

March Air Reserve Base

THE BEACON

EnCorps STEM Teachers Program Leverages Military Service to Produce Top Quality Teachers

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At Thrive Public Schools in San Diego, Kevin Dinh is teaching his students about the principles of flight and aircraft engineering. Most important, he is imparting a story of how math led him to an exciting and rewarding career as a flight control systems technician and integrated systems mechanic with the U.S. Air Force. A current Reservist with a bachelor's degree in Economics, Kevin is a member of the EnCorps STEM Teachers Program's military recruitment initiative, in the process of becoming a credentialed teacher in California and thereby improving both student performance and teacher retention.

Active duty, reservist, and veteran service members are a superlative answer to the complex questions around teacher shortages, inequity in learning, and pervasive science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skill deficits. Rooted in perseverance and triumph, the military experience is a well-suited, largely untapped training ground for the classroom. Members of EnCorps' military cohort are primed for work in high-stress environments, are well versed in matters of diplomacy, and are consummate problem solvers. Many claim their favorite aspect of military service is training and teaching others. "The principles and standards of the military profession - including life experience, discipline and problem solving - are valuable competencies that our Veterans deliver to classrooms in the communities that we serve," says EnCorps Executive Director Katherine Wilcox.

Since Fall 2015, Dinh has been guest teaching in Glenn Jacobson's 6-8th grade classes, helping students connect math with real-world applications, such as combustion engines and electronics. At Thrive, an award winning, free public charter school, Dinh's deep content expertise is helping inspire kids to pursue further STEM study and potential STEM careers. He says, "The military brings something very different to the table. Students definitely think it's cool and they respond to that."

The EnCorps STEM Teachers Program, which recruits, selects, and develops the best and brightest STEM professionals and military veterans as they transition into high quality educators in high need communities, launched its Military Pathway to Teaching in 2013. Dinh is one of 50 military candidates to date recruited by EnCorps to transform science, technology, engineering and math departments statewide. Nine years into its mission, EnCorps tutors, guest teachers, teacher candidates and full-time credentialed instructors are in service in more than 200 schools and organizations throughout California, impacting more than 13,000 students.

Dinh says, “EnCorps gives experience and information in becoming a teacher that you don’t even know you need, which will help you decide if you want to pursue a credential. They guide you through the whole process and you can start guest teaching without paying a dime.” EnCorps’ support includes professional development at annual spring, summer, and fall Institutes, through which Dinh met peers already teaching, who spoke to him about their experience. Ongoing mentoring from EnCorps staff and fellow cohort members combined with early teaching experiences results in an EnCorps STEM teacher retention rate of 80%.

The blended, project-based learning standard at Thrive has given Dinh the latitude to engage students in 21st century skills that ensure college and career readiness. He feels the most rewarding part is when students who have no interest in a subject, such as math, are super excited about it by the end of his lesson. “It’s definitely important to have a background in what you’re teaching,” he says. “Students say why do I need math? When will I use this? I show them how I use it in the Air Force. Math also teaches them resilience – not to give up if something gets hard.”

Since starting at Thrive, Dinh has taken over the design class, which incorporates engineering, construction and art. He has also been asked to be a substitute teacher by school administrators and requested as a speaker on airplanes and their control systems for a lower grade class. Following his brief, upcoming deployment, Dinh hopes to enter the Master's Credential Cohort Program at the University of San Diego, on his way to becoming one of an estimated 33,000 math and science teachers needed in California by 2025.

If you are interested in sharing your real-world STEM experience as a teacher leader inspiring the next generation of engineers, creators, and visionaries, find out more by joining one of our free, monthly EnCorps 101 webinars at <http://encorps.org/webinar/>.