

Lessons from Teach For America

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There is widespread agreement among education reformers that public school teachers should be hired based on their subject matter competence rather than their formal credentials; that the best teachers should be assigned to the lowest performing schools; and that teachers should be paid based on performance rather than tenure.



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Exactly the opposite takes place in most school districts. However, there is a program that does recruit, select, train, pay and evaluate teachers in a manner that most reformers would support. This privately funded program shows what can be done within the existing education system and suggests that system-wide educational improvement could be achieved through universal school choice.

The Problem with Traditional Teacher Education. Traditionally, public school teachers are selected and retained based on formal criteria, such as:

- Participation in a traditional, three-year teacher training program, usually leading to a degree in education.
- Obtaining certification or licensure required by the state or school district.
- Performance in the student teaching portion of their education curriculum.

Many public school teachers end up in “tenured” teaching positions after only two years on the job. Experienced teachers have more choices regarding the public schools to which they are assigned. As a result, the most experienced teachers are often found in higher performing schools, whereas less experienced teachers are assigned to low performing schools. Low performing schools tend to be located in high-poverty areas with high minority student populations.

The Teach For America Alternative. Teach For America (TFA) is an alternative teacher placement program that has been in operation since 1990. The selection process for teachers in Teach For America (TFA) begins with a rigorous interview and screening process. TFA provides:

- A guaranteed first and second year salary at a public school which accepts TFA participants, paid by the school district.
- A rigorous training schedule that better and more expediently prepares TFA corps members than do education degrees, licensing and certifications.
- A competitive market based on subject knowledge and teacher quality.

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Moreover, in contrast to traditional teacher education programs, the more than 32,000 teachers TFA has trained and placed have been almost entirely in high poverty schools.¹ They have taught more than 3 million children across the nation since the program began.²

After finishing the program, nearly two-thirds of Teach For America corps members continue careers in education, and half continue to teach.³ Many have gone on to work at every level in education, public policy and other professions. TFA is now active in 48 regions in 35 states and the District of Columbia.⁴ An estimated 11,000 corps members taught more than 750,000 students during the 2013-14 school year.⁵

The Quality of TFA Teachers. Teach For America differs from traditional teacher programs in that it puts less emphasis on classroom management and more on knowledge of the subject material. Rather than putting their recruits through four years of classroom management and child development classes, TFA recruits graduates with practical, subject-based experience and runs them through five weeks of intensive training designed to provide the basic knowledge required to manage a classroom. After they begin teaching, the program continues to support corps members through ongoing interaction with their alumni and staff.

Critics claim that these five week programs do not properly prepare new teachers. For instance, a 2005 Stanford University study found that teachers recruited through TFA and other alternative certification programs were less effective than their classically trained counterparts.⁶ However, more recent studies have found just the opposite. For example:

- A 2008 study of New York City public schools found that experience was more important to teachers' effectiveness than initial certification.⁷
- A 2011 Harvard University study found that Teach For America produced teachers who held stronger convictions regarding their students' academic success and were more likely than traditional teachers to continue working in the education field.⁸
- A 2013 study by Edvance Research found that students taught by Teach For America corps members score at the same level or better than similar students taught by non-TFA teachers.⁹

Thus, research suggests that TFA corps members are

at least as effective as traditionally-trained teachers with similar levels of experience. In many cases, studies have found that TFA corps members are better prepared than other novice teachers. A 2013 survey of school principals found that 84 percent who had experience with TFA corps members said they would hire other corps members, and 92 percent reported they were from "somewhat likely" to "extremely likely" to recommend hiring corps members to a colleague.¹⁰ [See the figure.]

Impact on Student Achievement. Recent studies in Louisiana, North Carolina and Tennessee show that, with respect to their impact on student achievement, Teach For America is a top provider of new teachers:

- In Louisiana, a 2009 study found that students taught by TFA teachers performed significantly better in English Language Arts, Reading, Mathematics and Science than those taught by other new teachers.¹¹
- In North Carolina, a 2010 study found that middle school mathematics students taught by TFA members received the equivalent of an extra half-year of learning.¹²
- In Tennessee, a 2013 study found Teach For America corps members were equally or more effective as veteran teachers in most subject areas.¹³

Academic Gains Due to TFA. Teach For America corps members have had a positive impact on student learning, particularly in math and reading. For example, a study by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management found that high school students taught by TFA members did better in science overall. Those already in the top one-fourth of their class saw even larger benefits than those in lower quartiles. Further:

- A 2008 study of students in New York City found that students taught by Teach For America corps members scored higher in math than similar students taught by noncorps members.¹⁴
- A 2012 study by the Harvard Strategic Data Project found higher academic gains in math and reading in grades 3 to 9 among students taught by first-year corps members.¹⁵
- A 2013 study by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. found that students of TFA corps members scored higher than peers taught by teachers from other alternative and traditional teacher preparation programs.

The latest research suggests that students of Teach For America corps members experience significant gains in math. One study equates the gains to the equivalent of 2.6 months of additional learning or a jump from the 27th percentile to the 30th percentile on standard end-of-year, secondary math student assessments.¹⁶

TFA Fills Teacher Shortages. TFA places teachers in participating school districts. TFA is known for its ability to fill teacher shortages in areas that have no other recourse. For example, in 2010, the Pine Bluff School District in Arkansas filled its teacher shortage with TFA corps members when none of the education programs in Arkansas and surrounding states provided new teachers. Arkansas school districts hired 169 TFA corps members in the 2010-11 school year — more than ever before. “This year, we could not have started school without them,” said Joyce Vaught, superintendent of the Lakeside School District in Chicot County.¹⁷ Superintendent Ray Spain in Warren County, North Carolina, accepted about 30 TFA recruits and says that without them, “we would probably be in the crisis stage.”¹⁸

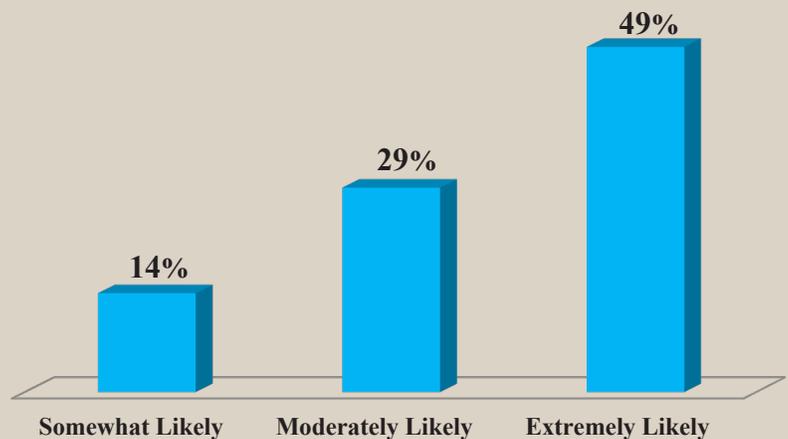
In 2004, the Philadelphia school district hired TFA to help the district fill its yearly teacher vacancies. The 200,000-student school district had 120 teacher vacancies the previous year. “Ted Kirsch, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, said that he supported programs such as TFA that could stem the teacher shortage, but that he hoped the teachers would stay longer than two years.”¹⁹

To significantly increase the number of students from low-income communities who continue their education through college graduation, the Teach For America 2015 growth plan makes the recruitment and development of individuals with backgrounds similar to students served by the program a priority for TFA. It aims to increase the number of teachers it prepares in order to better match students with effective teachers.

Other Alternative Certification Programs. Others have tried to emulate TFA’s success. For instance:

- In 2011, Emily Feistritz and Kunali Sanghvi created Teach-Now, an alternative, technology-based,

How Likely Principals Are to Recommend a Teach For America Recruit to a Colleague



Source: Colleen McCann, Tandra Turner and Richard White, "Results From the Teach For America 2013 National Principal Survey," Policy Studies Associates, Inc., May 2013.

online teacher training and certification program.²⁰

- The New Teacher Project (TNTP) was formed in 1997 with a focus on training effective teachers to work primarily with low-income and minority students.²¹
- New York State University offers two alternative preparation models for second-career professionals going in to teaching.²²
- The University of Minnesota has also joined with TFA to create a new alternative teacher preparation program that is as rigorous as the TFA program and lasts 8 weeks.²³

Conclusion. There is a shortage of qualified classroom teachers, especially in inner-city schools. Teach For America fills the teacher gap in many schools. In a competitive free market, teachers throughout the educational system would compete for pay based on their performance and would be selected based on merit rather than formal credentials.

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Endnotes

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