, in 1997. The mission of North Star Academy was to prepare low-income African American and Latino students to enter and graduate from college and lead choice-filled lives. Parents were very receptive of this model, and soon, North Star grew from a single school to a network of charter schools that became Uncommon Schools. Since then, Uncommon

RELAY/GSE

Learn.
Practice.
Perform.

The Relay Graduate School of Education is a nontraditional teacher-training program with the mission of creating a “relay” of effective teachers who are able to close the achievement gap for students across America. Relay Graduate School of Education is a national, accredited, nonprofit institution of higher education.

- Relay delivers teacher education through a “**nurse practitioner**” model: **practice above theory**, with teacher certification linked to demonstrated results in the classroom

Schools has expanded across the Northeast, and currently serves 16,000 students in 49 schools.

With a successful and rapidly expanding network of charter schools, what led you to start Relay?

I was sitting with David Levin, the founder of KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Charter Schools, and we started talking about how we wanted to create more opportunities for more students. We wanted to have an impact beyond what we could achieve with our networks of charter schools. We figured that training exceptional teachers and school leaders would be the best way to go do that. We began dreaming up what was initially called Teacher U, in partnership with Hunter College, and this eventually became the Relay Graduate School of Education.

Given the numerous education reforms underway around the country, what convinced you to focus on teacher quality?

I feel sad for kids who have teachers who are not strong in content knowledge and not skilled at providing rigorous instruction. And I feel sad for kids who have teachers who are not expressing love, building relationships, and setting high expectations for all their students.

It worries me that only 24% of all of America’s teachers are top-third college graduates; even more troubling is that only 11% of teachers working in low-income communities are top-third college graduates. When I compare these statistics to those in other countries with more successful education systems, I am convinced that we can and need to do more to get stronger teachers in classrooms. In the long term, I think that we need to fundamentally change the status of teaching in the United States. We need a massive strategic initiative, something like a GI Bill for teachers, to create incentives for the very top college graduates to go into teaching as a profession.

However, we’re not going to see that tomorrow, or anytime soon, so the question becomes: to what extent can we train and develop people who are interested in going into teaching to be successful as teachers? And to what extent can we create the kind of training and development and career trajectory that will motivate more people to go into teaching?

What programs does the Relay Graduate School of Education offer to aspiring and current teachers and school leaders?

We have a variety of programs for people coming from different backgrounds, including programs for undergraduates (both education and non-education majors) and a residency program for those looking for a gradual on-ramp into the teaching profession. We have programs for new teachers who are taking an alternate route to certification. We also have offerings for experienced teachers who are working on their master’s degree and/or their advanced certifications in areas such as special education.

Additionally, we are serving aspiring principals, sitting principals, and principal supervisors. We currently have 400 principals and principal managers from 24 states across the country enrolled in a yearlong National Principals Academy, and I think this is likely to grow significantly over time. Currently about half of the principals and principal managers in our program are from district public schools. We’ve been working closely with the Denver Public Schools and the Tulsa Public Schools, in particular. We see a huge and growing demand around the country for supporting sitting principals and principal supervisors.

How is Relay different from traditional teacher-training programs?

The Relay experience is unique in a number of ways. First, the clinical experience is very extensive. Relay student-teachers spend most of their time in classrooms working directly with students, while also participating in a gradual on-ramp into

- Relay currently serves **2,000 teachers** and **400 school leaders** across the United States, and already has **2,750 alumni**
- Relay currently has campuses in **10 states** (Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas) and counting
- Relay collaborates with more than **50 districts**, nonprofits, and philanthropic investors all over the United States
- Relay has also worked with principals and principal supervisors from **24 states** and the District of Columbia
- Tuition for a two-year Relay Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degree is **\$17,500** for teachers in high-needs schools. After institutional aid from Relay, effective tuition for graduate students is typically **\$6,000 to \$8,000**

the teaching profession through courses and online learning modules. Second, there is a tremendous emphasis on practice: rehearsing and scrimmaging outside of the classroom in order to get ready to deliver lessons in front of students. Third, the techniques and strategies both in general pedagogy and in content are specific and actionable. These techniques are taught by highly skilled teachers with experience and proven success teaching low-income students. Fourth, we have a strong emphasis on student learning outcomes. Finally, a focus on mindset is central to our program. We want Relay graduates to be able to help their students develop not only cognitive skills but noncognitive skills. We focus a great deal on teaching our teachers to develop character, which is really different from other teacher-training programs.

At Relay, we feel a great deal of urgency to get the teaching right for the benefit of students, and we are particularly focused on closing the opportunity gap for young people growing up in low-income neighborhoods. Our long-term goal is to drive systemic change in the education sector that will lead to a demand for a new kind of trained teacher: one with demonstrated results in the classroom.

And the way you are teaching these skills also seems different from traditional models ...

Relay students are not writing papers about education so much as they are videotaping themselves and getting feedback on the video from their professors, who are themselves exemplary teachers. The program is rigorous in that it is performance-based; you can't do well from your armchair or by cramming for a series of exams, the way you might prepare for a test in college. This is about deepening one's understanding of the skills, techniques, strategies, relationships, and mindsets that you need in order to be successful as a teacher. And, we're also using technology in somewhat novel ways. At Relay, many of our assignments and much of our direct instruction and peer collaboration occur online.

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Can you give a specific example of how Relay's instruction may differ from traditional teacher-training programs?

Many traditional programs focus on teaching how to develop engaging lessons for students, and feel that classroom management will take care of itself. At Relay, we have paid very careful attention to how to build the platform, set the tone, create the culture, and set up routines that help students to feel comfortable, safe, and productive in their classrooms;



I don't think there is anything that we're doing at Relay that the traditional teacher-training programs couldn't do if they wanted to.

in this environment, teachers can then launch the most engaging lessons.

We teach many specific techniques and strategies regarding instruction. One specific example is how we teach to check for understanding. I think that the traditional program encourages teachers to have a broad sense that the students are learning the material that's being taught, but at Relay we teach a number of specific techniques for ensuring the students are learning while the lesson is going on, such as using gestures, which help teachers quickly see how well each student in their classroom is following the lesson.

Why do you view the residency model as so critical?

In our early years, most of the people coming to Relay had been recruited by district public schools and charter public schools and were coming to us for training, certification, or a master's degree. But now, a majority of Relay students majored in something other than education as undergraduates. Many are coming to us right after college, but others may be several years down the road and switching careers.

Before they are asked to lead their own classrooms, it is extremely beneficial for novice teachers to participate in a yearlong apprenticeship or residency in the classrooms of model teachers, while gradually taking on an increasingly large role. We know historically, not just at Relay, but across the United States and across time, that teachers tend to struggle in their first year, no matter what port of entry they've come through. We're trying to mitigate that, but we're also trying to help them raise their game, so they can be effective as quickly as possible and feel successful and want to stay in those jobs over time.

As we build this residency model, we're continuing to recruit more talented, diverse people coming from backgrounds other than education. We have about 500 residents in our program this year; about two-thirds of them are people of color. After they have a solid residency year, we are preparing them to work in low-income communities across the country in both district and charter schools.

What results have you seen with teachers who have gone through the Relay program?

Relay graduates learn to track student learning through interim assessments, to respond to data, and to shift the instruction to make sure that all students are successful. They're employed full-time in charter and district public schools in underserved communities. They're leading their

Norman Atkins' Biographical Timeline



1984
Brown University
B.A., History



1985–1989
Independent Journalist
New York Times Magazine, New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Parenting, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and Boston Globe



1989–1994
Robin Hood Foundation
Co-Executive Director



1997
Columbia University
Teachers College
M.A., Educational Administration
Computer Science

K-12 students to achieve at least one year's worth of growth in a year. And in reading, our internal data shows that they're achieving an average of 1.4 years of growth in a year's time. For our graduate students, being able to demonstrate their students' growth with data is a critical piece of getting their master's degree.

Does Relay's model have the potential to become mainstream?

I don't think there is anything that we're doing at Relay that the traditional teacher-training programs couldn't do if they wanted to. I would expect that in time, many of the things that we're doing will be fairly common and routine across the board in teacher preparation programs. District public schools are going to want to hire teachers who have clinical experience and are able to manage classrooms, teach rigorous content, and adapt to meet the needs of all their students.

I'm optimistic that we're moving in this direction as a country. I'm encouraged by the district superintendents who are starting to take a look at the work that we're doing. Although rooted in the charter sector, our work is very much applicable to their schools and districts. Whether it's Relay or other institutions of higher education or teacher preparation programs, what's important is closing the gap. We need to collectively develop teachers for the specific roles that are needed in classrooms and schools in urban public school districts.

What are some challenges of implementing the Relay model?

One of the challenges is that states put out regulations and lists of topics to be covered in a teacher preparation or master's program, and higher education institutions essentially turn each one of these topics into a three-credit course. Across the board in higher education, there is a need to shift to more performance-based programs.

We need to shift the learning experience from writing about the task to learning how to perform the task.

You see this happening in the context of teaching hospitals or nurse practitioner programs, or even programs for people who are getting a master of fine arts in sculpture, painting, or poetry. We need to shift the learning experience from writing about the task to learning how to perform the task. Clearly, that needs to be done in concert with a background in theory. But the theory should not overwhelm the practice. At Relay, we're still trying to get the ratio right. And it feels like the field is also recognizing this need to change.

Of course, the greatest challenge of the residency model from a district perspective is how to pay for residents in the year in which they are not the teacher of record. But, I want to encourage a long-term economic view: consider the benefits of investing upfront in building strong teachers compared to the costs of churn, recruitment, and most importantly, weak student outcomes.

The tuition at Relay is a lot less expensive than that of many other teacher-training programs.

Our tuition and fees are mindful of the fact that teachers are not particularly well paid and often can't afford an expensive program. We're trying to find the financial aid and resources to ensure that teachers in great numbers are going to be able to get through their master's program with no additional debt.



1996–2002

North Star Academy
Co-Founder & Co-Director



1996–2008

Uncommon Schools
Founder & CEO



2008–Present

Relay Graduate
School of Education
Co-Founder & President



2012–Present

Zearn
Co-Founder & Board Chair

Consider the benefits of investing upfront in building strong teachers compared to the costs of churn, recruitment, and most importantly, weak student outcomes.

Our goal is to get to financial sustainability without philanthropic resources paying for core programs. We are on track to do that, and we want to run good programs that our graduate students and partners value.

What can superintendents and district leaders do to create a stronger, more effective teaching force?

I've spent the past half-dozen years going around the country to visit with superintendents and discuss their human capital needs. I worry about the challenge superintendents face of having to hire teachers late in the school year and not being able to orient these teachers to the model of instruction and

RELAY/GSE Programs

The Relay Graduate School of Education offers two two-year Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) programs:

1 For aspiring teachers: Relay Teaching Residency

In the first year, residents work with students under close supervision of a mentor teacher. In the second year, residents transition to a lead teaching role.

2 For current teachers: Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) Program

Students are full-time, lead teachers while enrolled in Relay.

Curriculum is designed around a central question:

What do teachers need in order to be immediately effective, to guarantee their students are engaged and learning, and ultimately, to be happy in their profession?

In both programs, students take courses at Relay in both core teaching techniques and content-specific instruction. Relay students practice these techniques in their classrooms and receive expert feedback weekly from faculty and classmates.

Year One

Graduate students learn:

- The basics of how to build relationships with students, families, and colleagues
- The fundamentals of classroom management, lesson planning, and assessment design
- Skills in data-driven instruction, so they can measure and track students' academic achievement and growth

Year Two

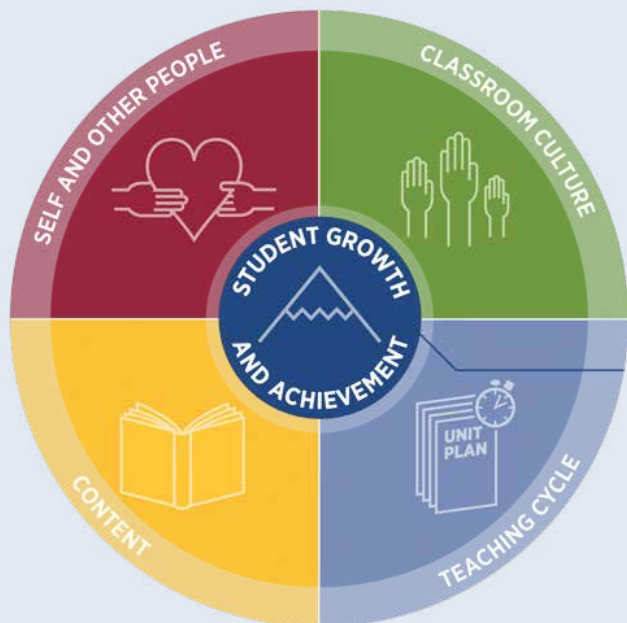
Graduate students learn:

- Broader knowledge of unit planning and how to incorporate literacy across content areas
- Specific techniques that help them build rigorous and joyful classrooms—the kind of learning environments that encourage both academic achievement and character development
- Graduate students prepare for the Master's Defense, a capstone project in which they track how students in their PK-12 classrooms grow throughout the year

Additional programs for education professionals:

- **For principals and principal supervisors:**
National Principals Academy and National Principal Supervisors Academy
- **For everyone:**
Free, open-enrollment online courses in topics such as blended learning, teaching character, and creating positive classrooms

Elements of Effective Instruction



Source: Relay Graduate School of Education

curriculum in the district. So I encourage districts to instead invest in the residency model.

In particular I want to encourage superintendents to consider putting into a residency model paraprofessionals and college graduates who have the requisite backgrounds. Using paraprofessional funds, Title 2, and other supplemental funds, you can have them perform these responsibilities alongside residency training like Relay. This provides the opportunity to have a yearlong tryout, and if successful, the district can hire these folks for full-time jobs as teachers the following year. I think this could be a good employment strategy for districts. Relay would like to partner with superintendents who are thinking about doing that. The goal of Relay in partnering with superintendents is not just to provide a boutique program for a small number of teachers, but to develop a really diverse, talented pool of teachers and school leaders for school districts and charter networks in low-income communities around the country.

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Even if Relay is not in your community, I think the basic concept is the same. I would encourage superintendents to build partnerships with residency programs nearby, and to develop future teachers systematically through a residency model in core schools. And I would encourage superintendents to develop resident advisors or mentor teachers in a way that provides a good professional opportunity for these skilled teachers. ♦